



Steve Torgerson is the general secretary of the Grain and General Services Union (ILWU•Canada). He joined the GSU as a staff representative in 2007.

In March 2023, Torgerson was appointed general secretary of the union, which is the chief executive officer position in the organization.

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GENERAL SECRETARY'S AUTUMN 2024 REPORT

One day longer. **ONE DAY STRONGER.**

This is a slogan we often use on picket lines to remind ourselves that each day on the picket line strengthens our resolve and power. But it's not just about the picket line—it applies to our daily work as union members in GSU. Every time we learn something new or educate ourselves, we grow stronger. Every time we welcome a new union member, we grow stronger. And every time we file a grievance or challenge our employers, we grow stronger.

This only works if we push ourselves forward and keep fighting to improve our workplace and union. If we sit back and let things happen—allowing employers to encroach on our family time, letting discipline go unchallenged, and allowing our workplace to be unorganized—we lose the strength we need.

This only works if we keep pushing forward and fighting to improve our workplace and union. If we sit back—allowing employers to take our family time, letting discipline go unchallenged, and leaving our workplace unorganized—we lose the strength we need. When we're unorganized we don't have an awareness of our fellow union members, we don't recognize our shared goals and issues, and without that awareness, we can't come together to drive real change.

This year, 2024, saw GSU members doing the hard day-to-day work of organizing, and they, their

workplace and their union have benefited. One Day Longer, One Day Stronger is how we will achieve the goals we have for ourselves and our labour movement.

GSU in 2024

This year has been a busy one for the union and its locals. From bargaining, education, local business and organizing members, officers and staff have been going the extra mile.

Bargaining is a core pillar of belonging to a union, and it has occupied a lot of our efforts this year. We began the year with the settlement of a long struggle between Viterra and Locals 1 (Operations & Maintenance) and 2 (Regina Head Office). After a few twists and turns, a new collective agreement was ratified by members. The initial excitement was quickly washed away as Viterra immediately changed their tune and refused to pay the 4.5% wage increases to all members of the Locals. Executive grievances were filed and they are in the early stages of arbitration as the Locals hold the company responsible for their shocking about face.

Local 6 (Wild West Steelhead) members ratified a new collective agreement this year.

A new Local 13 (IATSE 395) collective agreement was signed this summer and work continues to fill a needed position in their workplace. Local 9 (Trouw Nutrition) members in Chilliwack, BC ratified a new collective agreement early this summer.

This agreement was reached just at the new mill being constructed on site was being ready for operations and workers were moving over to the new plant. Negotiations took time and extra effort as both sides grappled with the known and unknown effects of opening a new modern mill. Significant gains were made and new ground broke with this settlement as the Local gained some control over overtime in the local.

A Local 19 (Prairie Co-op) bargaining settlement was reached as the final days after bargaining reached impasse and the mandatory cooling-off period was running down. Members rejected the previous offer and held fast to what they identified as critical items for the members. Sometimes you hear that small locals don't have a lot of power or are weak, but Local 19 has shown the opposite. Smaller can mean that you can fully engage with all members and build a tight local that is resilient to employer tactics. That solidarity can amplify the strength and power of a smaller group.

AEA/GSU Local 8 began negotiations early this year by meeting with the company prior to the expiry of the collective agreement. The purpose was to allow time everyone to discuss the issues and try to understand the other side's position and concerns. This was intended to provide a solid foundation for negotiations to begin. However, this did not happen as the company's representatives did not bring up their issues prior to bargaining and instead dropped completely unexpected proposals. Even though the company agreed to try this new approach, the members of Local 8 soon learnt that the company was just going back to their old tricks.

On Aug. 8, 2024, members initiated a 36-day strike after months of fruitless negotiations with their employer, Advance Tank Production Ltd. The strike was born from a unanimous vote, with 100% of the membership authorizing the walkout in a bid for fair wages, benefits, and basic respect.

AEA/Local 8 president Doug Murray, vice-president Scott Weisenberger, and treasurer Doug Kampman were vocal leaders throughout the strike, rallying both members and supporters to continue the fight. Murray's words on the picket line rang true: "Strikes aren't just about getting everything we demand—they're about letting the company know we will fight."

Members voted on a new final offer from the company and ratified a new collective agreement on Sept. 12, 2024. The Local fought hard during bargaining to always put their members' needs first. Even though they weren't able to move their employer and new owner, Terravest Industries, as far as they wanted, they fought the good fight.

Throughout the strike, the union members discovered their true allies—those who stood with them on the picket lines, reaffirming that collective action is essential to bringing about change. Supporters from the labour community and fellow workers demonstrated that when one group fights for justice, everyone benefits.

AEA/GSU Local 8's members should feel proud about fighting back. Standing up to their employer and withdrawing their labour is a testament to their determination and solidarity.

Local 7 (Heartland Livestock) and Local 15 (Nutrien) collective agreements are set to expire on Dec. 31, 2024, with negotiations for their new agreements beginning in early 2025. Work has already underway in both locals to identify issues, research, elect bargaining committees and prepare for negotiations. We often think that collective bargaining is what happens when both sides are sitting at the table hashing out a deal when in fact it is cyclical process that never ends. Once a new deal is reached, work begins to prepare for the next round of negotiations.

Grievances and arbitrations

Grievances and arbitrations are crucial for unions because they serve

as key tool for resolving disputes and ensuring the fair treatment of members. GSU doesn't generally have a lot of grievances, but those we file are important for various reasons. Grievances allow members to formally raise issues about unfair treatment or violations of their rights. If a grievance reaches arbitration, a neutral third party assists in resolving disputes between the GSU and employers. By addressing grievances and resolving disputes through the grievance procedure or arbitration, GSU pushes back against employers that are heavy handed or violate members' rights.

All too often we hear workers say, "Never mind, I don't want to fight it, I'll just go get another job." This mindset may stem from the belief that challenging the employer feels difficult or even impossible. However, this is precisely why we have a grievance process—to offer a structured way to resolve disputes. If we all simply walk away when the employer oversteps, we do nothing to address or fix the problem.

Grievances and arbitration decisions also help unions when it comes to bargaining. While the grievance procedure helps members address any breaches and ensure their collective agreements are followed, it also provides an indication of contract language that might need to be strengthened or included to address an ongoing issue.

Organizing

In 2024, GSU initiated a multi-year plan to strengthen its organizing capabilities both internally and externally. Most importantly, GSU aims to build the skills necessary for organizing new workplaces to join the union. Our focus has been on setting up an organizing committee to serve as the foundation for enhancing our ability to mobilize members around key issues like bargaining, politics, and collective action.

The committee's formation is a thoughtful decision to distribute responsibility, avoid burnout, and ensure that knowledge and skills are shared across a group rather than concentrated on one individual. This approach will also create a cohort of members passionate about organizing and working together to advance GSU's goals.

While the original goal was to establish the organizing committee by Fall 2024, the heavy workload on GSU staff led to delays. Nevertheless, the committee remains a priority, and GSU is committed to launching it in early 2025. The union encourages members and community organizers to step forward and join this effort, reinforcing the belief that true change happens when workers engage with one another.

This organizing effort aligns with GSU's broader mission to empower its members, whether it's through collective bargaining, political engagement, or the creation of policies like those focused on inclusion and solidarity. GSU is dedicated to learning from past struggles, such as strikes and community actions, to strengthen the movement going forward.

Members are reminded that their participation is key, whether it's through joining this committee or participating in other GSU activities. GSU's commitment to building a more organized and active membership will ensure the union is ready to act when necessary and that its strength continues to grow.

Engagement and Internal Organizing

The success of a union relies on many factors, but the involvement of its members and the strength of their internal organization are a sure test. Boosting member engagement by emphasizing, encouraging and promoting member participation in GSU activities has been a major focus this

year, and we are making significant progress in levels of involvement.

Local engagement happens when members identify with their Local and participate in its business. A renewed focus on Local executive and Board of Delegate meetings has seen more members participating in their Local.

Communication is always key to keeping members interested and informed in what is happening with GSU. We have had success with our weekly Tuesday MEMBERS' MEMO (TMM) email and our recent trials of bulk texting, and are continuing to improve. The staff are in the middle of implementing a new piece of software that will manage all our membership records and also allow bulk email and texting. Currently, we use three separate services for these, so bringing them under one roof will streamline the process, reduce errors, and cut costs.

In early 2024 we held our annual training for new officers elected at the Fall annual general membership meetings. This training continues to improve and provide our newest officers with the tools and skills to lead in their workplaces, Locals and Sub-Locals. On November 6 and 7, we will be hosting a two-day workshop for experienced officers and stewards. The workshop will focus on deepening their understanding of grievances, interpreting contract language, handling difficult conversations, and effectively enforcing the collective agreement in the workplace. This training is available for all GSU officers and stewards who want to take the next step in helping their fellow members and improving their workplace.

Where we are today

We find ourselves in the middle of a divided and confused world. The United States is experiencing a highly charged election this year, while in Canada, voters in Saskatchewan and British Columbia will head to the polls this Fall.

This year, GSU has provided a number of stories and articles on our website and the TMM discussing politics and why it is important for GSU members to participate. Some of us may not be a fan of politicians, political parties or the angry and dividing rhetoric used in the media and around the kitchen tables, but this is no reason to step away from politics.

One challenge in discussing politics is that people often take a stance—whether well-informed or not—and are unwilling to discuss, listen to, or consider alternative viewpoints. I encourage all GSU members to be open to listen to others (friends, coworkers, neighbours) and hear what they have to say. Ask questions and insist on real answers from your elected officials at all levels (city, province, country, and union). Evaluate the information you encounter, verify its accuracy, and consider what's important to you as a worker—such as family, affordability, your union, and retirement. Assess where candidates stand on these issues before casting your vote. Don't be taken in by those who offer simple solutions to complex problems, and I also caution against being taken in by those who claim there are mysterious forces engaged in manipulation too complex for us to understand. Question what you hear, be open to new information and don't be afraid to change your mind.

GSU Administration

A lot of work has been done, and is continuing, to move the administration of GSU forward. New policies have been reviewed and implemented, with additional ones in being worked on. Although policy work is not the most exciting aspect of the operation of an organization, I can tell you that it can have a large impact in achieving success or weather a storm. Having practical and reasonable policies in place ensures GSU is preparing for growth and change, all the while

maintaining a solid footing to maintain a strong focus on our members.

Officers and staff have been busy preparing and organizing the next GSU Convention which will be held from March 20 -22, 2024 in Regina, SK at the Royal Hotel.

Our financial picture for the union continues to be good. Events of 2024 have highlighted the importance of the special funds approved last year to support the union in saving funds for convention, retirement, and building maintenance. Our GSU Regina office had water seep into the basement and, although we did not have enough saved in our building maintenance fund to cover the cost of the repairs, it demonstrated the need for having these funds for our future.

GSU Defense Fund

As of June 30, 2024, the market value of the GSU Defense Fund stood around \$5.9 million. This is an increase over last year as interest rates and returns on investments continue to be above average. Managing and growing the fund is the responsibility of the GSU Defense Fund Board of Directors. The Board has met twice this year and conducted other business throughout the year as GSU locals have requested funds.

Currently AEA/GSU Local 8 are the only local who has utilized the Defense Fund to support their members walking the picket line.

This is why we have a GSU Defense Fund - To support our members when on strike or locked out and to defend our union from callous and aggressive employers who are more than willing to hammer their own employees.

Each year, GSU members attending annual meetings of their Locals or Sub-Locals have the opportunity to debate and vote on whether to continue paying additional dues into the GSU Defense Fund. This year is no different and GSU's

Executive Committee submitted the following motion to the Joint Executive Council. The JEC voted in favour of accepting the motion and forwarded it to a vote at the annual membership meetings this Fall.

“Be it resolved that the additional dues being paid into the GSU Defense Fund by members/ employees represented by GSU shall continue until December 31, 2025, subject to review by members of the union at the 2024 annual Local and Sub-Local meetings.”

A majority of 50 percent plus one of all the votes cast at all of the meetings is required for the resolution to be carried or defeated. The number voting in favour and against the resolution should be recorded and transmitted to GSU's general secretary.

Gearing up for 2025

I urge every member to seize the day to build a strong union, firm in its resolve to get the best collective agreements for union members. Whether you feel uneasy with your future, worry about feeding your family, or don't feel like you are being represented in the broader political movement, your union will always be a home for you. GSU is a place where our members can feel welcome and protected. Unions are worker-centric organizations that focus fundamentally on the greater good for their members. It is our collective responsibility to fearlessly promote the good that GSU does not just for union members, but also for the broader community and society.

In the weeks and months to come I challenge you to find a way to become more involved in your union. It can be as simple as reading the weekly TMM newsletter, talking to a new co-worker and welcoming them to the workplace and GSU, attending your Annual Meeting, or by running to get

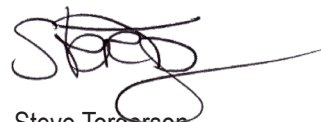
elected (or re-elected) on your Local's bargaining committee. By becoming more involved, you improve your knowledge and power in the workplace and you will strengthen GSU for all.

What we've accomplished together is good, but it's not enough. What we have in our collective agreements was fought for and won't be given to us. Belonging and participating in GSU does not mean you have to think like everyone else. In fact, your unique perspective is incredibly valuable. Diversity of thought fosters innovation and problem-solving, allowing us to approach challenges from multiple angles and create more effective solutions. Your distinct viewpoints and experiences contribute to a richer, more inclusive dialogue, helping to shape a union that truly represents and addresses the needs of all its members. Embracing different perspectives strengthens our collective voice and drives meaningful progress.

GSU is a democratic and welcoming organization that is focused on workers' rights. I challenge you to participate in your union. You will find your place within our ranks, and with each member who steps up we will see GSU grow.

Get involved.

Solidarity,



Steve Torgerson
General Secretary

Autumn 2024