

# Settling Conflicts Between Members

■ Co-workers Jack Valeri and Tony Kellerman are at it again — the harsh words, the blaming and then the uncomfortable silence. The whole unit goes through this once or twice a week and everyone's sick of it. They want the union to do something about it.

■ Kathy East and Jessica North both bid on the same job. Kathy got the job because she was qualified and had more seniority, just as outlined in the union contract. Jessica believes she was better qualified and she's giving Kathy the cold shoulder, making it difficult for Kathy to do her new job. "This is all the union's doing," fumes Jessica.

■ "Those young punks get all the perks around here and us old guys are just chopped liver," complains Juan about the younger workers in his shop who he claims get the better schedules. "I'm not giving them an ounce of advice — let them screw up on their own!"

**T**hese three examples of conflict between members are three potential headaches for the union steward. But before you reach for the aspirin, consider:

## What's the Source of Conflict?

Figuring out the source of conflict can help guide you to the best approach.

■ **Sometimes people just don't like each other**, as in Jack and Tony's case. The dislike may be rooted in something that happened between them, or it may be completely irrational — "I don't like his looks."

Since there's nothing in the union contract that says you must like your co-workers, point out to Jack and Tony the consequences of their battle. First, they are going to attract the wrath of management because their spats are disrupting work, giving management a clear shot at disciplining them. Second, they are making things tough for everyone around them — and that's just no good.

Not only should you talk to the two, you also should organize others to deliver the same message to them. Once you've delivered it, other co-workers will be more willing to speak up to them. If Jack

and Tony hear the message from enough co-workers, it just may sink in — hopefully before they get disciplined.

■ **A union issue forces the conflict**, as in the case with Kathy and Jessica. The union attempts to negotiate the fairest contract possible and enforce that contract fairly, but it doesn't mean that everyone will get what they want. It's a union contract based on what's best for the group as a whole — not a contract for each individual member's happiness.

Sit down with Jessica and acknowledge her disappointment. Go over what the bidding and promotion system would be like *without* a contract — the rampant inequity, the favoritism, the whims of management. Get her to put herself in Kathy's shoes — Kathy has worked long and hard and is looking for a way up like any good worker would. Kathy doesn't deserve wrath for that.

Jessica may not initially buy it, but it's important time spent to set the record straight.

A lot of other union issues can force conflict between members, as well — a close vote on ratifying a contract, for example. Keeping members informed every step of the way is the best way to lessen the conflict people feel towards

each other. It will also help to look for and focus on the things on which people agree, not disagree.

■ **Management stirs up discord within the unit** and members like Juan direct their anger at other workers, rather than at management. It's the age-old "divide and conquer" strategy and management can target it across many different lines. Some of the most common include: younger workers against older workers; male workers against female workers; day shift workers against night shift workers; whites against people of color.

Investigate the practices management is using and blow the whistle on them in a public way. Rally the unit around fighting the real culprit — not each other, but management. That may mean talking to the different groups involved and pointing out the inequity. Even if some group is benefitting from the inequity — say in Juan's case, the younger workers get a better schedule — point out that such a "benefit" will be short-lived. A management that uses favoritism really has only one favorite — management. They will never allow any group of workers to get too much. More importantly, the union won't tolerate management favoritism.

You can expect one group or the other might still continue their complaining about the other for awhile, but it's important for the union to take a stand on fairness in enforcing the contract.

If these approaches to member versus member conflict don't yield results — go ahead, reach for that aspirin.

Seriously, your efforts won't resolve every conflict, but they will gain the respect of the many other union members who are not in conflict.

— Pat Thomas. The author is on the staff of the Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO.