Union 101 – Union Meetings: Why you should have been there.

How many times have you seen that your union is having an important meeting? Maybe you saw a flier about or maybe someone shared it on Facebook. Either way, you made a mental not to try to attend, but then life intervenes and you never make it. Come Friday, you ask the steward what happened at the meeting, and he usually snaps “if it is so important for you to know, you should have been there.”

It’s shocking the first time someone says that to you. You get defensive. Our lives get busy and it’s not always easy to drop everything to drive across town to the union hall. But isn’t that true of all of us – including your co-w0rkers – who did attend the union meeting? We all have busy lives with priorities that pull us in many directions. The issue isn’t why you didn’t go to the meeting: instead, it’s why you should go to the meeting.

Union meetings have been around before unions existed. It was through meetings that workers would come together to build their organizing campaigns. They would share information, make plans, get assignments and report back their efforts. They would heatedly debate strategies and hem come together as one. That process of sharing information, debating, democratic decision-making and action is what transformed them from individual workers to a union.

The AFSCME Constitution enshrined the union meeting by requiring all local unions or units of a local to hold regular membership meetings at least once every three months, but most do it monthly. At these meetings, we elect our representatives, vote on expenditures and learn about issues affecting both our worksites and the labor movement as a whole. It is where we go to express our views and influence decisions. It is where we share examples across the worksites of the new trends in management’s behavior toward members or brainstorm ideas to help the community. We don’t go to meetings expecting to have all of our issues solved or all of our suggestions adopted.

We go to be a part of a whole – to be a part of discussion and understand the ultimate resolution. That stretch and pull of discussion and debate is what keeps our unions healthy and democratic. What happens when we don’t attend? Well, issues continue to be debated and decisions made, but a point of view might be missing because it isn’t reflected in the room. Officers continue to be elected and empowered with authority to make decisions and act on our behalf, even though many of the members they represent may not have voted in the election. Bargaining issues and strategies are discussed and settled on which might not reflect the concerns of all, because all have not voiced their concerns. What should be a dynamic and vibrant discussion becomes one-sided and unchanging.

Next months, your union will have another meeting. And again, you will think about attending. And as the time approaches., all the other things in your life will start to compete for your time. This time, do something different. Don’t think about all the reasons you can’t go. Instead, take a minute to think of the reasons why you should attend the next meeting – and then plan on bringing a coworker!