

# BUILDING

# POWER IN THE WORKPLACE



An introductory guide  
for UCU representatives





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by UCU general secretary Jo Grady

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# Foreword by Jo Grady UCU general secretary

We can't wait for a more sympathetic government to come along and fix things for us

The solution to the problems in post-16 education is to organise more effectively at the level of individual workplaces

## WHAT IS THIS HANDBOOK ABOUT?

This handbook is meant to give you the confidence and knowledge you need to change your workplace and your education sector for the better through collective action. Every UCU member has the ability to contribute something towards this goal.

There has been a long-term decline in the power of trade unions to bring about change in the workplace or the wider political landscape. Successive governments in the UK have been hostile towards unions, and unions have struggled to adapt to that environment.

We can't wait for a more sympathetic government to come along and fix things for us. The solution to the problems we see in post-16 education is to organise more effectively at the level of individual workplaces: to focus on addressing the issues that matter to you and your colleagues, whether that's workload, job security, or racial and gender equality. You can do this by persuading the non-members as well as the members you work with to join the union and act collectively to advance your shared interests.

Before I was elected general secretary I spent my ten-year career in education as a UCU rep in my department and as a branch committee member. I know what it's like to be in a well-organised workplace and the power it can give you. To take one example, we won a campaign against a proposed intensification of workloads for teaching staff by getting every member of my department to sign an open letter against the proposals. That display of collective organisation was enough to stop the proposals before they were rolled out to the whole university.

If more UCU reps can use this handbook to achieve victories like that, its purpose will be fulfilled. But we needn't limit our ambitions to just stopping detrimental changes. The most effective unions in the world are using the same basic methods to achieve truly radical change for the better, politically as well as in the workplace.

We need to watch and learn from education unions like the United Teachers of Los Angeles, who won an agreement for wide-ranging, systemic change in their school system after an all-out strike in 2019; the Bolivian trade union movement, who recently played an instrumental role in overturning a far-right



# Foreword by Jo Grady

## UCU general secretary

Parts of this guide might challenge your assumptions about trade unionism, and other parts might confirm the instincts which you already had

coup in their country; and our comrades closer to home in the National Education Union, who have organised to massively increase their membership and keep schools safe during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It isn't a coincidence that the LA teachers' union won that victory with close to 100% density and participation: that is, nearly everyone who is eligible to join their union took part in their strike. It isn't a coincidence that in Bolivia, nearly twice as many workers are trade union members compared with the UK. These victories happen in places with high levels of trade union membership and activity.

### **WHO IS THIS HANDBOOK FOR?**

If you are reading this, it's probably because you are already active in UCU or are starting to get active in our union. Parts of this handbook might challenge your assumptions about trade unionism, and other parts might confirm the instincts which you already had.

This handbook is the short version of a longer, more detailed and technical branch-building handbook which is intended for senior elected branch officers – the branch president, chair(s), secretary, etc. But that does not mean that the people it is intended for are any less important.

Trade unionists can sometimes fall into the trap of fetishising credentials and hierarchies just as much as their bosses. We can forget that there are lots of ways to contribute to the work of the union. Certain spaces and forms of participation in trade unions can be intimidating and exclusionary to members who have caring responsibilities or disabilities, to black members, to migrant members, to women, to trans and non-binary members. As well as working to change that, we also need to value forms of participation that cater to as many members as possible.

Nor should anyone act as a gatekeeper and discourage 'less experienced' members from getting involved. 'Experience' is a complex thing, and if you only recently joined the union you can bring important new attributes to the table. You might have a better understanding of problems that discourage other workers from joining; you might have lots of experience of non-union activism; you might have important skills because of the kind of work you do. Don't feel daunted. The idea of calling yourself a 'Rep' with a capital 'R' can seem



# Foreword by Jo Grady UCU general secretary

The idea of calling yourself a 'Rep' with a capital 'R' can seem intimidating but the truth is that everybody starts somewhere and nobody is the finished article

intimidating but the truth is that everybody starts somewhere and nobody is the finished article.

Perhaps you are an active member in a small department and you've taken the time to get to know your colleagues; you've built relationships of trust with them; you know what their priorities and concerns are; and you can persuade them to join the union, to come to meetings, to fill in surveys or vote in strike ballots. Or perhaps you are uncomfortable having conversations with colleagues and you are at your happiest designing leaflets, compiling picket line rotas, raising money for the branch's local strike fund, or spotting patterns in new membership data. Whatever you do, you are a lynchpin of this organisation and you are as important as anyone else in it.

Please enjoy this handbook and use it in whatever way you can. Bear in mind that it will change over time as our union grows and changes. If you have any feedback, please write to me using the contact details at the end. In the meantime, best wishes and solidarity.

**Jo Grady**



# Introduction

As a UCU member, you benefit when you can make your branch powerful enough to win better terms and conditions from your employer through a process of collective bargaining

## **BUILDING POWER THROUGH STRONG BRANCHES**

Strong branches are the key to a powerful union. Building strong, active, well organised branches is the most important task facing UCU and everything else flows from it. As a UCU member, you benefit when you can make your branch powerful enough to win better terms and conditions from your employer through a process of collective bargaining.

The whole union benefits when it is made up of branches that can do this. The sector you work in will benefit too, because you will build enough power to ensure that it is run in the interests of staff and students rather than senior managers.

That process of collective bargaining and building workplace power is what sets a trade union apart from other organisations, like professional associations or think tanks. A union isn't a body that advocates or articulates policy positions on behalf of workers. It is a body of workers who come together and deploy their power collectively in pursuit of shared goals. That power comes from maximising workers' participation in collective bargaining - not from having the cleverest arguments.

The conditions which you work under are not usually given freely by generous governments or enlightened employers. The vast majority of your terms and conditions of employment have been won by creating enough collective power to negotiate agreements. Employers have structural advantages over workers and there is no regulator in the UK to enforce the limited workers' rights that do exist. Individuals can take cases to the Employment Tribunal but that is an individual remedy. The only way to overcome your structural disadvantages is by getting organised and acting collectively.

If you are reading this handbook it's probably because you already know that there are problems in your workplace and you want to work within your UCU branch to do something about them. The question is how: how can your branch build the power necessary to win life-changing victories?

This handbook will help you answer that question. It is written with newly active members in mind, as well as more experienced branch representatives. It is a starting point which brings together the main elements you need to consider to bring about change in your workplace. It also introduces you to a wider range



# Introduction

Unions are about workers coming together to take control of their own livelihoods

of support and resources that are available to help you do that – from the staff in UCU’s regional, devolved national and head offices to the union’s training courses, written guidance and other relevant materials.

## Key principles

### 1. **The workplace is the foundation of UCU**

The workplace is where the union is best able to protect its members and improve their working conditions. Top-down campaigning, media work, legal work and political work focussed on Westminster, Holyrood, Cardiff, Belfast and elsewhere are helpful but they can’t deliver for members if the union is weak and ineffective in the workplace. That’s why branches are the building blocks of a strong union.

### 2. **Your interests are not the same as your employer’s**

As a union we will sometimes make common cause with an employer or employers (e.g. to get more funding from government for public services), but on most matters we have a conflict of interest. Employers cause most of our members’ problems and people join us to resolve those problems. Time and time again, the employers’ agenda is at odds with what staff consider most appropriate to their educational or research priorities and their needs as workers.

### 3. **It is the process of engaging in collective bargaining that will build the union – not the result**

Few people join UCU out of gratitude for a good pay deal in the past or for protecting a colleague from unfair dismissal. Most people join a trade union and get active because they are concerned about what is happening to them today and in the hope that we can win something better through our union tomorrow.

### 4. **You are strongest when you organise yourselves**

Unions are about workers coming together to take control of their own livelihoods. As a rep you will sometimes need expert professional advice on strategy and tactics, your legal options, financial issues and other matters; technical support; training; and help with member representation, organising and negotiations activities which branches aren’t (yet) ready to do on their own. Your union can help you get those things, but UCU staff shouldn’t do anything for you which you are able to do yourself.





# Introduction

There are many ways to put pressure on employers

There is no single model of an 'ideal rep'. You don't have to come from a 'traditional' trade union background (whatever that is)...

## 5. **A well-organised branch is always ready to bring its power to bear on the employer - including through strike action**

There are many ways to put pressure on employers. The ultimate threat which a union poses to employers is the threat that its members will withdraw their labour by going on strike. That doesn't mean strikes are always necessary or the best way to get what you want, however. The threat of strike action can be as powerful as the strike itself. That threat on its own can achieve real victories, as can other tactics.

### **The importance of workplace representatives**

A union can't function without a structure of workplace representatives, or 'reps'. Becoming a rep is a great way to build your confidence, as well as a sense of community and collective power in the workplace. But it shouldn't mean devoting all your time to union activity, or doing things for other members which they are able to do on their own. Your branch will fail if it relies on a few key activists to do all the work while excluding others (deliberately or accidentally) from participation.

There is no single model of an 'ideal rep'. You don't have to come from a 'traditional' trade union background (whatever that is), or have a lifelong record of activism. If your branch is serious about making the union bigger and more inclusive, that means recruiting and developing reps who are not the most obvious candidates as well as those who don't hesitate to put themselves forward. It means being open to new ideas and methods. It means recognising that workplace organising is difficult and that all of us have a lot to learn, regardless of our experience.

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## Organising



Unions get stronger when they can persuade larger and larger numbers of workers to take collective action in pursuit of their common interests

### 1.1 WHAT IS ORGANISING?

If you are a new member or rep in a relatively large UCU branch, you might ask yourself: how did the branch come to get so many members? How did it come to be officially recognised by management? How did it negotiate the collective agreements we have, whether on annual leave, sick pay, online learning, workload, or anything else?

If you are a new member or rep in a very small UCU branch that isn't officially recognised by your employer yet, you are probably wondering: how can we grow our branch in the way other UCU branches have managed to grow? How can we get enough members to finally force the employer to reach collective agreements with us?

The answer to all these questions is: through the hard work of organising. Unions get stronger when they can persuade larger and larger numbers of workers to take collective action in pursuit of their common interests. That's what organising is. When unions don't keep expanding and strengthening themselves in this way, they stagnate and fail.

#### **Organising versus mobilising**

Another helpful way to think about organising is by distinguishing between organising and mobilising.

- ➔ Organising is about speaking and - most importantly - listening to the people who don't already agree with you. It's about helping them understand that joining and taking part in the union is the best way to defend their interests in the workplace.
- ➔ Mobilising is about getting people who already agree with you, who are already willing to take action, to do something.

Mobilisation is a difficult and important skill in its own right, but it's not the same thing as organising. A successful branch can do both, but organising is fundamental. You need to be organising your workplace all the time. You only need to mobilise in specific moments of confrontation with your employer.

Don't let anyone confuse you about those two things. See if you've understood the distinction by inserting the correct word in the sentences below:

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## Organising



An 'organising' model sees the members as serving themselves through mass participation and collective organising

1. *You [mobilise/organise] your branch; you [mobilise/organise] your workplace.*
2. *The branch needs to [mobilise/organise] members to vote in the upcoming strike ballot.*
3. *The branch needs to [mobilise/organise] the staff in the English department so they have a higher membership density and someone to represent them in our next round of workload negotiations.*

### **Organising versus servicing**

There is a further distinction we can apply at the same time to help us understand another aspect of organising: the distinction between organising and servicing.

A 'servicing' model of trade unionism regards union membership as a service provided to you in exchange for your subscription fees. In this model, many of the union's activities are carried out by its salaried employees, or by elected members who are bought out of (part of) their day jobs and receive what we call 'facilities time'. There is only occasional participation from the wider membership.

An 'organising' model sees the members as serving themselves through mass participation and collective organising. Members' subscriptions pay for what is necessary to support that organising activity.

All unions involve important elements of servicing, including UCU: for instance, when UCU staff or branch caseworkers help members through disciplinary procedures or employment tribunals. These activities can have important knock-on benefits for other members. However, most of the things which members want and deserve to achieve can only be achieved through organising.

See if you've understood this distinction by categorising each of the following sentences. Which one reflects an 'organising' model of trade unionism and which one reflects a 'servicing' model?

1. *Joining the union is like buying a kind of insurance in case you get into trouble with your line manager.*

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# Organising



The main source of your branch's power lies in participation: the more of it, the better

2. *Let's talk to our colleagues about the proposed workload agreement and see if there's an appetite to push for something better.*
3. *UCU should arrange a big protest in response to the public sector pay freeze.*
4. *The union needs to protect my colleagues against compulsory redundancies.*

## 1.2 WHAT ARE YOU ORGANISING FOR?

The 'organising' model of trade unionism is a concept frequently used in debates about how trade unions can increase membership and influence. However, simply saying 'we are an organising union' begs a number of other questions. What are you organising for? Is it to improve political influence, or legitimacy in collective claims, or credibility in our representative role, or to boost the union's national membership count, or to get members to take industrial action?

These are not mutually exclusive objectives but it is important to think about the ultimate purpose of organising. The focus of this handbook is on organising to build power for collective bargaining.

## 1.3 MAXIMISE PARTICIPATION

The main source of your branch's power lies in participation: the more of it, the better.

Recruiting members is an essential part of organising and should be built into everything you do. A useful target for a union to aim for is to achieve a membership 'density' of at least 51%, meaning that 51% of the workers eligible to be members are members.

At the time of writing, in January 2021, UCU's density is on an upward trajectory in the sectors we cover – but it is not at 50% yet. We have a great base to build from, but our current membership levels should be seen as a floor rather than a ceiling.

However, the union doesn't simply need more members. It needs more active members. This works on two levels.

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## Organising



Branches should constantly explore ways of bringing new people into activity

### **More active members**

You need to make sure that your members are taking an active part in the work of the union: by attending meetings and other events, feeding into negotiations, taking part in industrial action, and so on.

The key to increasing members' participation isn't necessarily to get more members taking part in committee meetings and other layers of the union's bureaucracy. It's to make sure that the members have collective ownership of the branch's campaigning and collective bargaining.

You won't recruit as many new members if you are just asking them to join the union with no purpose in mind. You need to have a specific campaign around an issue or set of issues, and the campaign needs to be flexible enough to be informed by those new members' needs and concerns.

If members are not doing this, your branch will not pose a credible threat to your employer. Your power is almost entirely based on the threat of causing some kind of disruption in the workplace, whether through strike action or other means. The more your members are participating in your activities, the more credible the threat.

### **More active reps**

At the same time, you need to make sure that some of those active members are stepping up to represent their colleagues in a more formal, sustained way: you need reps.

Branches should constantly explore ways of bringing new people into activity. New members are the lifeblood of the union and those currently in leadership positions should recognise that an overdependence on the same faces leaves branch organisation extremely vulnerable.

Becoming a member of the branch or other formal committee is not the only way a member should be able to participate and contribute to the union. Not everybody has the capacity or desire to stand for election and attend regular committees.

The current branch leadership should find ways of enabling members to assist their branch with tasks that are not daunting, and to facilitate other ways of meeting and working together that could draw in more

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## Organising



To organise successfully, you need an issue that's important to people – but importance in itself is not enough

You also need to consider whether you have the capacity to launch a new campaign

people. It could be that a member would be happy to assist their union by working on a specific issue facing the branch, because they have a particular interest in that issue or could contribute some expertise. For example, there are branches that have set up specific working groups dealing with issues such as the gender pay gap, workloads, or casualisation.

### 1.4 IDENTIFY THE ISSUES AND DEVELOP YOUR CAMPAIGN

#### **Listen to the workers and identify the issues**

It won't be easy to recruit new members unless you can identify an issue which people in your workplace care about and develop a plan for dealing with it.

There are lots of ways to identify the issues that matter to your colleagues. You could hold a meeting, for instance, or issue a survey. You can look for patterns and recurring issues in the casework which your branch and regional or devolved national office are doing. But there is no substitute for holding one-on-one conversations with as many workers as you can and asking each one: what would you change about your workplace, if you could?

This method takes time and hard work, and the results might be different from what you expected. But it elicits more honest responses, it builds trust in the union, and it is the best way to make sure people will actually join you and take action on the issues that they identify as important.

#### **Think strategically**

To organise successfully, you need an issue that's important to people – but importance in itself is not enough. You also need to consider whether you have the capacity to launch a new campaign; your prospects of winning; what will benefit the union as a whole; and what kind of difference a win on a given issue might make over the longer term. You need to think strategically.

For example, the majority of UCU's current members are on permanent contracts. Only a minority are on fixed-term or other kinds of precarious contract. If you asked every current UCU member which issue matters

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Your branch should aim to know the people in your workplace better than your employer does

What motivates them? Which colleagues do they trust?

most to them at work, you might not expect a majority of them to say 'casualisation'. However, casual employment has increased in post-16 education in the past ten years. There are tens of thousands of potential members in the casually employed part of the workforce who might be willing to join the union to take part in collective action on this issue. And if the union doesn't win more campaigns in this area, we may reach a point where nobody enjoys the security of a permanent contract - except for senior managers.

Job security is therefore a key example of a strategically vital issue for UCU, even if it isn't necessarily the one which a survey of all current members would identify as the most important.

### 1.5 RECRUITMENT AND CAMPAIGNING TECHNIQUES

There are skills and techniques which you need to apply if you want to organise your workplace effectively. The most important ones are set out below. The principles underpinning them are that you need to be disciplined, methodical, and leave no stone unturned when it comes to making the most of your colleagues' abilities and collective power.

Together these methods make the difference between a branch that can organise the workplace, and a branch that can only mobilise a small constituency of current union members who already agree with its objectives.

#### **Map the workplace**

Your branch should aim to know the people in your workplace better than your employer does. What motivates them? Which colleagues do they trust? How do they feel about the union? What union activities have they taken part in and which ones have they avoided? This applies not just to members of the union but to non-members - or in other words, potential members.

We call the process of systematically building this knowledge 'mapping'. Mapping is the starting point for most successful union activity, including recruiting, communications, developing activists and leaders, and campaigning.

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## Organising



A map is  
a living  
document

It should be  
constantly  
refined and  
updated as  
your branch  
learns more  
about the  
workplace

There are various ways of undertaking this task. A standard branch-level map should provide an overview across the employer, broken down by departments or geographical locations, including (but not limited to):

- ➔ a list of all the departments in your institution
- ➔ a list of all the staff in each department
- ➔ categorisation of staff into members, non-members, and union representatives.

You may need to prioritise what you are going to do according to the information that you can get. In many branches simply getting hold of personnel lists or constructing a staff list from other sources will be a great step forward. Alternatively you could start with just one department.

A map is a living document. It should be constantly refined and updated as your branch learns more about the workplace. Your workplace is always changing and your map needs to change with it.

### **Identify leaders**

When you map the workplace you need to identify the leaders in different parts of the workforce. These leaders will not necessarily be union activists or even union members. They won't necessarily be the highest-ranking or most powerful worker in their department. They won't necessarily be the loudest person in meetings. The people you need to identify are the ones who can persuade their fellow workers to take action because their fellow workers trust them. Different leaders will have different ways of doing this, depending on the job they do and the community they come from.

The best way to find out who the leaders are in a workplace is to have one-on-one conversations with workers and ask them about their colleagues. In particular, ask them: 'If you were asked to do a task at work and you weren't sure how to do it, who would you ask for help?'

Another principle to bear in mind is that 'like recruits like'. Young people are better at persuading other young people to join the union, women are better at persuading women, and so on. Try to make sure that organising conversations are taking place between workers who have things in common, on top of the fact that they work in the same place.



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## Organising



You can't always talk to workers one-on-one and face-to-face, but you can try to do the next best thing

If you need a message to reach your members by email, get branch reps to send it to people in their departments

### Conversations

This guide has already referred to the importance of conversations, in particular one-on-one conversations. There is no substitute for conversations between people who work together and know and trust each other. This applies whether you are exploring and identifying the issues that matter to people in your workplace, or asking them to come together and take action over a specific issue that's already been identified.

Most line managers will have regular one-on-one conversations and team meetings with the workers they manage. Sometimes managers will hold extra one-on-one conversations with workers for other purposes, including, in moments of workplace conflict, to intimidate them. If your boss is having those conversations with your fellow workers, your branch must do the same thing.

This may seem scary or difficult, and it is. Having a conversation with a fellow worker who doesn't yet support the union, listening to them and seeing if they can change their mind can be harder than speaking at a rally to a hundred people who already agree with you.

### Other communications

The principles underpinning conversations also apply to other kinds of communication. You can't always talk to workers one-on-one and face-to-face, but you can try to do the next best thing. If you need a message to reach your members by email, get branch reps to send it to people in their departments. If you need to use text messaging for a statutory ballot, you can have personalised one-on-one text conversations with all your members using UCU's ThruText peer-to-peer messaging service (just ask your regional/devolved national office about it).

The more informal, two-way and personalised your branch's communications are, the better.

### Structure tests

You've mapped your workplace, identified leaders, held conversations with key figures, and made some progress recruiting new members to the union or getting people involved in the early stages of a campaign. Next, you need a way to build that campaign and track the extent of workers' participation in it. That is where the structure test comes in.

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## Organising



A structure test is an action that forms part of your campaign and aims to involve as many people in your workplace as possible

A structure test is an action that forms part of your campaign and aims to involve as many people in your workplace as possible. Examples could include (but are not limited to):

- ➔ surveys
- ➔ petitions
- ➔ open letters
- ➔ meetings and other events
- ➔ consultative ballots (ie the informal ballot of members which branches are expected to carry out before they progress to the formal, postal ballot which is required by law before a branch can take industrial action).

The key to a structure test is that you don't just take the action and hope as many people participate as possible: you monitor who is taking part and who isn't, you learn from the different levels of participation in different areas of the workplace, and you gauge which areas are ready to escalate to the next stage of your campaign and which areas need closer attention. You also use it to test the extent to which the leaders you've identified are able to persuade their colleagues to participate. Finally, you make sure that your structure tests become progressively more visible and involve more commitment as the campaign escalates.

If you are looking for a structure test to start a campaign, you might proceed as follows:

- ➔ **Choose something that isn't immediately public and visible,** because some workers might be afraid to make a conspicuous commitment to the campaign which their employer can see. One possible starting point is a 'majority petition', which the union will not publish until a significant majority (at least 60%) of members have signed it.
- ➔ **The petition should be as simple as possible:** it should lay out the issues in one or two sentences, articulate the signatories' demands regarding those issues in another sentence, and end with another

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If you can't get a majority of your members to sign a public petition, you won't be able to get a majority to take strike action either

sentence expressing the signatories' commitment to further action if those demands are not met.

- ➔ **Make clear that the petition is for workers only:** it isn't a public thing which anyone can sign. It is a test of workers' commitment to take further action if necessary.
- ➔ **Ask reps and anyone you have identified as potential leaders** to gather as many signatures as possible from colleagues they work with. Give them a fixed time frame to do it in.
- ➔ **Ideally the signatures will be collected via face-to-face conversations,** not by circulating the petition via generic emails or social media communications. Provide a loose conversation 'script' for those collecting signatures to work with.

At the end of the process you will have strengthened your branch simply by the act of carrying out the test, holding conversations and educating your colleagues about the issues. But you will also know more about your branch: who is and who isn't ready to take more action, and crucially, which areas need more attention from reps. You will know if you are ready to escalate - or not.

A good rule of thumb is that if you can't get a majority of your members to sign a public petition, you won't be able to get a majority to take strike action either - and that is what you are likely to need if you want to build real power and win life-changing victories in your workplace.

### **Organising with the wider community**

Workers aren't just employees and their interests are never restricted to the problems which their employer causes for them. UCU members are members of religious communities and political parties; they are migrants with visa issues; they have troubling paying rent; they care about the environment; they have relationships of pastoral care with their students. They are part of other professional communities beyond their workplace.

The most successful campaigns will animate and involve the wider communities which workers are part of. Your campaign planning and mapping should consider what kinds of leverage people in your workplace might have by virtue of belonging to those communities.

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## Organising



Campaigns go much further when students are consulted and involved from the very beginning and can contribute to the pressure which we place on the employer

Let's say, for example, your employer is proposing redundancies in a department that teaches English to non-native speakers. A lot of students in that department also attend a local place of religious worship. Are there any students or staff who know one of the religious leaders there? Could they prevail on those leaders to write to the employer explaining how the cuts will impact their congregation? Might it even be possible to organise a mass boycott of the employer by the whole congregation unless the cuts are reversed?

This organising technique is sometimes known as 'whole worker organising'. It will mean different things in different contexts depending on the specific workplace and the issues that are in play. However, one of the most important communities to involve in your organising will always be your students.

Students are the principal community which UCU members serve, whether directly or indirectly. As a union we are very good at working with students and coming to the understanding that our interests are aligned, or as the saying goes: 'staff working conditions are students' learning conditions.' Campaigns go much further when students are consulted and involved from the very beginning and can contribute to the pressure which we place on the employer.

Another community you need to take account of and try to work with are groups of staff represented by other trade unions, such as UNISON, Unite, GMB, and the NEU. UCU is the largest union in any of the sectors we organise in, but the more we can work and develop shared positions with our sister unions, the better for everyone.

### 1.6 BE PROACTIVE

Some campaigns you undertake - and the organising that goes into them - will be reactive. The employer will try to impose detrimental changes of some kind and you will attempt to prevent them.

The last ten years in the sectors covered by UCU have been a period of decline. Austerity, along with attempts by the government and employers to run post-16 education institutions like businesses, has led to declining pay, worsening job security and expanding workloads. One purpose of

# 1

## Organising



Many of the problems you face in the workplace can be addressed by action in your workplace – you don't have to wait for the rest of the union to act at the same time

this handbook is to empower members to arrest this decline and react more forcefully to attacks on staff when they do take place.

Reactive campaigns are just the start, however. The most effective unions in the UK and beyond are able to not just stop but to reverse the decline they've seen in the sectors they cover, and start to make things better. This handbook is intended to help every UCU branch push for and win real improvements for employees in their workplace.

Many of the problems you face in the workplace can be addressed by action in your workplace – you don't have to wait for the rest of the union to act at the same time. Some can be addressed by action in a single department or a cluster of departments.

It can feel like reactive organising occupies all of your branch's time. To get on the front foot, you might need to build your capacity for proactive organising by recruiting more reps. You may also need to rethink how your branch conducts its business. Employers use all sorts of tactics to stop branches from thinking proactively. One of them is to invite reactive behaviour through provocative communications to staff that criticise or misrepresent the union. Another is to schedule very frequent, but not necessarily very productive, meetings with your branch. Ask yourself:

- ➔ Does my branch need to issue a point-by-point rebuttal of every email which the employer sends to staff, or everything which the college principal or vice chancellor says in public?
- ➔ What concrete benefits does the branch derive from frequent meetings with the employer?

Sometimes, the employer holding lots of meetings can be a sign of your strength – a sign that they need to stay on your 'good side'. Inflammatory emails, too, can be a sign that the employer is rattled by something you've done, or that they are anxious to 'spin' something they're doing in their favour before staff try to challenge it. But these behaviours can also be tactics for distracting you. If you suspect this might be the case, consider letting the occasional provocation slide; reducing the number of meetings you hold with the employer; or even walking away from the bargaining table altogether so you can focus on re-engaging your members and escalating to the next stage of your campaign.

# 1

## Organising



Inflammatory emails, too, can be a sign that the employer is rattled by something you've done, or that they are anxious to 'spin' something they're doing in their favour before staff try to challenge it

### 1.7 CONCLUSION

UCU employs paid staff throughout the organisation who are responsible for organising in one way or another: from branch organisers in specific branches, to branch development organisers in regional/devolved national offices, to national organisers in our head office. If you have doubts or questions, or want support for your organising activities, look at the contact details at the end of this handbook.

Here are ten key points to take away from this section:

- 1. Organising is not the same as mobilising or servicing.** It requires members to grow and strengthen the union on a lasting basis, from the ground up. It lays the groundwork for truly effective mobilisation to happen. Organising differs from servicing in that more of the work is done by members for themselves, not done for them by a small core of elected members or staff.
- 2. Increase participation to build power.** Recruit more members and increase levels of activity amongst the whole membership.
- 3. Listen to people in your workplace.** Don't assume you know what motivates them.
- 4. Think strategically.** What are the long term, structural issues facing your branch and the union as a whole?
- 5. Map the workplace.** Know more about each area of your workplace and the people in it than your boss.
- 6. Identify leaders.** Every workplace has people whom colleagues trust and respect. You need those individuals on your side to recruit more people to your cause and build a majority.
- 7. Have conversations.** The most important form of communication between members or potential members is the one-on-one conversation. The more conversations you can hold, the better. The more your other communications resemble conversations, the better.
- 8. Test your structures.** Track members' participation in different campaign actions (petitions, mass meetings, ballots, etc) to

# 1

## Organising



Dedicate as much of your branch's time as possible to the issues which members want to take action over – not just the issues which your employer forces on to the agenda

determine how ready your branch is for collective action and which areas need more of your attention.

- 9. Use the communities your members are part of.** Every worker has connections they can draw on to enhance our collective struggle and improve things for everyone in our institutions: students, parents, alumni, political organisations, other community groups, etc.
- 10. Be proactive.** Dedicate as much of your branch's time as possible to the issues which members want to take action over – not just the issues which your employer forces on to the agenda. Don't meet with or respond to the employer unless it is productive to do so.

# 2

## Bargaining and negotiating



Organising and bargaining are intimately linked activities. You should organise with a view to building power and winning on specific bargaining issues

### 2.1 ORGANISING AND BARGAINING

This section is about helping branches think about how they approach negotiations with their employer(s). At the same time, it reinforces the fact that our collective strength comes from our members working together to get the best deal we possibly can in the short and long term.

This handbook began with a section on organising, but organising and bargaining are intimately linked activities. You should organise with a view to building power and winning on specific bargaining issues. At the same time, you should negotiate with employers in a way that makes the most of the organisation which you are building up within your branch.

### 2.2 OUR BARGAINING AGENDA

Typical issues on a bargaining agenda are conditions of employment such as working time, annual leave, equal treatment, training, occupational health, health and safety, the organisation of work and, of course, pay and/or grading matters.

Our agenda needs to be manageable but it should also acknowledge the fact that education is under attack with a host of hostile forces arrayed against it. Winning a few percentage points on our salaries or a few extra days' holiday is important, but we can and should go further. A bargaining agenda can cover all manner of issues, from race and gender equality to making our employers address climate change.

The aim of collective bargaining is to reach an agreement covering all the employees in the 'bargaining unit'. In essence, this process allows workers to deal with employers as a unified group through a trade union, rather than as individuals: to create a rising tide that lifts all boats.

There are legal stipulations as to what can and what cannot be a subject of collective bargaining between an employer and staff and those are covered in more detail in the longer version of this handbook.

There may also be stipulations enshrined in a recognition agreement between the union and the employer: a document setting out the basic relationship between the employer and the trade union once the employer has agreed to 'recognise' that union for collective bargaining purposes. Almost every established UCU branch already has a recognition agreement.



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## Bargaining and negotiating



Leverage either needs to hurt the employer economically or create sufficient reputational damage or political pain to induce concessions from the employer

A recognition agreement may also distinguish between matters that are subject to 'negotiation' with the employer, where both parties are supposed to reach agreement, and matters that are subject only to 'consultation', where the employer is only obliged to discuss the matter with the union and can impose a decision on staff without necessarily reaching an agreement.

However, the stipulations enshrined in recognition agreements or even in law are fairly open-ended and should be treated as a starting point rather than an absolute limit. If you have a powerful and creative branch you can make all manner of issues into matters for collective bargaining. You can also blur the boundaries between consultation and negotiation.

### 2.3 THE ROLE OF POWER AT THE BARGAINING TABLE

Negotiating skill is no substitute for lack of leverage. Skill can only offer short-lived advantages. Bargaining strength has to be built up over time from a combination of sound workplace organisation, high membership density, meaningful engagement of members, building relationships with allies and key actors, and finding the right tool to lever a set of negotiations.

It is possible to reach agreement without the need to bring leverage into play but, more often, you have to leverage the power of your members to put pressure on the employer to achieve your bargaining objectives.

Leverage either needs to hurt the employer economically or create sufficient reputational damage or political pain to induce concessions from the employer.

There are many forms of leverage. The most visible and often the most effective is the strike. However, there are many other forms that, depending on context, may be as effective as short or even prolonged strike action. These are covered in more detail in the long version of this handbook.

# 2

## Bargaining and negotiating



Openness and discipline go hand in hand. The more scrutiny negotiators will face from the members they represent and other parties outside the negotiating room, the more disciplined they need to be

### 2.4. NEGOTIATE OPENLY

Your approach to negotiations should be open and democratic.

- ➔ The more information your negotiators can convey to the rest of the membership about what happens in negotiations, the better.
- ➔ The more representative your negotiating team is of the workforce which it is negotiating on behalf of, the better.
- ➔ The more opportunities members have to feed into the negotiating process while it is ongoing, the better.
- ➔ Finally, nothing should ever be finally agreed without all the affected members being consulted.

Senior managers don't like scrutiny. Sometimes recognition agreements or other agreements with employers place strict limits on how many members and which members can attend negotiations, or how much can be reported back - but you can always try to overcome those limits and change the format of negotiations in your favour.

You should also avoid, where possible, treating information or offers provided by the employer as confidential. It can be an employer tactic to privilege union negotiators with information that they later use to create a difference between the negotiators and those they represent. You must be wary of any attempt to divide and rule.

### 2.5 COLLECTIVE DISCIPLINE IN NEGOTIATIONS

An open approach to negotiations will only work if there is absolute collective discipline.

- ➔ Nobody speaks out of turn during a meeting.
- ➔ Nobody adopts positions that haven't been agreed collectively in advance, or during a break in negotiations.
- ➔ Nobody undermines official, collectively agreed accounts of how negotiations have proceeded.

Openness and discipline go hand in hand. The more scrutiny negotiators will face from the members they represent and other parties outside the negotiating room, the more disciplined they need to be.

# 3

## What type of rep do you want to be?

SAVE OUR  
DEPARTMENT



UCU strives to have at least one representative in each workplace and department

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

If your involvement in UCU goes no further than applying a few of the principles and methods in this handbook within your branch, that's great. But you may have an appetite to do other things, too. The rest of this section outlines some of the ways you can develop as a trade unionist.

### 3.2 THE VALUE OF WORKPLACE REPRESENTATIVES

This handbook refers to different types of representative and specific branch officers or roles, but here we are referring to workplace representatives. They may have a different name (for example, departmental representative), represent broad or more distinct categories of members but the key is that they serve a representative function, speak for and are accountable to the membership.

UCU strives to have at least one representative in each workplace and department. Representatives:

- ➔ recruit and organise new members
- ➔ are the first point of contact for members in a workplace
- ➔ talk to members about the union
- ➔ talk to staff about their issues
- ➔ offer advice on issues at work
- ➔ support members with problems and accompany members in meetings with managers, including internal disciplinary or grievance meetings
- ➔ distribute union information to local members
- ➔ encourage more members to get active in UCU
- ➔ participate in the union's democratic structures
- ➔ promote equality, diversity and fair treatment for all members
- ➔ campaign for better working conditions
- ➔ raise members' issues with the branch.

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A report into members' views showed that wherever there is a local representative, UCU is viewed more favourably and is seen to be more effective on every issue

Perhaps unsurprisingly, member engagement ebbs and flows with 'issues'. Put simply, when there is a live issue affecting a group of members, they are more likely to get involved in the union. Research in UCU indicates that members who have been involved in campaign activity over the last 12 months are more likely to consider becoming representatives themselves.

The evidence also suggests that where that a branch adopts a bureaucratic approach ('leave it to me') member engagement is limited but where they involve members, encourage collective action, and members 'own' the issue, then engagement last longer, and the dips in membership engagement between peaks of activity are shallower. Building an assertive, campaigning, high-participation union branch is the best way to recruit new representatives and guarantee that there is some 'succession planning' for the branch's elected leadership.

There is a tendency to look hierarchically at union structures and to consider the branch chair, secretary, or another 'senior' officer as the key local leader. In large employers, this person may still seem remote from the day to day concerns in their workplace. In an organising approach, the key local leader is the workplace representative.

This evidence is replicated within UCU. A report into members' views showed that wherever there is a local representative, UCU is viewed more favourably and is seen to be more effective on every issue, than where a representative is absent.

Members perceive the UCU much more positively when there is a local representative present within their workplace. They are more likely to:

- ➔ feel positive about the union
- ➔ engage with union campaigns
- ➔ contribute to internal union democracy.

For further ideas about recruiting and developing new reps, please see the longer version of this handbook.

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## What type of rep do you want to be?

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UCU staff organise a comprehensive training programme for new and longer-serving representatives

### 3.3 EDUCATION AND TRAINING

UCU staff organise a comprehensive training programme for new and longer-serving representatives. Some courses are administered and accessed via UCU head office, others via UCU's regional and devolved national offices. Courses can also be customised or run in a shorter format to suit the needs of particular branches, regions or devolved nations.

Courses that are particularly relevant for readers of this handbook include:

- ➔ **Reps 1:** an introduction for new UCU representatives.
- ➔ **Local bargaining:** training on how to win through proactive, branch-level collective bargaining with your employer.
- ➔ **Your Union, Your Voice:** a short, one-day course on how to organise effectively within UCU.
- ➔ **Transforming UCU:** an intensive residential course where you will learn to build winning campaigns based on a deep strategic understanding of the institution and sector you work in.

In addition to our normal training offer UCU members and staff also participate in the recurring 'Organizing for Power' programme led by renowned trade union organiser and author, Jane McAlevey. This is not just a course: it is an international event which takes place once or twice each year and brings together thousands of members of trade unions, renters' unions and other organisations across the world, via online videoconferencing, to learn the kinds of organising principles and methods taught in this handbook. Organizing for Power is the best way to learn from some of the world's most successful unions and you are strongly encouraged to attend, regardless of how much experience you have as an active UCU member.

Finally, UCU has a wide range of courses in continuing professional development. CPD is important to us as a union: not for replacing or subsidising courses which your employer should be paying for you to attend, but for helping you improve as an educator or education professional in ways that are aligned with our values and agenda as a union.

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You shouldn't get demoralised if your branch cannot fill all these roles

These include subjects such as safeguarding; creating an inclusive and positive classroom environment; and caring for your voice as an educator. CPD courses can also be an important route for recruitment of new members. The most effective and radical education unions across the world tend to place a strong emphasis on CPD and UCU is proud to be among them.

### 3.4 OTHER BRANCH ROLES

Being a workplace representative isn't for everyone. There are other equally important roles you can take on:

- ➔ **Health and safety representative**
- ➔ **Union learning representative**
- ➔ **Negotiator**
- ➔ **Caseworker**
- ➔ **Green rep**
- ➔ **Branch officer roles:** president, chair, secretary, treasurer, membership secretary, equality officer, anti-casualisation officer

You shouldn't get demoralised if your branch cannot fill all these roles. Much more important is to ensure that members are properly represented on the committee and that the branch committee reflects, as far as is possible, the characteristics of the membership.

For more information on these roles, see the longer version of this handbook.

### 3.5 FACILITIES TIME

It is not easy to do sustained organising and proactive bargaining while coping with the extreme workloads which we encounter in the sectors we cover. UCU employees can provide support for this, but it is equally important to make sure that your branch gains, and makes use of, facilities time so that members are in a position to lead your workplace struggles. Facilities agreements are often part of a union's recognition agreement with the employer. Such agreements should include time off or cover for the union's representatives.

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Facilities time is a key resource and it is good practice that branches use the allocation of any 'blocks' of time in a strategic way

Facilities time is a key resource and it is good practice that branches use the allocation of any 'blocks' of time in a strategic way. For example, if the branch has agreed a range of objectives that it wishes to work on over the next 12 months then it makes sense to allocate facilities time to achieve these. Your branch should think carefully about the allocation of time, rather than fall back on previous custom and practice.

You must make use of any facilities time you have while recognising that a serious organising drive is always likely to take more time than your recognition agreement allows. That is because you are trying to build capacity for collective bargaining beyond where it currently is. This is what the UCU members who came before you did when they won any recognition agreement which your branch may have. This is what you need to keep doing so that the branch can make further progress, rather than treading water.

For more guidance and information on winning and defending facilities time agreements, see the longer version of this handbook.



# Key contacts and further reading

For any branch campaigning and organising activities your first contact should be with your regional or devolved national office

## KEY CONTACTS

### Feedback on this handbook

For feedback on this handbook or questions about any aspect of it please contact UCU's general secretary, Jo Grady:

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/2063/UCU-general-secretary?formid=53616>

### Regional and devolved national staff

For any branch campaigning and organising activities your first contact should be with your regional or devolved national office. Every office has staff who are responsible for organising and most offices have one staff member with the job title 'Branch Development Organiser', whose role concentrates exclusively on organising.

Staff contact details for UCU's regions and nations can be found by visiting the list of senior officials in each one at

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/regionalofficials> and selecting 'Full details'.

Some larger branches are also able to fund a full- or part-time branch administrator/organiser to work exclusively with the branch. To explore this possibility, please contact your regional or devolved national official.

### National organisers

In addition to paid organisers based in UCU's regions and nations, UCU also employs two national organisers who work out of UCU's head office and provide dedicated support with specific initiatives.

### Bargaining and negotiations officials

Members of the Bargaining and Negotiations team in UCU's head office have extra responsibilities covering specific areas, sectors and groups of the UCU membership, as follows. Please contact them at

[BargainingAndNegotiations@ucu.org.uk](mailto:BargainingAndNegotiations@ucu.org.uk)

- ➔ Academic-related and professional services staff
- ➔ Prison education
- ➔ Anti-casualisation and adult & community education
- ➔ Health & safety
- ➔ Pensions





# Key contacts and further reading

## Training and CPD

There are four key contacts for your and your branch's training needs.

The majority of UCU training courses are provided and administered by UCU's regional and devolved national offices. For contact details for those offices, see the 'Regional and devolved national staff' section, above.

The content of almost all UCU training, and the administration and provision of some courses, is determined centrally by UCU's training officer, Karen Brooks: [kbrooks@ucu.org.uk](mailto:kbrooks@ucu.org.uk)

The 'Transforming UCU' development programme for workplace leaders is run by Michael MacNeil: [mmacneil@ucu.org.uk](mailto:mmacneil@ucu.org.uk)

UCU's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) offering is the responsibility of Rob Hancock: [rhancock@ucu.org.uk](mailto:rhancock@ucu.org.uk)

## FURTHER READING

Parts of this handbook - in particular the 'Organising' section - are heavily indebted to the work of Jane McAlevey, an American trade unionist, academic and author who has described the practices that some of the most radical, successful unions in education and other sectors use to grow their membership, win campaigns and bring about political change. Organisers rarely talk publicly about their strategies and techniques and Jane's books are the best guides available in this area.

- ➔ **Raising expectations (and raising hell): my decade fighting for the labor movement** (Verso Books, 2014)
- ➔ **No shortcuts: organizing for power in the new gilded age** (Oxford University Press, 2016)
- ➔ **A collective bargain: unions, organizing, and the fight for democracy** (Ecco Press, 2020)

Jane also leads the 'Organizing for Power' training series mentioned in Section 3.3. You can watch an introductory event for UCU members which she held with UCU general secretary Jo Grady in September 2020:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpfEna\\_q4fk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpfEna_q4fk)



# Key contacts and further reading

The Ella Baker School of Organising is based in the UK. It runs regular events and training sessions both online and offline for trade unionists and community organisers: <https://www.ellabakerorganising.org.uk/>

**Tribune magazine** (<https://tribunemag.co.uk/>) has regular articles and updates relating to industrial relations. For an interesting report on a recent, well organised, and successful mass-participation campaign, see Willie Howard, 'How the Bexley Bin Workers Won', Tribune, 1 August 2020

<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/08/how-the-bexley-bin-workers-won>

**The Labor Notes website** (<https://labornotes.org/>) has some useful materials, resources and news updates on matters relating to organising and collective bargaining and negotiations. See in particular their guide to one-on-one organising conversations:

[https://www.labornotes.org/sites/default/files/22AnOrganizingConversation\\_0.pdf](https://www.labornotes.org/sites/default/files/22AnOrganizingConversation_0.pdf)

## Acknowledgements

Apart from my foreword and these acknowledgements, this handbook has been written by UCU staff in consultation with the elected members on our Recruitment, Organising and Campaigning Committee (ROCC). I would like to thank everyone who has contributed.

*Jo Grady*





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