



Shop Steward – What Is It About?



Shop Steward

A shop steward is a representative of the employees at the workplace. They are an employee who has been selected to the position by their co-workers.

A shop steward acts as a negotiator, mediator, agreement maker and messenger in matters related to employment between the employees and the employer.

Electing a shop steward is the employees' right and benefit. While it is not mandatory to elect a shop steward, it is always beneficial to do so.

The literal meaning of the Finnish word for shop steward – *luottamusmies* – is "person of trust". As the name implies, a shop steward is someone who is trusted by their co-workers to act in their best interest.

What is the difference between a shop steward and an occupational safety and health representative?

Both are staff representatives, but their tasks are different. A shop steward monitors compliance with terms of employment, while an occupational safety and health representative monitors occupational safety and health.

Duties

As a representative of the employees, the shop steward monitors compliance with the terms of the applicable collective agreement, legislation, and employment contracts at the workplace.

The shop steward is the representative of the Industrial Union (Teollisuusliitto) at the workplace. Every union member belongs to a local branch, and the shop steward also acts as the representative of that branch.

Certain provisions of collective agreements can be deviated from through local agreements. The shop steward has the right to conclude local agreements with the employer. In such cases, the terms of the local agreement apply to all employment relationships at the workplace.

The shop steward advises, supports, and assists employees who are members of the Industrial Union in matters such as pay, working hours, breaks, leave, and other employment conditions, and negotiates with the employer if disagreements arise.

The shop steward encourages employees to join the Industrial Union. When employees pull together, the shop steward has better opportunities to influence fair working conditions, smooth daily work, and equitable treatment of employees.

Role in Disputes

Collective agreements define the negotiation procedure, or in other words, who negotiates disputes and in what order. The aim is to resolve disputes at the workplace level.

If an employee has a disagreement with their employer, they should primarily contact the workplace shop steward and ask for assistance. It is important for the shop steward to be informed of all potential disagreements at the workplace.

If no solution is found with the shop steward's help, the shop steward refers the matter to the Industrial Union to be settled with

the employers' federation. If the employer is not a member of an employers' federation, the Industrial Union handles the matter directly with the employer.

Disputes are always primarily resolved through negotiation and agreement. Most disagreements are solved through negotiation.

If no agreement is reached in negotiations between the Industrial Union and the employers' federation or the employer, the matter may have to be taken to court. In such cases, members can apply to the Industrial Union for legal aid.

Rights

The position of the shop steward is based on collective agreements concluded by the Industrial Union with the employers' federations. In this respect as well, the union has negotiated better terms than those provided by the law. By law, the provisions of collective agreements must be followed.

Collective agreements differ across sectors. It is important to check the details in the collective agreement applicable at your workplace or in the shop steward agreement attached to it.

Performing Duties During Working Hours

The shop steward may use working time to perform their duties. The employer pays wages for this time. The amount of time that can be used for shop steward duties depends on the size of the workplace. At large workplaces with hundreds of employees, the chief shop steward may perform their duties full-time. At medium-sized workplaces, the time varies from a few hours per week up to half of the working time. At very small workplaces, the shop steward performs their duties alongside their normal work.

Financial Compensation

The employer pays the shop steward compensation in accordance with the collective agreement. The amount depends on the size of the workplace. At large workplaces, the compensation can exceed €200 per month, but typically it ranges from about €50 to €150. At very small workplaces, no compensation is paid.

Facilities and Equipment

The employer must provide the shop steward with appropriate premises where they can store documents and hold confidential discussions with employees. The shop steward has the right to use the employer's office and communication equipment in the performance of their duties.

Access to Information

The shop steward has the right to obtain necessary information from the employer to perform their duties, such as information about employees and their positions. Details of the information shop stewards are entitled to can be found in the collective agreement or in the shop steward agreement attached to it.

The shop steward's right to information may also be based on law. In change negotiations, when the employer is planning to reduce personnel or make other organizational changes, legislation

guarantees the shop steward access to information such as the grounds and objectives of the plans and their impact on personnel. Under the Act on the Contractor's Obligations and Liability when Work is Contracted Out, the shop steward has the right to information about temporary agency work and subcontracting. Under the Aliens Act, the shop steward has the right to information about all foreign employees working for the company.

Protection

A shop steward may sometimes find themselves in a challenging position when defending employees' rights in the workplace. Due to their position, shop stewards are given special protection against dismissal and the weakening of their position under collective agreements.

A shop steward cannot be dismissed for performing their duties as a shop steward. Terminating a shop steward's employment relationship for financial or production-related reasons, or for reasons related to their person, is very difficult. They also cannot be transferred to worse or lower-paid work because of their role.

This protection allows the shop steward to act without fear of weakening their position. The protection continues for a certain period even after the shop steward's term has ended. In some collective agreements, the protection also covers candidates in shop steward elections.

Training

The shop steward does not have to manage alone. The Industrial Union supports their capabilities through training and guidance.

Shop stewards receive training on legislation, collective agreements, and how to perform their duties. The Industrial Union's Murikka Institute offers a comprehensive learning path for shop stewards, and additional training is organized across Finland. During training, shop stewards have the opportunity to network, learn from one another, and receive support from their peers.

The employer pays the shop steward's wages during training. Training, accommodation, and meals are free of charge for the shop steward, and their travel expenses are reimbursed.

Selection

Electing a shop steward is the right of employees. The employer is not allowed to participate in or influence the process.

The selection is carried out through an election or a nomination meeting. When planning to elect a shop steward, it is important to carefully follow the Industrial Union's election guidelines to ensure the process is formally correct, especially if there is no prior experience of organizing elections at the workplace. It is also recommended to contact the Industrial Union in advance.

Primary and Deputy Shop Stewards

A deputy is also elected for the shop steward. Larger workplaces may have multiple shop stewards. For example, in addition to the chief shop steward and their deputy, shop stewards and deputies may be elected for different departments of the workplace. At smaller workplaces, one shop steward and one deputy are elected.

The deputy performs the duties of the shop steward when the primary shop steward is unavailable due to annual leave, sick leave, or other temporary absence. If the shop steward is permanently unable to perform their duties, the deputy assumes their duties until a new shop steward has been elected by the employees.

The employer must always be informed when the deputy shop steward assumes the role of shop steward.

Term

The shop steward's term is two years. A shop steward may also be elected mid-term.

Nomination of Candidates

Candidates are nominated in a meeting called for the purpose. An election committee is selected in the same meeting.

The meeting must be held at least two weeks before the elections and must be announced at least one week in advance.

All employees who are members of the Industrial Union's local branch at the workplace are eligible to run.

If only one candidate per position is nominated in the meeting, no election is held. Instead, the sole candidate is elected by decision of the meeting. Minutes of the decision must be recorded.

Elections

If more than one candidate is nominated for shop steward at the nomination meeting, the selection is made by election. Elections are held in even-numbered years in November–December. If there is no previous shop steward at the workplace, elections to select one can be held at any time.

If elections are held at the workplace, this must be agreed with the employer well in advance. Elections can also be organized somewhere near the workplace or, with the permission of the Industrial Union, electronically or by mail. Members entitled to vote must be informed of the elections as soon as possible and no later than one week before they take place.

The right to vote is held by members of the Industrial Union who work at the workplace in question. Laid-off employees and new members who have joined the Industrial Union before the start of the election are also allowed to vote. Each person's right to vote is verified at the time of voting.

Ballot secrecy must be ensured when organizing the voting. All eligible voters, including shift workers and those on leave, must have the opportunity to participate.

Notification

The Industrial Union and the employer must be notified of the elected shop steward in writing.

Exceptions

Collective agreements in the following sectors contain differing provisions on the election of shop stewards: the car retail and garage branch, the motor vehicle tyre branch, forestry, plant nursery, machine work in forestry, peat production, the media and printing branch, and delivery.

FAQ

What if there is no shop steward at my workplace?

If you are a member of the Industrial Union and there is no shop steward at your workplace, you can contact the union directly regarding any employment-related questions and problems.

It is also worth discussing the right to elect a shop steward with your co-workers. Organized members of the Industrial Union can, together with their local branch, organize an election at any time.

Why should we elect a shop steward?

When there is a shop steward at the workplace, employees have better opportunities to influence their working conditions. Conditions are generally better at workplaces that have a shop steward.

The shop steward negotiates with the employer on behalf of employees. They know the applicable collective agreement and labour legislation well and are supported by the Industrial Union's experts. The shop steward has the right to obtain information about workplace matters and can ensure that employees are treated fairly and properly.

What if there are only a few of us employees?

The number of employees does not make a difference when electing a shop steward. Even if there are only a few employees, it can still be beneficial to elect one person to represent everyone.

Who can become a shop steward?

If you are a member of a local branch of the Industrial Union, you can become a shop steward. You do not have to be superhuman or know everything. It is enough to be familiar with the matters of your workplace, interested in handling shared issues, willing to learn the rules of working life, and motivated to develop your skills in listening, speaking up with confidence, and negotiating effectively.

What if I disagree with the shop steward?

It is important to support the shop steward and actively communicate your own views about workplace matters to them. The shop steward often has more information than other employees and sometimes has to make compromise-based decisions that may be difficult to understand without knowing the full context.

You can also nominate yourself for shop steward in the next election or encourage a co-worker to run.

What is an elected representative (luottamusvaltuutettu)?

An elected representative (luottamusvaltuutettu) is different from a shop steward. By law, employees may elect such a representative. However, they do not represent the union at the workplace. The Industrial Union has not trained them for the role, and they do not have access to the support of the union's experts.

