

Rebuilding a branch/LA

Southampton is a case study in how the new conditions in higher education can revitalise a struggling branch or local association (LA). It is also a case study in how even a small group of activists can be vital to this process.

The industrial action in 2004 was a shot in the arm for an LA which had only been kept alive by the dedication of a few individuals. The national strike days and the need to win support for and coordinate the industrial action short of a strike at a place where morale was initially very low, enabled a small group of new activists to come forward.

Under the aegis of an action committee, we began to work towards getting the LA working again. In the wake of the successful end to national negotiations these activists filled vacant executive committee positions and we began to meet more regularly as an executive. But the real progress was enabled, ironically, by Southampton's attempt to rewrite the Memorandum of Understanding, which brought us to the brink of a local dispute.

In the face of management's actions, culminating in a threat to by-pass collective agreement, the new committee's core of activists knew that it was vital to gauge the feelings of the members at all times and to involve them actively as far as possible.

We bombarded members with emails and leafleted the campuses to keep them in touch with developments at every stage and to build support for mass meetings. We noted that the more we did this, the more people came out to support us and help us and the more attendance rose at our meetings. This gave us the confidence that we accurately reflected the feelings of members at every stage in our decision making as an executive. It also gave us the strength to think that we might get a reasonable settlement and be able to rebuild a functioning LA on this basis.

The local struggle culminated in mass meeting with an overwhelming majority in favour of condemning management's actions and a referendum on to gauge the feelings of members on taking further action. With this behind us, our negotiators were able to rein in the management and we reached a mutually acceptable interim settlement without a dispute.

The most crucial element in our success was our activists' conviction that the LA's decisions and structures must be built on mobilising an active membership. We knew that we had to be in touch with the views of the members and only then could we provide effective leadership. We also knew that it was crucial to encourage the emergence of more activists like ourselves.

The seriousness of our situation gave us a ready constituency of angry members, if only we could mobilise them effectively. With every success, we grew more confident that we were accurately expressing their views and members, seeing our growing effectiveness, became more willing to get involved. We have since been able to draw on the active participation of an ever increasing membership base.

It is often slow, patient and frustrating work, but it is also exhilarating and rewarding. We enjoyed unstinting support and encouragement from national UCU (then AUT) negotiators, executive committee members and the campaigns team at every stage and it is safe to say that they have been absolutely instrumental in the regeneration of our LA.

Jonathan White, then President, Southampton UCU.