



A Guide for Local Unions Responsible for Servicing Bargaining Units



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**315,000 members from
coast to coast to coast**



Introduction

At its founding convention in 2013, Unifor committed to strengthen and support its local unions. As part of this work, the union launched the Local Union Task Force in 2015. The goal of the Task Force was to identify best practices across Unifor's local unions that encourage membership engagement and build stronger connections in the community. It also aimed to identify what tools local unions need to carry out their work more effectively. The Task Force travelled the country, soliciting input and suggestions from members during community meetings as well as through online surveys.

Local unions are the bedrock of Unifor and are ultimately responsible for servicing the day-to-day needs of members. Local unions may receive support from a Unifor National Service Representative – a staff member assigned to assist an individual bargaining unit in collective bargaining negotiations and other needs. Where a Service Representative is assigned, their responsibility to the members of a bargaining unit is shared with the local union.

In some cases – and particularly when the bargaining unit in question has few members – local unions will service their members independent from a National Service Representative. This is not uncommon. However, reports received through the Local Union Task Force highlighted the need to clarify the expectations and responsibilities of local unions as well as how local unions can best access National Union resources. One of the Task Force recommendations directed the national office of Unifor to establish a guideline and standard for local unions in these circumstances. The goal: to ensure equitable access to union services for both existing and newly-organized smaller bargaining units.

Unifor should also examine, and clarify, its broader servicing model (i.e. how the union assigns resources required to service members). This is an especially important consideration among “small” bargaining units because the dynamics of Canadian workplaces continues to change and evolve. In fact, one-third of Canadians work in small businesses with fewer than 50 employees. Unifor must continue to evolve and adapt to these realities, in order to become a stronger and more effective organization for working people. To be adaptable, Unifor needs to further develop the capacity of its local unions to provide some level of direct servicing, independent of a National Service Representative. This approach can ensure closer ties between small units and their local union by providing services to members from trained local union leadership and staff.

Background

Small bargaining units have existed in Unifor since its inception in 2013 as well as in both of its predecessor unions for decades prior.

While there is no official definition of a “small” bargaining unit, these are typically identified as having 50 or fewer members. In most cases, and due to their size, these units are part of a larger amalgamated local union – a local comprised of multiple bargaining units. As indicated above, these units are sometimes serviced directly by their local union and independent of a National Service Representative. This is because amalgamated locals are often better equipped than single-unit locals to supply internal resources, including elected and/or appointed local union service staff as well as communications, health and safety, and legal support personnel.

An abbreviated count of existing Unifor bargaining units reveals that more than 2,000 members, across 54 small bargaining units, are serviced by their local unions, independent of a National Service Representative.

Suffice it to say, there is extensive local union experience in Unifor when it comes to direct servicing of members. And this is a good thing. Local unions that are properly equipped to service the needs of members, independent of a National Service Representative, are encouraged to do so. Not only do these arrangements enable the union to better manage its resources, it establishes a framework for member representation that strengthens our local union capacities, and creates new opportunities for Unifor to organize new workplaces.

Guideline

Properly-equipped local unions are encouraged to service small bargaining units, independent of a National Service Representative

In an effort to better manage the staff resources of Unifor, where practicable, the expectation will be that properly equipped local unions will oversee the servicing of small units independent of a National Service Representative.

Arrangements for local unions to service bargaining units, independent from a National Service Representative, must be made through the Unifor national office

Unifor local unions that commit to servicing a bargaining unit independent from a National Staff Representative will typically make these arrangements with the national office,

through the offices of the President and Secretary-Treasurer. These arrangements are often made before the start of an organizing drive for a new, small bargaining unit. This is a necessary process in order for Unifor to determine whether a local union is adequately equipped to service its members or requires further resources and support.

There have been situations where existing arrangements for direct local union servicing have been maintained, following a union merger. This has been the case with the Fish, Food and Allied Workers-Unifor (FFAW-Unifor) and the United Fish and Allied Workers Union (UFAWU-Unifor), for instance.

Reviewing the servicing arrangement through the offices of the National President and National Secretary-Treasurer

If circumstances dictate, the national union can review the servicing agreement with a local union that services a bargaining unit independent of a National Service Representative, upon request. This request would be submitted to the offices of the National President or National Secretary-Treasurer.



Accessing Unifor resources for small bargaining units serviced by a local union

Every Unifor member is entitled to an excellent level of service. That includes services rendered by Unifor national and regional offices and all its departments, including: Communications, Research, Health and Safety and Environment, Legal, Pension and Benefits, Political Action, Organizing, International, Human Rights, Women's, Retired Workers, Skilled Trades and Education.

For local unions that service members independent of a National Service Representative, it is not always apparent how best to access these resources. It is also not always feasible for Unifor national or regional offices to resource individual requests from workplace representatives. Local unions interested in accessing these resources are encouraged to follow this guideline:

- **Local unions are always the first line of communication.** Workplace representatives needing assistance should always be encouraged to first contact the appropriate local union representative. In the vast majority of cases, local unions are well-equipped to handle the day-to-day needs of members and able to answer many pressing work-related questions.

This includes information related to bargaining, grievances and arbitration, and day-to-day servicing for labour management issues.

- **Requests for national support should be sent to the appropriate Unifor Area Director.** If the local union faces an exceptional situation that is beyond their internal expertise, and they require advice or resources that are beyond their capacity, they should contact the Area Director. Requests for Legal Department resources must go through the Assistant to the President with responsibility for the sector in question.

The role of National Service Representatives assigned to small bargaining units

There are instances where a National Service Representative is assigned to a small bargaining unit. In these circumstances, the involvement of a National Service Representative with the bargaining unit will depend on the unit's needs. When local unions are equipped to handle the day-to-day membership needs, the National Service Representative serves as a resource person. For cases in which local unions are less equipped to service members, the National Service Representative may be required to

Differentiating small bargaining units from small local unions

Small bargaining units can exist as a single unit local union. In Unifor there are approximately 350 local unions with one single bargaining unit that has under 100 members. Despite making up almost half of the total local unions, they represent less than 1% of the total membership. Some small local unions have always existed as such, but in many cases they were at one point in their history a large local union that was downsized.

Small single-unit local unions are encouraged to consider the best interests of their membership and to review the guides to Amalgamated Locals, Resource Sharing and Mergers. Staff of the national union are always prepared to guide local unions through this process.

Unifor does not mandate mergers, but encourages local unions to consider merging in an effort to build stronger locals and to the benefit of members, according to the Constitution.

provide day-to-day functions that are typically the responsibility of the local union. This is most common when small local unions represent workers in a small bargaining unit.

New member organizing

Unifor's capacity to organize new members is directly impacted by the union's ability to service all forms of workplace, from big to small. Work in Canada is undergoing constant transformation, including a growing share of jobs are precarious and non-standard. Unifor will carefully consider all requests of workers, in small bargaining units, who want to join the union, including the more appropriate way to service them. This may be through a direct-service agreement from a local union.

Unifor encourages small bargaining units to join the union as part of its "All-In" worker organizing strategy (which aims to identify jobs, departments or other parts of an already organized workplace, and encourage them to join the union). Ideally, and wherever possible, the union will include the new unit within the scope of the already established unit, but that is not always possible if the employer successfully resists. Even if it must be a stand-alone unit, Unifor will consider organizing it if there is an agreement and a capacity for the local union to service the members.

In other cases, small non-union workplaces will seek out large local unions in their community to organize because they have directly witnessed the power of the union. It often makes sense to consider a direct service agreement to be able to organize in this situation.

Did you know?

Today, about one-third of Canadians work for a small employer, with fewer than 50 employees. **That's nearly five million workers.**

Conclusion

It is impossible to grow as a union and to truly be accessible to all without establishing some parameters with how best to organize and service small bargaining units in an effective and efficient manner.

This document intends to provide a basic organizational guideline on how Unifor will approach the organizing and ongoing servicing of small bargaining units. It is important to remember that every situation is unique, and may warrant individual responses. As the Unifor constitution advises, the union shall "act according to the dictates of common sense, guided by an earnest desire to advance the best interest of the union."





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