

Fighting For My Rights

by Marie Stephanie Edma

I first heard about union classes at my job. My friend helped me. She pushed me to come to class. I have learned a lot from the Worker Education Program. My English improved and I got my high school diploma. WEP taught me to speak-up anytime and anywhere.

Last year—in January—I made a vacation-request for the month of August. The union contract states that vacation requests have to be made between January and March. I submitted

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my request to the scheduler and it was approved by the Director of Nursing. Once I got my request approved, signed, and delivered back, I saved it along with my paychecks.

In July, when I looked at the schedule, I saw my name selected for the entire month of August. This was when I planned to go on vacation. I went to the scheduler and explained the situation to her. She told me, "You have to see the administrator."

A few hours later, after my lunch, I asked one of my co-workers to go with me to the administration office. I said, "Well, Mr. Kneland, I requested an August vacation at the beginning of the year, and it was approved by the Director of Nursing; however, I saw my name on the schedule for the entire month of August. Could you explain to me what happened? I have already made reservations to fly to Haiti and I cannot cancel the ticket." Mr. Kneland replied, "The request has to be approved by me and not the Director of Nursing." I countered, "Show me the paper saying that the Director of Nursing does not have the power to approve a vacation form." He started getting angry. He said that I could not go on vacation and threatened that if I went

to Haiti, I would be terminated. I banged my fist on the table and I said to him, "Don't play games with me because I am not a child; I am an adult! Since I requested my vacation, I shall take it and then come back to work.

"Mr. Kneland immediately backed down and assured me that everything would be OK and urged me to fill out a new request form, which he would approve on the spot.

I realized that by making myself heard, I became stronger. Sometimes managers try to put us down by being strict. However, the union makes the workers stronger because it teaches us how to defend our rights! The union teaches us about workers' rights and that knowledge is POWER!

After this incident, I realized that workers can have more power than managers if they communicate and organize together. I then decided to become an SEIU Local 2020 steward so I could learn more about workers' rights and defend them and myself.

In June of 2002, I graduated from the union's steward school. This accomplishment has made me feel stronger and more powerful. Workers are here to stay, but managers like Mr. Kneland—who was eventually fired—are temporary if they abuse and manipulate workers. Fellow workers, I hope you think about your goals and dignity because you can achieve whatever you want.



Marie Stephanie Edma is from Haiti. She works at East Village Nursing Home as a Certified Nursing Assistant, a member of SEIU Local 2020 and is a student at WEP.