

AS I SEE IT!

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We have all heard the term “telemarketing” in our busy lives. You know the people that call at the absolute worst time of day and try to sell you all variations of things. Some of us may have worked in the industry in another life. It is one of the most difficult things to do for a living. Convince someone to purchase something over the phone. It is simply too easy for the other party to simply say no thanks. Saying no over the phone is so easy telemarketers become discouraged and leave the industry.

At this point you may be asking what the above has to do with APWU and my employment. I’m glad you asked. You see, NBAs all across the country have been relegated to the telemarketer’s abyss. Effective in June, all Step 3 meetings and Direct Appeal meetings must now be conducted over the phone.

I have been meeting on Step 3s face to face with the Employer for the past twenty years. I can say that face to face meetings allow for good faith negotiations between the parties along with the building of a working relationship. I think most of you will agree that a meeting in person over serious matters has a greater degree of success than talking over the phone. I’m concerned that your issues and your disputes will not receive the “good faith effort” to resolve as required by our Collective Bargaining Agreement. It will simply be too easy to tell the APWU “no” over the phone.

Our Collective Bargaining Agreement has been in place for almost forty years. Our grievance procedure has changed some over these years, but a basic principal has remained. Employees and their Union representatives meet with the Employer in person. A review of Article 15 requires that employees who feel they have a grievance must meet with their supervisor to try and resolve their dispute. A Union representative may accompany the Grievant if requested by the Grievant. Article 15 also allows the Grievant to be present with their Union representative for their Step 2 meeting with the Employer. Finally, the Grievant is allowed to attend their arbitration hearing. The Arbitrator is allowed to view witness testimony to help determine the facts and the credibility of witnesses. All of the above is “on the clock”. The negotiators of our first Collective Bargaining Agreement recognized the importance of face to face meetings. They understood that people have a better chance of resolving their differences when they look each other in the eye and tell that person how they feel. Being able to see another person’s body language and emotions are important to understanding the seriousness of the circumstances surrounding the dispute.

The officers at Headquarters APWU tell us in the field that this latest agreement to meet over the phone is being done as a “cost saving” measure. After all, travel is expensive and APWU membership is declining due mainly to the fact that our members are retiring and are not being replaced by the Employer. I have no problem with “cost cutting” so long as one doesn’t “gut” the very reason for our existence as a Union. The way I see it the APWU has two main responsibilities. Negotiating a Collective Bargaining Agreement that is in the best interests of our membership and then enforcing that Collective Bargaining Agreement in the grievance procedure. Anything else is secondary to those two missions.

I as a national officer was never given input into the decision to “telemarket” Step 3 meetings. Very few NBAs were. I know Locals were never surveyed as to their thoughts and the membership was never asked how they feel about this change to their grievance procedure. Had I been given a chance to bring my twenty years of experience into the conversation I would have questioned why other APWU programs weren’t being cut before we start gutting the grievance procedure? Normally changes to our Collective Bargaining Agreement come through resolutions passed at a National Convention. Ideas are formulated at the Local level and work their way to the convention. The convention delegates then vote to pass those contract changes we believe are in the best interests of our membership. Our national negotiators then use these resolutions to guide them in negotiations with the Employer. Believe me when I say that the convention delegates never gave our negotiators the message that our membership wanted Step 3 meetings over the phone.

As we move forward into this electronic era, I’m sure other changes will be forthcoming in an effort to save dues money. However, at some point the membership must ask what exactly their dues money is being used for. If representation is going to take a back seat to other programs, then I think our national leadership has a responsibility to tell our members how the money is being spent and why other programs are more important than the Article 15 grievance process.