

## Winning support

No matter how unfair, one of the main criticisms of trade union campaigns is 'Well they would say that wouldn't they?' Most campaigning organisations suffer from the same accusations, that they have an agenda, are controlled by politically motivated activists and do not have the support of their own members.

There are some campaigns where a show of public or membership support is more appropriate than others. The more high-profile the issue, the more likely it is that your branch/local association (LA) will need to show that it is speaking with the support of members, and sometimes the wider academic community including students, other unions, non-members and perhaps even the general public.

### Why do we need support?

As mentioned above, many of the people at whom campaigns are targeted hide behind the fact that they are being talked to by an official of an organisation that they assumes holds an automatic bias on a particular issue. This is seen by many as a reason not to deal with the issue, but rather to distract attention by attacking the organisation for not having any support and being out of touch.

Being able to prove that there is more widespread support for your position outside of your executive committee is a powerful response to such statements. But it is even more effective if the union has done this work before initial contact, and therefore makes the target of the campaign concentrate on the issues from the start. It proves that the issue is one about which people feel strongly and want something done. It puts the branch/LA in a stronger position when negotiating with management, the government, local council or any other organisation or individual who is the target of your campaign.

Showing significant support also makes your case stronger when trying to gain the attention of your local MP, local councillors, other unions or the media. Another reason for organising an activity designed to show wider support for your campaign is that the mere act of undertaking the work gives your issue a wider profile among your target audience.

By asking for support your activists are raising the profile of the union, the issue and making the arguments. A final, related, and equally important reason for trying to gain support for your campaign is recruitment and retention. If members see the union being active on an issue which affects them directly and they are asked to do something simple to help, like sign a petition, then they may be more interested in becoming an activist.

Also, non-members of the union who are asked to show their support may see it as a stepping-stone to becoming a member. This can only make the union stronger.

## How do we obtain support?

There are many different ways of gaining concrete evidence of wider support for your campaign. Some of them are quicker and easier than others, but each could have their place in a campaign strategy. There may even be a case for using a selection of these ideas at different points in a long-running campaign to maintain momentum or ratchet up the pressure on your target.

### Membership/institution community petition

This is the most frequently used tactic for showing wider support for a campaign. It is simply a list of names of people who support a statement at the top of the petition. There are basically two types of petition. The most widely used is a statement that calls on an organisation, government or individual to do something.

The top of the sheet should include:

- Who you are asking for action from? For example, the vice-chancellor or principal.
- Who is signing the petition? Eg 'We, as academic/teaching members of staff at ...'
- A short (two sentence), background to the issue. For example: 'The college is refusing to allow members of staff on short-term contracts to have holiday pay. We believe this breaks the spirit of the Part-time Workers Directive.'
- What you are calling on the person or organisation you are petitioning to do? Eg: 'We therefore call on the vice-chancellor/principal to allow those members of staff on short-term contracts to have paid holiday on a pro rata basis.'

Each line of the petition that people sign should be numbered so that signatories can see how many other people have signed it and it is easier for the organisers to count at the end. It is also a good tip to ensure that you never give anyone a sheet to sign that somebody has not already signed, as an empty sheet makes a potential supporter more nervous about signing. It is probably worth getting the committee to each sign a different sheet at the top as it then gives you a selection of continuation sheets that are not blank.

There are two common ways for those you are petitioning to rubbish your petition, apart from there being insufficient signatures, and these are both things you should look out for. One is 'Mickey Mouse syndrome' where some people think it is funny to put down famous non-de plumes instead of their own signature. This gives your opposition a ready made sound-bite to dismiss your petition with – 'How can I bow to pressure from a petition signed by Donald Duck and Joseph Stalin, they have clearly just added names hoping we would not read it'. The other way of discrediting your own petition is if people sign it more

than once: 'Some people have signed this petition twice, I have not looked through all the names yet but I am sure they have just done this throughout to bulk up the numbers'.

The best way, indeed the only really effective way, to get people to sign your petition is to go out and ask them. This may be done by asking activists and departmental representatives to cover a certain department or section of the college or university, and then to return the petition to a central collection point. Alternatively, it could be done by setting up staffed signing points in areas where there are a lot of people, for example, a refectory at lunchtimes.

There is a temptation to leave petitions lying around areas like staff rooms with pens attached to a piece of string. This is not necessarily a helpful way of going about your petitioning as sheets can go missing, there is no explanation of the issue if somebody has questions, and it is impossible to keep an eye out for the double-signing or 'Mickey Mouse syndrome'. Personal contact is the best way. This is also the case for a petition, much less likely to be used by a branch/LA, which targets the general public. You should set up a stall in the local town centre with people to answer questions, and have literature available about the issue in addition to the petition.

## Stalls

The objective of organising a stall is two-fold. The most important is to have a presence and make people aware of the issue you are campaigning about through the production of leaflets and other campaign material. It is always useful to have a roll of campaign stickers that people who visit the stall and support you can wear to show their support. The other reason to have a stall is to get people to sign your petition. You should always have a reason for people to come and visit your stall – and signing a petition is the most useful for you and the easiest task to undertake on a quick visit to your stall.

There are some things you must ensure in organising a stall:

- Your stall should be in a prominent place so that people do not have to make a detour to visit you.
- Ensure you have permission from the university/college/landlords/council to set up your stall in the position you choose.
- Ensure that your stall is staffed at all times.
- Provide easy to understand and attractive leaflets and stickers for people to take away when they visit your stall.
- Brand your stall with the UCU logo and posters about your campaign.
- Always have a supply of recruitment leaflets and general information about UCU on your stall.
- Advertise your stall beforehand with posters, emails, a mailing to members and word-of-mouth by activists.

- Have something for people who visit your stall to do – like signing a petition.
- Try to make the table at your stall look presentable and professional by using a tablecloth and backdrop if possible.

A regular stall can be an organisational boon as it gives members and prospective members a regular contact point with UCU. However, over use of stalls reduce their campaigning benefit because people get used to the stall and do not necessarily notice a new campaign or petition on the stall. This is a decision that will need to be made carefully by the branch/LA. Perhaps a monthly stall reaches the right balance between regularity and new campaigns.

## **Polls and surveys**

Polls and surveys seem to be the same thing, but they have two different roles to play in a campaign. Polls are best used to answer a single yes/no question thereby producing a simple percentage for your case and are very easy to organise, a quick campaign tactic. Surveys tend to bring out more information on a subject, including how strongly people feel about an issue, what is most important to them etc, and are therefore more time consuming to organise and analyse. Many academics, for example, will use surveys in their research and for detailed advice on how to produce a statistically correct survey you should check with one of your members. This is only intended to be a brief guide to the use and purpose of surveys as a campaigning tactic.

Surveys are often best used as a basis for your argument in the first instance and to identify your membership's key concerns. They allow you to use a series of statistics to show how important the issue is to people, whether they believe it has an impact on their life at the university, what they think should be done about it etc. A survey can be conducted in two ways, either face to face by questioners or via email/posting, asking for it to be returned. As with petitions the best way to ensure you get a good return is to conduct the interviews face-to-face. However, be aware that if some of the questions are of a sensitive nature – what is your manager like at managing? Then you may get less honest answers and these may be best handled through a postal survey, which allows for anonymous responses.

Polls provide more immediate and simple information that can be useful in campaigning. A simple question: 'Do you think the college/university should continue to employ people on short-term contracts rather than full-time permanent members of staff?' should be asked to solicit a yes/no or support/don't support answer. The analysis of responses to this question will give your campaign a clear indication of support and a media tag for a story in your local media. Polls can be carried out face to face or by email/telephone. The immediacy of the tactic largely rules out postal polls.

However, be careful with polls. If the result goes against the campaign position you are supporting then this could stop your campaign dead in its tracks. Be sure of your ground

before you organise one. These types of polls are not scientific and do not need to be weighted. They are designed to show that your membership supports you. If you do not think it does support you then perhaps you should question your campaign, but definitely do not organise a poll.

## **A meeting**

There is information elsewhere in this section about the logistics of organising a campaign meeting, but it has been included in this guide because it is a good way of gaining support for your campaign. A well-attended meeting is a good way of measuring your support, and of encouraging activists to sign a petition, or send a letter, because you are speaking to people face-to-face.

A campaign meeting should concentrate on planning actions rather than speeches. A representative of the branch/LA committee should open the meeting with a very short introduction to the issue and what has been done to date. There should then be a presentation of planned work by another member of the executive followed by a discussion of issues and tactics by all present. As many people as possible should be encouraged to speak. At the end of the meeting there should be an agreement about the way forward and everybody who attends should be asked to sign a pledge form showing what they are prepared to do to help the campaign, and a petition if you have one.

The pledge form should set out a timetable for the campaign with tick-boxes beside activities – for example staff a stall, write a letter, be on a campaign committee etc. Everybody should have one of these on their chairs when they arrive and should be encouraged to fill them in and return them. Above all the meeting should be positive and the leadership should make an effort to talk to as many people as possible individually at the end of the meeting to thank them for coming.

The objective of all of these campaign tactics is to win your campaign, but along the way you may pick up new activists, new members and useful contacts for the future. So use them, enthuse people about your campaign and make sure that UCU is the most active and attractive union on campus. And above all....enjoy the struggle.