



Being a UCU activist: Principles of being a UCU rep

Being a UCU local representative is a very practical job. It can involve campaigning, negotiating, running meetings, talking to members, working with committees, writing newsletters, recruiting and dealing with various issues. The wide range of activities and differing circumstances ensure that it's often exciting and rarely boring.

Changing circumstances, varying activities and the range of options for possible action at any one time can sometimes mean that the way forward is not always obvious. When this happens it is important to remember some of the basics of the union and the role. Keeping these in the front of your mind will help guide you through many situations.

Working together

The influence and power of the union comes from working collectively. The more people the branch/LA represents and the more unified they are, the more authority and bargaining power you have.

Decisions that unite people are to be preferred over those that divide them. A divided membership (or staff) gives management the option to play you off against each other. This does not mean that you should always take the minimalist approach or avoid debate. Sometimes it will mean that to gain unity you will need to spend extra energy convincing some groups of members, or non-members, why supporting a position is in their interests.

Ways of operating that bring people together should be used wherever possible. This does not mean that diversity is not respected. On the contrary it means that everybody's needs should be acknowledged and everybody should be included. Whether you are part time or full time, black or white, smoker or non-smoker, male or female everybody believes in fairness. You should try to emphasise fairness, justice and dignity over complex details that can tend to divide

And people sometimes need reminding that things that don't affect us directly have a habit of returning to affect us later.

Democracy

Democratic decisions made by all affected members are to be preferred over those made by smaller select groups.

People are more likely to support decisions that they have had the opportunity to take part in, than those imposed upon them – even if they disagree with some or all of the decision.

Members (and non-members) rightly get angry when management makes decisions without consulting or involving them. If you do the same you run the risk of their anger with management being directed at you.

Members will also take more responsibility for decisions they have made than ones made for them. If you make decisions on behalf of your membership they will hold you responsible for failures. If you involve them in making the decisions they are more likely to form realistic expectations of success, as they understand that they are responsible for the success or failure of the decision.

Finally where success is not achieved immediately people who have been involved in making decisions are more likely to accept a compromise or, if they do reject something, support the decision to reject with action.

Participation

Ways of working that involve more people rather than less are better.

Decisions have more legitimacy, actions are more compelling and ultimately we are more convincing if we can demonstrate strength of feeling through active support.

While it is true that people involved in making decisions are more likely to get involved – people who are involved will usually also take more interest in the decisions being made.

Widening participation in union work also builds our capacity to campaign, lessens your workload and makes us less vulnerable to the sudden departure of key individuals.

And it's more fun!

Education

Informing and educating members is preferable to not disclosing information. Unless you have very good reasons you should always err on the side of releasing information over withholding it.

Some representatives become disillusioned with staff, and members, failure to take interest in issues that affect them. However sometimes we forget that members and staff don't always have the level of understanding that we have. Even where members do have a general understanding of an issue they may not identify all, or the extent of, the threats to them.

Ongoing information and education is preferable to distributing information just prior to asking members to make decisions. Members need time to think about issues. They may not have time to prioritise informing themselves on an issue, especially if they can't see the immediate threat to them.

Members are also more likely to be decisive if they feel they have had time to consider an issue. Distributing information just prior to asking for a decision can create the impression that the information was only released to get the decision that was wanted.

Educating people about the role the union plays in helping staff is an important way to build the strength of UCU. Communications and language that reinforce the importance of solidarity, democracy, participation and education should be used wherever possible.