

**PRESIDENT'S &  
VICE-PRESIDENT'S  
HANDBOOK**

# PRESIDENT & VICE-PRESIDENT

## INTRODUCTION

This handbook was developed to give newly elected Presidents and Vice-Presidents an outline of their duties. The handbook describes how an effective President or Vice-President contributes to the development of a strong local union. The handbook suggests where they can look for advice and a list of relevant Education Department Courses.

## I - Role of a Local Union Executive

The union executive (President, Vice-President, Recording Secretary and Secretary-Treasurer) is responsible for the leadership and administration of the local. The "job" of all union leaders is to advance the interests of the members. Consequently, the best run locals are not those with the lowest dues rate, the most money in the bank, or the best filing system. They are those that successfully advance the interests of their membership and solve their problems.

Unions represent their members by negotiating collective agreements and by lobbying governments to improve laws that affect the membership. Unions also represent their members by ensuring that employers do not violate their collective agreements or laws (health and safety, human rights, etc.) that affect the members.

Unions must force employers to do things that they would not otherwise do. Our employers want to have a free hand to provide public services as cheaply as possible. Union members must work together to force employers to pay more than the bare minimum, to provide safe working conditions, to provide us with job security, etc. Even at a time of cutbacks, wage freezes and contracting-out, unionized workers do better than those with no protection.

The difference between members of an effective union and unorganized workers, or members of a passive local, is the difference between bargaining and begging. The difference between bargaining and begging is the power to effect change. Unionized workers who act together and support one another have more power than individual workers who can't even complain about working conditions, harassment by supervisors, racism, or being passed over for promotions for fear of being labelled a

troublemaker. Unorganized workers and members of weak locals can only hope that their employer will find other ways of saving money besides cutting their wages or laying them off. In short, members of strong locals have a lot more say about what happens at work than workers with weak or nonexistent unions.

Unions are not insurance policies where you pay your dues and expect someone to solve your problems for you. Unions are self-help organizations where the members work together to solve common problems. It is the job of the executive to coordinate these activities, and to ensure that the members have adequate information, advice and funds to deal effectively with workplace problems and concerns.

## **II - Role of the President**

The President is the local's leader. This means that the President is responsible for diagnosing problems affecting the members and proposing strategies for dealing with these problems.

In order to help the membership solve workplace problems, the President must develop and implement plans to build solidarity and militancy.

To build militancy and solidarity, the President must ensure that the membership is informed about the activities of the local, the settlements negotiated by other locals and the programmes and campaigns of CUPE and the CLC.

To represent them, the President must know how the members feel about issues and should convey these sentiments to the employer. He or she must develop, justify and present concrete ways of dealing with the problems experienced by the membership.

The President is also responsible for planning future activities of the local. This means leading discussions about what the local could be doing to be more effective.

The President is responsible for all of the activities undertaken by the local. **This does not mean that the President must do all of the work.** Effective Presidents delegate as much work as possible. Presidents should also encourage others to get involved, delegate tasks to those most likely to carry them out and see that each task is completed on time.

Thus, a major role of the President is to motivate executive board and committee members, stewards and the membership.

### **III - Role of the Vice-President**

The Vice-President is the President's assistant. Vice-Presidents chair meetings in the absence of the President and represent the local at functions when the President is not present. Vice-Presidents usually chair some committees. In addition Vice-Presidents usually chair executive board meetings so that the President has more opportunity to take part in the meetings. To gain experience, the Vice-President should act as the union's spokesperson from time to time. In many cases, the Vice-President eventually becomes President.

### **IV - Duties of the President**

#### **Membership Meetings**

- Chairs membership meetings.
- Decides on questions of law and parliamentary procedure subject to appeal by the members.
- Casts the deciding vote in the event of a tie.
- Reports on his/her activities.
- Sees that activities accepted by the membership have been carried out.
- Promotes attendance at meetings by investigating why any group (women, visible minorities, anyone from a particular work site, etc.) is not attending.

#### **Executive Meetings**

- Leads discussions on future plans for local activities.
- Leads discussions on executive recommendations for activities to be taken to the membership meetings for ratification.
- Helps prepare the report of executive board activities.
- Sees that all committee and executive board members' reports are ready for the membership meeting.
- Assigns people to carry out tasks voted on by the membership and sets deadlines for their completion..

#### **Committees**

- Sit as Ex-officio member of all committees.
- Serve as spokesperson for the local (along with the CUPE Representative) during negotiations.

**General Administration**

- Exercise general supervision over the affairs of the local.
- Enforce CUPE's constitution and the local's By-laws.
- Sign all cheques and all official documents.
- Allocate work to other members of the executive, to committees and to members and see that the assignments are carried out within the deadlines set by the executive.
- See that CUPE policy and campaigns are carried out by the local.
- Act as the local's spokesperson at press conferences, newspaper interviews, etc.
- Recruit interested members for unfilled committee positions, stewards, delegates for affiliated groups, etc.

**V - Duties of Vice-Presidents****Membership Meetings**

- Chair in the absence of the President.

**Executive Meetings**

- Chair the meeting.

**Committees**

- Act on assigned committees.

**Union Administration**

- Complete duties delegated by the President.
- Assume President's duties when the President is absent.

## VI - Tips for Presidents and Vice-Presidents

### Chairing Meetings

- If you have never chaired meetings before or if you are uncertain about parliamentary procedure, take the "Public Speaking and Parliamentary Procedure" course offered by the CUPE Education Department. A CUPE Publication "Tips for the Chairperson" will also help those who are unfamiliar with the rules of order. It's available from your CUPE Education Representative.
- Make sure that you have an agenda prepared and posted before the meeting begins and that all committees are ready to report.
- Make sure that reports are short and to the point.
- Don't get too involved in what is being discussed. It's hard to chair and take part in the discussion at the same time. If you think that important points are being missed, hand the gavel to the Vice-President and "leave the chair" before you speak.
- View criticism of the activities of the local as an opportunity. Ask what the local should be doing. Unless a proposal is outrageous, ask the presenter to make a motion proposing a solution to the problem that they raised. If the motion passes, ask the presenter to work on implementing his or her proposal. Finding volunteers to work on union activities is part of the President's job. Vocal critics are a good place to start recruiting!

### Union Administration

- At each executive meeting, go through each item voted on and make sure that someone is assigned to carry out the motion and that a deadline is agreed to.
- Keep in touch with everyone who has agreed to do anything on behalf of the local to see how they are doing. Let them know that they will have to make regular reports on their activities.
- One of the President's biggest jobs is motivating members to get involved and to complete on time those activities they agreed to do. Since almost everyone involved in union activities is a volunteer, you can't threaten or humiliate people into doing anything. This leaves positive motivation and encouragement. Any work done by a member on behalf of the local should be publicly recognized at membership meetings and in union publications.
- Check that expenses have been approved by the membership and that each expense is accompanied by an invoice or expense claim before signing any cheques. Never sign blank cheques or sign cheques made out to "cash" or to the Secretary-Treasurer.

- Make sure that each executive board member, committee chair and steward has a written "job description" listing the details of duties assigned to the position.
- Make sure that every new executive board member, committee chair and steward is sent for appropriate training as soon as possible after being elected or selected.
- **If any significant group, such as women, visible minorities, or people who work in a particular department never come to union meetings, make a point of finding out why. To be effective, the union must represent all members and it is important that all members feel that the union is there for them.**

### **Communication**

- To lead effectively, the President and Vice-President must know what is going on in all parts of the workplace and what is happening to other locals in the area. This means making sure that there are regular meetings with stewards, that newspaper reports about the employer are kept, and that the local is affiliated to the CUPE District Council and the Labour Council.
- Information must be passed on to the membership on a regular basis at meetings and through bulletin board notices. Regular communication with the membership and an open attitude encouraging members' involvement in union activities are the keys to fighting apathy.

## **VII - Skills and Knowledge Required to be an Effective President or Vice-President**

- CUPE's Constitution
- CUPE policy, procedures and structures
- Local By-laws
- The Collective Agreement
- Labour Laws
- Parliamentary Procedure and Rules of Order
- Public speaking skills
- Negotiating skills
- Leadership skills (how to get members involved, how to motivate people, etc.)
- Knowledge of the contract settlements in nearby locals, important disputes and campaigns supported by CUPE, the Federation of Labour or the Labour Council.

## VIII - Sources of Advice and Assistance

- Former Presidents
- Presidents in other unions (meet them at the CUPE District Council or the Labour Council)
- Experienced members of your executive
- Your CUPE Representative
- CUPE Education Department Courses

## IX - Relevant Education Department Courses

- *"Introduction to CUPE"*  
A short course for newly selected executive and committee members introducing them to CUPE and to effective union administration.
- *"Our Union"*  
A more detailed course on the roles of members of a union executive and committees and on the skills needed to be effective.
- *"Face to Face Communication"*  
A course in how to communicate effectively. Useful for anyone who would like to have more effective listening and communication skills.
- *"Public Speaking and Parliamentary Procedure"*  
Useful for anyone who is unfamiliar with meeting procedures or who feels uncomfortable speaking in front of groups.
- *"Assertiveness Training"*  
A course on how to present your ideas and proposals in a straightforward manner and how to deal with other people's ideas and criticisms. This is an excellent course if you are uncomfortable in conflict situations.
- *"Cross-Cultural/Combating Workplace Racism Training"*  
In most large communities, our workplaces are becoming diverse as recent immigrants and people of colour make up an increasing proportion of our membership. CUPE has developed these two courses to help union executive and minority group members deal with the problems associated with multi-cultural workplaces.

Contact your CUPE Education Representative for more information on these courses as well as other courses offered by the CUPE Education Department or by your Federation of Labour.



