



STEWARDS CORNER

Monthly Newsletter for Union Stewards

May Day: Everywhere Flames Blaze Up

“If you think by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement...the movement from which the down-trodden millions, the millions who toil in want and misery, expect salvation—if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but there and there, behind you and in front of you, everywhere, flames blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out...”
August Spies, 1886



August Spies was sentenced to death on October 9, 1886; not so much because of anything he did but because the Chicago business community wanted to crush the labor movement. He was 31 years old.

Since 1889, workers worldwide have celebrated International Workers' Day on May 1. Organizers selected May 1 as the date for the new holiday because of its proximity to labor struggles that occurred in Gilded Age Chicago and the deaths of Spies and his fellow organizers.

Spies words are prophetic. They did not stomp out the labor movement. Today, International Workers' Day is an occasion to celebrate workers' diverse identities amid the ongoing fight for dignity and justice on the job. Today, we are seeing a surge in organizing...Starbucks, Amazon, and in our own union, we recently organized 3300 workers at the University of Pittsburgh. Thank you, August.

New Infrastructure, New Work

The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 marked the beginning of a new era. No longer would waterways or horses determine the movement of goods and people. Chicago, Illinois, epitomized this change more than any place. Thousands of people flocked there from to work in its stockyards, railroad hubs, and workplaces that manufactured a vast array of products.

The factory system also created a new type of employment relationship. Unlike family-run farms or small workshops in which "hands" or "artisans" had close relationships to a "master", foremen ran the new workplaces with the authority of the owners. In some places, workers went about their jobs with considerable autonomy; in others, foremen oversaw their every move.

Workers responded by organizing unions, including with the Knights of Labor, which consisted of over 700,000 members by 1886. The KOL pioneered industrial unionism in which workers, regardless of skill or craft, could become members. At its 1886 convention in Richmond, Virginia, the leader of the KOL,

Terence Powderly, made a bold statement for racial equality when he insisted that Frank Farrell, an African-American member from New York, introduce him to the delegates.

Eight Hours for Work, Eight Hours for Sleep, Eight Hours for What We Will

A key demand of workers during this period was for the eight-hour day. At this point, a "typical" workday varied from 12-18 hours. On May 1, 1886, 350,000 workers in the U.S. went on strike for an eight-hour day, including 40,000 in Chicago.

As the general strike reverberated across the country, another strike at Chicago's McCormick's Reaper Works reached a fever pitch on May 3. Striking workers confronted scabs at shift change, and police opened fire, killing two workers. Organizers called for a mass rally at Haymarket Square the following day. As the rally concluded, an unknown assailant threw a bomb (to this day, nobody knows who did it). The explosion killed four workers and seven policemen. Martial law was declared throughout the U.S., and organizers were rounded-up in Chicago—including several that didn't even attend the rally—and indicted for criminal conspiracy. Eight were condemned to death; four of those sentences were carried out. The reaction against the labor movement was a devastating setback for workers in their efforts to challenge Gilded Age inequality.

International Workers Day

In 1889 organizers celebrated the first International Workers' Day in honor of the Haymarket Martyrs and the global struggle for workers' rights. Unfortunately, in 1894, President Grover Cleveland, who was uncomfortable with the holiday's origins, signed legislation that made the first Monday in September Labor Day. Canada followed suit shortly afterward.

In recent years, here in the U.S., May 1 has become closely associated with the immigrant workers' rights campaign. For example, in 2006, immigrants and supporting unions in several cities held massive, spontaneous marches called the "Day Without an Immigrant" (Día sin inmigrante). Around the world, workers march on this day to celebrate the work we have done and to continue the struggle. In Mexico City, thousands of workers join together, educate one another about the Haymarket martyrs, and march for justice.

Check your local area for May Day celebrations. It is a time of new infrastructure and new work. Let's go organize; be the spark.



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Dealing With Difficult Supervisors

If you've been a steward for a while, you could probably fill the squares in a game of lousy boss bingo. What's the most creative technique you have seen management use to avoid responding to issues you've raised? *"We'll think about this and get back to you?"* *"We haven't had a chance to discuss that subject."* *"This isn't my call. I take orders around here!"*

Collective bargaining agreements (CBA) are designed so that unions and management can work together to resolve issues before they're reduced to formal grievances. However, that principle grinds to a halt if front-line management doesn't cooperate. The boss's willingness to discuss and resolve problems reflects the Union's power in the workplace. Whether a foreman is a decent person or a jerk shouldn't determine if the process works. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

Before You Meet with Management

In most grievance procedures, the first step is a discussion between an affected worker and their supervisor, with or without the steward (check your CBA for the specific steps of the procedure, including the timeline and who participates in the discussion). Before approaching management, ask the member to walk you through all the facts. Ask the member: "how is this a violation?" Stewards can lose credibility with their supervisor(s) and with other members if they raise complaints that have no merit. Finally, get your talking points in order, and don't forget a pen and pad of paper so you can take notes.

"I've got a department to run and don't have time for this. . ."

The purpose of a grievance procedure is for issues to get handled ASAP. Remind the manager about the grievance timeline and explain that it's better to deal with the matter now instead of in a step meeting that involves upper management. If the problem happened before and was settled in the Union's favor, emphasize it. However, if it wasn't resolved in the Union's favor, explain how the current situation is different from the previous one.

"What is this about!"

A manager who loses their temper undermines the problem-solving process, which is also true for stewards and members. Remember the equality principle: when acting in a

representative capacity, you are equal to management. You should expect nothing less than their respect. You can raise your voice to match a manager who yells, but you should avoid profanity. The bottom line is to not let their actions dictate yours. If a manager has a history of this behavior, bring another steward or union officer to your meeting and keep your cool.

Management Tries to Turn the Table

Suppose that you and a member approach a foreman about a seniority question. The foreman responds: "Where did you disappear to before the end of your shift last night?" Were you sleeping somewhere? It might be that the supervisor is deflecting from the seniority matter by asking an accusatory question, or perhaps it's something you aren't aware of. The key point is to not let the tables get turned on you. Instead, pause for a moment and refocus the discussion on the issue that you first raised. If the manager continues to question the worker, remember that Weingarten Rights apply.

Reflect on What Worked & What You Can Do Differently in the Future

Stewards often deal with situations that no manual exists for. Just do the best you can. It's a good practice to discuss how you handled a situation with another steward. Don't "coulda, woulda, shoulda" yourself. Keep your head up and keep going.

And as always, if you are unsure how to proceed, reach out to you Local Grievance Chair, President, or Staff Representative.

TEACHING TUESDAYS

All classes are held at **11 AM (EST)** and **8 PM (EST)**

- ▶ May 10, **USW Convention 101** ([11 AM](#)) ([8 PM](#))
- ▶ May 17, **New Hire Orientation** ([11 AM](#)) ([8 PM](#))
- ▶ June 7, **Legal Rights of Union Stewards** ([11 AM](#)) ([8 PM](#))
- ▶ June 14, **Internal Organizing Panel** ([11 AM](#)) ([8 PM](#))
- ▶ June 21, **LGBTQIA Panel** ([11 AM](#)) ([8 PM](#))
- ▶ July 5, **Representing Members in Investigatory Interviews** ([11AM](#)) ([8 PM](#))
- ▶ July 12, **Developing Leaders in Your Local Union** ([11AM](#)) ([8PM](#))
- ▶ July 19, **Officer Basics** ([11 AM](#)) ([8 PM](#))



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