

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO



AFGE Leader's Guide to New Employee Orientation

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Introduction

An important role for AFGE leaders is to introduce new employees to our union so that they understand what the union is, what it does, and why it's in their interest to join.

We know from experience that workers form their opinions about the union within the first few days on the job. So, how do we maximize the opportunity to welcome new employees and to build a stronger, more powerful AFGE?

This booklet will assist you in developing and conducting a dynamic program for welcoming new employees – a program that will bring your local good publicity, and hopefully, lots of new union members!



First Impressions Count!

What's different about local Unions that have high levels of membership participation and those that don't? The most important factor is that members have had "positive personal contacts" with the Union during their first months of employment.

On the first day of work for a new employee, does anyone from the Union greet new workers, or is their only "official" greeting from their supervisor or another management representative? For example, who tells new workers where the bathrooms are, or which vending machine steals your money?

First impressions are lasting impressions. New employees who might only hear about the Union from the boss may not feel inclined to join the Union and be an active member. However, if they get a good first impression from a local Union officer or steward, they will be more likely to join and take part, and benefit.

When the Union passes up an opportunity to meet with new employees, it cedes to management the power to shape the new employee's perceptions of AFGE. Taking an active role in new employee orientations lends credibility and professionalism to AFGE, demonstrating to the new employee that in this Agency, the Union is an equal partner.

Benefits of Conducting New Employee Orientations

- 3 New employees first receive workplace information from the Union, not the Agency
- 3 New employees develop a positive relationship with the Union before they have a problem
- 3 New employees will see that the Union is pro-active
- 3 The Union gets to frame workplace issues from the employee's point of view, not the Agency's



Negotiate the Union's Right to Participate

If you haven't already done so, negotiate an agreement with the Agency to include the Union in its formal orientation (See box). If you can't negotiate it through the contract, negotiate an agreement with the Agency's HR or Labor Relations Office. (If you need assistance with this, contact your National Representative in the District Office.)

Note: Some agencies are moving towards providing new employee orientations online. If this is the case, make sure you negotiate the Union's right to include information about AFGE in the online orientation. Whether the forum is a Lunch and Learn or a one-on-one conversation, making that personal contact is key to recruiting a new employee to join AFGE.

SAMPLE CONTRACT LANGUAGE

A. Union Contact. During each pay period, Agency Human Resources Offices will provide the Agency Vice President/Chief Steward a list of new employees assigned to positions in the bargaining unit expected to report for duty during the following pay period. The list will include the employee's name, organizational unit, position title, and work location. The Union representative, normally a steward in the Agency or the Chief Steward, shall be provided thirty (30) private minutes to meet with new employees immediately after their personnel processing.

B. Orientation. "The Union will be afforded the opportunity to make a 20 minute presentation during each orientation session for new employees. The Union will make this presentation just prior to the official lunch break.

Management will provide the Union with timely notice of the date, time, and place at the time the orientation is scheduled. Each local Union should inform the local personnel office in advance of the name of the Union official who will make the presentation so necessary arrangements can be made for the Union official's absence from duty. The Union may leave its literature in a location where the employees leaving the orientation have access to the materials.

On the first day of work, the employees should be introduced to the Union steward."



Idea: Meet with New Employees Their First Day on the Job

In many federal agencies, new employee orientations are held quarterly. In such cases, it is possible to negotiate additional time to meet privately with new employees. The labor agreement between AFGE Local 12 and the Department of Labor allows for this.

During each pay period, the Union receives from the Agency's HR office a list of new employees assigned to the Bargaining Unit who are expected to begin work in the following pay period. The Union representative is allowed to meet with new employees in private for 30 minutes immediately after the employee completes his/her initial in-processing.

AFGE Local 1658, which represents DOD workers in Detroit, MI, has negotiated a similar arrangement with their Agency. New employee orientations are held quarterly, so the Local has negotiated an opportunity to do a 20-minute presentation with new employees during their initial in-processing. During this time, the Local sets out signs welcoming new employees to the Agency and includes the Local's logo on signs directing new employees to their initial processing area. Representatives from the Local also make sure they arrive early to personally welcome new employees on their first day. Often, the Union is the first contact the new employee has with the Agency.

Connect the Union Orientation to a Lunch Break

When you negotiate Union involvement in new employee orientations, be sure to schedule it next to a lunch hour. This allows more time to educate new employees on workplace issues, to advise them on how to make their probationary period easier, and provides a golden opportunity for recruiting new members. *(Remember, the new employee has been signing forms all morning, so they are more apt to sign a membership form at a Union event.)*

Be sure to get a schedule of new employee orientations from HR and put these on the Local Union's calendar of events.

Recruit Volunteers to Coordinate the Orientation

Many Union members are not interested in taking on confrontational roles for the Union such as becoming a Steward, but they might participate in other ways. This is a perfect assignment for a local volunteer who enjoys meeting new people and coordinating social events. This person volunteers to help staff the orientation, coordinate logistics of the Lunch and Learn and be available at the orientation to welcome new members one-on-one. Brainstorm with Stewards and other Executive Board Members for possible candidates to serve as volunteers. Consider your retirees or other available personnel.

Know Your Audience

The first step in preparing the Union's orientation program is to know your audience. Are they new hires? Re-instated workers? Persons who have transferred from another Agency? The best way to do this is to request the list of new hires and/or transferees from the Agency HR department. Target your orientation to the new employee's interests, *(e.g., highlight flexible scheduling with younger workers, benefits of the Union credit card, and mortgage help.)*

Prepare New Employee Orientation Kit

Just as employees receive basic information from the Agency about its history, its structure and personnel policies, the Union can provide new employees with basic information about the Union. Your kit should include:

1. Welcome Letter
2. AFGE History* and/or Local Union History
3. Contract
4. Summary of Latest Victories
5. List of Member-Only Benefits*
6. Contact Names, Pictures, and Phone Numbers of Local Union Officers and Stewards
7. New Employee FAQs *(written up by the Local - what you need to know: probation period, sick and annual leave, Union is here to serve you and your concerns, etc.)*
8. Explanation of Dues Structure
9. A Schedule of Union Meeting Times and Places
10. 1187 or 277*

**These items are available directly from the AFGE Membership and Organizing Department at 202-639-6410. Samples of other items on the list are included in this Guide.*



Idea: It Pays to Advertise.

At an AFGE Local in Arkansas, in addition to negotiating their right to be included in the VA's new employee orientation sessions, the Union pays the VA a monthly stipend for refreshments for the new employees. In return, the Union hangs a big sign letting new employees know that the refreshments they are enjoying are compliments of their Union, AFGE. So, while the Agency representative is talking, new employees are viewing a big welcome sign from the Union in the speaker's background!

SAMPLE WELCOME LETTER

Dear _____:

Welcome to _____ (*name of Agency*) and to Local _____ (*name of Local*). We represent _____ employees at the Agency who are located _____ (*insert geographic location here.*) At the national level, AFGE negotiates agreements with the Agency that directly affect our professional lives and our work environment such as in flextime, credit hours, telework, and professional development. At the local level, we have negotiated child care and transportation subsidies for employees and fair procedures for employee evaluations and promotions. We have achieved these successes through the efforts of men and women like you who make up our local.

As an employee of _____ (*name of Agency here*) you are eligible for Union membership which includes access to a whole host of free and discounted consumer benefits such as home mortgages, low interest credit cards, computer discounts, scholarships and online learning, as well as best buys in travel and entertainment.

Over the next few weeks, you may have questions about the benefits, pay, or working conditions at _____ (*Agency name here*). Please feel free to contact the local with these questions or go to your personal representative on the job, _____ (*name of steward here*). He or she has the knowledge and training to assist you in any of your workplace concerns.

Our local meets regularly on the first Thursday of the month to discuss matters of interest to Agency employees. Please join us and bring your concerns and ideas.

Again, welcome to _____ (*insert Agency name here*). We care deeply about the Agency and its mission. We believe that respect in the workplace results in productive and creative employees. We hope you do, too.

In Unity,
Local Union President

Go In with a Positive Attitude

Every Local officer and steward represents the face of AFGE to our members and to new employees. Whoever represents the Union at the new employee orientation — their dress and manner, and how they describe AFGE - will be the new employee’s first and lasting impression of the Union.



The way you frame issues in the new employee orientation can make the difference between someone who relates the Union to problems and management confrontations, and someone who sees the Union as a group of people working together to improve their working lives. It’s better to emphasize solutions (e.g., “...through national consultation rights with the Office of Personnel Management and our lobbying strength, we’ve been able to keep our health care costs down...”) than to focus solely on problems (e.g., “if you get in trouble, contact me...”). Remember, a new employee has no reason to think the smiling face who just signed her up for health benefits is a bad guy.

Welcome New Employees to Government Service and to AFGE

At the beginning of your presentation, introduce yourself and the other Union members or officers in the room. If there are only a few new employees present, ask them to introduce themselves as well.

Congratulate them on their decision to work for the government. Explain that AFGE is the only employee organization or Union that works exclusively with management to ensure that all government employees have the best tools, training, and work environment to provide quality government service.

Show the AFGE Orientation Video

Introduce the video by stating that AFGE members are employees just like you who are committed to government service.

Note: There are two orientation videos available from AFGE: “AFGE and Me”, and “Everyday Heroes.” You can order these directly from AFGE National Headquarters. In addition, the National VA Council has completed a new orientation video for VA employees. Contact the National VA Council office for copies. Be sure to screen the videos first to select the video or DVD that best fits your group. The more familiar you are with the video, the better able you will be to link it to your presentation and promotion of AFGE.

SAMPLE LOCAL UNION HISTORY – AFGE LOCAL 1923

Local 1923 was chartered as a labor organization in October, 1959, representing approximately 30,000 employees nationwide who are employed in the Social Security Administration, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (formally HCFA), Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense, and the National Mediation Board.

Local 1923 is the largest federal Union in the country with over 8,000 members and continuing to grow. We have negotiated state of the art contracts, our officers have testified on many congressional hearings on behalf of federal employees and have successfully organized many new units under the Federal sector. Our officers and activists work extremely hard and takes seriously their responsibility seriously to ensure Agency contracts are enforced properly and that all federal employees are treated fairly.

State the Mission of the Union - Make it Positive.

Explain that the overall mission of AFGE is to improve the professional and personal lives of our members and to improve government service. You can also add a statement about the local Union's mission.

(e.g., "And here in our Local our mission is to provide the best service to Veterans, SSA Beneficiaries, etc...that we can. To do this, we negotiate agreements at the national and local level with the Agency to provide employees with day care subsidies, transportation allowances, training and career ladder opportunities. And we lobby members of Congress on those work issues that only Congress controls such as our pay, health benefits, and retirement.")

Go Through the Contract – Make it Brief

Hand out a copy of the labor agreement to each new employee, explain that the contract spells out their rights from A-Z in this Agency including when you take vacation, your work schedule, etc. Have them open to the table of contents and briefly go over select sections such as AWS, annual leave, daycare subsidies, etc... Make sure to target selections that, based on your knowledge of the audience, will appeal to the new employee.

End your discussion of the contract by saying something along these lines:

"I know you've gotten a mountain of paper and information today and I know you have a million things whirling around in your head. Put your contract in a safe place so that when things settle down you can look through it. There is a lot of important information in this little book that you'll want to refer to."

Promote AFGE Successes

Discuss major bargaining accomplishments you are proud of! Say something like:

*"We are very proud of the child care subsidy we negotiated for the employees of this Agency."
Or, "Because of our bargaining efforts on Capital Hill, we receive the same pay raises as the military and we have been very successful over several years in boosting that pay raise."*



Idea: Use New Technologies to Welcome New Employees

In the old days, you may have handed out a letter from the Union along with some benefits information. Now, you can give the Union a face, making it much easier for a new worker to find you. With a digital camera, you or another activist can take photos of stewards and leaders inexpensively and put them easily on a leaflet. Include a couple of sentences of welcome, along with the name, work area and shift of the leaders in the photos. If possible, include a phone number and location where leaders usually take breaks, so new employees can find them when they need to. You'll want to print out only a few colorful leaflets at a time, so you can update them as your stewards or their phone numbers change.

If your local has a website, especially one with FAQs about the Union or the contract, be sure to include that address too as well as the national web site address. The Web gives workers an opportunity to study the contract or their Union in the comfort of their own homes, at a time convenient to them, without the boss looking over their shoulders.

Invite an Outside Speaker to Discuss Current Issues Affecting Employees in That Agency

One of the key advantages in getting in front of new employees is the opportunity to frame workplace issues from the Union's point of view. This is critical, because whoever frames workplace issues, controls the debate.

Bringing in a national or district staff person who is knowledgeable about issues facing new employees in their home Agency shows them that the Union is serious about taking on Agency challenges that affect their professional lives.

Go Over the Union Orientation Kit

Ask participants to pick up the orientation kit. *(Make sure it is distributed before the meeting so they can look at it during the formal orientation.)* Be sure you have a card or flyer in the orientation kit that provides contact information for Union officers and stewards. Introduce any stewards who are in attendance and make a point of stating which worksite the steward represents.

Explain How New Employees Can Contact the Union





Tell folks where the Union office is located. If the facility is spread over several buildings or locations, include a map of the bargaining unit in the orientation kit that shows the location of the Union office, break areas, credit union, bulletin boards and other important areas new employees will need to know about. You could even provide a list of recommended places for lunch or some other helpful information to a new employee.

Tell new employees when the Union meets and what the purpose of the meetings are. Have pictures, email addresses and phone numbers that make it easy to reach a Union representative.

Sample Union Contact List

AFGE LOCAL 12345

"Proud to Make Madison Work"

 <p>Jamie Clarke, President AFGE LOCAL 12345</p> <p>Office: 444 South Madison, C Building Phone: 404-123-12334 Cell: 404-456-7890 Email: jclarke@afge12345.org</p>	 <p>M.J. Blige, Steward AFGE LOCAL 12345</p> <p>Office: 222 South Madison, B Building Phone: 404-123-12334 Cell: 404-456-1540 Email: mblige@afge12345.org</p>
 <p>Sally Forth, Secretary-Treasurer AFGE LOCAL 12345</p> <p>Office: 111 East Jefferson, A Building Phone: 404-123-12334 Cell: 404-789-1011 Email: sforth@afge12345.org</p>	 <p>Buddy Holly, Steward AFGE LOCAL 12345</p> <p>Office: 345 North Jefferson, D Building Phone: 404-123-12334 Cell: 404-123-1111 mail: bholly@afge12345.org</p>

Conversation Starters with New Employees

One of our functions as Union leaders is to welcome new employees. Here are some suggestions for talking with new employees either at a Lunch and Learn or, one-on-one in the workplace.

Get to know each other. Ask: Where did they work before? Where do they live now? Do they have a family? Hobbies? Sports? Start off by listening.

Offer information. Tell the new employee where the vending machines are (*and what not to buy*), where to go for a quick, good lunch, what the boss is like, who manages the softball team, or how you get in on ride-sharing.

Give the new worker a welcome packet if you have one. If not, be sure they receive a copy of the contract and explain important provisions to them.

Promote AFGE's Successes. Explain that the benefits most important to them (*higher wages, health care, holidays, career advancement, and a voice on the job*) have come from AFGE's collective bargaining efforts and its lobbying efforts on the Hill – not from the benevolence of the employer.

Build Trust with the New Employee. During the conversation, remember that you want the employee to begin identifying with the Union. Whenever the worker has a question or concern, you are the person to see, not the supervisor. The Union is the members, the people right there all around you, not some unknown outsiders. If you get these two ideas across, you've done your job.

Invite Them to a Union Meeting. If your Union is doing its job, there'll be a meeting coming up that you'll want to invite the new worker to. In fact, why not take them with you? They'll feel more at ease with someone they know. (*Remember your first Union meeting?*)

Give Them Your Business Card. Make sure the worker has a business card with your name and phone number and the Union bug, and encourage them to call if they have any problems.

Leave a Few Minutes for Questions

New employees may have some questions to ask regarding the Union. The typical types of questions you should be prepared for are: Do I have to join? How much are the dues? (*See page 12 for common questions and suggested responses.*)

Recruiting New Members

At the end of the formal orientation, invite new employees to join you and other local Union officers and members to a free lunch compliments of the AFGE local. Make sure there is plenty of good food! Look at the list of new hires before the orientation and make sure that a Union leader or a Union member from the new hires work location comes to the new orientation and makes a point of connecting with the new employee.

Be Candid With New Employees

Share with new hires what they won't hear from management including tips about dress, attendance, getting the job done and career advancement.

Advise new employees on how best to use their leave time. Read what the contract says about leave time and follow it. Explain that this is one of the single biggest factors used to terminate new employees on probation.

Tell new employees that during their probation, if something goes wrong between them and their supervisor, or they feel they are having difficulty with the work, contact us sooner rather than later. Many arrangements can be made for training or reassignment when a problem first surfaces rather than when a decision to terminate has been made.

Hold up the New Member Application (1187 or 277)

Begin walking through each line with the group. Make sure everyone has a working ink pen in front of them to sign the membership form. You might say something like:

"In order to get your computer discount or other discounts on dental, health, home mortgages and cars, fill out this form. Most of our Union reps are at your service to help you pave a successful and rewarding path in government service. The greatest benefits come from the Union's work on Capitol Hill."

Orientation Follow-Up

After the orientation, hang onto the sign up sheets. Make a point of sending out a thank you note right away to those new employees who attended the orientation. In your note be sure to include your contact information (or the steward's contact information.)

One or two weeks following the lunch and learn, make a one-on-one visit to the new employee. (This can be done by any member of the E-Board or the assigned steward in that location. Just be sure it is someone familiar with the work location.)

Make the visit informal - during a break or lunch time - and check in with the new employee about how things are going. Listen to any concerns they may have (Union related or not) and offer them assistance. Take this opportunity to recruit them for membership (if they have not already joined). Be sure to leave a business card with them on how to contact the Union.



SAMPLE THANK YOU NOTE

Dear (New employee name):

Thank you for attending AFGE Local ____ Lunch and Learn yesterday (put date here). We are here to promote and protect your interests as a government employee, including job advancement, and to improve government service. Please contact _____ if you have any questions or if you need help in your new job.

Questions from New Employees: Suggested Responses

Why Should I Join the Union? AFGE is the only organization which lobbies on behalf of government workers and their issues. Our lobbying efforts have paid off in higher raises, flexible scheduling, and better pension guarantees. The more members we have, the stronger our voice on Capitol Hill.



I Can't Afford the Dues. We all work hard for our paychecks and want to make sure we're getting our money's worth. As a member of AFGE, you'll have access to a deep pool of resources – attorneys, representatives, lobbyists — who work on your behalf for better pay, working conditions, and promotional opportunities. And if you join today, you'll get a \$20.00 rebate on your first year of dues.

According to the *New York Times*, joining a Union can yield a better rate of return over the long term than money in a 401K plan. This makes joining a Union one of the best long term economic decisions you can make.

You Have to Represent Me Whether I Join or Not. Not necessarily. Dues paying members enjoy the benefit and insurance of free and full representation when and if they need it. Should the situation arise where you feel you were passed over for a promotion or received an unfavorable work evaluation, the Union is limited in what it can do for you. For example, the Union is not required to represent non-members in adverse actions (suspensions of 14 days or more, removals, etc.) or certain types of statutory appeals such as EEO, Workers Compensation or Merit Systems Protection Board hearings. Paying an attorney for these services is very expensive – \$1800* on average for a workers compensation claim and \$4800* on average for an EEOC case. (*Based on estimated attorney fees of \$120 per hour.)

In addition, think of the benefits you pass up by not joining. You will lose out on discount mortgages, free legal services, and college scholarships for you and your family. Why settle for less when you can get all of it by joining.

I Don't Need the Union; I Can Handle My Own Problems. I'm sure you are capable and so am I. That's why it's so effective when co-workers combine forces. None of us ever knows when we'll run into a problem. Supervisors change, agencies get reorganized, funds are cut. Together we can depend on each other and make it easier to handle our own problems.

Unions Are Out of Date. We Just Don't Need Them. One of the big reasons that the employer seems fair is that the Union works hard to make them fair. Workers helping each other, protecting what we have and winning improvements is never out of date!

What's the Probationary Period? Am I Covered by the Contract When I'm on Probation?

The probationary period, by law, is part of the job hiring process. During this time, you are covered by all provisions of the contract with the exception that if you are terminated during this time, you are not protected by the Contract's grievance and arbitration provisions. We can, however, contest the action through EEO if discrimination was a factor in the termination.

Checklist for Conducting New Employee Orientations

1. Negotiate the Union's Right to Participate — Connect it to a Lunch & Learn.
2. Get a Schedule of Orientation Dates in Advance.
3. Recruit Local Union Volunteers to Help.
4. Know Your Audience.
5. Prepare a New Employee Orientation Kit.
6. Go in With a Positive Attitude.
7. Circulate a Sign in Sheet.
8. Show an AFGE Welcome Video.
9. Briefly Review AFGE Accomplishments and Benefits.
10. Invite a District or National Staff to Speak.
11. Walk Participants through the Union Membership Form.
12. Follow Up.



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