

# Not-So-Obvious Reasons Why Grievances Are Valuable in the Union Workplace



Virtually every union contract contains a grievance/arbitration procedure, which is how the union and the employer tackle disagreements about workplace rights covered by the contract agreement. Filing a grievance is the equivalent of starting a lawsuit: you put in writing what you believe another party has done that is contrary to the law and what action will be necessary to correct the situation. If, after going through a series of procedural steps, the dispute is not resolved, then the last step of the grievance process – arbitration – is the equivalent of appearing before a judge to argue the case out and obtain a final resolution, one way or the other.

## Why Grieve?

The natural inclination is to think about pursuing a grievance only if it has a reasonably good chance of winning. Why file a grievance in the first place unless your union is determined to take the case all the way to arbitration if the employer doesn't back down?

**There may be many good reasons for a union to file a grievance without expecting to "win."**

### 1. Fire a Warning Shot

Sometimes, it doesn't make sense to fight the employer to the death over a particular action. It may just not be worth it to arbitrate a relatively minor erosion of existing working conditions or what looks like a one-time event. At the same time, rather than do nothing, a group grievance could put the employer on notice that its action has not gone unnoticed and that if it tries the same maneuver again, it may have a serious fight on its hands.



### 2. Shine a Light

One of the most frustrating experiences in the life of a union representative is to hear an employer say, *"That's just you complaining; none of the people you say you represent even care."* Sometimes, it takes a grievance filed by an employee – or two or three or more – to get the employer to acknowledge that a particular problem is real and needs to be addressed.

### 3. Build a Record

One not entirely humorous definition of paranoia is "a heightened appreciation of reality." Sometimes, it's hard to know where to draw a line between an isolated memo taking you to task for something and the first serious shot in your supervisor's war against you. If there may be a suspension or termination action looming in your future, sometimes the wisest course of action is to build a written record in your defense immediately.

### 4. Forge Employee Unity

It may well be that, for one reason or another, an immediate practical resolution of a particular problem may not be in the cards. However, a grievance – particularly a group grievance – might be just what is needed to start building solidarity among those wronged by a particular supervisor or policy. If you and others can organize and take a small action, like filing a grievance, this may be the first step toward you and your co-workers later doing whatever it takes to fight – and win on this or a more significant issue.

**If you have questions or comments, we've opened this page for them, so please feel free to post in the margins. Make sure to check your notification settings before you post for your preferred option.**