



# Building Member Power: How do we add Members to our Workplace?

**I**f you want to strengthen union power in your workplace and, therefore, have more power at the bargaining table, the more union members there are the better.

Workplaces where everyone belongs to the union (called “wall-to-wall” workplaces), generally have more

power to negotiate a good contract than offices where some employees are in the union and some are not. So how do you add members to your union? A quick primer is below.

## **Organizing 101**

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) clarifies workers’ right to organize unions and bargain collectively. In labor terms “organizing” means to organize a union. It can also mean adding more members to an existing union.

Under Section 7 of the NLRA, you have the legal right to join or support a union and to engage in collective bargaining. These rights include:

*“ . . . to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organization, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection, and shall also have the right to refrain from any or all of such activities except to the extent that such right may be affected by an agreement requiring membership in a labor organization as a condition of employment as authorized in section 8(a)(3). ”*

## **Organizing Committee**

When organizing employees at your office, the first step is to establish a two-way communication system between the unorganized workers and the union. Workplace leaders need to be identified and an organizing committee is then formed.

Ideally, the committee will be representative of all departments, reflecting the shifts, locations, racial, ethnic and gender diversity. The committee must be educated about workers’ rights to organize and understand the principals of democracy.

The committee gathers workplace structure information including: departments, work areas, shifts, jobs and employee information, name, address, phone, shift, job title, and department for each worker, along with all the employer information such as locations, parent company, products, customers and union history.

## **Strategy**

The committee devises a strategy for developing a list of “issues,” “demands,” or the improvements the group is organizing to achieve. The next step is to sign up a majority of your co-workers by having them complete a membership card. The goal is to sign up a sizable majority.

By law, there only has to be a 30 percent showing of interest. However, the campaign’s success can rest largely on whether or not the percentage of interest is as high as possible. This process should be done quickly and prior to sending a “Demand for Recognition” letter to the employer.

## **PERC**

The signed cards are used to petition the Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) to hold an election. It takes the labor board several weeks to determine who is eligible to vote and schedule the election.

During this period of time, the campaign must intensify and the committee must work very hard to inoculate the employees and organize a solid plan, in case the employer tries to launch an anti-union campaign. It can be an uncertain time, especially if employees have not been properly prepared for the employer’s aggressive stance.

Winning a union election requires a strong, diverse organizing committee with a clear list of issues or demands. It must also be strong in educating, communicating and inoculating the employees with factual and positive information about the benefits of having a union.

An election is held and conducted by the labor board. If the union wins, the employer must recognize and bargain with the union. Getting a union or adding members, is only the beginning of the hard work. Bargaining a first contract is long, tedious and difficult work. Statistically, the odds of getting a first contract are very low without a proper committee and a good communication system. Workers must be mobilized to support the union negotiations and work together to achieve the mutual goals.

However, your efforts in building a strong, educated and powerful membership will yield better results than bargaining a contract for only a handful of members across a bargaining unit. — *By Roberta Burnett, Local 17 Union Representative*