

AFUM and groupwork

Paul Johnson* and Lydia Savage

Abstract: Over the past decade, both authors have been members of the AFUM statewide executive committee. The group holds regular monthly meetings during the academic year. It has become apparent to both authors that undertaking this responsibility successfully requires a great deal of support. The AFUM executive committee has applied the concepts detailed by Gitterman & Shulman in their analysis of mutual aid group dynamics. The mutual aid group work model, rather than remaining a theoretical concept, has demonstrably practical implications now integrated into the AFUM executive committee's endeavors. This paper demonstrates the application of this modality and proposes its potential adoption by other union organizations.

Keywords: group work; mutual aid; AFUM; University of Maine System; union work; education; groupwork

Correspondence: paulj@maine.edu

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Dr. Paul Johnson is a professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Southern Maine, where he has been a faculty member for twenty-six years. He has published research in the areas of group work, fieldwork, and trauma and grief. A member of (IASWG) since 1997, Dr. Johnson has served as the grievance representative for the Associated Faculties of the Universities of Maine at the University of Southern Maine for the past eleven years. Additionally, he is the chair of the statewide university grievance committee.

Dr. Lydia Savage is a geography professor in the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine, where she has been a faculty member for twenty-nine years. She has published research in the areas of feminist geography, union organizing, and healthcare. Dr. Savage was elected statewide President of the Associated Faculties of the Universities of Maine in 2024 after serving as Co-Vice President and chapter president at the University for Southern Maine. Additionally, she serves on the statewide negotiating team.

Background

University of Maine System

In 1968, the Maine Legislature established the University of Maine System.

Both authors are members and elected officers of the Associated Faculties of the University of Maine (AFUM). AFUM is the labor union that represents the full-time faculty of the University of Maine System (UMS), which comprises the University of Southern Maine (USM), the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF), the University of Maine at Augusta (UMA), the University of Maine at Machias (UMM), the University of Maine (UM), which includes Cooperative Extension (CE), the University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI), and the University of Maine at Fort Kent (UMFK).

AFUM

The executive board of AFUM, composed of delegates from the eight institutions above, holds monthly meetings throughout the academic year. Since COVID, these meetings have usually occurred via Zoom. However, at least once a semester, the group meets in person. The University of Maine is the designated meeting venue, strategically positioned at the geographical midpoint of all eight programs.

As is typical with most meetings, each monthly meeting has an agenda addressing the following issues.

1. Approval of the agenda
2. Approval of minutes
3. Presidents report
4. Negotiating team report
5. Committee reports
 - a. Grievance
 - b. Employee health
 - c. Legislative
6. Old business
7. New business
8. Chapter round table
9. Adjourn

Consequently, this forum provides a platform for the AFUM executive committee from the seven universities to address issues at their respective home universities and stay abreast of statewide developments that have implications at various levels. Numerous matters require attention, including compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, adjustments to teaching responsibilities, shared governance practices, concerns regarding sabbatical leave, inadequate release time for department chairs, the volume of grievances at a specific university, state funding levels, and the negative impact of reduced University of Maine appropriations on individual institutions.

According to Wampole et al. (2023), group work is a foundational method in social work practice, spanning macro, mezzo, and micro levels. The use of groups can serve a variety of purposes, from positively managing high caseloads, as noted by Nichols et al. (2022), to more problematic applications where managerial strategies prioritize cost-efficiency over workforce sustainability (Hills et al., 2004; McCrone et al., 2005; Nakimuli-Mpungu et al., 2020; Tambay, 2019). In the context of AFUM executive board meetings, group processes function similarly to bring together diverse representatives to collaboratively manage complex institutional challenges.

These monthly gatherings serve not only as administrative checkpoints but also as working groups where collective problem-solving, negotiation, and advocacy occur. Much like in social work practice, the strength of the AFUM executive board lies in its ability to harness group dynamics to respond to systemic pressures, balance competing interests, and advocate for equitable solutions across the university system. This group work then forms the basis for continuous organizing and education of ourselves and our members.

Group Work

Schwartz (1961) established a precise definition of the helping group:

The group is an enterprise in mutual aid, an alliance of individuals who need each other, in varying degrees, to work on certain problems. The important fact is that this is a helping system in which the clients need each other as well as the worker. This need to use each other, to create not one but many helping relationships, is a vital ingredient of the group

process and constitutes a common need over and above the specific task for which the group was formed. (p.18).

Shulman (1999) asserts:

The group is a special case of the general individual-social interaction. In a sense, the group represents a micro-society. (p.302)

Based on the sources above, the authors argue that AFUM aligns with the group definitions proposed by Wampole et al, Schwartz, and Shulman. All full-time University of Maine System faculty are considered AFUM members. Thus, this constitutes a group in a macro context. Furthermore, the faculty are considered members of their respective universities and local AFUM chapter, forming a group at the mezzo level. Lastly, the Executive Committee comprises elected members from the seven universities, forming a group at a micro level. In Schwartz's view, the Executive Committee at the micro level engages in mutual support, offering different levels of assistance to one another through examples, advice, acting as a sounding board, attending meetings with them, etc. For example, members might engage in joint responses to systemwide faculty concerns when a proposed policy change at the system level has the potential to impact faculty negatively, committee members collaborate to draft a unified response, leveraging shared data and faculty testimonials.

From various perspectives, one could make the case that collaborative endeavors are undertaken at multiple levels within this framework. For example, at the macro level, AFUM negotiates systemwide contracts that reflect the shared priorities of faculty across all campuses, such as workload equity, salary adjustments, and academic freedom protections. At the mezzo level, local chapters may coordinate efforts to implement these agreements through campus-specific initiatives, such as revising departmental bylaws or advocating for improved faculty evaluation processes. At the micro level, Executive Committee members support one another by sharing negotiation strategies, reviewing grievance cases, or jointly responding to emergent issues, such as administrative overreach or sudden policy shifts. AFUM enthusiastically adopts and actively implements the principles of group work. It is both a theoretical concept and a deliberately utilized practical strategy. According

to Shulman, it mirrors the norms and values of society, such as mutual respect, equity, and collective responsibility, which AFUM operationalizes through its layered structure and active engagement at every level.

Organizing models of unionism

In the post-World War II period of relative labor-management peace, unions quickly adopted many aspects of institutional or corporate practices and turned toward serving their members. Three-year collective bargaining agreements with annual increases, healthcare, and pensions replaced wildcat strikes and temporary agreements. As labor relations were regularized, so were labor union structures. Professional staff employees of a labor union would serve as the intermediary between workers and management and while shop floors had powerful shop stewards, the collective bargaining agreement formalized all actions—obey then grieve became the response to any violations and lengthy processes to resolve grievances often involved management and union staff (Blanc 2025, Cobble 2016, 2007, Herod 2018, 1998).

These changes in the form and function of labor unions were not uniform but did become the dominant model, and workers began to see their union dues as payment for services rather than an act of solidarity and support for fellow members. While manufacturing unions set the tone for the U.S. labor movement, labor unions that sought to organize and represent service sector workers did little to modify the model even as they began to represent workers in hospitals and offices and universities. The debate in the labor movement between the service model of unionism and the organizing model of unionism has a long history, but creates a false dichotomy as unions must and should do both. It is this connection between an organizing model of union and group work that this paper will explore using our union as an example.

The Dynamics of Mutual Aid

The ten theoretical constructs of mutual aid proposed by Gitterman and Shulman constitute a strong framework for both illustrating and integrating the dynamics of mutual aid group work.

1. Sharing data
2. Dialectic Process
3. Discussing Taboos
4. All in the same boat (same storm)
5. Developing a Universal Perspective
6. Mutual Support
7. Mutual Demand
8. Individual Problem Solving
9. Rehearsal
10. Strength in Numbers (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005, p.21)

This enables one to see how group work is relevant and can be applied to the work of AFUM at a macro, mezzo, and micro level. For instance, if a proposed system wide policy threatened to increase faculty workload without additional compensation, the Executive Committee would convene to share campus-specific data (sharing data), openly discuss concerns about speaking out (discussing taboos), and recognize that all campuses were facing the same challenge (all in the same boat). Through collaborative dialogue (dialectic process), they would craft a unified response (strength in numbers) and provide mutual encouragement and accountability (mutual support and mutual demand) throughout the advocacy process.

This is not just a theoretical concept but has practical benefits, especially in today's heightened stressors in U.S. higher education, where faculty face increasing demands, administrative pressure, shrinking budgets, and growing political intrusion into academic governance (Cain, 2020). AFUM provides a structure through which we can address systemic and localized issues that impact faculty across the eight chapters. For instance, the Collective Bargaining Agreement applies to all members across seven universities and eight local chapters, whose sizes range from as few as 14 to over 500 members. A localized university issue often exhibits characteristics of a mezzo-level problem, with implications beyond one campus. Workload, a persistent and

escalating concern, exemplifies this dynamic. We routinely address issues that affect both groups of faculty and individual members, navigating increasing institutional pressures and advocating for equity. As articulated by Steinberg, mutual support is often the primary factor that brings individuals to a group (2014, p.112). One could argue that unions, by definition, are built on the idea of mutual support, but as many have observed, contemporary unions often operate under a business model of unionism, with paid staff and a largely transactional relationship between members and leadership (Julius & DiGiovanni, 2019). In contrast, AFUM strives to cultivate a participatory model grounded in shared responsibility, solidarity, and active engagement, which we assert is a necessary shift given the intensifying challenges faced by faculty today.

Sharing Data

Sharing data focuses on how group members recognize one another as sources of information and wisdom (Steinberg, 2014, p. 98). In this dynamic, executive committee members provide information about what is happening at their universities. As a result, this forum allows the AFUM executive committee from the seven universities to address issues at their respective home universities and stay informed about statewide developments that have implications at multiple levels.

As an illustration, in recent years, numerous AFUM leadership members have consistently convened with their university's president, provost, and head of human relations. This proactive approach has mitigated potential departmental discord.

Another example of data sharing is employee health. Health insurance coverage represents the largest share of faculty benefits for higher education across the U.S., rising from an average of less than 3% of total compensation in the 1980s to a figure that had risen to over 10% by 2020 (Toutkoushian, 2023). Over the last several years, the administration and AFUM, along with the other collective bargaining units, have established a task force examining healthcare premiums. The Employee Health Plan Task Force EHPTF is a joint labor/management group with representation from all of the bargaining units, as well as non-represented employees. EHPTF meets monthly, and their charge is to review the UMS health plans

and make recommendations. EHPTF has agreed in some cases to increase costs in one area to decrease them in another. UMS is a self-insured employer, so all claims incurred by employees and their dependents are paid from University resources. UMS pays a small administrative fee to an insurance company to administer the plan and adjudicate claims.

This collective has diligently strived to prevent excessive escalation of healthcare expenses and to guarantee accessibility to medical services for all individuals in a rural state like Maine, as providers and facilities close due to low numbers and escalating costs. For example, the Maine Rural Health Research Center documents that emergency services in rural areas have been greatly diminished, creating “ambulance deserts” (Jonk, 2023), and these types of changes affect many of our members.

At the monthly meetings of the AFUM Executive Committee, representatives from the healthcare task force regularly present updated data and relevant policy information to committee members. These presentations facilitate the dissemination of critical insights to individual university chapters, enhancing transparency and supporting informed decision-making across campuses. Notably, this year has seen an increase in faculty members’ out-of-pocket healthcare expenses for various medical procedures. A healthcare task force representative provided concrete case examples during a recent meeting, which contributed to a clearer understanding of these developments and enabled more effective communication with local constituencies.

This exchange exemplifies what Yalom (2005) identifies as a key therapeutic factor in group work: didactic instruction, wherein the provision of information serves as a form of direct guidance for group participants. Within this context, the sharing of healthcare data and policy implications demonstrates mutual aid in practice, functioning across macro (systemwide), mezzo (chapter-level), and micro (committee-level) dimensions of union activity.

The Dialectical Process

As stated by Shulman (1999):

An important debate of ideas can take place as each member shares views on the question under discussion. Group members can risk their tentative ideas and use the group as a sounding board—a place for their views to be challenged and possibly changed. (p.305).

Challenging discussions frequently arise during our monthly Executive Committee meetings, particularly during the chapter roundtable, where leaders from each chapter report on campus-specific developments and faculty concerns. On numerous occasions, representatives raise issues regarding the treatment of individual faculty members by the administration, often citing a failure to adhere to the provisions of the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). The CBA, a legally binding document negotiated between AFUM and the University of Maine System, outlines the terms and conditions of faculty employment, including workload expectations, procedures for evaluation and promotion, grievance processes, academic freedom protections, and compensation structures. Allegations of administrative noncompliance with the CBA may constitute procedural violations and typically prompt further examination. Such reports give rise to important procedural questions: When is it appropriate for the grievance officer at a given campus to initiate a formal grievance? Under what circumstances should a faculty member be required to attend a meeting with administration? At what point must AFUM be notified to ensure the faculty member's contractual rights are fully protected? These questions underscore the importance of consistent interpretation and enforcement of the CBA across the system.

This frequently leads to members discussing how they deal with issues at their respective universities. For instance, at the University of Southern Maine, where both authors are faculty, we convene bi-weekly with the President and Provost, who serve as administrative representatives of the university's senior leadership. At these meetings, we work to resolve faculty concerns. Additionally, we endeavor to articulate faculty members' experiences and explore methods of collaborative problem-solving. We will then hear from other university representatives that their administration is unwilling to meet with the AFUM executive

team at their respective universities. A notable reluctance to engage in this process has been observed at other universities within the system. Most AFUM chapter leaders report they are only able to schedule meetings with a President or a Provost when an issue arises and not on a regular, ongoing basis. However, it is important to note that several presidents and provosts at different campuses have begun implementing these meetings as an aspect of shared governance in recent years. The success of the bi-weekly meetings, evidenced by their positive outcomes, illustrates Middleman's (1987) theory of constant accessibility for all members (Steinberg, 2014, p. 40).

Discussing taboos

This raises the concern of engaging in conversations about contentious topics. There is often a vast discrepancy between the administration and faculty about what is in each's purview. This is usually addressed under the semblance of shared governance and institutions such as the Faculty Senate or Assembly, and the interpretation of the Collective Bargaining Agreement. For example, the administration believes that it is their management prerogative to lead the university. They can set budgets and decide what academic programs the university will offer. They also have the authority to eliminate programs or even retrench faculty.

The result is an ethical dilemma. Faculty members assert that they are accountable for academic responsibilities, which include curriculum development, teaching, conducting research, advising students, and participating in various department, school, and university committees. Conversely, the administration asserts its right to undertake these responsibilities, exercising authority over decisions related to curriculum design, class size, teaching methods, and faculty involvement in conferences. Each of these positions is deeply ingrained in each party's understanding of their role and responsibilities (Cain, 2020). Hence, there is a clash of priorities and a difference in how administration and faculty see their roles.

At our monthly AFUM executive meetings, after pleasantries and words of support and encouragement, the group discusses these underlying differences. At one's respective university, it would be inappropriate to discuss these issues in an open meeting (Tiede, 2021).

Numerous issues are confidential and, therefore, cannot be shared with other faculty. Within this assembly, constituted by AFUM Faculty Presidents and grievance representatives from the seven universities, open discussion of these sensitive matters is permissible and always confidential. It is important to note that the university Presidents and Provosts have bi-weekly meetings with each other and the Board of Trustees, so we always assume they are having parallel conversations.

Each individual in the group contributes distinct behaviors from their respective universities to the executive committee. Consequently, in this nurturing atmosphere, members possess the capacity to delve into sensitive topics that we have encountered within our academic environments.

The All in the Same Boat Paradox

We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some of us are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar. (Barr, 2022)

The University of Maine system comprises a workforce of 4,635 individuals, with 27.5% (1,274 individuals) serving as faculty members. This system spans a diverse state, encompassing various distances, geographical locations, and rural and urban settings. However, despite these differences, the authors argue that common issues and dilemmas (the storm) must be acknowledged and addressed.

At our universities, we are all striving towards the same goal: to improve our colleagues' working conditions, enhance our students' educational experience, and bolster the reputation of our respective institutions. Yet, over the past decade, the one issue that has confronted all seven universities and cooperative extension is finances. For years, university budgets and budget deficits have become the dominant theme at all our monthly meetings.

In 2014, the University of Southern Maine faced a nine-million-dollar budget deficit, which resulted in the retrenchment of 25 faculty members and the elimination of five academic programs. Additionally, a significant number of administrative employees were let go, placing further demands on faculty time to make up for the labor and skills lost by these vacancies to conduct their work, the work of their programs, and the institution, and serve our students.

A decade later, the University of Southern Maine once again faced a nine-million-dollar deficit. This financial crisis is not unique to USM but is affecting many public universities (Muller, 2024). In response, each university has developed strategic plans to address this issue. At the University of Machias, their response has been to absorb the University into the University of Maine. They are no longer a university but a regional campus. The University of Farmington's approach has been the model used at USM, that of retrenchments and the closing of programs. At Presque Isle, the response has been to increasingly turn to competency-based education. This program has been based on the concept that the student takes classes in a competency-based education program branded as Your Pace. The faster the student demonstrates knowledge, the more they can save financially. They are charged a flat eight-week tuition rate, with no fixed deadlines, and have control over their learning. In June of 2025, a successor Memorandum of Understanding for Your Pace at UMPI and pilot MOUs were negotiated and signed for UMF and UMFK to also develop and offer Your Pace programs. In Augusta, their unique modality is online education. This enables the university to recruit students from all over the country -even the world - and Fort Kent has used the modality of offering fewer in-person programs and collaborates with other universities to offer their students online courses in programs such as nursing. UMFK and UMPI are small universities that are only one hour apart by car, so between face-to-face courses and online courses, students can access collaborative programs and resources that can be shared by faculty.

The University of Maine stands as a unique case, as it receives unwavering support from both the Board of Trustees and the Chancellor's office, despite its persistent financial deficit.

Developing a Universal Perspective

Based on the aforementioned, many of the members of the executive board would internalize many negative opinions. They would falsely believe that the issues facing their respective universities were their responsibility. Yet, in reality, they were attempting to address the problems that were not of their making.

For example, when academic programs are discontinued and faculty face termination, they typically seek insights from the executive

committee. They inquire about AFUM's actions, reasons for their job losses, and strategies for securing alternative positions. Having dedicated their entire academic careers to the university, these faculty members now confront the unsettling prospect of termination and question prospects for new positions elsewhere.

Regrettably, this has become a common occurrence in higher education in recent years. As reported by Inside Higher Education, 14 non-profit four-year colleges have announced closures throughout 2023 (Moody, 2023). In an article by Marcus in *The Washington Post*, it is asserted that colleges are shutting down at a rate of one per week (Marcus, 2024). There is a legitimate concern that faculty members could be subject to layoffs at any given time. As mentioned in this paper, this is not just a theoretical concept. In 2014, 25 faculty members were laid off at the University of Southern Maine, and nine faculty members faced the same situation at the University of Maine at Farmington in 2022.

The AFUM executive committee, as part of a mutual aid group, recognizes that these experiences are widespread among the seven universities. These issues are not limited to the University of Maine system but are also prevalent in higher education institutions nationally and internationally. Negative comments and accusations of fear or anger being projected on the executive members are not a product of their shortcomings. However, they are the responsibility of the administration and board of trustees, who have not addressed their primary responsibility of ensuring the financial sustainability of the University system and should be held accountable for the negative comments, accusations, and sense of fear and anger projected onto the executive members (Johnston, 2023; Lieberwitz, 2021). These experiences are not a product of the executive member's shortcomings but are common amongst the faculty across the seven universities.

Mutual Support

The AFUM executive committee creates an environment of support and encourages the free expression of emotions, fostering empathy among members and deepening relationships and networks to call upon to combat issues (Dolomore et al., 2020; McAlpine & Piszczek, 2023). During monthly meetings, numerous members often voice

their frustrations about working with the administration or recount difficult experiences in meetings involving faculty and administrators. Therefore, when group members have shared experiences, it frequently leads to a mutual understanding of frustrations. Acceptance, care, and concern for the group can be a significant source of support for a group member facing a challenging issue at their university (Gerber, 2015).

Mutual Demand

Over the years, the co-authors have served as members of the executive committee and have observed that the group occasionally calls for action from university representatives. In my capacity as chair of the statewide grievance committee, I have frequently encouraged other grievance representatives to file formal grievances. A common response is, 'We do not want to make the situation worse with our administration.' However, others often counter that pursuing a formal grievance may help to halt the behavior and lead to a resolution (Compton, 2018).

According to the collective bargaining agreement, individuals can file a grievance at four levels. The first three levels are at their respective university level, and the fourth level is at the system level. (AFUM, 2023-2024, Article 15, C, Formal Procedure. p.32-33). With this information, other group members will speak up and encourage the respective grievance representative to be proactive. This is an example of the group making a mutual demand for action. Importantly, such calls for action are not accusatory in nature. Rather, they are expressed in a supportive and collegial manner, intended to empower grievance representatives at their respective universities. These expressions of encouragement communicate a collective commitment and assure representatives that they have the full backing of the group.

Individual Problem-Solving

As articulated throughout this paper, a central purpose of the monthly AFUM executive committee meetings is to provide mutual support. These meetings offer a forum where individuals can raise concerns and seek assistance. Serving as a union leader, whether as president, vice president, or grievance representative at one of the seven universities,

can be both demanding and isolating.

At our monthly meetings, the atmosphere is characterized by a consistent display of helpfulness, support, and genuine concern among members. Expressions of encouragement, which include affirming a colleague's efforts in assisting faculty or acknowledging their advocacy at a Board of Trustees meeting, for example, can serve an important function beyond collegiality. These acts of recognition validate the individual contributions of members, reinforcing their sense of purpose and efficacy within the broader union structure.

Although the AFUM executive committee operates as a collective body, it intentionally recognizes and affirms the work of individuals on their respective campuses. This recognition is not merely symbolic; it plays a critical role in empowering members by reducing the sense of isolation that can accompany union leadership roles. Moreover, it reinforces that their efforts are meaningful and impactful. The group dynamic thus fosters both collective solidarity and individual agency, offering practical problem-solving while strengthening the emotional and professional resilience of its members.

Rehearsal

Another way in which the mutual aid group can help the executive committee is through rehearsal. Often, we will discuss meetings with administrators at our respective universities. When these meetings occur, there should always be two members of AFUM. We should have questions ready in advance, ensuring that we have reviewed the relevant sections of the collective bargaining agreement. (AFUM, 2023-2024, Article 5, Meet and Discuss, p. 6-7).

Furthermore, our discussions often revolve around the prospect of accompanying a faculty member to a meeting with the administration. To be fully informed, it is customary to hold a preliminary meeting with the faculty member before the main meeting. Consequently, the executive committee serves the purpose of providing a secure space for the practice and discussion of potential scenarios.

Strength in Numbers

Throughout this paper, the authors have sought to illustrate how the

principles of group dynamics impact collective bargaining and union ideology by focusing particularly on the foundational belief in solidarity enacted through the structure and function of the AFUM executive committee. The collaborative efforts of all seven universities exemplify the idea that there is strength in numbers. This collective engagement ensures that each executive committee member is supported and affirmed in their role. The monthly meetings serve not only as a space for strategic coordination but also as a vital source of emotional and professional reinforcement, mitigating the isolation that can accompany union leadership and reaffirming that no member faces challenges alone.

The executive committee, through its collective voice, affirms and respects the work of each AFUM president, vice president, and grievance representative across the seven campuses. With over nearly 1,000 members statewide, as reported by the Maine Education Association, AFUM represents a highly diverse constituency with each university serving distinct student populations and employing varied instructional methods. In this context, the executive committee functions not only as a site of solidarity but also as a forum for synthesizing the unique concerns and insights of its members. By actively listening to and integrating the experiences of representatives from across the system, the committee can develop informed, responsive action steps. The mutual aid dynamic of the group further underscores that one's concerns and trepidations can be overcome by participating in this group process..

Conclusion

This paper highlights the concrete implications of group work in our union activities, demonstrating that it is not merely an abstract concept but an essential, lived practice within AFUM. The ten mutual aid constructs outlined by Gitterman and Shulman provide a strong foundation for our monthly Executive Committee meetings, guiding how we address the complex and varied challenges facing faculty across the University of Maine System.

Through strategies such as sharing data, rehearsing conversations, engaging in difficult dialogues, and offering mutual support and

demand, the AFUM Executive Committee functions as a working group rooted in collaboration, accountability, and shared purpose. Furthermore, there is a widespread belief that individuals do not have to confront the challenging problems encountered at our universities alone. Rather than relying solely on themselves, they can seek help. Group work not only serves as a means of utilization but also acts as a theoretical framework that enables collaborative efforts within our respective universities. As a result, the authors firmly maintain that this paper is intended to showcase the pivotal role of mutual aid group work in our union initiatives. It provides a practical framework that enables us to advocate for our members. Not only does this model showcase its relevance to AFUM, but the authors assert that Gitterman's and Shulman's mutual aid concepts can be successfully applied in diverse union environments.

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