



The union team in the workplace

Harassment is a buzzword often used for “if my supervisor would just stay out of my face, I can get the job done.” Good arbitration advocates and stewards know that harassment, as a charge against management, is often times difficult to establish. Often it’s like beauty being in the eye of the beholder—what’s harassment to one is nuisance to another.

Years ago, a friend of mine told me the story of representing a letter carrier who had been removed and whose ethnicity was identifiable by his appearance. During the course of my friend’s steward investigation, he found himself interviewing the letter carrier who had been removed. After tediously going through all aspects of the relevant circumstances, my friend said to the letter carrier, “It sounds like they’re doing this to you as a form of harassment.” To which the letter carrier, who was originally from another country, said to my friend, “You know, it’s funny how people in this country perceive harassment. In this country, when there is harassment, people here tend to blame the harasser, whereas in the county I came from, in such circumstances, people blame the person being harassed.” The message the letter carrier was trying to give my friend was that one can only be harassed if one allows himself to be harassed. Sometimes true—sometimes easier said than done.

First of all, harassment rarely occurs when all the carriers on the workroom floor feel like they are part of a team, the union team. They may believe individually that they are the only person who knows anything worth knowing about their route or assignment, but everyone around them is part of the team. Branch leadership knows that this is an important aspect in assuring that managers don’t think they can improperly intimidate someone into skipping their lunches and breaks, jumping high fences with a single vault and using rocket-powered roller skates on the park and loop swings, only to meet the DOIS-falsely-predicted workload and time for the route. Giving a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay and providing a reasonable effort are the standards for letter carriers, nothing more and nothing less.

Point number two—an analogy to real harassment can be drawn when thinking of the high school bully. He only got away with his intimidation because he knew which individuals would cower before his tactics and which ones would not. He invariably only picked on ones who would buckle to his attempts at intimidation. Same thing works with managers who are guilty of attempts at bullying carriers into either running their routes unsafely or not seeking their steward, or both. They only do it when they know they can get away with it.

Understanding this, NALC branches ensure that everyone on the floor feels a part of the union team through dialogue in and out of branch meetings, sporadic get-togethers, picnics, family nights, ball games, etc. They educate the members to not argue with managers over workload, simply to give them their reasonable estimate, ask, “What do you want me to do if you [the manager] are wrong [call in, bring the mail back or deliver it]?” and make sure to ask for a shop steward if there is a contract violation. The stewards are trained to process the right grievances when necessary. Carriers, when approached by such managers in the office or the street, don’t act intimidated, but have a smile on their face, because they know the union is behind them as long as they give a reasonable effort and a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay. They are in charge of their feelings, not the manager.

Some reading this will say, “That’s the way my office is.” Others won’t. For those in the latter category, remember: the folks in the first category didn’t get to be that way because “Super Steward” came down from the skies. They got to be that way because they worked and strategized together to make it that way, as a team, the union team.

Do not interpret this article as suggesting that I do not believe that real harassment exists. Quite the contrary—sexual harassment and other overt forms of intimidation should be fought by every legitimate means possible. But we also need to have our “ducks in a row” from the standpoint of strategic planning for dealing with the average daily interchange between a carrier and a manager. ☒