

Running formal meetings

This document provides you with a guide to running formal, decision-making meetings, explaining how to ensure that they are efficiently conducted and why this is important.

Think about your meetings

Too often union meetings are run by a small circle of activists with most members taking little or no part. This can create a vicious circle. Members going along to a meeting for the first time find they don't know what's going on and can't understand the jargon. The activists are too busy with the tasks needed to run the branch and don't have time to explain things to new members. The new members don't come back and the activists get busier, and so it continues.

Re-organising meetings is the only way to break out of this cycle. Formal meetings can be re-arranged to be more relevant and welcoming to members. And department meetings, informal discussions, or small group meetings to discuss issues can be set up to get the union message across in a more relaxed atmosphere.

Rearranging branch meetings to make them more relevant and interesting is a useful topic for your branch committee to discuss when considering raising the level of participation by ordinary members. The following ideas have been tried with success.

- Make meetings relevant to members. Allow time to discuss issues, and then follow up in future meetings by putting topics that concern members on the agenda.
- Make publicity for meetings friendlier. Highlight discussion of issues that you know are widely and deeply felt.
- Make sure everybody gets an invitation to the meeting.
- Make meetings lively by putting open discussion sessions on the agenda or by arranging a speaker or video.
- Run meetings specifically to explain things to people, like 'how management's proposed building relocation will affect you' or 'what the new pay deal means for you'.
- Find out what place and time are most convenient for members and make changes to suit them. Think particularly of members who work part-time and any members who

have disabilities.

- Strictly limit the 'business' part of meetings and make sure reports are in writing so they don't take up a lot of time.
- Make sure that meetings don't run over time.
- Find out if any members have child care problems and discuss what the union can do to help, for example by planning a baby-sitting rota or having a crèche in a room near the meeting.
- Plan social events to attract people, such as a 'welcome to the union' meeting for new members.

The chair, and other members of the committee, should look for new members, or members who have not previously been active, before the meeting. Make sure these members get introduced to other people, are encouraged to speak up, and that other people listen to what they have to say.

When trying new things don't be put off by a lack of immediate success. If meetings have been dry boring affairs for years, the message that things have changed may take a while to get out.

Balancing involvement and efficiency

Meetings should be run in ways that are as inclusive as possible. You should always be aware that many people are not familiar with formal meeting procedure and that its use can alienate and intimidate people, creating barriers to participation. People who do not know what is going on around them are less likely to take the risk of speaking up.

However, many UCU branch meetings, occasionally co-ordinating committee meetings and any public meetings the branch may organise will need to be run with some degree of formality. Although being as inclusive as possible should be your primary objective, there are a number of reasons why, at times, you will need to give more formal structure to your meetings, for example:

- there are too many people for informality
- a lot of business has to be dealt with
- there is limited time
- there may be disagreement in the meeting
- decisions made at the meeting will affect people not present
- decisions will have to be reported to other meetings.

Consultations and negotiations with management and or other unions will also need some degree of formality and will probably be run broadly according to the rules of procedure.

When thinking about how to run a meeting, you will need to consider what you hope to achieve and who will be there. Meetings to consider detailed proposals and make formal decisions (such as during negotiations or considering offers from management) will need more formality. Smaller department meetings, recruitment meetings, campaign groups, or meetings to discuss an issue initially can be set up in a relaxed atmosphere that promotes discussion.

However there is no set piece. Even the most tense formal meeting to discuss a management proposal will usually benefit from an initial 15 minutes of open floor discussion that lets everyone have a short say about how they feel before moving on to a formal debate. And even the most informal group chat will need enough procedure for everyone to understand when a decision has been made and when the meeting has ended.

The importance of well chaired meetings

It is the chairperson's job to ensure meetings run smoothly. Even those meetings where there is no formal chair require someone to facilitate the discussions. Although the branch chair will often chair meetings, they do not necessarily have to. It may be that:

- the branch chair has been busy with other union business and doesn't have time to prepare
- another person knows the people or business of the meeting in more detail than the branch chair
- somebody else is better suited to chairing meetings
- the branch chair wishes to participate in the meeting (they perhaps have been involved in negotiations).

Chairing a meeting is a balancing act. On the one hand you have to get the business carried out efficiently. On the other, you have to ensure that there is real democracy and that everyone is involved and encouraged to take part. Often there is no contradiction between these two points. People get fed up with meetings that ramble on and run late. They also get annoyed when they can't follow the discussion because everybody else seems to know what they're talking about and are using confusing jargon.

When chairing meetings you should:

- Make clear from the outset what the meeting is for, how the meeting will be run, what the meeting can and cannot do and how decisions can be taken.
- Be firm about the rules of the meeting and the agenda but don't be bureaucratic.
- Make sure you finish on time.
- Explain what the procedure is for motions and amendments - so those new members can follow what's happening.

If you're chairing a meeting you have a special responsibility to see that everyone gets a say. This means encouraging people to speak up as well as stopping the meeting from being taken over by a small group.

Here are some practical suggestions for improving the way that meetings are run:

- Introduce new members to the meeting and encourage them to speak.
- Ask everyone to give their name when they speak.
- Stop the meeting being dominated by an individual or small group.
- Encourage everyone to have a say, but discourage people from rambling on.
- Members should only talk when called on by the chair and not across the meeting. This is called talking 'through the chair'. Don't be scared to call the meeting to order if problems occur.

Formal meeting procedure

Understanding formal meeting procedure is important for a chair even in informal meetings because the rules of meetings, even when not followed to the letter, can help you give structure. This is also important in case informal meetings inadvertently require more formality, somebody else at a meeting invokes formal rules, or in case management or other unions use formal procedure.

Rules of meetings

The conduct of meetings will be set out in your local rules but they generally follow similar procedures. The following are guidelines to help you run a formal meeting.

Consultation and negotiations with management are best conducted according to agreed rules determined in advance and preferably in writing.

Many of these rules are common sense; for example only one person should speak at a time. Some rules are more complicated.

The chairperson

If you are the chairperson you should try to observe the following:

- Make sure you are familiar with the rules and standing orders and you can explain what you are doing.
- Explain any union jargon and initials even if most people know what they mean.
- Read out motions and amendments when they are proposed and read them out again before a vote is taken.
- Sum up what has been decided after a discussion or at the end of the meeting.

Always try to stick to the published starting and finishing times. If you need more time make sure everyone is in agreement, at branch meetings you may have to suspend standing orders to allow for further time.

The agenda

An agenda is a list of things that will happen or will be discussed at the meeting. The chairperson and the secretary usually draw up the agenda before the meeting. They will have a rough idea of how much time should be spent on each item on the agenda, and will try to keep the meeting to these timings. There will be some 'standing items'. These are things that are always discussed, if there are standing orders they may have a fixed agenda that must be followed.

Any member can ask for an item to be put on the agenda. Usually there will be rules about how long before the meeting you need to give notice to the secretary that you want an item included. Important business shouldn't get put to the end of the agenda or there won't be enough time to discuss it! If there is a really important item or an emergency, then you can ask the chairperson to 'suspend' the usual rules and deal with this first. Sometimes the chairperson will make the decision. On other occasions the meeting will vote about whether to take the item earlier.

The agenda is usually copied and circulated to members in advance.

The minutes

Minutes are a record of what went on in a meeting. They are not meant to be a verbatim record but they should summarise recommendations and record decisions that were taken.

Minutes are a brief record of the discussion and the decisions reached. They link meetings together to provide continuity. 'Matters arising' from the minutes is a chance to ask questions about the last meeting. These should be genuine questions, not an attempt to start the discussion going again.

It is usual for the branch secretary to take the minutes. If they are going to play an active role in presenting reports and answering questions in a meeting it is a good idea if they get someone else to take notes to produce the minutes.

Making decisions

For a meeting to make a decision it must have a proposal before it, usually in the form of a motion which needs to be debated. The debate may give rise to amendments to the motion all of which need to be voted on to reach a decision. Throughout all this the chair must keep the meeting to order.

Discussion and debate

The chair will control discussion. Usually people in meetings are asked to speak 'through the chair'. In other words they should not speak out of order or without the chair's agreement.

Motions and resolutions

Motions are a way of getting a meeting to make a decision. The decision once taken is a resolution of the branch or committee meeting.

Most branches will have rules about when motions have to be given in to the chairperson or the secretary; this is usually before the agenda is issued. This helps the chairperson to structure the meeting and so allows members to know what is going to be discussed. Sometimes this is not possible. There may be an emergency or the need for a decision might arise after a discussion. Then a motion can usually be submitted during the meeting.

As soon as a meeting starts to deal with a motion, several things usually happen.

- The chair will ask if there is a 'proposer' (or 'mover') and a 'seconded' for the motion. If two people do not support the motion by moving and seconding it, it will 'fall', in other words it won't be dealt with.
- The chair will then ask the proposer and seconded to 'speak to' (in support of) the motion. They will say why they support it, and why they want other people to support it.
- Once the motion has been proposed and seconded the secretary will put it into the minutes.
- The chair will then ask other people to join the discussion. At the end of the discussion the proposer has the right of reply. This means that they can quickly deal with points raised during the discussion. They cannot introduce new points at this stage.
- Finally, a vote will be taken. If a majority of votes are in favour the motion becomes a 'resolution' of the meeting.

Amendments

Amendments are alterations to the original motion. You can not allow an amendment that completely distorts or changes the meaning of the original motion.

If the mover of the original motion accepts the amendment, it can become part of the motion if the meeting agrees. Otherwise it will have to be debated and voted on. Once it has been agreed it becomes part of the 'substantive motion'.

If there is a lot of business, or not much time, the chairperson might say that members can only speak once on any item. They might also put a time limit on each contribution. To

save time if there is general agreement about a motion, the chair will call for any speakers against, rather than have a lot of speeches saying more or less the same thing.

It helps the discussion if people stick to the subject, and that they avoid repeating what others have said.

Voting

Voting on motions can be confusing, especially if there is an amendment.

- The amendment should be voted on first. If the voting goes against the amendment, then discussion can continue for the original motion. If the amendment is voted for, then the motion, as amended, is voted on. To avoid confusion, the chair will have the amended motion read out to the meeting.
- The chair's casting vote is reserved for when there is a tie. Otherwise the chair does not usually vote at all. The casting vote should always be used to maintain the status quo.

Abstentions do not count in a vote, the effect of abstentions may prevent a majority in favour and so they often align with votes against.

Points of order

Points of order deal with the conduct, or procedure, of the debate. Anybody at the meeting can say 'point of order' if they think that:

- there is a departure from the subject under discussion
- an objectionable form of speech is being used
- there is a breach of the rules of debate or the meeting's own rules.

The chairperson will then decide whether the complaint is justified or not. The chair's decision is final. You should not use a point of order to waste time or disrupt business. The chair's decision or ruling can be challenged by a procedural motion, which must be voted on and if carried overrides the decision.

Any member without being invited to speak may move procedural motions. They require no notice, should be moved and seconded formally and voted upon immediately and without debate.

Any member may propose next business at any time. If the proposal is carried by the meeting consideration of the current business is terminated at once and without a decision being taken upon it.

Any member may propose that the question be put on the motion or amendment under consideration. This need not be put if the chairperson considers that there has been insufficient or unbalanced debate at that time otherwise it should be voted on. If the

proposal is carried, consideration of the current business will be terminated at once except for any right of reply by the proposer of the main motion. Thereupon a vote will be taken on the motion or amendment being debated.

Reporting to the branch

A key responsibility of the chairperson is ensuring that the committees and membership of the branch are kept fully informed of what is going on. This does not mean that the chairperson has to do all the reporting themselves but rather ensuring that the appropriate people do it.

This means:

- Making sure that everyone knows what the branch is trying to do and getting them to support it.
- Making sure that all representatives report back to the branch committee.
- Trying to ensure that the distribution of work falls evenly on the officers.
- Publicising the success of the branch to members and the regional councils.
- Involving members in planning strategies to overcome individual and collective problems.

The chairperson should organise the manner in which reports are made and representatives are held accountable to the body of the union that elected them.

Chair's action

In the interval between branch and committee meetings the officers may need to act on behalf of the union. The chairperson is the officer finally responsible to the members for these actions and should ensure proper reports are made.