

Building the branch/LA committee

The branch/LA committee is the nerve centre of the branch. It's where information from all over the branch/LA about all union business is discussed. The committee makes decisions, develops plans and co-ordinates activity between full members meetings.

Having an effective committee is essential because it will:

- share the workload
- encourage involvement
- create a pool of ideas and experience
- produce a wider spread of ideas and skills.

Composition of the committee

UCU branch or local association (LA) committees will vary from workplace to workplace. In some places, the committee is made up of all the branch/LA officers and departmental reps in the union plus any activists that want to attend. At others, the committee is made from a smaller number of elected officers.

A functioning committee should represent members' views and follow decisions made by members' meetings. In order to be representative of the membership, the committee should be in close contact with representatives from each department or site in the branch/LA. This allows the committee to have a real presence in the workplace and to take the views of all members into consideration. It ensures that information gets back to members quickly and effectively via each department rep.

The committee should try to be generally representative of the composition of the workforce, taking into consideration ethnic backgrounds, gender, part-time staff, age groups etc.

Each of the branch/LA positions should be elected by the full membership at the annual general meeting. However in many cases, it will be a matter of taking those people who volunteer.

It is a mistake to think that you need to fill all the posts in the committee. The most important characteristic of a committee member is that they are active in their own workplace. If you develop an active committee, people will tend to do the work needed. If you concentrate on 'filling positions' you may find that people are intimidated by the formalities and you get very few people volunteering.

Activity of the committee

Committee meetings should be held regularly (ie every fortnight or month) to discuss union business.

The committee should focus on activity and action and not get too bogged down in formalities and reports. If there is not much going on then committee meetings can be shorter and less frequent.

The types of things that the committee should deal with include:

- mapping the workplace and keeping it up to date
- organising recruitment
- identifying potential activists and making plans to develop them
- educating members about issues in the workplace
- identifying and discussing members issues through one to one contact and surveys etc
- planning and co-ordinating workplace campaigns
- discussing current negotiations with management and directing the negotiators
- writing and distributing newsletters to keep members informed
- discussing issues that arise and taking them up with management
- allocating individual members representation work
- discussing trends in individual representation work
- organising meetings or other UCU events
- hearing reports from UCU regional meetings and receiving correspondence from UCU regional and national offices.

Running meetings

Committee meetings should not be overly formal. They should be meetings where ideas are discussed and action planned, if possible by consensus. If there are genuine divisions about the way forward, and it is not clear what the membership would do, a members' meeting probably needs to be called to get clarification.

However this does not mean that the meeting should be chaotic. The chair should develop and circulate an agenda before the meeting so that people know what will be discussed and it should be revised at the beginning of the meeting in case new items have arisen. Each item should be timed so that all the business is got through.

For more on meetings see *Organising events and meetings* and *Running formal meetings*.

Looking for people to be on the committee

The committee doesn't exist in isolation from the branch. Building your committee isn't about finding the right people who will then do all the work. Building your committee should be about creating activity in the branch, developing activists and involving people who then see the importance of being on the committee.

Of course you will have some people who are either on the committee already or who are keen to be on the committee and need little persuasion. These are the people that you should work with to get the branch/LA active and help to look for other activists.

Tips for building a sustainable active committee

- Involve people in the branch/LA.
- Identify and develop activists.
- Map the workplace (see Workplace Mapping).
- Engage in personal one-to-one contact with members.

When trying to identify people for the committee the following tips may be useful:

- Ask people directly. Putting out a newsletter asking for volunteers is not enough. You must go over the membership lists, identify those who might be willing and ensure someone they respect and trust approaches them.
- Assure them they will have the backup and support they need. People are more likely to agree if they know the task is manageable and that they will not be alone.
- Look for people who get angry over issues and are active in the workplace.
- Look for leaders who are representative of the workforce. There should be a good representation of gender, grade, ethnic background, age, sites, part-timers etc.
- Look for leadership qualities – for people that have good judgement, who are respected and looked up to. It is better to put a little effort into finding the right people now than have to deal with problems later
- Tap into natural social groups in the workplace. Find out where people congregate, who with and when. Find union supporters and ask for their help first.
- Never stop. Few committees look like the ideal. Don't think that because you have found a few new people for the committee that you can stop – think of all the new people you can reach with the new committee members!