

# Organising a local AWL branch

The branch is the basic unit of AWL organisation.. It is normally based on a particular geographical area (although a few branches are organised around workplaces).

A branch elects a local organiser, a treasurer and a sales organiser. A branch above a certain size - say five members - should also elect a branch committee consisting of these three officers and, perhaps, other members, each with a specific role.

While every branch officer has an administrative role, their fundamental task is a political one. The committee forms a local political leadership.

## 1. Local meetings

The local AWL branch meeting should be the centre of every comrade's political week. If meetings are businesslike, attractive, interesting, well-attended and regular (weekly), then a lot of matters will be sorted out almost automatically. If they are not, no amount of effort can compensate.

The main purpose of the meeting should be to get adequate discussion of our current political priorities, so that each comrade understands what we are doing and what their part is in it.

Prepare! The organiser must read our own publications and circulars, and the local and national press, and decide what issues, disputes and campaigns need to be discussed. The organiser/committee should have a clear idea of what he or she wants to achieve in each meeting.

### What to do, what not to do

a. The agenda. A written agenda must be produced in advance and copies circulated at the start of the meeting. Stick to a regular format - something like this:

- (i). Attendance
- (ii). Political Report [not a "timeless" educational, but a report on major current political issues]
- (iii) Finance
- (iii) Reports from activities, organiser's report, minutes of last meeting, other reports
- (iv) Discussion
- (v) Review of next week's activities
- (v) Date of next meeting
- (vi) AOB

b. Agenda items:

Attendance. The organiser should phone each comrade before the meeting to ask them about reports they will give. The organiser should report any apologies to the meeting.

Avoid giving excessive, fussy reminders (otherwise comrades will conclude that they shouldn't take any arrangement seriously unless they get reminders for it), but make sure that every comrade knows when and where the meeting is (and not just by email which they may not read).

Comrades who miss meetings should be chased up within a day or two by the organiser. Tell the absentees what they've missed! Express your concern if they are absent without apologies. (Better than asking "why", which may just train people to be "good" with sob-stories.

If someone habitually fails to attend, do something

about it. If there is a real obstacle to them attending (maybe even one they are shy or embarrassed to talk about), address it, maybe by changing the meeting time, maybe by arranging for yourself or some other responsible member to meet them in weeks they don't attend. If they really just don't want to attend, lapse them, and talk to them about the contribution they can make as a sympathiser (financial, help in trade union work, whatever).

Use branch funds to pay for a babysitter if a member needs that to attend, or to help with fares for a member who has a long way to travel and is jobless.

Political report. Based on the major political issue or task as highlighted in the paper, or maybe in the recent days' news. Encourage discussion on practical conclusions. Make sure that major activities are explained and discussed politically, not just announced administratively.

Finance. Money for local levies, any money due to the national organisation (subs collected in cash, money due for national events, extra sales money, fund money, etc.) should be collected in the meeting, at this point, by the branch treasurer. Do this even if most members pay most money by standing order. Gathering money is a political matter, not a private and personal one. Don't leave it to be dealt with as a personal matter between the treasurer and the individual.

Make sure that each branch meeting reviews and discusses the branch's activities since the last meeting - highlighting successes, but registering failures too - so that the branch develops some collective accountability. Maximise the number of comrades who give reports (even if it's only a one-minute report from a street stall or a trade union meeting). An indicator of success as an organiser is that you, as organiser, do not speak much in the meeting, and yet the meeting is lively and everything you have planned to get from it is got or replaced by something better.

Organiser's/committee report. The branch committee should be able to economise on the time spent on organisational matters. On the other hand the committee should not "substitute" for the branch, and leave branch meetings as just general political discussions with all practical organising "referred to" the committee. The branch has to develop a collective responsibility for the organisation of its work. Check that the branch and individual members have done what they said they would do during the week; refer to last week's "clipboard" (see below).

Prepare a diary clipboard, listing upcoming activities. Pass it round the meeting for comrades to sign up to activities. The organiser should review who's signed up for what, and at the end of the meeting ask for discussion if some crucial activity lacks volunteers.

Educational discussion. You can add a less "ephemeral", more educational discussion at the end of the agenda if you have time.

c. Time of meetings. Always start on time - to do otherwise penalises the punctual. The meeting should not last more than two hours. Nor much less: it is not possible to do all the necessary business in a meeting so brief as to be perfunctory.

d. Chairing meetings. The organiser should never chair meetings. Do not feel obliged to rotate the chairing. Try to pick a good chair and stick with them. A bad chair can make a meeting frustrating and irritating; a good chair can make it efficient and enjoyable.

e. Bad behaviour. Meetings must be habitable for young people, new people, people with little formal education, shy people... Comrades who tell in-jokes, speak obscurely at length, or parade their cynicism or world-weariness should be stopped from abusing the meeting. A good chair will prevent much of this sort of behaviour; a good organiser will talk to the people involved, face-to-face, after the meeting.

f. Political controversy. This is not something to worry about, to attempt to avoid, or push to one side. If someone disagrees with what you have said, or with a point made in the paper or magazine, organise a local discussion. Do not be indulgent with tired older comrades who may be showing off how "dissident" they are, but make sure that any new comrade who has a comment does not get "put down" or treated with condescension, even if the comment seems off-beam to you.

Our internal regime is rational, open and tolerant. Political disagreements should be dealt with by debate which seeks to clear up misunderstandings and clarify real disagreements.

g. Varying the format. You can vary the agenda from week to week, alternating mainly business meetings with mainly discussion meetings. But every meeting should include a political report.

h. Minutes. Minutes of decisions should be taken each meeting, either by the organiser, or by someone who will do legible minutes and give them to the organiser at the end of the meeting. You should never have minutes taken by someone, not the organiser, who promises to go off and type them up in their own good time. The organiser should keep a copy of the minutes and refer to the minutes and the diary clipboard (see above) during the week, checking the branch is carrying out all its decisions.

Elaborate minutes of what everyone said are not necessary.

Short minutes, circulated within a day of the meeting, are good. Long minutes, not circulated until a few days later, are virtually useless.

Copies of minutes should be emailed to the national office.

i. What to take with you. Distribute Discussion Bulletins, Organising Notes, leaflets and other materials from the national office before the meeting begins. Have extra papers and pamphlets available.

## 2. Local public and open meetings

Our policy is to hold public or open meetings at least once a month. Otherwise, how does a new contact "check us out"?

The public meeting should replace the weekly branch meeting for that week.

It is best to pick a regular date for public meetings - the 1st Wednesday or 3rd Thursday, or whatever - and stick to it.

Debates are generally better meetings than simply having an AWL speaker - the political lines tend to stand out more clearly - invite representatives of other socialist tendencies, campaigns or parties to speak. Or invite representatives from a local campaign or strike. Or use a video during a meeting. Or run a meeting in an unconventional way - brainstorm session, "practical workshop", whatever.

a. Advertising the public meeting.

A leaflet. The meeting should have an interesting title. Include the following details: a local contact number/address; an e-mail contact address; our web address.

Listings. In local and student union papers.

Posters. In student unions and labour and trade union offices and centres.

Mail and/or email people you think might be interested with the flyer (you should have a list which is regularly updated). Then follow up with a phone call or visit. Personal contact is vital. Meetings cannot be built by mailings or emails or Facebook or text messages alone.

Do not necessarily do all the phoning-round yourself. Your aim as an organiser should not be to make yourself irreplaceable, but on the contrary, to make yourself redundant as local organiser and able to move on to other activities - to inspire, encourage, assist and train other comrades to do work.

Usually it is best to have one comrade in the branch - not the organiser, and maybe someone who gets out less, because of shifts, childcare, or ill-health - taking regular responsibility for a regular phone-round to contacts.

Having one comrade who does a large, systematic contact phone-round is generally more efficient than parcelling out the work so that each comrade has three or four phone calls to make.

Don't divide up the task of organising the public meeting (person A books the room, person B fixes the speakers, person C designs the leaflet, person D prints it, person E does the mailing, etc.): if there is even a 15% chance of each of A, B, C, D, or E failing or delaying in their task, that makes a 56% probability that the meeting won't happen.

b. Getting people there

The organiser should focus members on which contacts they will invite and bring to the meeting, rather than have them think that they have done their revolutionary duty if they turn up themselves.

Don't harass them with "reminders", but a phone call to ask them to do some little job in the meeting - or to check on a contact they were inviting - can also help remind.

For some people attending a socialist meeting for the first time is intimidating - offer to meet new people before the meeting; offer lifts.

At the meeting, make sure new people are talked to. If you see someone at the meeting whom you don't recognise, introduce yourself and talk to them. Train comrades to be open and friendly, not cliquy.

c. Speakers

You do not necessarily need a speaker from London to hold a meeting. Use local public meetings to help train comrades in your branch in public speaking. Make sure comrades new to speaking have help from someone more experienced for their first few times on the platform.

Make sure some comrades have contributions "from the floor" prepared in order to kick off discussion after the lead-off. The initial contributions should be short - a long initial contribution may well put off others from speaking.

Unless the meeting is tiny, speakers should stand up to address it, not speak from a sitting posture.

#### d. The meeting: dos and don'ts

Set the meeting room out as attractively as you can: with banners and posters. Bring a bookstall.

The comrade who chairs the meeting should do so formally. At the end of the meeting, give the main speakers an opportunity to reply to the discussion and make some concise announcements (future AWL meetings, and other activities - workplace bulletin distribution, picket lines, demonstrations, campaign meetings - which the AWL is supporting). You should have planned your next public meeting and be able to announce the time, date, venue and title.

If comrades from other tendencies attend - good, they should be encouraged to do so.

Have a sign-up sheet prepared to pass round the meeting for people to put names, addresses, email addresses and phone numbers for further information.

#### e. Small branches or groups

You should still have publicised open meetings. They will generally also be small - but even one or two additional people is a start.

Small groups often bill their open forums as 'Marxist discussion groups'.

### 3. Organising sales

Selling Solidarity and the pamphlets or books we publish is one of the two main ways we have of getting over our ideas. The other is by talking with people. Pretty much everything else we do is ancillary to those two activities.

Don't assume that people will 'be ready' to read pamphlets or books only after they have read the paper for some time. Some people will buy books or pamphlets more readily than the paper.

#### Organising the work

Distribution. The best method is to ask one comrade to pick up the TNT consignment and drop off copies at every comrade's home that evening. Do not set up complex organisational chains (A takes papers to B, who then takes them to C, who passes some on to D, etc): they break down, leaving some comrades without their publications.

Do not wait until the next branch meeting, or until you happen to bump into a sympathiser or less active comrade. Such sloppy arrangements send precisely the wrong signals: that the publications we produce are not worth energetically circulating even to our own members.

All activists should do at least one public (workplace, street or estate) sale per week. Each regular public

sale should have a comrade responsible for it, who turns up and sells whatever anyone else does, or who cancels the sale for a week if she or he is unavailable and cannot fix a substitute.

Here are the rules for the various types of sale:

Street and college sales: use a petition (use the petition of a local campaign, do your own, or get one from the web). When a passer-by signs, ask them to buy a paper. If they buy a paper, chat about the issue while they get their money ready. Tell them about our next public meeting (you should have leaflets with you).

Ask comrades to approach people as they pass (make eye contact, be polite); stop comrades standing around looking miserable, or talking to each other in groups.

Your branch should have a stall (a paste table) on which pamphlets, leaflets and papers are placed). Discourage comrades from standing in front of the stall so as to block passers-by from access to it.

Street and estate sales usually last one hour. Not longer: quit while you are still fresh.

Door-to-door sales are the quickest way to sell papers. The best times are early evening or weekend late mornings. Keep a note of who buys, who refuses, and where you get no answer, to guide you when you go back with the next issue.

Introduce yourself: "We are selling Solidarity and campaigning against privatisation (or whatever is on the front page). Would you like a copy? It is 80 pence, or 30p if you're unemployed". If people are prepared to talk, discuss with them. Ask them if they want to be kept informed.

Take along spare copies of a back issue of the paper, and put them through letter boxes when you get no answer, with a standard note.

The biggest drawback of door-to-door sales these days is the very high proportion of people who are out, or don't answer their doors, whatever time you call. However, you can sell a lot of papers, and hostility on the doorstep is very rare.

Ensure comrades sell at work (unless victimisation is a real threat).

Ensure that our members always have papers and magazines with them. We've made a few contacts over the years just by getting into conversations by someone seeing one of us reading a paper or a pamphlet on a bus or train.

At meetings, ask each person present to buy a copy; don't stand in a corner; don't ignore right-wingers or members of other groups.

Systematically attend other organisations' meetings and sell our literature.

Get as many comrades as possible to develop a regular "paper round" of buyers.

Some comrades are outgoing, some may be shy and find selling publications and talking to people more difficult. Help them by going on a sale with them. Perhaps at first they can just give out leaflets, until they develop confidence.

Subscriptions: The efficient method of selling subs is to approach specific people, face-to-face, and ask them for cash or a cheque.

#### 4. Local branch committees

A branch committee should: deal efficiently with routine business, freeing up time in branch meetings to discuss politics; organise the most active comrades; train comrades to become organisers.

The membership of local committees is the three basic officers - organiser, sales organiser and treasurer - plus, in a larger group, additional members, each with specific roles.

The committee should meet at least weekly and meetings should be brief and businesslike. The organiser should take minutes of decisions.

#### 5. Recruitment

Effort spent in the creation of 'self-sufficient Marxist propagandists' will, in the medium term, be re-paid many times over: in many situations and struggles the presence of even small numbers of well-educated, organised socialists is decisive. Through such people the AWL can have a tremendous impact on very broad layers, well beyond our immediate ranks.

We have to make more effort than in the past to reach out beyond the existing, easier-to-find, organised "left milieu", especially to young people, students not involved in student-union stuff, young workers. Most contacts will be "raw" (who would "cook" them for us?) Many may be a long way from us politically when we first meet them.

Contact work requires patience and a certain tenacity.

An AWL contact is someone who will discuss with us in a structured way, someone who will agree to meet us and talk. They may be close to us politically, or, at first, not very close at all.

Someone who is close to us politically but not interested in discussing is not an AWL contact.

Someone who is friendly and cooperative in trade-union or campaign work, but not interested in discussing AWL ideas, is not an AWL contact.

Someone whose name is on a "contact list" and turns up to activities occasionally is not necessarily an AWL contact.

All those people are "contacts" in a broader sense, and may be very valuable. But we must think of contacts actively, in terms of what we will do with them and they will do with us, rather than passively (drawing up contact lists and musing about who should be top or bottom of the list).

Stages of contact work:

Finding new people. We find new people in every area of our activity - from work in the unions to selling papers on estates - by talking with them, and by not giving up if on first contact they are not quite "on our wavelength". (Who would have brought them "onto our wavelength", if we haven't talked to them yet?). To find new people you have to be talkative, friendly, outgoing, and confident-seeming: that's all.

Talking with them.

Asking them if they'll meet to discuss AWL, our ideas, what we do. (Often it is good for the contact to have these regular discussions with a different AWL member from the one who first "found" them).

Inviting them to activities. (But remember Lutte Ouvriere's maxim: our job is not to "get people to do things", but to get them to want to do things - and have suitable, useful, accessible things for them to do).

Asking people to join us. It is counterproductive to "recruit" people who do not understand what they are joining. Generally they leave at the first problem, often recoiling entirely out of our orbit.

It is equally counterproductive to hover round contacts until we judge that they are "ripe" for joining, and only ask them then. (The contact thinks: who are these people? Why don't they want people to join their organisation? Or why don't they want me to join?)

The answer is to ask people straight-out and soon. If they say yes, explain that discussions are necessary, and organise those discussions. If they say no (which is more common, first off), ask if they will undertake regular discussions.

The purpose of discussions is to persuade contacts of our political ideas, not primarily to get them to do this or that (although we might ask for money for the group, a subscription or help with a particular initiative, at the end of a meeting - even better, the contact might suggest one of those things). Discussions might begin around whatever the contact is interested in, moving on to more abstract questions of theory and to systematic discussions after reading articles or pamphlets.

You may have to continue those discussions over a period of years. Even if the contact never joins AWL, that is not a waste. We will have some sort of fellow-traveller who will work with us in particular areas for the common good and serve as a conduit for our ideas to others.

When a contact joins, discussion should not stop. The organiser, perhaps by way of conscripting another more experienced member to be a "mentor", should ensure that the new member gets education (see below) and advice and encouragement about practical work. In other words, you should organise "internal contact work".

#### 6. Education

New members are required to go through a six month period of education before they are admitted to full membership, with voting rights.

Education, however, is not just for new members. Every member should be engaged in some systematic process of education and self-education all the time, however long they have been in the organisation. Educational sessions within branch meeting agendas are not sufficient. They have a lot of educational value for the member introducing such a session, but are too low-intensity to be very educational for others.

a. Local study courses

On Capital, on The Fate of the Russian Revolution, whatever.

b. One-to-one or very-small-group educationals

Especially for newer members.

c. Introductory schools

These schools are run by the national organisation, usually over a weekend. They cover basic questions - such as bourgeois democracy and workers' democracy, the revolutionary party - and various practical matters of group organisation.

d. National crash courses

These deal, over a few days, with questions of Marxist theory - Marxism and anarchism, AWL history, Capital...

Materials for study courses are at [www.workersliberty.org/study](http://www.workersliberty.org/study)

## 7. Organising for national drives.

Periodically we organise national political drives. This could be a nationally co-ordinated drive to sell a book, or to get subscriptions, or to build our summer school, or to get signatures on a petition or statement. First, address the question politically: the branch committee, then the branch, should discuss the political purpose of the drive.

The rules here are similar to those for public meetings. Make one competent person in the branch responsible for organising the activity.

Cast your net as wide as possible: include all those interested in the issue, not just those on our wavelength.

Mail them stuff and then go and visit them. Never imagine that email, mail, or text-messages can be a substitute for personal contact.

For a national event:

i) Ensure transport is booked, booked properly, and that every minibus has a driver. It is important that transport (minibuses, hired cars, group train tickets, whatever) is booked early because you will need to tell

every interested person how you are going to get to the event, when you will set off and arrive home again, and how much transport will cost. Booking earlier also generally makes travel cheaper.

ii) Get ticket money from those who say they are interested in attending. If someone says they want to attend an event but will not buy a ticket or give you a deposit, they have not decided to attend at all. Your branch still needs to persuade them that the event is interesting, useful and worthwhile.

## Appendix: Problems in the branch

a. Difficult conflicts.

Disputes can sometimes arise on non-political or semi-political matters, or from clashes of personality.

The organiser should try to smooth these over, devising ways to minimise friction, and to avoid taking sides. If the conflict comes from another member's hostility to you, be calm and get a third comrade to mediate.

Remember that our organisation has no right to attempt to regulate the private lives of members. Don't attempt to play God.

b. Difficult people

In every branch there are comrades who are less active and reliable, or more quarrelsome and apt to take offence. It is important that such people do not set the tone. They will drag down the more active and enthusiastic comrades.

Don't spend all your time and emotional energy on such people. Build on areas of strength.

Decide, case by case, what you're going to do with 'the difficult person'. If a comrade is having a hard time in their personal life, perhaps they just need a bit of time and space. Perhaps they need to find another area of work - ask them what they want to do.

Perhaps they are unconfident and need your help. Or maybe they should simply be told to shape up or ship out.

But decide what to do in each case, and do it. Avoid getting into long-running low-level petty disputes. Even if pettiness is directed at you, and even if you conclude such behaviour is completely unjustified (and you should ask yourself if it is), try to rise above it.