



How GSU Local 4 mobilized and made change happen at work

By Steve Torgerson, GSU staff rep

In Fall 2013 the Local 4 membership met to prepare for negotiations as they had many times before, but this time their frustration was building against a Company they felt wasn't listening to them. They agreed at their Fall meeting that bargaining would be different this time. They elected their bargaining committee, focused on the changes they wanted in their new collective agreement, and agreed that doing things differently included organizing themselves internally so the Company would have no choice but to listen to them.

The members and executive of Local 4 tried many things. Some worked and some didn't work so well. But they kept at it and built on their successes year after year until they began to see improvements in member engagement and participation.

Fast forward to August 2022, Local 4 members voted to accept a tentative settlement that will bring changes to their new collective agreement that signal a major victory for members. With improvements in various areas that include wages, shift premiums, sick leave and medical benefits, Local 4 members know that their years of hard work have paid off.

I've summarized some of their successful strategies into four broad categories below.

Communication

They found that people at work were not receiving updates and meeting information. This led to a focused effort to increase two-way communication in the membership with their executive and GSU staff. This began with an...

- Overhaul of the union bulletin board in the office that included a seniority list, meeting notices, copies of the collective agreement and the executive's contact information.
- Local 4 business cards with one side having a list of the executive and their cell phones numbers and the back of the card having their GSU staff representatives' information.
- With 182 members we have roughly 145 personal email addresses and 110 cell phone numbers. And during bargaining we sent bargaining updates via text message to reach more members.

Representation

Members were not aware of their rights and did not know who they should talk to if they had an issue, and the executive members felt like there were not enough of them to cover all the members in the local.

- The executive worked on a new member orientation that has been provided to all new members within the first week of their hire since 2018. This includes a copy of their collective agreement, union card to sign and information about who their executive and department reps are.
- Along with electing an executive, each Fall they have made a goal of electing a representative from every department. This is allowing issues and concerns to bubble up to instead stop at the coffee break the department rep knows they pass along the concerns.

Talk talk talk

Even with everyone in one plant it seemed like news and information wasn't being passed around the membership effectively. If something was happening or a meeting was being called there were whole departments that wouldn't hear about it. This seemed to be a communication issue and the executive felt that person-to-person contact deserved special focus.

Emails, text messages and posters in the lunch room are good but they can't beat face-to-face communication.

- Electing department representatives to help share and send information increased engagement and feedback.
- Always highlighting the option of talking to your executive or bargaining committee members has led to elected officers seeing a big increase in members' conversations.
- There have been a number of department-wide meetings called by members to talk about schedules, wages and workplace issues. This direct action is from members talking at work and realizing their issues are shared by others.

Speaking up

Years ago members seemed to be frustrated that things were not getting better and the same issues kept coming back around. It seemed members raised an issue but didn't take the next step to actually raise the issue with the company.

- When elected officers were approached by members with an issue, they would offer the member the option of talking to the company before filing a grievance. We even bargained language in the collective agreement that informal discussions about an issue don't reduce the time limits to file a grievance.

- With department meetings, direct conversations with managers and challenging company decisions, members are seeing the benefits of speaking up when something isn't right.

The above changes that have taken place over the years were driven by members' concerns. They seem like a bit of a no brainer and they weren't earth shattering when we began to try them out, but they helped the members in Local 4 realize the power they have working together and how loud their voice can be when they say the same things.

A focused and active membership meant the Local's bargaining committee can enter bargaining knowing that not only will they will hear from members if things aren't going well, but they will also hear from them when things are going in the right direction.

A mobilized Local takes work but the result is a membership that is engaged, active and willing to stand together every day.

Other stories

Food Banks serving more people despite rising costs (*Saskatoon*)

While the top 1% and corporations continue to benefit from rising inflation by siphoning record-breaking profits from working-people, the rest of us are feeling the inflationary pressures that are driving up the cost of groceries, fuel, and life's everyday essentials. A direct result of this are more folks in Saskatchewan having to turn to their local Food Bank to meet everyday needs. Access to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food is a basic human right, and is linked to economic stability and long-term health. Yet the Saskatoon Food Bank is seeing the opposite as client intake increased in 2022.

<https://www.ckom.com/2022/10/07/food-bank-serving-more-people-despite-rising-costs/>

Selling Off Saskatchewan (*Saskatchewan*)

We often get poetic and nostalgic when we talk about the value and beauty of our prairie grass lands in Saskatchewan. These lands since confederation have been deemed Crown Land, but for generations beyond that they were the traditional lands of the First Nations. We need to take a long look at how we have changed our Crown lands and how well we have followed the promises made with the First Nations as written in our Treaties. We need to ask ourselves, "Is this what we want to leave for the generations to come?"

<https://saskdispatch.com/articles/view/selling-off-saskatchewan>

Refusing to sell out young workers (*Newfoundland*)

All workers, young and old, deserve respect and to be paid fairly. When workers don't allow themselves be divided by their differences, they are able to secure a collective agreement worth fighting for. A divided union is what the employer wants, and a long, hot summer on the picket line did not break this local's solidarity, all the while building a stronger sense of community.

https://cupe.ca/refusing-sell-out-young-workers-heart-one-cupe-locals-strike?utm_medium=rss

Gen Z Moves to unionize (US)

We have seen unprecedented union organizing at Amazon warehouses in the United States and a streak of Starbucks organizing one after the other. These types of campaigns have been led by a new generation of workers who are successfully pushing back against companies pouring millions of dollars into union avoidance campaigns to keep their unions out.

<https://www.randomlengthsnews.com/archives/2022/09/01/gen-z-moves-to-unionize/41375>