



# EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

## **STRIKE ASSISTANCE:** **A GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEES**

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# Introduction

The community services committee is one of our eleven constitutionally mandated standing committees. Its early roots can be traced to 1938 when the UAW created the Welfare Department to address the social needs of unemployed workers. By the time World War II began, that department dissolved into the Community Services Division involved in war relief work. The modern Community Services Department began in 1951.

Our highest function is to look out for the health and welfare of our members and their families. We build relationships with service organizations in the area. We strengthen those relationships by volunteering to work for and with community groups. In times of need, we educate members about the resources available. We stress that this is not charity but essential services available to the community we support through our contributions and taxes. All the community services committee's work is done with an emphasis on protecting the dignity of our members and their families. Finally, it is in our union's DNA that when members are in need, we snap into action and do whatever is necessary to look out for our union family.

Generally, the community services committee's function is to help members utilize their community's various government and voluntary social service agencies to deal with family and personal problems. Since a strike assistance program is nothing more than broadening the local union's community services program, local unions with an established community services committee will have a head start mapping out an effective program to assist members and their families during strikes.

The first step for a local union without a community services committee is to create one as far in advance of a potential strike as possible. It is best to have members and a chairperson who are not overly extended with other union affairs. Also, it is essential that committee members be briefed on their responsibilities, emphasizing regular attendance at meetings and the need to develop a well-rounded community services program as soon as practical. The size of the committee is a matter of local judgment, often found in your bylaws. It should be large enough to be representative of the membership yet small enough to function efficiently.



# Overview of Layoffs, Closings, and Strikes

To understand the role of the community services committee in providing strike assistance, we must define strikes and other situations in which members may find themselves.

## Layoffs

There are different legal definitions of the term “layoff”. Most include the following:

- 1) The temporary or permanent termination of a job by an employer’s initiative. A layoff does not happen when a worker quits.
- 2) Most layoffs (but not all) come from an economic downturn or the employer’s desire to reduce costs. In recent years, there have been more reported layoffs caused by natural disasters.

## Worksite Closings

There are some specific legal definitions of a worksite closing that vary. Still, the most common one is that it is a shutdown of the employment site. It is commonly referred to as a “plant closing,” but it is not a term that is limited to factories. Offices, hotels, casinos, laboratories, and any number of other worksites can close.

## Strikes/Lockouts

A strike happens when workers collectively decide to withhold their labor after authorization from the International Union, UAW. In the UAW, strikes are governed by the UAW Constitution, including Articles 12, 16, and 50.

In contrast to a strike, a lockout happens when the employer refuses to let workers work. It is basically when the boss strikes the workers. In a strike, workers decide when we go out. In a lockout, the employer decides. Honeywell is a known example of a recent lockout. In New York and Indiana, UAW members were locked out for nine months after they voted against contract ratification. Further negotiations failed. By working with a mediator, the parties arrived at an agreement that ended the lockout.

These situations are different, but all three involve disruptions of wages and routines for our members. They also can create high levels of stress for our members and their families. There are resources available to help members adjust in all these situations. Local unions rely on community services committees to be the conduit for connecting members with what they may need.



# Local Union Strike Assistance Programs

An effective strike assistance program, like an insurance policy, anticipates and prepares for the future. As far in advance as possible, your committee must answer these basic questions:

- What are likely to be the most common needs encountered by members and their families, especially in a long strike?
- What union resources do we have at our disposal?
- How can we best organize to help our members and their families?
- What about community resources, such as services provided by health and welfare agencies?
- Where are these agencies located?
- Who are the people in charge of these agencies?
- What are the eligibility requirements for various kinds of help?

Committee members must familiarize themselves with the community's government and private social service agencies and their directors and staff and federal, state, and local assistance programs. While the details of each local union's strike assistance program will vary, reflecting different conditions, the most efficient programs are based on the following principles:

- 1) Local unions with active community services committees and ongoing programs are the locals best prepared to fulfill their responsibilities to their members during a strike.
- 2) Always plan for a strike.
- 3) When union funds are used for strike-related activities, they must be disbursed according to established union policies and procedures.
- 4) Family and personal problems—marital difficulties, parenting problems, alcohol or drug abuse—are likely to worsen during the stress of a strike. So, a well-planned strike assistance program considers the need for helping members get high-quality professional help with these problems.
- 5) Do not make promises that can't be fulfilled.



# Developing A Plan

Months before contract expiration, it is difficult to know whether a strike will happen. But strike preparation does not start when workers know a strike is imminent. It starts long beforehand. To win a strike, it takes preparation. And often, it is that preparation that shows employers we are serious about our position and therefore urges settlement at the bargaining table.

## **Six to one month before possible strike:**

- Strengthen relationships with community agencies. Reestablish contacts, learn about their missions and programs, and communicate the values of labor unions.
- Build new relationships with community groups. In our communities, we have many of them, from parent associations fighting for public education to constituency groups within the AFL-CIO such as Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) or A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI). Create a list of these groups, their descriptions, and leadership contact information. Survey membership to find out in which groups they participate.
- Members of the community services committee should get training on: Strike administration (offered through the Secretary-Treasurer's office), an overview of protocols on connecting members with resources, and setting up a peer-to-peer network (offered through the Education Department/Community Services Department).
- Work in partnership with the education and consumer affairs committees to offer financial planning workshops to members, helping them begin saving six months before a strike.

## **One month before contract expiration:**

- Work with local union leadership to create private communication spaces at the local union.
- Gather current information regarding available services from community agencies (including criteria, hours of operation, etc.).
- Create documents (brochures, social media graphics, etc.) to help members understand the available resources (to be used in the event of a strike).
- Set up a peer-to-peer network using current membership information. This differs from a member-to-member network, as contact will occur over the phone, picket line, or union hall.

## **During the strike:**

- Set up a clear and consistent schedule. This should indicate when someone from the community services committee will be available at the local union hall (or another specified area) to help members navigate available services.
- Set up a schedule to regularly visit the picket line and connect with every member.

The community services committee must regularly report to the local union officers, executive board, and membership of the steps taken to assist members.



# Peer-to-Peer Support

Through a closing or layoff or working on a picket line during a strike, workers endure stress. The amount and their reaction can vary depending on their health, life experiences, and financial security. Our job as good community services committee members is to be aware that stress affects people differently. There is no one-size-fits-all reaction to the same event. Our job is to keep in contact with all members and connect them with appropriate services. The stress emanates from many “unknowns.” They may wonder: How long will the layoff or strike, or lockout last? Will I find other work? How will I pay my bills? In the context of strikes, it is good to create a “buddy system” where a more senior member can pair up with a newer member to answer their questions and check on them. Stress is not always limited to the member – it can strain family relationships, or family can add additional stress. Finally, stress can manifest itself as physical symptoms such as high blood pressure and alcohol abuse.

So how do we help our union family through these tough times? It begins with a structure that emphasizes one-on-one communication. For this structure to succeed, the community services committee must be observant, knowledgeable, and discreet. This can be the most challenging and vital part of our work in the community services committee. But we also have a lot of experience in this area and have learned some lessons.

**IT IS DIFFICULT TO KNOW WHETHER A STRIKE WILL HAPPEN. BUT STRIKE PREPARATION DOES NOT START WHEN WORKERS KNOW A STRIKE IS IMMINENT. IT STARTS LONG BEFOREHAND.**



# Peer-to-Peer Support

So, what does peer-to-peer support look like?

**Get trained.** First, get training. If your committee members do not have experience giving peer-to-peer support, then ask for training. If you have an EAP representative who is a union member, ask that individual to meet with your committee to learn basic skills. For example, your committee members can get training on how to approach members in distress. Successful approaches might include saying: “I sense that you might need help. I think (the Red Cross) can help you” or “I know a family that went to (United Way), and they found it helpful.”

**Checkup.** Always remember to take the initiative and check on everybody. Strikes can be sudden and very energetic, and it’s easy for someone to slip through the cracks. Make sure everyone gets checked on, especially if the strike is protracted. If you learn that a member struggles with food insecurity, deliver a bag of donations instead of waiting for the member to come to the food pantry.

**Communicate.** The best way to counter rumors is to keep information flowing. If members get used to receiving updates from Facebook, texts, etc., they will naturally adopt a routine to seek updates. That means constantly creating updates – whether it is about the status of the strike or new resources available.

**Involve families.** Encourage members to talk with their families. Family members will also have questions and stress. Remind members that the services available to them through outside groups and agencies are not charity. UAW members have contributed to these organizations through fundraisers and pay taxes that support local agencies. Destigmatize peer-to-peer support. When your local leadership vocally supports it and recommends members to use the system, it goes a long way toward getting members comfortable trusting and using the process.

**Follow-up.** Always follow up after suggesting services. We never pry for details, but it is good to let members know that you remain available to support them.

Here are some tips:

- 1) Ensure every member has contact with a member on your committee. It is easy for someone to fall through the cracks because routines are different during a strike. Meet often with other members of your committee to review membership lists.
- 2) Set schedules and follow patterns so members know how to find you. Suppose that members know that community services committee members are at the hall on mornings from 10 to noon and helping out at the picket lines from three to six. They will start to look for you during those times.



# Peer-to-Peer Support

- 3) An excellent way to check in with everyone is to visit the picket line and hand out snacks or water. Don't wait for people to come to your table or tent – carry a basket of snacks or water and approach everyone on the picket line. After a while, you can tell if someone is having a rough time or withdrawing.
- 4) Finally, committee members must respect the privacy and dignity of our members. Members may talk to you about sensitive matters. Our goal is to assist and be aware of circumstances enough to provide helpful assistance. We should not gossip or share information beyond what is necessary to do our good work.

We are neither counselors nor psychologists. We should be clear about what we should and should not do. Here are things we can do:

- Motivate members to seek help
- We should always observe and be proactive. If you think someone is in distress, check in on them!
- We should listen – that means ask open-ended questions, make eye contact and show empathy
- If your worksite has Employee Assistance Program or EAP reps, enlist their help and seek advice. Though they are not mental health professionals, they are trained to refer members to seek help. Same with local union chaplains who are trained to provide comfort to members.

In contrast, there are also things that we absolutely should not be doing:

- ✗ We do not diagnose or treat members
- ✗ We do not isolate ourselves or wait for everyone to come to us. Be available and initiate conversations.
- ✗ When we engage with members, we do not pass judgment. We do not say things like, “we told you to start saving six months ago.” We do not interrupt them or diminish their pain.



# Helping Members **Manage Their Finances**

Without question, loss of income can create multiple issues for our members. We can prepare them by working with them long in advance on basic financial planning skills. It is impossible to create a rainy-day fund when it has already started raining. Saving \$50 a week adds up to \$2600 after one year.

It is helpful if the local union education committee or consumer affairs committee offers workshops on this subject. “Money Matters” is a workshop available through the UAW Education Department that teaches members methods for saving money and handling their finances. You can request this workshop by contacting your local union president. Many credible websites or news organizations also offer tips to consumers. Information can also be distributed in newsletters or on your local’s social media channels. When a strike is possible, local union leadership should advise members to start saving at least six months before the potential strike.

Another way to help members mitigate the instability is to help them communicate with their lenders about the situation. We have sample letters that members can use.

Here is a sample letter that members can use to send to creditors. This can go to your landlord, mortgage company, utilities, or credit card companies. The end goal of creditors is to get paid, so some are patient with customers during hardships.

Date:

Creditor Name/Address

RE: Account Number

Dear (Creditor Name):

I am writing this letter to request a temporary change in the repayment terms of my account. Since I have become unemployed due to layoff, I have had to make some financial adjustments.

I do have some income from \_\_\_\_\_. However, when I carefully examined my financial situation and made a strict budget for my basic expenses, it also became necessary to ask each of my creditors to accept reduced payments.

I would appreciate your cooperation in making this payment plan work. In place of my regular monthly payment of \$\_\_\_\_\_ due on the \_\_\_\_\_, I am requesting that you accept payments of \$\_\_\_\_\_ paid on the \_\_\_\_\_. I assure you that I will add no further debt until my financial situation improves.

I will begin making normal payments again as soon as possible. I regret that I have to ask for this consideration and hope that you will understand. When there is a change in my situation, I will notify you immediately.

Your understanding during this difficult time is most appreciated.

(Signature)



# Helping Members **Manage Their Finances**

This letter is one that the local union leadership can prepare for members to use during a strike.



UAW Local Union XXX  
1111 Main Street  
City, State Zip Code

To whom it may concern:

Please be advised that \_\_\_\_\_, social security # \_\_\_\_\_

Is currently involved in a labor dispute and is receiving strike benefits of \$275.00 per week. Your cooperation in this matter is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

(CS Chairperson - LUXXX) (Financial Secretary - LUXXX) (President - LUXXX)

## Family **Needs**

Because we are so focused on our members' needs, it is sometimes easy to forget that members have families. Members are often the primary support for their families. The stress and uncertainty of a strike can adversely affect spouses and children. That stress can become tension and strife. Committee members must be fully aware of this potential and do everything possible to alleviate the stress and help educate family members to understand the strike's goals.

There are many options available to the committee. Still, the appropriateness of what to do will depend on assessing the level of stress they are perceiving.

For example, the committee may set up a daycare with volunteers from the community while members walk the picket line. Or the committee may work with close community allies to create support groups to help spouses or children talk through their issues. In general, the uncertainty of the strike can be mitigated by giving family members a role to support the strike. For instance, teenage children can help create picket signs, young children can help write chants, and spouses can help distribute at the food pantry.

Under certain conditions, support for children in their own homes is provided under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program.



# Finding Services in the Community

## Social Services (Public Assistance or Welfare) Agency

The committee should meet with the county, city, or township's social service agencies to:

- Determine the policy of the department under which public assistance is given
- Set up a uniform referral system between the local union and the agency
- Establish a special office, if necessary, to expedite assistance to workers
- Arrange for the elimination of unjust restrictions or procedures which will hamper the effective and humane distribution of assistance
- Ensure that temporary emergency assistance is rendered before investigation where the need exists
- Work out a system of clearance of unique problems as they arise by the local union committee and the agency
- Arrange with the agency to participate in a surplus food program

## Other Community Services

Under federal law, the government may deny food stamps (SNAP benefits) to the family members of striking workers. This law was challenged and upheld by the US Supreme Court in 1988. However, there are a few exceptions, under which households of strikers may receive these benefits:

- Locked out or permanently replaced strikers who otherwise meet other program financial requirements
- Eligible for or receiving benefits before a strike
- Exempt from work registration the day before the strike

## Loan Finance Companies and Credit Unions

The committee should contact the various credit and loan companies and the credit unions in the community to request that they declare a moratorium on payments. Circumstances may arise requiring the need for legal services, for example, in dealing with eviction. In many communities, such service is rendered by a legal resource agency supported either by the city, state, federal government, or United Way.



# Relationships with **Community Partners**

To be effective in looking out for the welfare of our members, the community services committee should have been engaged for a long time with community partners. That means we know who runs those programs and how to reach them. That we are aware of their programs and participate when appropriate. We do this for several reasons.

First, whenever we interact with outside groups, we are representing the UAW. That means our good work and intentions and good relationship building will only improve their perception of unions and the UAW. Remember that people form opinions based upon impressions, and you have an opportunity to make a solid and powerful impression with outside groups whenever you volunteer with or work in conjunction with another group.

The second reason why these relationships are meaningful is that they inform us of what is available. It could mean winter coats for school-aged children or job counseling help or assistance with home repairs. Many social groups offer programs, and it is only through our relationships with them that we learn what they are and what eligibility requirements exist.

Finally, we do not often think about it, but these groups are often powerful messengers in our communities. We are talking about churches and volunteer groups. If you are in a difficult strike in a community, don't you want your community on your side? Keep in mind that the employer will probably be exerting its pressure to neutralize support for the strike. When we develop these relationships, we can talk effectively and at length with our community partners to understand and support our members. When the Teamsters went on strike against UPS in 1997, the drivers would talk to their customers on the route. They told them about the negotiations and the possibility of the strike. When the strike happened, the public was on the drivers' side because of those earlier communications.

- AFL-CIO Constituency Groups (such as APRI, CLUW, Pride at Work, etc.)
- Faith-based agencies such as Catholic Social Services or Jewish Social Services
- United Way
- Public social services agencies such as Department of Family Services
- Private social services agencies
- Veterans groups
- Food pantries



# United Way/AFL-CIO Community Services

Our union has had a long tradition of protecting member interests beyond the workplace. Back in the 1930s, we saw some organizations, such as the Red Cross, who refused to assist strikers' families. Yet, these groups would look to our members as sources for their fundraising.

As a result, the labor movement prioritized creating relief committees because we could not rely on existing organizations to support our members. We also reached out and partnered with some organizations where we could. From this emerged our long-standing partnership with the United Way, which has formally existed since 1946. Some examples of the benefits of our partnership with United Way are:

- They employ labor-appointed staff who provide continuous information and referral services to union members and their families, laid-off workers, and members on strike
- They implement programs such as food drives, ramp builds, holiday projects, etc.
- They conduct training programs such as U-Can and coordinate labor's participation in United Way campaigns



# Red Flags: When to Refer for Help

Sometimes the help members need it's just as simple as knowing that an area church has winter coats for young children. In other situations, our members may need more than information or tangible goods. That is when we should refer them to professionals who can evaluate and help them. This is especially the case when you know or suspect any of the following:

- 1) Substance abuse is an issue, either abuse of alcohol or drugs. It could even be prescribed drugs. Abuse of substances can quickly escalate and produce grave consequences for the member.
- 2) A member indicates ongoing deterioration in their life. If members have enough insight to identify this in their lives, then we should take them at their word and connect them with services.
- 3) Physical complaints. Stress and anxiety often manifest in physical symptoms: high blood pressure, migraines, back pain, and insomnia.
- 4) Someone threatens harm to themselves or others. We cannot overlook statements of self-harm or harm to others. It's not about your assessment of whether the member is likely to follow through or not – you aren't an expert in that kind of behavior. It would be best if you recommend that they speak with a professional who can help them.
- 5) When a member engages in aggressive or abusive behavior, whether it is words or acts, we need to take that as a serious red flag. We certainly don't want anything to escalate and cause permanent harm to anyone.
- 6) You are unsure. Again, we are not mental health professionals. All we can do is refer and encourage members to take advantage of the referral. We can follow up with the member. It is up to the professional, working with the member, to decide the best course of action. Better to be cautious on this front and refer even if you are unsure.



# Conclusion

A well-prepared and thorough community services committee can make a significant difference in being successful in a strike. In the case of a strike, ensuring that the membership is educated, protected, and supported creates an additional layer of strength that makes UAW members a powerful force.

As a reminder, the UAW Education Department has a selection of workshops that can assist local unions and their community services committees in preparing for the possibility of a strike:

- Community Services Committees
- Layoff, Closings, And Strikes
- Money Matters

To request these workshops, follow protocol and contact your local union president.

All questions regarding strike pay should be directed to the Strike Assistance Department, under the Secretary-Treasurer. Please see [uaw.org](http://uaw.org) for the most up-to-date information regarding strike benefits.











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