

# What is the role of a union steward?

A union steward, also known as a union representative or shop steward, is an employee of an organization or company but is also a labor union official who represents and defends the interests of his or her fellow employees. The position is a voluntary position and is generally elected by fellow workers through democratic election. On occasion, this position can be appointed by a higher union body. The role of the union steward is to represent the nonmanagement employees commonly referred to as the “rank-and-file” and to be a link and conduit of information between the rank-and-file and the union leadership.

Duties of a steward vary in accordance to each labor union’s constitutional mandate for the position but generally include informing the workers of their rights under the collective bargaining agreement (CBA); monitoring and enforcing the provisions of the CBA; and ensuring employer compliance with federal, state and local laws. Additionally, when an employee is believed to have violated company policy or the CBA, the steward duties are to represent and defend rank-and-file employees in investigatory interviews (in accord with employees’ Weingarten Rights), that are reasonably expected to result in disciplinary action, and through the grievance procedure.

Collective bargaining agreements generally include a steward clause in which the union steward will be granted the right to engage in union activity at work and conduct union business on work time. Additionally, the clause will grant the elected union officials, stewards and members leaves of absence for union business. Union contracts generally include what is called a “no-docking” arrangement in which the steward is typically permitted to use part of his or her workday or workweek for union-related duties, such as disciplinary meetings, grievance investigations, arbitration and contract negotiations, without any loss in pay or benefits. Union leave and no-docking benefits may be expressly provided for in the CBA or may be an unwritten practice of the employer or may be an informal arrangement with the employer and union.

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