

EDITORS CORNER

How do we most effectively mobilize our workplace? How do we achieve equity and respect in bargaining? How do we play to our collective strengths and withstand retaliation and pettiness? The **\$1,000,000** Answer? Get to know **YOUR. UNION. BETTER.** In this edition, you'll find information about contract negotiation, the grievance process, and a history of resilience from one of our most prominent leaders, Jean McClure, DMH Chapter President and Co-Chair of the Indigenous Peoples Caucus. Remember the following links: **The 2026 Steward Assembly & Annual Meeting is on October 2nd and 3rd in Westborough.** Accommodations provided. Also: Join us for a **Contract Negotiation Discussion at Friday's Stewards Meeting on October 9th @ 12:00p.**

Oly Wallenfels, Dan Moss, Alyssa Persson

CONTRACT NEGOTIATION

Preparation: SEIU Local 509 began to prepare for contract negotiations by sending surveys to members in an effort to gather information to prioritize what's important to us, the members. Member participation in the surveys is critical since the bargaining team will use survey results to inform tactics and strategy during contract negotiations. As stewards, it's crucial that we get involved in planning actions and help members to support actions by keeping them informed. The final structure of the 509 bargaining team will be soon decided.

Process: Contract negotiations occur approximately every three years. 509 and the Commonwealth each designate Bargaining Teams, each party has a Chief Negotiator. The 509 Chief is accompanied by the Chapter Presidents. Each team will analyze the current contract to identify areas they want to propose changes to. They gather input from stakeholders, including SEIU members on potential proposals. During the negotiation, either party may request to caucus for internal/private consultation. There are many rounds to negotiating and the process can take a long time. Once there is agreement on the terms, the agreement can be ratified by member votes.

509 Commitment: 509 remains committed to transparency, visibility and keeping the membership involved by communicating during contract negotiations. Members are also invited into negotiation sessions as observers, to experience the process firsthand. We win when we all fight in solidarity!

Carmen Solorio, EEC and Jean Voltaire, MassAbility

GRIEVANCES

Grievances are in many ways the backbone to landing a good contract. It is an opportunity to set precedent to ensure the Commonwealth is aware of our needs and standards of conduct. They also help to address the toxic misinterpretation of our professional roles and responsibilities. They help to increase our solidarity and put management on notice that we are looking out for ourselves and all our union siblings.

SEIU 509 has Member Action Resource Center (MARC) organizers who cover the various regions of our local. They help build and establish accountability through the grievance process. MARC Organizers are an important resource as they hold valuable knowledge and experience when it comes to upholding our hard-earned contract. Their support during the grievance process helps members to fight contract violations.

Grievances are crucial and useful tools in a well-worn arsenal that has historically generated positive outcomes in the fight to enforce our contract. In that arsenal we also have labor-management discussion, Labor Law, media pressure, activism, strategic campaigns, direct lobbying, and day-to-day organizing. Understanding which approach is most appropriate requires us to consider the circumstances of each issue, the needs of the member, and the broader implications for our membership.

Each grievance generates valuable insight beyond the individual case and is an opportunity to move from anecdote to evidence. Individual grievances can reveal larger patterns of contract violations and issues in our work place so this requires us to capture and interpret that information. There is a meaningful difference between saying, "We're hearing it's too hot over there," and being able to demonstrate that heat-related health and safety violations have generated a recurring pattern of grievances across multiple agencies and workplaces for years.

***WE ALWAYS NEED EVIDENCE** that can strengthen our position. A 2026 study from researchers at Harvard Kennedy School found that administrative and inspection data alone can fail to capture substantial workplace violations, while worker complaints can provide an important source of information about actual working conditions. This is an exceptional value to building this "organizational memory" as it helps ensure member experience doesn't go to waste and that said experience can be molded into deep organizing and activism.

***MEMBER EXPERIENCE MATTERS.** Lessons learned from grievances can help inform future negotiation. There are multiple ways to affirm and understand our membership and to connect individual experiences to broader conditions. As long as we use what we learn, recognize patterns across cases and carry that knowledge forward, we can reinforce the benefit of steward involvement and leadership well beyond the present moment. The goal is not simply to process grievances, but to use what we learn from them to become a more informed, responsive, and effective Union. In doing so, we can protect the rights we have today while building the knowledge and capacity necessary to strengthen them in the future.

Dan Moss, DMH Fuller and Annie Kelley, DMH Tewksbury

All that harms labor is treason to America.
- Abraham Lincoln

Weil, D., Costa, G., & Schneider, D. (2026). Labor Standards Compliance and Worker Complaints: New Data and Insights. ILR Review.

★ STEWARD SPOTLIGHT ★

Part One: “I couldn’t back down.”

There are moments in union work when being a steward means answering a difficult question: *What are you willing to do when you know something isn’t right?* For Jean McClure, that question was not theoretical. What began as advocacy for members eventually became a fight against disciplinary action, suspensions, accusations, and what the Massachusetts Department of Labor Relations ultimately determined was unlawful retaliation connected to protected union activity.

Jean could have backed down. She didn’t. And when you ask her why, her answer reveals that this story was never only about Jean. **“I couldn’t back down, because I knew if I did, then what happens to the next person that’s chapter president, or the next chapter officer? Like, if management are going to come after the chapter president, what about our stewards?”** That may be the most important lesson in Jean’s story. Sometimes a steward stands up for one member. Sometimes we stand up over one contract violation, one disciplinary action, or one workplace injustice. And sometimes we realize we’re standing at a line that matters to everyone who comes after us.



The Cost of Not Backing Down

Jean’s victory can sound simple when reduced to a headline: Union leader takes on management and wins at the DLR. The reality was anything but. The adversity stretched on while Jean continued doing the exceptional community work she does. She was constantly looking over her shoulder, trying to stay two steps ahead and feeling as though she always had to defend herself. “The hard part is the process takes so long,” Jean explained. That time takes a toll. Imagine trying to lead members through their workplace battles while simultaneously fighting your own. Jean did exactly that.

The People Behind the Case

Perhaps the most revealing part of our conversation came when Jean stopped talking about charges, hearings and decisions. She started talking about people. Jean remembered members who lost their jobs and clients who lost a program they depended upon. **“I still get emotional when I think about the clients and the staff. That was hard.”** Even after winning, those losses stayed with her. One employee in particular had previously worked under Jean’s supervision and had once told her, “Jean, I love working for you so much, I will follow you anywhere.” Jean embodies a courage that is not an absence of fear, sadness, guilt or doubt. And winning doesn’t magically erase what was suffered along the way. Sometimes courage is feeling all those things and deciding that backing down would cost even more. Jean knew that if intimidation succeeded with her, the consequences could extend far beyond one person. So, as the true leader she is, she kept going.

A Union Is Bigger Than One Workplace

Jean credits fellow members, union staff and organizers who provided support throughout the process. Jean described solidarity across SEIU Local 509, with members from other sectors showing up when her Chapter needed support, **“We stick together,”** Jean said. This is not simply a slogan, it is strategy. When workers build relationships before a crisis happens, management isn’t dealing with one isolated employee or one isolated steward. They’re dealing with a network, a community, a family, a legitimate powerbroker and stakeholder. Jean’s determination, humanity, and strength is an inspiration to us all. Don’t miss Part 2 of this interview in the next edition of The Stewards Corner.

Interview by Lyndsey Mewa, DMH