



Draft Code of Conduct for Union Members Involved in Labor-Management Health and Safety Committees

Many local unions have had years of experience with labor-management health and safety committees. Gains in workplace health and safety has resulted from having such a committee where the union can raise and discuss its concerns. In some cases, however, management has used these committees to stall, redirect attention away from union concerns, and limit progress in addressing union issues. Every local union member participating on a labor-management health and safety committee should be aware of the pitfalls of these committees, and what he or she can do to best represent and pursue the interest of the union and its members.

This is a draft code of conduct for union members who are involved in labor-management health and safety committee activities. Note that this code is not much different from what we would expect of a union member in other settings – especially when union members are engaged in any type of discussion with management.

Many consultants in the labor-management field have tried to convince unions that we are in a new era – a new period of history – and that the code of conduct for us as union members, therefore, has to be different. They focus on “trust,” “listening,” “respect in meetings,” and “looking out for the needs of everyone.” But despite all the rhetoric, there are certain basic union values, and a code of conduct that goes with them, that cannot be abandoned.

The following are ideas for that code of conduct as it relates to union members serving on labor-management health and safety committees.

1) **Always remember that a union approach to health and safety that is different from a management approach to health and safety**

Union approaches to health and safety recognize that workplace injuries and illnesses are caused by exposure to hazards and that the goal of all health, safety, and environmental efforts must be to identify and eliminate or reduce hazards. Management approaches often blame those who are exposed to hazards – the workers – for job injuries.

A union approach views health and safety hazards as anything in the workplace that can damage a worker’s physical or emotional health – including toxic chemicals, unsafe equipment, poor ergonomic job design as well as understaffing, long work hours, speed-up, heavy workload, rapid work pace, and other work organization issues. Management generally seeks to limit the definition of health and safety and often resists, for example, dealing with the health and safety impacts of how work is being organized or restructured.

Union approaches support the “hierarchy of controls” in hazard control and prevention, which promotes hazard elimination or engineering controls over the use of personal protective equipment. Management approaches often promote the use of personal protective equipment as the preferred way of addressing workplace hazards.

These differences are reflected in everything from how health and safety problems are defined, to the solutions that get promoted. Union representatives on labor-management committees must pursue union-advocated solutions to the problems that the union has identified and defined.

- 2) **When in labor-management meetings, stick to the union agenda. If you are not sure what the union agenda is or how to respond to something that management is saying, call a caucus or wait until the next break.**

It is important for the union representatives on labor-management committees to act together when dealing with management. This means that significant disagreements should be saved for caucus rather than being aired in front of management. All union representatives should aggressively pursue the union agenda. If the discussion moves to something that the union is not prepared for, a caucus should be called or the issue should be tabled.

Remember that the only way to adequately prepare our agendas and strategies for the labor-management meeting is to hold union-only health and safety committee meetings at least as frequently as labor-management meetings. This means that all local unions should have functioning local union health and safety committees.

- 3) **When in caucus, talk about all your hesitations, concerns, etc.**

While it is important to work together when in meetings with management, it is equally important that any disagreements be aired in caucus. People should feel free to raise issues and concerns in caucus; in fact, they should see this as their responsibility. This is the only way to build unity of action.

- 4) **Evaluate all proposals and ideas for their impact on the members and the union, and do not endorse “solutions” that can hurt members and the union**

It is critical that ideas, proposals, and activities be evaluated for their impact on the members and the union in both the short and long term. This takes more time than simply looking at “how it affects us today.” There are ways to fix one problem that can create other problems for the members or for the union.

- 5) **Report to the union on all labor-management safety and health committee meetings and activities, and don’t keep secrets with management**

The union cannot act in a unified manner if it doesn’t know what is going on. It is therefore important for union participants on labor-management committees to regularly

communicate with the union leadership about what is going on in their workplace-wide or department-wide labor-management health and safety committee meetings. Don't keep secrets with management. Frequent, full and open two-way communication and discussion with union leadership and membership is the only way to keep things on a union track and build the support needed to take on and win health and safety improvements that management may be resisting.

6) No involvement, direct or indirect, in disciplining other members

There are many ways, besides the formal discipline procedure, for members to be involved in disciplining other members. Management may ask for union buy-in into policies that involve disciplining, drug testing or counseling workers when they report an injury or accident. These policies do nothing to make workplaces safer – they drive down injury reporting and punish workers rather than identify and correct hazardous workplace conditions.

Behavior-based safety programs can result in members being identified for engaging in “unsafe acts,” something resulting in discipline. In addition to promoting the disciplining of our members, these types of programs can also create divisions within the union. Union representatives should oppose “blame-the-worker” safety programs and advocate for a comprehensive worksite safety and health program that emphasizes finding and fixing hazards.

7) UNITY

This cannot be said too many times or in too many ways. Building unity with union members (within and outside of the health and safety committees) must always be on the minds of any union representative serving on labor-management health and safety committees.

8) Take good notes

As part of keeping an overall record, and to serve the strategic process, it is important that there is accurate reporting of committee meetings and activities. Never rely on management to keep the only minutes of a meeting.

9) Never go into any discussion alone

You can't be a union if you are by yourself. We should always try to make sure that when we are in discussions with management, there is at least one other union member present. This helps build the presence of the union, it allows us to demonstrate unity and it gives more than one union “head” to generate ideas and evaluate actions.

10) Ask for help when you need it

No one union health and safety committee member knows everything about the health and safety concerns in their workplace. However, when we communicate with each

other, involve the members, local union leadership, and international union staff, solutions can be developed that will address health and safety hazards while involving membership and building the union.

This list is a draft that can be added to or changed. But when your local has done that, let us know about your suggestions as well as print up the finished product, post it around the union hall and make sure that all our members who are involved in labor-management health and safety committees have a copy and know what is expected of them.