

The Importance of Participation in Your Union

The lifeblood of any union is its membership. Simply put, unions have power because they are, in effect, amalgamations of the collective strength of their membership. Each of us alone has very little power in the face of the overwhelming power of a Class One Fortune 500 rail corporation. But together through the union, we can defend our interests and win better wages, benefits and working conditions.

But this does not happen by magic. It does not happen simply because you pay your dues. It does not happen simply because you hold a union card. It does not happen because your leadership has superior intelligence or wisdom. The way we achieve power through the union is by membership participation and mobilization. There are countless ways that you can participate in the life of your union. Below are twelve ways to take part:

- Read your union newsletter, union bulletin boards, communiqués and other information.
- Check out the union's website regularly for updates of what is going on
- Familiarize yourself with the union agreements – master contract, on-property agreement, and local agreements.
- File claims in a timely manner when you are aware that the company has violated the contract.
- Stay abreast of union issues at the local, general committee and international level.
- To the extent possible, always maintain cordial and fraternal relations with your co-workers, your union brothers and sisters, and assist in building a workplace based on trust and solidarity.
- Participate in union campaigns both formal and informal while at work on the job. Stick together and refuse to be picked off by management for short-sighted selfish ends. Think, talk and act UNION every day!
- Attend your union meeting, get to know the leadership and players in the local. There is no better way to learn what is going on. There is no better place to voice your concerns and let your voice be heard.
- Once eligible and knowledgeable of the issues, consider running for union office.
- Participate in union trainings, educational forums and conferences.
- Wear your union T-shirt, jacket, hat, button or other items to work and show your support for your union to both your co-workers and the company alike.
- Mentor new employees and fellow union members, welcome them into the union and the workplace, and share your knowledge and wisdom that you have gained in your months/years as a rail.

It can be intimidating at first to play an active role in your union. All too often local union leaders and “old heads” have a cynical and/or distrustful attitude toward new members. This bad attitude can even affect some of your co-workers who are not much “older” than you! But do not be deterred. You have every right, in fact, the obligation to participate in your union. Ultimately you will win the respect and acknowledgement of your fellow union members. Speak your peace quietly and firmly, stand up for what is right, stand up for your rights and the rights of your co-workers, refuse to be intimidated or bought off by the company, and you will find a warm and welcome place in the union. Solidarity!

