

## **Principle One: The Organizing Model**

Recently in the labor movement, a division has been staked out between competing models of running unions: the service model union and the organizing model union. While this division is probably oversimplified, some brief notes will clarify key guiding principles in grad movement unionism.

**Service Model Unionism:** By far the most widely used model of union organizing past and present, the service model union has been compared to an insurance company. Staff experts handle the activities of the union, including contract negotiations and grievance proceedings. Members pay dues to the organization and should it become necessary later to file a grievance, they receive this service. In the most extreme examples, this is the extent of member involvement in the union. With expertise consolidated among leadership, and with leadership tending to be long-term, members tend to feel very alienated from their leadership, and hence the goings on of the union.

**Organizing Model Unionism:** In this model, the union is run mostly by member volunteers. Members pay dues to facilitate the organization, except they are brought into the decision making process, and hence take ownership of their own union. Members are even involved in contract negotiations. A continual focus of the union is on organizing—in other words, a premium is placed on communication with members in order to facilitate union democracy. Leadership rotates fairly often, emphasizing a do-it-yourself ethic for members.

**The Link to Collective Action:** Put simply, the latter is a *union of individuals*, while the former is a *union for individuals*. In this sense, it is easy to see how an organizing union lends itself better to collective action. By constantly stressing ownership and community, the members of the organizing model union more easily come to understand that their greatest source of power lies in their ability to act as a collective.

**Grievances and Social Movement Unionism:** The contract will be broken. In instances like this, every union has at its disposal two broad options for pursuing a solution: filing a grievance or collective action. While grievances can be effective solutions in themselves, they can also lead the union into long and drawn out legal proceedings. The organizing model union often uses grievances as a tool for inspiring collective action. By filing grievances and having them denied at early stages by the boss, coworkers learn that they need to stick together if they want to achieve their goals. Collective action is not the be all and end all for every problem of the union, but having mass support and the threat of collective action has proven to be a very strong tool for winning good contracts and preventing contract violations.

**High Turnover and Grad Labor:** Lofty principles aside, the choice between service models and organizing models is largely predetermined in the grad labor movement due to a simple structural reality. With huge turnover semester by semester, grad unions must continually communicate with and recruit new members. *Publicize* or perish! Within a few years, a grad union that doesn't organize will have no members and an unenforceable contract.

## **Principle Two: The Organizing Conversation is the Building Block of an Organizing Culture**

In the organizing model, there is a continual focus on organizing, but what does this mean exactly? Broken down, organizing is nothing more than members talking to members. There are several modes of organizing, including office visits, phone calls, emails and newsletters. In grad unions, what we term office visits, is really just a code for having organizing conversations in offices. The end result of organizing (with some pushing) is members working together, collectively solving problems.

**Ideal Modes of Organizing:** Many times, union communication is about building mass support. The ideal is to have intimate face to face conversations, but that can take a lot of time. While mass emails are a tempting solution, they may be better suited to simpler functions like posting announcements. The following is a table of modes of organizing, from most effective to least.

<b>Mode of Organizing</b>	<b>Utility</b>
Face to face organizing conversation	Most effective means of building support and getting real commitments.
Phone call	This is a good way to reach hard to find members.
Individual email	This is a good way to set up appointments for having conversations.
Stuffing mail boxes	Good for distributing newsletters, updates, or other announcements.
Mass Email	Should be used sparingly for important union-wide communication (e.g. bargaining updates).
Posting flyers on walls	A good activity to recruit new (or old) members to help with in conjunction with other modes of organizing.

**Pushing—The Mental Orientation:** What are we trying to accomplish when organizing? It may be helpful to clarify the mental orientation of the organizer. First and foremost, it is important to keep in mind that it is the workers' union, because it is the workers lives that are at stake. Sometimes it may seem awkward or uncomfortable to approach coworkers with a goal in mind, but it is important to remember that we are neither selling nor begging our coworkers for anything. We are pushing people to decide whether they want to keep living the way they do or to fight for change. You are there to show them what other workers have learned to do through struggle and experience.

**Structure of the Organizing Conversation:** How do we have conversations with our members? The following is a useful, if generic, model for the structure of the organizing conversation.

Step One: Get In The Door. Usually you are approaching the co-worker in their office or in their own home. The conversation will need to be comfortable, since it is apt to last more than 5 minutes, so you need to get in and get a seat.

Step Two: Listen To Find Issues. In this early stage of the conversation, you ought to ask probing questions, but the real challenge is to get the person talking about themselves so that you can figure out what is important to them. Listening is the toughest task in the organizing conversation, and it is also the most important.

Step Three: Agitate on their Issues. Our coworkers have to stand up for themselves based on the issues that they feel strongest about. Finding these issues can be a helpful point of reference later in the conversation as you move to push them for a commitment.

Step Four: Painting the Picture of the Collective Solution. At this point in the conversation it will be useful ask the coworker how he or she thinks that their problems can be solved. While reminding the coworker that they deserve a rectification, try to move the conversation towards a solution that involves the union. This is a moment of education for the newly empowered coworker.

Step Five: Inoculation. It is important to be realistic with our members, and this includes being upfront about the challenges that lie ahead. At this point in the conversation, the coworker may begin to back off or lose some enthusiasm; in this case, we just remind them of they said earlier about their own issues. By going through inoculation, coworkers gain a better sense of trust among one another. Not least, the collective is also better prepared for the boss' tricks.

Step Six: Ask for a Commitment. Now that you have regained the confidence of the coworker it is essential that you ask them for the appropriate commitment. First, ask if they are ready to stand up with the rest of their coworkers in this union. Then ask them to get involved. This can be volunteering with flyering, coming to a meeting, or becoming a steward for their department. The secret to organizing is to ask, and expect that your coworkers will generously say yes. More often than not, they will!

**Following up with Volunteers:** It is your job as the organizer to follow up with people you have had conversations with. If they made a commitment, be sure to give them a reminder phone call. For those who agreed to come to their first union meeting, perhaps you want to meet them beforehand and go together. This can seem overbearing to some, so it is important to be attuned to that. The principle here is to set up a situation where people in the union are accountable to one another, because this will become important later. For those turned off by this approach, be sure to explain your reasoning and allow them room to honestly decline from making commitments they can't keep.

**No Thank-You's--**When people do get involved, be sure to acknowledge them appropriately. However, we don't want to say thank-you, as they ought to be doing it for themselves. Thank-you implies that they are doing a service for you as a favor. Instead tell them: "You rock!", "good stuff", or, tell them that you appreciate having them around. It is important that they feel valued for their time, but it is also important that they don't feel like they are doing favors.

**An Organizing Culture Needs to Include Social Activities:** It is often the case that there is more “work” to be done than there are people to do it. Consequently, it is easy for volunteers to become overworked. If you want to avoid burnout, the union has to be a source of joy. Some of this can be derived from working hard (*homo faber* and the species being!), but there must also be social activities. Throwing a good party just for the insiders who make the union run can be just the thing to build solidarity and rejuvenate the gang. There is a strong union tradition of throwing picnics. Social events can also work to bring new people into the group, by showing them that the people in the union are just that: people. Bottom line is that grad school can be a pretty lonely experience, and the union can serve as an invaluable nexus for people to gain a broader community than they can find in their own departments.

**Building Leadership and Radicalizing our Members:** By pushing people to stand up for themselves we are throwing people into struggle. This often has the side effect of radicalizing our members. As labor and management interface, people will be taken aback by the harsh motivations of their “enlightened institution”. In the academic setting, grad students will learn that their proud university all the sudden appears to them as a factory—teachers appear to be treated as tools, and students as products. By involving themselves in this struggle, we hope to spur our members to engage larger questions of restructuring higher education. This is why our graduate unions stand up for pedagogy issues and issues of access to higher education. Finally, we aim to build good leaders in our volunteer-run organizations. The union can be a model of progressive civic engagement; the effects of which we hope will spill over into other aspects of our society. This is the bigger picture of the grad labor movement.

### **Principle Three: The Value of Structure and Communication**

What is the best structure for the organization? Running a grad union is complex, and problems of structure permeate every facet of this task. From leadership inside the union, to communicating with the membership and the administration, it is important to consider the ramifications of union structure. Two questions offer a useful guide to all questions related to structure: Are we growing the union? Are we increasing members’ voices?

**Why We Need Structure:** First it is important to address why structure is necessary. Abstractly, having strong organizational structure means having organizational efficiency. There are times when we need to wield the organization like a hammer, but this cannot be accomplished without leadership and a certain amount of stability. In grad unions, with their high turnover, having a stable union structure can be a real challenge. Leadership itself turns over at an alarming rate when compared to the broader union culture. Having a good structure in place is the best possible way to address the continuity issues borne of high turnover. This means having a structure in place for building and recruiting leaders and new active members. The two components of a strategy for maintaining continuity are 1) having regular and ongoing recruitment activities and 2) having clearly defined roles for people to step into.

**Democracy vs. Efficiency:** One tension common in all complex organization is between the values of democracy and the necessities of efficiency. Union democracy means having an open system for involvement at all levels, granting access into leadership and influence on union policy. Union democracy also means all forms of diversity of involvement and opinion. In grad unions, union democracy struggles usually focus on decision-making processes. Debates rage between having majority rule decision-making versus having a consensus model. Moreover, who gets to make which decisions? Who decides on union expenditures, who gets a vote, who gets to speak, and who sets the agendas? The guiding principle for all of these complex issues is to remember that democracy has to be in a healthy balance with efficiency. Increased democracy lends legitimacy to the union and empowers activists. That said, it will not always be feasible to accommodate every democratic impulse, as your meetings will drag on for hours and burn out your activists. The most important thing to remember is that having a structure in place early will save your union from bitter struggles, especially at times when these issues are amplified (such as during contract negotiations).

**Union Communication and the Steward Structure:** How do we guarantee that our union leadership and our broader membership are on the same wavelength? This is the fundamental question of union communication. In the grad movement, we have adopted the steward structure for dealing with this precise issue. Since our unions are made up of scores of different departments separated spatially from one another, we strive to gain broad representation by recruiting stewards from each department. Stewards are the link to the non-active members, and if they regularly communicate with their colleagues they will help to ensure that the leadership and membership see eye to eye. Given this, stewards ought to be organizers and they should also be involved in internal decision-making.

**Union Communication and Caucuses in the Union**—At the university there are minority groups that need strong representation in their union. Examples include international students, parents, and the LGBT community. How do we stand up for minority issues during a contract year, when the platform is decided by majority vote? The answer is by having a vibrant caucus system to push for minority issues inside the leadership and to organize the membership. In this key area of union communication, we demonstrate that bringing the leadership and membership together on an issue sometimes involves organizing and educating the membership to adopt the views of the leadership. (Awkward phrasing)

### **Principle Four: You Have to “Count” on Winning**

We have thus far touched on several aspects of grad unions, from communication to collective action. How do we expect that graduate students, with their busy lives, will be able to run their unions as volunteers? In this section, we discuss the logic behind the counting and accountability that goes on inside a healthy organizing union. Counting refers to any of the means by which we track what is going on in our union, and accountability refers to how well we are able meet the commitments we make to one another to achieve our goals.

**Counting in a Grad Union:** Counting is in the first place a rational means by which to know what is going on in our unions. What do we count? The following is a list of important things we ought to quantify and continually keep track of:

- Member's feelings toward the union
- Member's issues
- Membership percentage (overall and by department)
- Number of dues cards remaining to be collected
- Number of people who committed to come to meetings
- Number of people who come to meetings
- Goals for event attendance (overall and by department)
- Number of people committed to participate in an event
- Number of members at events
- Number of conversations we have had

**Assessing Members Feelings towards the Union:** A first and important indicator of union strength lies directly in how the union is regarded by the members. Each member we have conversations with ought to be assessed, or reassessed if they have already been assessed. In the grad movement we have developed a 1-5 counting system for quantifying this. Since there is some variation, it might be helpful to put it into writing.

- 1**=Actively involved in the union (Steward, Officer, etc.)
- 2**=Supportive of the union, comes to events
- 3**=On the fence, needs follow-up. This person may be truly undecided or has yet to participate in any meaningful way.
- 4**=Anti-union. This person has expressed a definite negative opinion about the union or unions in general. Still organizeable, even if it would be difficult
- 5**=Belligerently anti-union. This person is hostile and non-organizeable (not worth revisiting). They may be actively working against the union.

**How you Count is Just as Important as What you Count:** Each union needs to have a good system for collecting important information, whether it is from the university lists or from each organizing conversation. Much of this information ought to be stored rationally in a database. A good database can be a powerful tool for storing information, but it can also generate useful reports. That said, storing this information in a database is a waste if your core activists don't have regular access to the database. Besides training your stewards to use the database, important information should be highly visible in your office (if possible).

**Why we Count:** If this system seems complicated or fetishistic, there ought to be some strong principles to justify going through the effort. Certainly organizers need to know what is going on. Never is this more important than in decisions around the contract negotiations. First, you want to have an accurate sense of what issues members are likely to fight for. Second, you want to know how many people you have talked to about these issues. Third, you need to make a very educated assessment of your union's strength in order to decide on a firm bottom line, or in order to decide whether or not to go on strike.

**Counting Publicly:** Members need a count to keep hope alive. The more you can make members actually see that their coworkers are standing beside them in the struggle, the stronger their convictions will be. This includes having wall charts of membership percentage by department. If an event is coming up, there should be a poster sized sheet of the goal for attendance and the names of the people who committed to come.

**Letting the Administration Know the Numbers:** The administration has various ways by which to judge the strength of our union. If dues deduction goes through the payroll system, they might well be able to figure out what proportion of the membership is paying full member dues. It is a good general assumption that the administration can know whether 50 people showed up for a membership meeting or if 250 people showed up (this is especially true if the meeting is in a campus building). This should not be a source of weakness for the union, but rather the precise means by which the union communicates its strength to the administration. In many cases, the union will want to do precisely that. Whether that means emphasizing turnout at a rally, or working hard to gather signatures to deliver to the administration, the union will want to be aware of these lines of communication. In this regard, counting is again essential for a strong union.

**Public Accountability:** Members ought to know how much work is needed to reach the goals of the union, and people ought to feel accountable for reaching these goals. We achieve our goals by working together, and part of that is by making commitments to one another about what contributions we each can make. In this way, responsibility for achieving the goal is spread out, but still clearly attached to individuals. Organizers follow up with their stewards as a means of ensuring that the work will get done. Without accountability, the goals we set will be meaningless. Another way to think about it is that the number goals we set ought to be the aggregate of the individual commitments made. For example, if the goal for attendance at the rally is 150 people, you want to know how many people each steward has committed to organize to come.

**The Difference between “Hard” and “Soft” Commitments:** During the course of each organizing conversation there comes a point when we ask for a commitment. It is important to be able to discern the difference between the so-called “hard” and “soft” commitments. A hard commitment is the pledge of someone who intends to honor that commitment—they may break that commitment due to extenuating circumstances or they may forget (which is why we do reminders). There are two types of soft commitments. The first are from people who commit in order to blow you off. This is hard to read, the best way is by keeping track of whether these people follow-through. The second are from people who say maybe. They may be truly unable to gauge whether they can commit, they may not want to say no, or they might not feel strongly either way. Regardless, in organizing parlance a “maybe” is a no. Though it is tempting to count soft commitments, doing so will skew the perception of how close the union is to reaching its goal, which in turn will affect how much work people perceive needs to be put in to achieve the goal. In the end, it is more important to push for a hard yes or no than to have a bunch of maybes.

## **Principle Five: Politics should be an Integral Part of our Work**

There is a long history of direct union involvement in the political process. In its thirty year history, the grad student movement is best characterized as unevenly involved. This section addresses politics from the vantage point of grad unions that have had success in this arena.

**Why Not Politics—A Brief Inoculation:** Inevitably, when grad unions consider getting involved in partisan politics they stand to alienate a few different groups. On the right, conservative members of the union will reject and find distasteful union endorsements of progressive candidates and/or issues. They will claim that the union has no business being involved in politics and should stick to bargaining contracts for the members. On the left, our most radical members will reject the notion that partisan political activism can affect our lives (especially at the national level). Reticent leaders may want to sidestep partisan politics for fear of dividing the membership. The important principle here is that we need to know where our members stand on political issues before we assume that the ranks of our grad labor force are filled with arch conservatives.

**Why Politics—A Service Model Answer:** There are two main reasons why grad unions should be involved in politics. The first is from a service model perspective. If part of the function of the union is to better the lives of the members, then it is important to recognize that members' lives are affected by what happens in the private orbits of their workplace, but that they are also affected by the decisions made in the broader political arena. There is no better example than the decisions made by the National Labor Relations Board on the rights of graduate students to have unions. The composition of this board is tied to the political process and their decisions have impacted the lives of thousands of graduate students across the country.

**Why Politics—An Organizing Model Answer:** Not only do politics affect us, but we have the capability in the grad movement to affect politics. This is because we train people in grassroots organizing and we constantly develop leadership. Large constituencies at grad unions give them the potential to be powerful players in both electoral and non-electoral politics. This can take the form of creating voting blocs, running candidates out of our own memberships, or facilitating progressive political education among our membership. The political agenda of the grad movement starts but does not necessarily end with issues of education and labor rights.

**Why Politics—A Pragmatic Answer:** Returning to the immediate concerns of bargaining contracts for our members, there are two further points of connection to politics. First, local and statewide politicians can be helpful allies or huge obstacles when it comes time to bargain. Either they can pressure key decision-makers at the university to concede at the bargaining table or they can do the opposite. Second, the very people who ratify our contracts in many cases are elected officials, for example some universities have elected regents. In both of these instances, it is well worth considering publicly involving the union in these campaigns for pragmatic reasons.

**Locals Can be More Involved State and National Affiliates:** Part of the reason that our local unions affiliate with state federations and the American Federation of Teachers is that we are stronger when we are a union of unions. This is especially true in politics. While grad unionists may have little experience in running effective political campaigns, the affiliates do not. Resources are available from the state federations and the national office. Grad unions ought to consider being more involved in the political processes of their affiliates as well. For example, grad locals can elect members to sit on the boards of their state federations, and they can also send delegates to vote on political matters at the state and national conventions.