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Power in the Workplace Starts With You

by Leslie Frane, SEIU Local 503, OPEU Executive Director



I accepted the position of Executive Director of SEIU Local 503 because I admired this Local from afar. Now, after six weeks on the job, I've come to respect our leaders, members, and staff from up close. Already, I feel part of this Local, and I'm excited about helping to guide its future.

The key to our future, I'm convinced, lies with worksite leaders throughout the state. Organizing starts in the workplace. We take the first steps toward strengthening our Union when individual members take leadership in making their working conditions fairer.

Every day, I hear stories of stewards and other leaders who organize their coworkers to take action against unfair working conditions. More than any other reports, these stories affirm my conviction that our Union is on the right track.

Let me share a few of these stories with you. Linda Ingham is a steward in the State Print Plant. When the state hired a new supervisor on night shift, Linda began to hear reports about this supervisor's inappropriate behavior. He monitored how frequently employees went to the bathroom. He belittled and threatened workers, with comments like "How are you going to make your car payments if I fire you?" He seemed to focus his wrath on workers who had difficulty standing up for themselves.

When individual complaints to this supervisor's boss did not solve the problem, Linda decided to get serious. She organized the entire shift to document every instance of the supervisor's rude

behavior. Armed with dozens of written accounts of the supervisor's harassment of union members, Linda and her coworkers demanded a formal investigation. A month later, the supervisor was history.

Another example comes from the forestry department, where Mary Basham is a shop steward. Management planned to contract out bargaining unit work at Phipps Nursery, near Elkton in Southern Oregon, without doing the feasibility study required by our collective bargaining agreement. Mary filed a grievance, and she sent a letter to the state legislators from the area. But she did not stop there. She also organized nearly 50 coworkers to come together, on their day off, to present the grievance to the plant manager as a group. Nothing like this had ever happened at Phipps Nursery before! Two days later, Mary got a commitment that the state would do the feasibility study.

With leaders like Linda Ingham and Mary Basham, I know that our Union is in good hands. As an organization, we have critical challenges ahead of us—contract campaigns, general elections, initiative battles, and state budget crises. We should devote significant union resources to making sure we win them. But our fights at the print shop and the nursery remind me of the importance of our smaller, day-to-day struggles for dignity and justice at work. Linda and Mary's stories also remind me just how much power we have when we organize ourselves, in the workplace, to fight back.