



# Treat It As Continuous Bargaining:

## Dealing with the Changing Workplace - New Technologies, New Ways of Organizing Work and Work Restructuring/Involvement Programs

Negotiating a new contract every few years doesn't provide sufficient protection for the workforce and for the union in a workplace that is rapidly changing. Contracts can quickly become out of date when:

- \* New technologies eliminate the need for whole job classifications overnight;
- \* New work processes threaten established job ladders and seniority provisions;
- \* Management demands increased flexibility and continuous improvement (continuous change);
- \* New technologies eliminate jobs, monitor the workforce and change skill requirements;
- \* Work is simplified, standardized and intensified;
- \* Computerized work processes make work easier to move or contract out; and
- \* Changes in work processes create new health and safety hazards.

While it might be nice to just say "no" to all of the changes that are harming our members and our unions, we usually don't have the leverage to make that stick. Instead, the pace of change is accelerating and the negative impacts of the changes are increasing. In particular, changes in the workplace can undercut our bargaining power by de-skilling work, making work more easily moveable and under-cutting seniority by creating divisions and isolating workers from each other.

Management, through programs like Kaizen, Lean, Toyota Production System, Six Sigma, 5S, is sitting down with union members to gather their knowledge of the work process and engage them in making changes that management wants. They are dealing directly with the members and ignoring or bypassing the union.

We need new strategies for representing the members' interests and protecting the union in the midst of rapid change. We need to insist that the union be notified about change in advance and be involved in any discussions of specific changes in technology and work organization. We need **Continuous Bargaining to deal with continuous change.**

There is a lot we can do to build a continuous bargaining culture inside our unions. When unions get ready to bargain at contract time, they know that preparation and collective action are critical. Among other things, they:

1. Select the Union's bargaining representatives and train them (in union-only sessions) for their roles;
2. Understand the members' issues and concerns using surveys, planning meetings, one-on-one information gathering, etc.;
3. Organize and activate the members to defend their interests and the union's strength in the bargaining process;
4. Analyze the union's (and management's) strengths and weaknesses given the current bargaining environment;
5. Understand the company's plans and goals by submitting information requests and researching the company's financial status, corporate structure, business plan, plans for new technology or work restructuring, etc.;
6. Prepare proposals and positions as a committee and approach management as a united and organized voice;
7. Develop a bargaining strategy;
8. Caucus regularly to maintain unity, to develop a common strategy and to formulate responses to management proposals;
9. Demand that any agreements reached are written, clear and enforceable.

### **Watching Out for Involvement**

In many workplaces, management is setting up mechanisms that engage the members in discussions of how to restructure or "improve" the work process. Management is seeking to "harvest" our members' knowledge to achieve their goals of efficiency, productivity and profitability (without having to give anything in return). This really can be seen as one-sided bargaining. Every discussion between labor and management should be seen as bargaining, no matter whether it is called a team meeting, problem-solving group, improvement session or kaizen event and we need to insert the union and union values into any and every bargaining process.

Management would prefer to bargain with individuals or small groups. They would prefer to control the approach, the training and the agenda. They want to control the rewards. And they want to make sure that the outcomes meet their goals. This is why unions need to view involvement as a way of bargaining around the union, and treat all forms of involvement as continuous bargaining.

Preparing for dealing with technological change, new work organization or any work restructuring program that could (and should) be seen as ongoing or continuous bargaining must be just as thoughtful, just as well organized, and just as inclusive of members' concerns as preparation for contract bargaining. A key challenge for unions is to create mechanisms for carrying out these activities on an ongoing basis.

In the course of continuous bargaining, in whatever forum it takes place, it is crucial to:

- Always seek to maintain and build unity within the union;
- Always think about how to build the independent identity of the union in the process;
- Never ignore your gut feelings - if something makes you nervous, figure out why; and
- Remember to caucus early and caucus often.

*This fact sheet was prepared by the Labor Extension Program, University of Massachusetts, Lowell, MA 01854. For more information, call 978-934-3266.*