

Being a UCU activist: Advice for new reps

Being a new rep can seem a bit daunting. Often you are as worried about what you don't know, as what you do! But remember that an old rep is just a new rep who's been doing it for a while. And no rep (in fact nobody!) knows everything. Your members are more interested in you being honest with them than having all the answers. In fact often it's less intimidating for members to work with a rep that understands why they are angry, confused or worried.

Don't forget the basics

The biggest trap new reps can fall into is to forget the basics. Racing on to bigger issues before getting yourself, and the branch/LA, organised will leave you overworked, vulnerable and less likely to succeed.

Inform people that you are a UCU representative

The first thing to do is make sure people know you are a rep. The following people will need to be informed.

Your employer

Check whether they have been informed. If not then inform them in writing. Address the letter to the personnel officer or another appropriate senior manager and send a copy to your regional office. Also inform your immediate supervisor as a matter of courtesy.

Your regional office

Informing regional office that you are a rep will ensure you receive all the appropriate information. You should also check that your contact details are up to date on the membership system. If possible you should speak to one of the full time regional officers to introduce yourself.

The members in your workplace

Not all the members will know that you are the rep. At the very least you should send an email or newsletter to all members letting them know that you are the rep and announce it on the notice board – giving your contact details. Additionally you should make an effort to

meet those individuals, or departments, that you do not have regular contact with, to personally introduce yourself and encourage them to get involved.

Gather basic information

You will need some basic information to keep you informed. Ideally you should have inherited a file or folder from the previous rep. Where this information is missing, you will need to collate it. Your regional office should be able to give you advice and some information. Where you are unable to get the information from anywhere else try your personnel office, especially for local policies and procedures and agreements. Below is a summary of the information you will need.

Who you need to know

Members

You should have a complete and up to date list of members. If you don't have a current list, contact your local committee or regional office.

Other UCU representatives

There should be other UCU reps in the Branch/LA that meet regularly. You should attend meetings or, if they don't occur regularly, make contact with the reps.

Other union representatives

There will almost certainly be at least one other union in your workplace. UCU encourages its reps to work positively with other unions.

Essential information

Make sure you have:

- copies of your disciplinary and grievance procedures
- copy of your recognition and/or facilities agreement
- copies of any other union agreements eg health and safety, equal opportunities, union learning
- a copy of management policies and procedures, which may be in the form of a handbook or simply a collection of staffing procedures
- any standard employment contracts that management may issue from time to time
- UCU toolkits and other information available in the UCU Activists section of the union web site

You should also be aware of the relevant national agreements UCU has negotiated in HE and FE. These agreements cover a wide range of areas including grievance, disciplinary and consultation over change. They can be found on the UCU web site too.

Where and when union activities take place

You should try to find out when and where:

- the local UCU committee meets
- members or department meetings are held
- joint union meetings are held
- meetings with management take place, such as a joint consultative meeting or health and safety consultative meeting

Training

Training is available for both UCU reps and activists. For more details of courses available go to the Training for Activists section of the website.