How to Reach the Union Member

These suggestions on how to do a better job of reaching the individual union member and building increased participation in local union activities come from many sources. Original work was done by the Southern School for Workers and the Education Department of the United Rubber Workers Union. The pamphlet was published in the October and November, 1958 issues of EDUCATION NEWS AND VIEWS.

One of the toughest problems facing union leadership today is how to reach all the members to explain the message and program of the union, to arouse loyalty to the union and build participation in its activities.

You can try to reach the rank and file membership of your local union in four ways: at the monthly meeting of the local; through the stewards or committeemen; on the job at the plant and in their homes and communities.

Take a look at each of these four methods. See their advantages and disadvantages and think how they can be used effectively in your union.

Many local unions, of course, are already using some of the techniques described in this article. All of them are drawn from actual experiences. Resourceful union leaders will use these suggestions, adapt them to their local situations and probably come up with new—unique and effective—methods of helping the millions of local union members participate more effectively in making the decisions of the labor movement.

1 Local Union Meetings

Good, interesting, well-run local union meetings are important in keeping the membership interested in attending, and in getting more members to attend and participate.

The monthly meeting of your local union gives you a first-rate opportunity to discuss union problems and programs regularly, face to face, with the members who attend. The great disadvantage of this method is that only a handful of members attend the average meeting.

Think about your own union and all of its members from the card-carriers to the most active officers. How can you get more people to come to meetings? How can the union meeting build loyalty to the union and an understanding of the union's program for those who do attend?

Why Do People Stay Away From Meetings?

Are your meetings long and dull, often taken up with individual grievances? Is the business of the meeting poorly organized and haphazardly conducted, with no control by the chairman? Is the meeting monopolized by the Chairman and one or two officers, with little or no participation by the membership? How about your meeting night; does it conflict with other important area—community activities such as the PTA, important church functions and popular bowling leagues. How many of your members want to be sure to see the Wednesday night fights on TV?

Plan Your Meeting Carefully

Plan your meeting for speed and drama. Some or all of the suggestions that follow will help you keep the business of the meeting moving. This doesn't mean you have to use steam-roller tactics to get through the union business. Don't get bogged down in details that should be handled personally or by union committees. More members will come to union meetings, if they can expect to get information, interested discussions, and, when possible, excitement, from the meetings.

For example, if your union has just won a pension plan, have a discussion of the new plan, how it works, what the benefits are, the effect of lay-offs on benefits, members' responsibilities, etc.

Don't dodge controversy. If there's an issue that affects the union, it belongs on the union agenda. When handled properly, discussion of controversial issues can build the union.

Play down the role of chairman, letting others from the floor carry the ball. The officers should be familiar with standard rules for conducting meetings. Several unions have published easy-to-use pamphlets that will help you.

The agenda (a list of everything to be done at a meeting) should be worked out in detail before each meeting.

Write down each item of business and the name of the person who will introduce it. Include the routine matters (reading of minutes, etc.) so that you don't forget any of it. Who will read communications and where should they be referred? Who is scheduled to make reports (which committees, which delegates to conventions or other meetings)? What is coming up under old and new business? Check ahead of time with officers and committee chairmen to find out if they have items to be included on the agenda.

Talk (or send a postcard) to all persons listed on your agenda, asking them to be prepared and to be brief.

Avoid long discussions of small details. Refer details to committees or individuals. Do not discuss individual grievances on the floor.

Look over the correspondence before the meeting. Weed out unnecessary letters. Read important sections only. And read clearly. Correspondence is usually read by the secretary, but, when possible, some letters should be read by other members, such as the committee chairmen involved, in order to get more people active in the meeting and give it variety.

Set a time limit on everyone who speaks at a meeting to eliminate long-winded talkers. Try two or three minutes each, certainly not more than five minutes per person. Enforce the parliamentary rule that no one speaks twice on a subject until all others have had a chance to speak.

The Arrangement of the Meeting Room Is Important

Arrange the meeting room so that everyone sits together, not spread all over the hall. Put away extra chairs; place a desk or table in front as close to the people as possible. Avoid holding small meetings in a large hall. For a small meeting try arranging chairs in a circle or around a table. Vary the seating arrangements from meeting to meeting.

No matter how good your program is, it'll be a dud if people can't hear what's going on. Make sure everyone who speaks can be heard in every part of the hall. Rent amplifying equipment, if necessary.

The chairman should stand when conducting the meeting.

The same rule applies to the secretary when reading minutes, correspondence, etc., and to everyone who addresses the meeting, whether making reports, speaking from the floor, etc. All reports of delegates or committees should be made from the front of the room.

Take a look at your union hall. Does it need painting? Decorating? Some union posters? Better lighting? Cleaner rest rooms? How long has it been since it was swept? Are old pamphlets, paper, and dirty ashtrays scattered around?

Are new pamphlets where members can get them? Do you have a bulletin board with interesting items affecting the union? Have you tried playing union or popular records before and after the meeting?

Publicize Your Union Meeting

Do all the members know where and when meetings are held? Some of the following suggestions may help in your local. You'll be able to think of other ways to publicize your meetings, ways that will be especially suited to your union, your town. Above all, vary your publicity from meeting to meeting.

Personal contact between stewards and members is probably the most effective way to publicize your meetings. If meetings are worth attending, the steward will try to get people to be there. Make sure all the stewards know the important items on the program for each meeting.

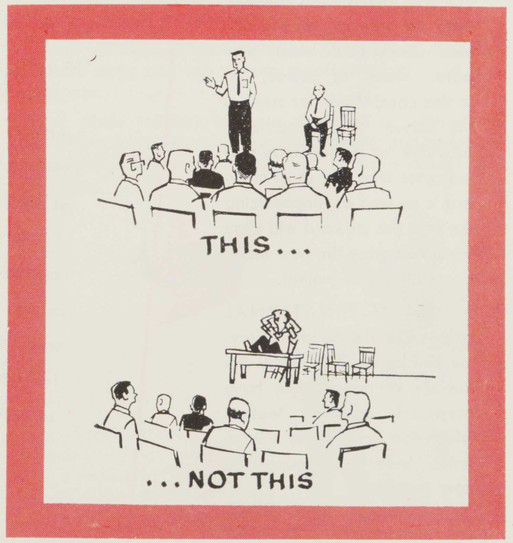
Try an occasional letter or postcard direct to the worker's home reminding him of a meeting and the subject to be discussed. At least occasionally, send a postcard or letter to all stewards and officers, urging them to get other members out to a meeting.

An advertisement in the town paper or a few radio spots advertising an important meeting and its program will work in small towns.

Do you have shop bulletin boards? If so, work up colorful notices advertising your meetings. Use your imagination to get attention. Remember that the typewritten notice has gone the way of the horse and buggy. Some internationals have special posters for advertising union meetings.

In all publicity, play up the subject matter of a meeting, so that people will not want to miss it. But don't oversell a meeting. If you lead people to expect more than they're going to get, they won't come again.

Vary Your Program

Most meetings need more than good discussion and action on routine union business. People want to feel they have gotten something out of the meeting—new ideas, new information. Don't just tack a speech at the end of a long, dull business meeting. First follow the suggestions to streamline union business, then try some of the following suggestions:

Invite a guest speaker to talk on a subject that will