

Policy # 97:101

Duties of Local Union Officers

Local union officers have a dual set of responsibilities. As representatives of members, they must be their spokespersons and champions in dealings with management, government, and the public. As representatives of the international, the local officers also have the duty of implementing the programs and policies of the parent union. It is the local officers who provide the link between union membership and its international officers and staff.

This chapter will provide a brief outline of the duties and functions of local union officers. Understandably, these will vary with the size, geographic distribution, and general activity of the local. They are only meant as general guidelines.

The Local President

As the chief executive of the local union, the president is responsible for maintaining the unity, peace, and order of the local. His or her chief function is giving leadership to the union and it is under this category that the bulk of his or her duties fall. It is the local president who ultimately is responsible for conducting all business of the union, for carrying out local programs, and for implementing policies of the international.

His or her duties fall into two divisions – Executive and Financial. As the chief executive, the bulk of the president's duties are in the administrative and supervisory category. However, his or her financial responsibilities, primarily in the area of countersigning checks and vouchers, should not be minimized. Here are the typical major duties of the local president:

1. Giving Leadership to Local

The president must cooperate with and give leadership to his or her executive board – a group generally consisting of all elected officers and sometimes union stewards.

The president, similarly, must be skillful at getting all union members to cooperate for the common purposes and goals of the union. At all times, the president must remain impartial to personality conflicts. His or her leadership role is carried out through many of his or her specific duties, usually outlined in the union constitution.

2. Planning and Presiding Over Meetings

It is the president's function to chair, plan, and preside over executive board and membership meetings. A poorly planned meeting is a disaster; a thorough, well planned meeting is the president's key to a smoothly run local organization.

A. Executive Board Meetings. The board normally consists of all local officers and sometimes shop stewards. (Even when stewards cannot vote at the meetings, their attendance helps to keep them better

informed and to keep membership informed.) It should meet at least once a month and well in advance of the general membership meeting. At these meetings, the president has the opportunity to check up and review the work of other officers and their committees. He hears the full reports of the committees and decides which have enough importance to be discussed at the next membership meeting. Preliminary handling of communications, payment of routine bills not requiring membership authorization, and agenda planning for the membership meeting is conducted.

B. Membership Meetings. The president must see that membership meetings are conducted with fairness and democracy. He also must see that the agenda is one of interest and relevance to members. (See chapter on union meetings for suggestions and details on programs, parliamentary procedure, etc.)

He or she should prearrange the business agenda at the executive board meeting. This will prevent haphazard meetings, and will ensure that the most important items of business are covered. The president should attempt to focus the meeting on a high point of interest to the members—something important happening in the plant—layoffs, an arbitration case; in the union—dues increases, negotiations; or of general interest to the labor movement—congressional bills, elections. This local point should be publicized well in advance of the meeting, so that members will be aware of what will be discussed.

The second major duty of the president in conducting membership meetings is maintaining an attitude of fairness and impartiality. As one union guidebook observes, the president in essence is the “referee of the meeting.” He or she must make the meeting an example of the democratic and participating union in action – and give members an opportunity to feel that it is their union and their views that are respected. Members must be given a feeling of equality and participation, while the president serves as their impartial leader, as they make collective decisions. The president can best achieve this by encouraging discussion, questions, and comments from members – and by making them understand that it is also their responsibility if they are to have better meetings and a more effective union.

3. Appointing Committees

The president has the responsibility of naming those committee members not otherwise provided for (e.g., through election). Again, the president must preserve his or her impartiality. He or she should strive toward representation of all departments and units on as many committees as possible, and should not neglect new members. At the same time, the president should make an effort to place on committees all who volunteer to serve and should encourage others toward committee work.

4. Enforcing Bylaws and Constitution

As the chief local executive, the president must see that all local programs, as set forth in the bylaws, are

carried out. The same obligation extends to enforcing the laws of the international union that are applicable to local unions and their members. **Despite disagreement with any of the programs, the president, as administrative head of the local, must see that they are implemented. Although he or she may work to convince membership to change a program, until this change occurs, it is his or her responsibility to carry it out.**

5. *Reporting to the Local Union*

The president has a duty to keep members informed of actions on the part of the international union. If the union is entering negotiations, kicking off an organizing campaign, or embarking on a joint political drive, the president must notify the members about it if they are to feel that the union is really their ally.

6. *Signing Vouchers and Checks*

This is the primary financial duty of the president, and never should be taken as a routine matter. **The president should make sure that a check has been approved by the membership before signing it, and should attach a bill to the records. Pre-signing of blank checks should never occur.** If the president will be unavailable to take care of his or her financial duties he should name someone (usually the vice president) to take over for him.

If a motion is passed at a membership meeting which would expend money unconstitutionally, the president, as chief executive officer, has a responsibility of ruling that motion out of order.

7. *Organizing, Bargaining, and Grievances*

Although these are among the responsibilities of the president, their scope and importance is too widespread to be presented here, and will be dealt with in separate sections.

The Vice President

As the president's right arm, the vice president must be prepared to serve effectively should the president's office become vacant for any reason – temporarily or permanently. For this reason, vice presidents often are given special responsibility to prepare for the presidency and to make their jobs more than an honorary one.

Some locals appoint the vice president as chairperson of stewards, with responsibility for their training. This gives stewards a voice on the executive board and helps the president to keep more directly in touch with major grievances on which the stewards are working. Other locals appoint the vice president as chairperson of the organizing committee – a major committee that gives the vice president a chance to exercise his or her administrative duties and again, keep the president in touch with the committee work.

By giving the vice president the opportunity of cosigning union checks, there is less of a chance the president will get into the habit of pre-signing checks.

Briefly, the duties of the vice president are:

1. Work with, and under, the direction of the president.
2. Assume president's duties if he is absent or unable to serve.
3. Assume presidency, if the president's office becomes vacant for any reason.
4. Perform additional duties assigned by the president, the local, or the executive board.

Recording Secretary

Briefly, the duties of the recording secretary typically include:

1. *Keeping Minutes*

The minutes are the permanent record of activities and official action of the local union. As such, they should reflect briefly, but clearly and accurately, every action at board and general membership meetings.

Although avoiding details, the recording secretary should include in the minutes every motion that is made, by whom it is presented, and the action taken – including the exact count if there is a vote. Some record may be of comment, pro and con, although not in great detail. He should also include in the minutes, reports of committees and the financial report. Attached to the minutes of each meeting should be a copy of the secretary-treasurer's report and an attendance sheet showing the members who attended.

2. *Correspondence*

The recording secretary is responsible for maintaining the bulk of the union's correspondence. In this role, however, he or she works closely with the president and other executive board members, to determine the proper and efficient routing of letters and replies. All correspondence should be opened immediately after it is received to avoid delays on important matters. Correspondence also should be acknowledged immediately – particularly if there will be a delay before the local can take action on the matter.

Most correspondence may be disposed of at the board meetings, with the executive board deciding which action should be taken on communications. Any letters that are viewed as important enough by the board, shall be presented by the recording secretary at the general membership meeting. This usually may be presented in digest form – containing the source and subject the letter, the gist of the contents, and the action requested. In this form, the secretary will focus attention on the main items, ensuring the attention and clarity necessary for action.

3. *Maintaining Membership Records*

An up-to-date role of the local's members is essential for efficient running of the union. Membership cards should include the name, address, and job classification of each member. Such a file is invaluable when the local is conducting an internal organizing campaign.

4. Maintaining Files

The recording secretary is responsible for maintaining a complete set of files on union action. These should include correspondence, reports, grievances, arbitration cases, and any other important documents (e.g., union publications, constitutions, and bylaws). If the secretary does not maintain the records him- or herself, he or she should see that they are channeled to the appropriate officer of committee chairperson for filing.

Secretary-Treasurer

Although in some locals, financial duties are divided between a financial secretary and a treasurer or else administered entirely by the treasurer, for the purpose of this chapter, such duties will be outlined under the title secretary-treasurer. Because procedures vary and the duties of the financial officer are so involved, most international unions have special manuals outlining these duties. In general, the financial officer:

1. Receiving and Receipts All Money for Local

As the custodian of all assets of the union, the secretary-treasurer must make all collections – membership dues and special collections, keep a record of funds, and deposit them promptly in union bank accounts. Records should also include individual accounts of dues payment by each member, as well as an overall report.

2. Giving Monthly Financial Report at Membership Meetings

The monthly report should be kept straightforward and easy to understand, so that the membership is given every opportunity to know the financial status of the union and to realize where dues are going. Some unions also require a monthly membership report to be submitted to the international.

A yearly financial report should be sent to all members by the secretary-treasurer. Again, this report should be phrased in simple, laymen's language, and, if possible, should include a chart explaining distribution of dues by percentage – so that members may see that their money was spent for services benefiting them.

3. Paying All Bills

After a bill has been approved for payment by the president or the executive board, the secretary-treasurer must pay it by check. Generally, checks must be countersigned by the president and the secretary-treasurer. If the secretary-treasurer is unavailable, the vice president usually is deputized to cosign checks.

3. Preparing Federal Financial Reports

Under the provisions of the Labor Management Reporting and Disclosure (Landrum-Griffin) Act of 1959, local unions are required to file certain information and reports. These reports must be filed directly with the Secretary of Labor. Local unions also are required to file Internal Revenue Service Form 990EZ, by the 15th day of the 5th month after the organization's accounting period ends. If the regular due date falls on a Saturday, Sunday, or a legal holiday,

file on the next business day. If the organization is liquidated, dissolved, or terminated, file the return on the 15th day of the 5th month after the liquidation, dissolution, or termination. If the return is not filed by the due date (including any extension granted), attach a statement giving the reason(s) for not filing on time. Withholding and F.I.C.A. (social security) taxes must be deducted from all salaries paid to union officers and to employees from funds of the local.

Executive Board

Executive or governing boards serve as the governing bodies of local unions, except when general membership meetings of the local are in session. Board members are responsible for promoting the policies and programs of the local union, and it is through their cooperation and leadership that an effective, growing union is built.

Composition

The board's composition is important if the body is to provide effective leadership. Top officers (president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, or secretary-treasurer) automatically are members. Most unions also appoint major committee chairpersons to service on the executive board. These might include any or all of the following committee heads: grievance, organization, legislative, educational, or political action. By placing committee chairpersons on the board, the union will ensure more direct lines of communication and direct action on immediate problems, than if all committee reports were routinely relegated to the monthly meeting agenda.

Particularly in larger local unions, wider representation is important. In these cases, it is often desirable to appoint to the board a representative from every department or locality. This representative may be either the chief steward or someone elected at large from the department. Although he will not have voting rights, he will be able to help keep his or her membership informed on executive board action, particularly on issues in which they may be involved.

Duties

1. Act for Membership Between Meetings. It is the executive board that has the job of acting for the local membership on matters that arise between meetings. These may include both routine matters – such as paying of bills, handling routine business problems, etc. – which do not require membership approval, as well as urgent matters which must be acted on immediately and can not wait until the regular monthly meeting. A report of all actions, other than those which are strictly routine, must be made to the members, who in turn, have the opportunity to overrule actions and decisions made by the executive board.

2. Makes Recommendations on Major Programs. As the leadership of the local union, the board has the duty of making recommendations on major items of business. These suggestions and ideas should be discussed at the board meetings and then

presented at the monthly membership meetings as part of the executive board report.

3. Plans Agenda for Local Meetings. From the work of the executive board and the content of board meetings, the officers determine the agenda for membership meetings. Although all members should assist in planning the agenda, the duty primarily belongs to the president.

Board Meetings

The executive board should meet regularly – at least once before the monthly membership meetings. Some boards conduct their regular meetings just before the membership meetings – usually for about an hour, giving the board members time to submit reports and review the agenda for the membership meeting. Other locals have two board meetings – one a few weeks before the monthly meeting for the purpose of planning the agenda and conducting general business, another, an hour or so before the membership meeting for review and updating.

The agenda for the board meeting generally includes reports of officers and some committees, preliminary handling of communications, payment of routine bills, and other pending new and old business. The secretary must take minutes at the board meeting and make a report of the board's activities at the membership meetings of the local.

TRUSTEES

Trustees, functioning as "the elder statesmen" of the local union, as one international phrases it, have the responsibility of auditing the financial records of the local on a regular basis, of overseeing the property and investments of the local, and of guiding the officers to ensure the constitutional functioning of the local. Because the trustees' role is an involved one, requiring considerable background in administrative work, as well as union functioning, those elected to the position are frequently ex-union officers.

Most local unions have three trustees – one being elected each year for a three-year term. In this way, the newly elected trustee has the assistance of two experienced workers and can more quickly adjust to the duties of the job.

Although the trustees are "responsible" for the audit of the local's finances, they often do not conduct the audit themselves, but arrange for its performance by a certified public accountant. The purpose of the audit – whether conducted annually or semi-annually is to determine what the local was worth at the time of the last audit, what financial actions took place since then, and how much the union is presently worth. Audits should look for authorization of expenditures as well as expenditures themselves to ensure that all financial transactions were warranted.

Trustees also must see that the books and financial records of the local are properly kept, and generally give leadership in directing the way the local spends its funds. It is the duty of the trustees to provide the

membership with an overall picture of the union's financial stand – thus advising the membership on the advisability or voting for or against all but the most routine expenditures.

Some locals also put the trustees in charge of all of the union's property. They must see that equipment and furniture is kept in good repair and must sign all documents on the purchase or sale of property.

In seeing that the local is in compliance with the union's constitution, the trustee must assist the officers in leading the local under the constitutional provisions. If a trustee feels that an officer is not following the union's rules, it is his or her duty to point this out and to advise the officer on how to best reach compliance. Particular constitutional points that the trustee must advise on include bonding elections, tax payments, and the audit.