



Workplace Training: A Mandatory, and Necessary, Subject of Bargaining

The Problem:

Workplace training comes in many forms – from basic skills such as literacy or GED to “soft skills” such as communication or working in teams to new workplace skills such as statistical process control or using new computer systems, to the more traditional workplace skills like machine setup and operation.

Lack of training can also be a significant problem for many as new technologies, new forms of work organization (like job combination or “multi-skilling”, new data gathering and analysis techniques and new products and services demand new knowledge and skills.

While it is often tempting to think of “more training” as our goal (the more the better), training programs can create serious problems for a union and therefore need to be carefully investigated, critically analyzed and bargained.

Unions need to aggressively bargain over training, both when management initiates training programs and when management is not doing enough to provide needed training. In cases where employers fail to provide necessary training (instead opting to hire from the outside, or rely on de-skilling strategies) the union has a critical role in determining training needs, in formulating demands for new training programs and in bargaining over those demands with management.

Training is a mandatory subject of bargaining for a reason. Failure to effectively bargain over training can, among other things, lead to:

Weakened seniority systems

Increasing use of “skill and ability” clauses to displace seniority in job bidding, advancement and even layoffs.

Divisions within the union

When some get trained and others don’t, resentment and divisions are inevitable. If training leads to infringing on job classifications, these problems are only increased.

Divisions among unions in a multi-union shop

Where there is more than one union, training can lead to blurring of jurisdictions and create conflict among the different unions.

Loss of key bargaining unit jobs

As training is provided and jobs are “upskilled” management may try to move them out of the bargaining unit.

Introduction of management activity and outlook into bargaining unit jobs

Training has been used to take “team leaders” and turn them into mini-supervisors and facilitators

for a management-driven program of work restructuring.

Bad training or the wrong training

If the training isn't designed for the audience (for your members) it can set certain groups up for failure while advancing others (computer training that is given to those without basic computer experience).

Training Which Moves the Members Away from Unionism

Some types of training (particularly team, kaizen or other types of work restructuring training) teach management values as much as they do any particular skills. This can seriously undermine the members' connection to the union.

Bargaining over Training: What to Do

If training is an issue in your workplace, either because management is doing it or because they aren't and should be, you should enter into a bargaining process to ensure that the members are getting the training they need, and that the members and the union are protected. If the company does not provide any training or enough training, the union might think of putting training proposals on the table that will help to enhance opportunity for the members, to equalize skill levels and opportunity, to be sure that critical skills are not lost, to gain new work as technology changes or new products and processes are introduced and to avoid the company using lack of training as an excuse to outsource work or move it out of the unit. In order to do this, the union must have done its homework and formulated a strategic plan around training. Steps to take include:

Form a Training Committee

Having a group of strong union activists focusing on training, in close coordination with the union's leadership, is a good way to ensure that important issues are not missed.

Research Training Needs

Talk to the members about the training they need and want.

Examine changes in work organization and technology that have been or are about to be introduced and evaluate the training needs that will come with them.

Carefully research and evaluate any training that the company is proposing, including putting in

Develop Demands

It is very important that the union have a clear sense of what it wants and that you do not simply try to "fix" management's training proposals.

Bargain

There needs to be a clear process for bargaining with management over training.

Remember that you have legal rights to bargain over training because it is a mandatory subject of bargaining. Don't settle for a "discussion" with "input".

Follow through, Follow-up, Evaluate

It is critical that the training committee, or whoever is watching over training issues, stay on top of any training as it is developed, presented and evaluated. Active oversight is important to ensure that management does not make changes in approach or content as the training progresses.

In order to effectively bargain over training, unions have to have a clear idea of what the training needs are from the perspective of the workforce. They need to know what skills the members already have. They also have to understand management's goals for training and establish a set of union goals. Finally, they need to understand changes in technology and work organization that are being planned or are likely to be implemented. Without all of these, it is practically impossible to bargain effectively in the long-term interest of the union and the members.

When entering into bargaining over training, unions should be prepared to deal with a long list of issues including:

What training is offered

As described above, the wrong training can cause significant problems for the union and the members. On the other hand, the right training can be a great benefit to the members and can help build the union. It is important that the union develop a broad sense of what kinds of training should, and shouldn't, be offered.

When it is offered

The timing of training can have a significant impact on accessibility for the members. Is the training on work time? Is it available to all shifts? Is it at a time of year when people are available?

Who has access to the training

Access should mean the aggressive removal of barriers. While a deaf person might be able to sign up for a course (technical access), they don't have real access unless arrangements are made for signing or closed captioning. Offering a course which is open to everyone but which is scheduled right after work, means that people with child care or other responsibilities outside of work don't have real access. And while a computer illiterate might be able to take a course on advanced (or even basic) word processing, they don't have real access unless there is some form of pre-training to get them comfortable with the computer.

How the training is evaluated

Training programs should be evaluated for effectiveness. Are people learning what they want and what the training program is designed to teach? Are there other intended or unintended impacts that need to be understood such as the socialization impacts described above? What should we do in the next round of training to improve it? It is critical that a means for evaluating the training from the union's perspective be created prior to entering into the program and that the program be carefully monitored.

How the students are evaluated

What kind of student evaluations will be done? This is a critical question that will have a large impact on who feels comfortable signing up for training. Grading in school holds many bad

memories for people. The issue of individual evaluation should be carefully separated from the program evaluation described above. In general, external evaluation should be avoided, and written tests in particular are a bad idea.

The impact of training on advancement

This issue must be carefully reviewed. As was stated earlier, training can have a significant impact on access to advancement opportunities and can therefore disrupt established seniority systems and assumptions. At a minimum, the link between training and advancement should be made clear to all involved

Who does the teaching

Are union members involved in providing the training? If not, why not? It is important from the union perspective to ensure that the trainers are qualified, but it is also important to ensure that they are not bosses. Ideally, strong union advocates with the necessary skills should be providing the training.

The actual content of the training

It is possible to bargain not only over the general nature of training, but also over the specifics of content. For example, in a machining training program, the union might want to insist that computer skills be included so that people will more easily be able to upgrade to operating and programming CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machine tools. The union should demand to carefully review the content to ensure that the training will be accessible to all, to be sure that there is no anti-union content built into the training and to be sure that all of the important subjects are taught.

Recognition or Certification

The union should discuss with management how those who complete the training will be recognized. Portability is one particular issue to deal with - in other words will the training be recognized by other employers or is it company-specific?

Bargaining over training is an ongoing process. New issues will arise constantly. It is important for unions to have in place mechanisms for understanding the training needs of the members and the union and to develop demands.

As the rate of technological and work organization change increases, and as management is increasingly aggressive in reaching out to the workforce and setting a training agenda, training programs can be a significant danger to the union, or they can be an important mechanism for maintaining advancement opportunity, promoting equity and keeping skilled jobs inside the union. The only way to ensure good training is for the union to be involved in defining training needs, and in developing, providing and evaluating training programs.

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