

Organising to build a strong and active branch

This document provides a more in-depth guide to organising and building a strong and active branch.

Why we need strong branches

The secret of union power is having a strong and active branch behind you. Building the strength and activity of your branch is the most important task for UCU workplace representatives; everything else flows from this. With a strong and active branch everyone benefits:

- members feel genuine power and see results
- you as representative aren't overworked and overburdened by being caught between members' demands and results that you can't deliver
- management knows exactly where it stands and doesn't try to impose changes it can't get away with
- your branch is a positive force for all workers in the workplace
- regional and national structures of the union are able to focus scarce resources on campaigning for positive outcomes in education at national and government levels instead of fighting rear-guard actions in individual institutions.

However, building this power in your branch sometimes doesn't feel as simple or easy as it sounds. One of the main requests from reps is for help and advice about getting people involved. No magic wand will change everything overnight but with a little planning, some patience and focussing on what members want we can achieve remarkable results.

Think about people not members

Most importantly we need to remind ourselves to look at things through the eyes of the people we work with. Everybody wants to be treated fairly and with respect and dignity. Everybody knows that this isn't always the case at work. Unfortunately everybody doesn't always know that something can be done to change this.

How many times have we heard people say 'I wish things were different' or 'it isn't fair' or 'this is not the way I should be treated' at work'? But when you speak to them about it they tell you that it isn't worth trying to change things because 'it will never work'.

When you hear this it is important to remember that people will only try to change something if they think it has a chance of success. Although they might not say it in these words, these employees do not feel they have enough power to make the changes they need. Feeling powerless to create change is the major reason that people do not get involved in the union, or when they do, feel that the only way forward is to rely on weak laws.

Of course, we know that the way people get power at work is to act collectively. That which a hundred people ask for individually, they can demand collectively. The conditions that UCU members work under are not usually given freely by generous governments or enlightened management. The vast majority of our terms and conditions have been won by creating enough collective power to negotiate agreements. And even when governments or employers provide generous provisions in law or agreements, we can only enforce and protect our rights if we have the collective power to do so.

Educating people as to how things could be better, giving them the hope that it could be better for them and helping them do it, are the most important jobs for UCU reps.

Learning by doing

Sometimes we forget that although we know the power of acting collectively, other people may not. What seems obvious to us may not be obvious to them. This can be one of the most frustrating experiences for an activist or rep.

When this happens we need to remind ourselves how we came to know that there really is strength in numbers. The answer is that we have experienced it before, whereas others have not. Some of us may have had it explained initially by someone we trusted; this would not have been enough if we had never had opportunities to experience it.

The reality is that only those people who have been involved in collective activity, no matter how small, really know that it makes a difference and feel confident and safe enough to try it again. When trying to build strength in a branch there is no substitute for providing people with opportunities to understand their own collective power through experience.

If you want to build strength in your branch you must provide people with the opportunity to experience acting collectively, and you must aim to make this as positive experience as possible.

Issues, activists, education and organisation

Sometimes it can seem like a vicious circle. People don't understand the importance of acting collectively because they have never experienced it. But they are unlikely to experience it if they don't understand the importance! It sounds tricky – and it can be!

You will need to be creative and always on the lookout for opportunities. But there are some other key elements.

Issues

Always remember why people want the power in the first place - to change something they don't like or secure an advance. These 'issues' should form the basis of all your activity. When people say they haven't got the time or are too busy, it often just means that they don't think an issue is important enough, or can't see how it affects them enough, to make some time.

Finding the right issues is critical. But always remember – good organising issues are important because they mean something to employees not because we think they are important. Once you have found one don't be afraid of putting it at the centre of everything you do.

Activists

You can never have enough activists. Activists are people who do things. The more activists you have - the more you can do. And the more you do, the more people see that getting involved can work.

Activists talk to people. It's a fact that people are more likely to trust somebody they know – so the more activists you have the more people you can reach.

Finding and developing activists is essential work for any union. Making the most of the activists you have is also important.

Education

Creating a healthy branch is about changing the way people think about things. People aren't born with a commitment to collective union activity. You should use every opportunity to reinforce the idea that the more people are involved, the more power we have to achieve things. Newsletters, meetings, notice boards and most importantly conversations should all be used to give hope to people about how things could be, and to explain to people how they can achieve it.

Remember that people will take you at your word. If you really mean it when you say, 'the members are the union', ensure that decisions are taken by members – not the reps, and

not the committee. Don't say that the 'union' is doing something if you mean 'the union rep' is doing it. It encourages people to think that union activity doesn't involve them.

Organising

Collective action isn't just going on strike. Every time you play football, sit in a staff meeting, sign a petition or do something with a local community group you are involved in something collective. Opportunities for acting collectively just means finding opportunities for getting people involved.

Good organising makes it easy and obvious for people to get involved. Start with small activities and build up to bigger ones. Always make sure that your activity focuses on an issue and be on the lookout amongst those who get involved for potential activists.

The best activities have a focus. They achieve something so that people can see that 'it is worth bothering'.

The 'iron law of organising'

A section on building a healthy branch would not be complete without mentioning the need to manage your workload as a representative and keep yourself healthy.

Members will often come to you with problems that need fixing. It is a common trap to think you must necessarily jump into action just because a member has asked for help. The number one reason why reps don't spend enough time keeping the branch (and themselves) healthy is because they don't think they can say no to members with problems. Remember that:

- sometimes members don't want you to do anything
- just because a member feels aggrieved doesn't mean you have to agree
- just because a member has a genuine problem doesn't necessarily mean that you can solve it.
- if you are the only rep, or the reps are overworked, you can prioritise work and then allocate time to each depending on the priority.

Remember the iron law of organising

The iron law of organising is - **never do for somebody what they can do for themselves.**

If a member has a genuine problem then they will be willing to do something about it. In fact the more genuine the problem the more they will be willing to do something. Providing information and advice and working with a member to decide what to do next doesn't necessarily mean that you must do everything for them. In fact members who take control of their own situation are more satisfied with the outcomes than those who don't.

Always make sure that members are doing as much for themselves as possible.

You will be surprised how much members can do for themselves. And because a member who you have assisted to do something for themselves has learnt something, you have not just fixed a problem you have educated somebody as well. They might even be able to help somebody else next time!

Sadly members will sometimes try to place demands on you. Because they are worried or scared or don't fully understand your role it is not unusual for members to over estimate the importance of their situation or the injustice that they face. When this occurs they can start to make demands of you that they would not normally make. And sometimes members will simply ask you to do something because it is easier for them if you do it.

In these circumstances asking members to do something for themselves can test how strongly they feel about the issue. If it's not important enough for them to collect some information for themselves, speak to a few people or make notes about their case – then its probably not important enough for you. You will be surprised how many members will suddenly re-assess the importance of an issue when asked to do just a little for themselves. If they do what you ask of them and return, then not only do you know they think the issue is important but your job helping them is a little bit easier.