

# Collective Bargaining: What It Is and Why It Matters

- Local Presidents Training – Virginia



# A Brief History of Collective Bargaining in Virginia

- Virginia is a 'Right-to-Work' state since 1947—limits union power but doesn't ban unions
- 1977: Virginia bans collective bargaining for public employees after a court ruling
- For 43 years, public sector workers had no legal path to bargain contracts
- Virginia was one of only 3 states with a complete ban on public sector CB until 2020



## The 2020 Breakthrough

- In 2020, Virginia passed a law allowing \*local-option\* collective bargaining
- Local governments must pass an ordinance to allow it—no statewide mandate (yet)
- This opened the door, but only a handful of localities have acted
- IAFF and VPFF are working toward a statewide mandate for all public safety unions



# What Is Collective Bargaining?

- A formal, legally-recognized process between the union and employer
- Negotiates wages, hours, benefits, and working conditions
- Results in a binding contract (CBA)
- Requires both sides to bargain in good faith



# Key Elements of Collective Bargaining

- Recognition of the union as the exclusive representative
- Legal obligation to negotiate before changing employment terms
- Binding agreements enforceable through grievance and arbitration
- Protects against arbitrary decisions by management



# What We Have Now in Most of Virginia

- No legal obligation for employers to bargain
- No binding agreements—just policies that can be changed
- No grievance/arbitration rights
- No formal voice in wages, staffing, or safety
- We're operating on “trust,” not enforceable rights



## Example: Staffing Language

- Now: Management can ignore staffing concerns
- With CB: Union can propose minimum staffing levels
- Employer must negotiate
- Agreement can be enforced if violated



## Example: Vacation Seniority

- Now: Seniority-based vacation picks can be changed at any time
- With CB: Language protecting seniority is locked in
- Changes must be negotiated





## Example: Discipline Without Recourse

- Now: Appeals go to city HR or management—often biased
- With CB: Union can grieve the discipline
- Disputes go to independent arbitration



## Example: Wages & Raises

- Now: Raises are decided entirely by the employer
- With CB: Union can negotiate salary scales, COLA, and incentives
- Decisions are based on data, not politics



## Example: Broken Promises

- Now: Verbal promises can be ignored
- With CB: Agreements must be honored
- Language like gear replacement or training is enforceable



# So What **\*Is\*** Collective Bargaining, Really?

- It's how we negotiate our pay, benefits, and working conditions
- It turns handshake deals into legally binding contracts
- It gives us a seat at the table when decisions are made
- It's the only way we can enforce what's promised



## Think of It Like a Contract for a House

- You wouldn't buy a house on a verbal promise
- You want the terms written down and legally enforceable
- That's what a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) is
- Without one, we're trusting management to 'do the right thing'



# What Can Be in a Collective Bargaining Agreement?

- Wages and step increases
- Health insurance and retirement
- Overtime, callback, holiday pay
- Disciplinary procedures
- Staffing levels and apparatus requirements
- Training, safety policies, PPE replacement
- Grievance and arbitration process



# How to Explain CB to Members in 30 Seconds

- “Collective bargaining means we get to negotiate what our work looks like.
- It’s how we secure better pay, safer staffing, and real protection.
- Without it, everything is up to management—and it can change overnight.
- With it, we have a contract they have to honor.”



## Where We Go From Here

- In 2024, a statewide collective bargaining bill passed the General Assembly
- The bill was vetoed by the Governor—but it showed strong momentum
- 2025 presents a new opportunity with a possible new Governor
- We must be ready with educated locals, organized members, and local to win





## What You Can Do Right Now

- Educate your members about what CB means and what it could deliver
- Talk to your local elected officials—find allies now
- Support locals pursuing local-option ordinances
- Prepare for 2025: Share your story and advocate for a statewide mandate



# Summary

- Collective Bargaining Gives Us:
  - - A seat at the table
  - - A voice in decisions
  - - A contract that holds up in court
  - - Protection for our members
- Without it, we're relying on handshakes and hope.

