



official union newsletters

One of the faults of union bureaucracies is their failure to keep members informed. There is probably a union journal, but it probably does not cover workplace issues too well, lacks any critical assessment of what the union is doing, promotes the union leadership with all the gloss of PR experts, and does little to inspire activism. Even a good national union journal would not be enough: workers need publications that cover their specific concerns in their workplace and act as an organising focus.

- Lack of regular publications makes members feel that the union sees them as a 'stage army' – only worth communicating with when union leaders want them to vote or take some limited action; not worth keeping informed in between.

- Perhaps union bureaucrats understand that an ill-informed, uninvolved membership is less likely to challenge them. Marxists certainly understand the opposite: that information, accountability and debate is crucial to developing a confident rank and file that can transform the unions into effective, fighting bodies of workers.

- Whatever union post you hold, produce a newsletter. Branch secretary? Produce a branch newsletter. Health & safety rep? A newsletter on health & safety issues. Regional women's officer? Do a regional women's newsletter.

- Report on negotiations with the employer. This a basic matter of democratic accountability as well as a good way of keeping members informed. If you have had a local negotiating meeting, follow it up with a newsletter listing every demand that you raised and how the boss responded; and every announcement that management made and how you responded. Explain the implications, and how members can fight against the latest attacks or mobilise support for the demands you are pressing.

- Report on union decisions. Perhaps the union has decided on demands to improve working conditions. Or has launched a campaign to defend a member who management have victimised. Or agreed a new grievance procedure with the employer. Maybe your branch has voted to affiliate to 'No Sweat', or to take part in a local anti-fascist initiative. Tell the members; and tell them how the decision was made.

- De-mystify what a union rep or official does. Explain the structure of negotiation and consultation in your company. Explain that the union rep is a worker who speaks on behalf of his/her workmates and invite workers to give you their ideas and opinions. Avoid coming across as an expert who 'sorts things out' for workers.

- Encourage workers to become more active in the union. Give concrete examples not just exhortations to 'get involved' eg. tell the rep about workplace concerns, represent the union branch at a conference, report safety concerns, come to a protest, sign up new staff to the union, canvass members to vote in the election/ballot etc. Explain that there is a role for members who are not the official rep. Also explain that by getting active, members can influence the union's

policies and strategies, and can raise criticisms.

- Any union elections coming up? Advertise vacancies and explain to members how to stand or nominate a workmate. Invite candidates to write a short election address. If there is a national or regional election and your branch has nominated a candidate, include an article explaining why. Tell members how to vote.

- Have a regular 'know your rights' column, addressing one issue in each edition eg. sickness; grievances; refusing to work on safety grounds; working hours; maternity/paternity/parental leave; flexible working; etc. This enables workers to stand up for their rights and be more assertive.

- If one member asks you a question, assume a dozen others are thinking it. Include it in the newsletter. How do I complain about a manager who is bullying me? Why does the union oppose the new performance-related bonus system? Am I entitled to a day's leave for my uncle's funeral? Why does the union have a political fund? Is this new working practice safe?

- During disputes, there may be lots of questions, and some doubts. Address them. Maybe do a special issue in a question-and-answer format, or '50 reasons why you should vote Yes', or similar. Keep your ears open: maybe new staff are scared of striking; or workers have read management's propaganda that they are better paid than workers elsewhere; or they think the union can win its case at talks rather than having to strike; or they worry about the effect of strike on service users.

- Use comments and quotes from members. If the rep successfully defended a member against disciplinary charges, that member may give you a positive quote. Another may write a short article about why s/he supports the union's campaign for less anti-social rosters. Use names if they are willing; allow anonymous quotes if people prefer.

- Wherever there is an individual case, there is a collective issue. You may represent a member in a 'flexible working' application. You might not want to report on the case in your newsletter, but you could explain how to apply for flexible working; or write an article about the benefits and shortcomings of flexible working legislation.

- Use the union's logo on your masthead; give details of how to join; include the union's website address and helpline number.

- Advertise the next union meeting – branch, workplace meeting, women's meeting, social, whatever is relevant to your particular newsletter.