

The Halifax Workers' Action Centre is committed to improving the lives and working conditions of low-waged and marginalized workers.



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The Halifax Workers' Action Centre is located on Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People.



Resolving conflict in a unionized workplace

For a worker in a union, the vast majority of their workplace concerns must be resolved through the union's grievance procedure.

What is a union?

A union is a group of workers coming together to negotiate with their employer as a group. By negotiating as one unit, instead of as individuals, workers who form unions greatly increase their bargaining power. That is why union members are often paid better, receive better benefits, and are treated more fairly than non-union workers.

Union members usually pool their resources to pay for expenses they might have, such as hiring staff or renting an office.

What is a collective agreement?

For a unionized worker, the collective agreement serves as the employment contract. It sets out the terms and conditions of employment, such as rates of pay, vacation entitlements, job posting provisions, etc. The union enforces the collective agreement on behalf of its members.

Grievance procedure

Only the union can enforce the collective agreement against the employer when the terms are violated. To resolve a workplace dispute or address a violation of the collective agreement, a unionized worker can file a grievance.

Often, union members elect coworkers to be “**shop stewards**”. Shop stewards are trained to file grievances on behalf of coworkers who feel that the employer has violated the collective agreement or otherwise treated them unfairly.

Most unions elect an **executive** to do their day-to-day business and run the union’s affairs. In some unions, it is the executive members who file grievances and enforce the collective agreement.

Many unions hire (or elect) **staff** to help negotiate and enforce the collective agreement. A union member who contacts their shop steward or executive may be directed to contact their union’s staff to help resolve a workplace matter.

Most collective agreements contain strict timelines for when and how the union can file a grievance against the employer. A union member should contact the union as soon as possible after the events giving rise to their concern.

What if the issue is still unresolved?

If a union member is still unsatisfied, they can take the following steps:

- First, the union member can contact another steward or executive member to discuss the matter and confirm the union’s position on the issue.
- Second, the union member can contact the union office to discuss the matter. Union staff in the office may provide more insight into the union’s position.
- Third, unions are governed by constitutions and bylaws. Often, unions have rules about how to deal with members’ concerns. There may be an individual or a committee for appealing union decisions.

Best practices

Unions have the most bargaining power and are most effective when their members are engaged.

It is always a good idea for union members to gain familiarity with, and stay involved in, their union. Union members are well advised to attend regular union meetings and get to know their fellow union members and representatives.