

# Appendix 1.

## Being Effective at Union Meetings

### (When the Officers Think They Own the Union)

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In a democratic union meeting the chairperson encourages participation and fairness and, most of all, makes it possible for the members to make the important decisions. The chairperson uses the rules to make it easier for people to have their say. This appendix is for members of unions where, in contrast, the leaders think the union belongs to them. They don't like union meetings. They try to keep those who disagree with them from participating, and they or their favorites do most of the speaking. They use the rules to try to intimidate and confuse members, and misuse the rules when convenient to prevent the members from making decisions the officers don't like.

When your local is run this way, you cannot expect simply to show up and have your issues fairly heard and voted on. You need to make special preparations in advance: choose your issue and define your goals for the meeting; organize support; become familiar with the rules governing the meeting; and prepare for speaking—who will speak about which points. Of course, the union meeting should be just one part of your overall strategy for building your

group—the more important organizing will go on back at work.

Let's take a look at each of these items.

### Define Your Goals: Pick One or Two Issues

A smart local officer can label someone who always has a long list of complaints as a crank, a nut, or (worst of all) a politician. If you bring up all the changes your union needs, you are likely to be talking about matters that many people in the local know nothing about. This makes it easy for officers to pick your weakest or least understood issue to focus on and turn the majority against you.

Therefore, to prepare for a union meeting, pick one or two issues that have wide support or directly affect a lot of people. If you only complain about technical violations of the bylaws you may get a reputation as a nitpicker.

Be sure that you raise positive issues (propose a holiday party for the kids, an organizing drive at a competitor, a contract demand for more relief workers) as well as negative ones (questionable union expenditures). You don't want a reputation of just being a naysayer, of opposing the officials on everything just because you are against them, or an "out-of-office politician." In fact, sometimes the most effective approach is to build your proposals around something good that your officers have written or an international union policy ("organizing is job one").

Focusing on one or two topics can sometimes cause problems in a group if people think you are concerned only with one leader's favorite issue. In your group you should discuss which issues to bring up, and decide democratically.

You and your supporters should be clear on your goals for the meeting. Especially when you are just getting started, your goal may be simply to raise an issue so that members can find out about it. Or you may just want to put the union leadership on the spot so they can't claim later that they didn't know about a problem. It takes time to build support, and often many meetings. You may accomplish a lot even without winning a motion.

### Organizing Support

The key to winning anything at a union meeting is simple: numbers. Numbers of people voting on your side, numbers of people speaking on your side, and numbers of people who understand your

issue and will create a climate of interest and support at the meeting.

To get people to the meeting, put out a leaflet, post notices, phone-tree, and, most important, talk one-and-one. Tell members what you propose to bring up at the meeting, how it affects them, and why you need their support. You may want to emphasize that you are only asking for a small commitment; you may want to warn them that the wrangling at the meeting may be unpleasant, but it will be worth it if we can get our issue passed.

While there may be an occasional advantage to springing your issue on the meeting as a “surprise,” this is seldom effective. Surprises make it impossible to organize in advance and thus to really get people to understand what’s at stake. Of course, one way undemocratic officials hold onto power is through “surprises.” So one of the jobs of your group is to anticipate the issues that will be brought up by the officials and give them advance publicity. This way the members are better prepared for the meeting, and you get the respect for informing them.

When you organize the activists in your group or the members with a particular concern about the issue, the secret is to make sure that everyone has a job. Here is a list of jobs to distribute:

- Prepare the flyer explaining the issue
- Distribute the flyer
- Contact other members and encourage them to attend the meeting; for example, set up a phone tree
- Prepare fact sheets, copies of contract language, or other materials for the meeting
- Distribute these at the meeting
- Make the motion
- Second the motion
- Speak on different aspects of the motion
- Watch the rules for violations

If you spread these jobs out you will start with a solid core who cannot easily be ignored.

## Rules and Parliamentary Procedure

Although it may not be apparent, the basic idea behind parliamentary procedure is to allow the body to take action. It is a democratic idea, because it provides a way for large groups to make a decision that counts. Without this approach, many meetings would consist of nothing but aimless discussions that would go on and on

and resolve nothing. Then, later, a small group would make the real decisions.

It is for this reason that all the rules in parliamentary procedure are built around the “motion.” It is by using motions that you get things done at a meeting.

Sometimes people will say, “We complained about that problem at the last two meetings, but nothing was done.” Of course nothing was done, because no motion was put on the floor. No vote was taken that would have directed the executive board to take action by a specific date and report back to the membership by another specific date, for example.

You should not always seek to put forward a motion, however. If your support is low, you might just make a suggestion to the executive board. You may plan to ask good questions about some matter. These are questions of tactics. You need to get a feel for when to press ahead with a motion and when to have more modest goals.

Check to make sure you know of any special procedures for getting issues heard at membership meetings. Some locals may require advance notification to the executive board, or all motions in writing, or a first reading of a motion at one meeting followed by discussion and voting at the next.

Check your local bylaws for anything that might be relevant. You may have more rights than you think.

Here are some tips on Robert’s Rules for those who are operating from the floor. See also Appendix 3.

- The maker of the motion gets to speak first on the motion.

This rule is in Robert’s Rules of Order Revised (#3). If the chairman has the habit of immediately speaking to any motion put on the floor, or calling on a favorite, or just cutting off debate, it is useful to know this rule. The same section of Robert’s also makes clear that a person cannot speak a second time while someone who has not spoken wishes to speak.

- An appeal of the decision of the chair can reverse a ruling that you are “out of order.”

If you are ruled out of order unjustly, this is your basic remedy. Remember, it is worthless to try to overrule the chair if you do not have the votes. But if you do have support, this rule can help make

the point that you won't accept arbitrary rulings lightly. (See Appendix 3, but many local bylaws have specific procedures on this.)

- Be careful on reports.

If the meeting “approves the minutes” or “report” of the executive board or any other committee, you are approving whatever is included in those reports. If the Building Committee, for instance, recommends building a new union hall and their report is approved, then the body has authorized the local to spend the money for a new building. In most cases where the membership meeting has the right to overrule an action of a board or committee, this is the place to do it.

What's more, you can move to amend the report of a committee or a recommendation of the executive board, as a way of bringing up your issue. Suppose that the report says, “The executive board appointed Kelly to be sent to the skilled trades conference.” You may move to amend the report to say that two trades people should be sent, and that they should be elected by the membership meeting. You can also build on what the board has included in its report. For example, the board's report might mention that it received and filed a letter from a local on strike, requesting support. You might amend the report to contribute a certain amount of money to the strikers.

Sometimes you can use the reports that are given at the beginning of the meeting to your advantage. For example, if your local has a regular agenda point called “Communication” or “Correspondence,” you can get your issue brought up on the floor simply by writing a letter to the executive board on that topic.

- Don't get wrapped up in the rules.

It could create the impression that you or your group is concerned with trivial matters. Others may think you are just a show-off or some kind of politician. Use your knowledge of the rules sparingly.

The best policy is for your group to have one or two parliamentary experts—people who make it their hobby to know the rules, bring a copy of them to the meeting, and are able to back up challenges to the arbitrary actions of the chair if the occasion arises. This is one of the jobs to assign when you are preparing for meetings.