

MEDIATING DISPUTES BETWEEN MEMBERS

The ability of a shop or an entire union to present a common front depends on its ability to resolve internal disputes internally. To this end, mediating disputes among members—when necessary, appropriate, and possible—is key. Besides being one of the most effective means of maintaining union solidarity and discipline, it contributes directly to the improvement of everyone's work environment.

It is critical first to decide whether mediation is appropriate. Ask yourself:

- Is there a contractual answer, which even agreement of the parties could not supercede?
- Is there an issue of union policy, which even agreement of the parties should not set?
- Are others in the shop affected so that they must be involved in any solution?
- Is there a significant inequality of power between the parties?
- Is the matter not related to or affecting the job or workplace?

Assuming that it is appropriate to mediate, job number one is to be evenhanded. If you cannot get and keep the trust of the parties, you will fail.

Make sure you have the available facts and respective positions straight.

Beware of drawing from, or feeding, the rumor mill.

Be respectful. Remember that if this were not important to the disputants, the problem wouldn't exist in the first place. On the other hand, don't take everything at its initial face value; the presenting problem may be important only because it is symptomatic of, or masks, a larger problem. That is one of the reasons why you must seek creative rather than judgmental solutions. A win-win is always better than a mere compromise, and if you've already decided this is an appropriate matter to mediate, even a mere compromise is better than having one side feel like the loser. Creative compromise, something short of a complete win-win, but where both sides are better off than by just splitting the difference, is where most of your real solutions will be found, and where most of your most valuable work will be done.