



a socialist workplace bulletin: *guidelines on content*

notes for activists ♦♦♦ october 2002

THEFRONTPAGE

- The front page should carry one or two editorial articles. This should include articles about general political issues, as well as about the important issues in the workplace / industry / union.
- Write general political articles in a way which addresses your audience ie. your workmates. Make points about how the issue affects them eg. when writing about the political fund, mention the MPs that your union sponsors.
- Avoid left jargon. Workplace jargon is fine, so long as it is widely used, not specific to one small set of workers.
- Write clearly and simply, but don't water down politics for the sake of patronising assumptions about some ideas being 'too difficult' for workers.

THEBACKPAGE

- The back page should be made up of short articles on workplace issues. Keep each back page item brief.
- Be clear about the point each piece is trying to make. Are you encouraging readers to take some action? Vote a particular way in a ballot or election? Support a particular strategy? Realise that a particular union official is going to sell them out? Or to better understand management's attacks?
- Don't just reflect a culture of moaning. Try to ensure the bulletin encourages workers to draw positive conclusions, to think and to get organised.

HAVINGAGO

- Attack managers and union bureaucrats (or politicians, or newspaper editors ...), but do so in a way that mocks them, explains their actions, and explains the problem with the system not just the individual.
- Avoid libel suits! It is alleged that ... rumour has it that ... we have heard that ... you might think that ...

THEBULLETINANDTHEUNION

- Be clear that attacks on union bureaucrats are not attacks on the union itself: quite the opposite, your criticisms are in the cause of effective trade unionism, and in the interests of rank-and-file members.
- In a workplace with two or more unions, don't be chauvinist for one union - it will cut you off from talking to members of the others. But if one union is better than the others, say so.

KEEPITLIVELY

- Make the bulletin lively and interesting. Have a sense of humour.
- Illustrate! Take photographs, or get pictures or cartoons from the internet (go to the Workers' Liberty website, Web Links, Resources / Artwork). Even better, find someone who is willing and able to draw cartoons specifically about your workplace.

ANDFINALLY

- Where relevant, point out the role of the bulletin, and of a socialist organisation. Explain the case for an independent voice for the rank-and-file. Don't be shy: take credit if you have pushed an issue that has won a victory for workers.
- Have a 'who we are' box which identifies the publishers as socialists (with a brief definition), and summarises your stance on a few key principles on industrial issues.
- Have another box inviting workers to send in comments and articles, to attend your regular readers' meetings, and to subscribe to the bulletin.
- Include phone, postal and e-mail/website details.



a socialist workplace bulletin: *guidelines on production*

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REGULARITY

- Publish the bulletin strictly regularly - as a minimum, monthly; ideally, fortnightly.
- Be prepared to produce the bulletin more frequently during times of heightened activity eg. strikes.

THE BULLETIN MEETING

- Put the bulletin together at a meeting. Have a political discussion about the front page article, and talk about any issues of policy or strategy that arise from the back page stories.
- **The bulletin meeting should not just be a technical exercise, but a series of political discussions, and an organising forum. Invite workmates and contacts.**
- Get people to write articles before the meeting, and circulate them to everyone involved in the bulletin before the meeting if possible - either by hand, or on an email list. Articles can be amended in the light of discussion at the meeting, and additional items written. It is important that all the content of the bulletin is in the hands of the editor at the end of the meeting - do not rely on people writing things the next day.
- At the meeting, review the last issue and report on any feedback from your workmates, and any developments on the issues you covered.
- Decide what the main article will be in the next issue, and who will write it. Have a brainstorm of ideas for back page articles.

ORGANISING

- Organise around the issues you cover. The bulletin is not just a commentary. Decide at the meeting which of the issues need action, and organise what you are going to do. Take a resolution to your next union meeting? Refuse to work on safety grounds? Go round the workplace with a petition? Campaign for a particular candidate in an election?
- **Involve workers in producing the bulletin - writing articles (or giving you suggestions or stories if they are not confident enough to write it themselves), coming to the meetings, making a donation.**

PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

- Make sure the bulletin is well-produced, with a recognisable masthead, each issue dated, decent layout, spelling etc.
- Sell subscriptions to the bulletin. This will help with distribution and with production costs, and will get people involved beyond simply reading it. Include details of how to subscribe on each issue.
- Occasionally, produce a separate subscription form for people to complete and send in, and staple it to each copy of the bulletin. You will usually get new subscribers each time you do this. When you use a special subs slip, make an extra effort to distribute more copies.
- Organise effective distribution - involve people from outside the workplace who will be able to distribute it more openly. Nominate one person to take charge of making sure distribution happens; s/he should report regularly to bulletin meetings.
- If distribution is done at a regular time and place, then over time, distributors will develop a political relationship with workers.
- Upload the finished bulletin onto the Workers' Liberty website, and plug it via e-mail.



a socialist workplace bulletin: *seeking out stories*

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- What are people talking about at work? What are their complaints about management? About their working conditions? Can they tell you of any incidents or issues in other departments, or which have arisen when you were not at work? Don't just talk at your workmates: listen to them.
- **What has happened at work recently? An accident, injury or other safety matter? A clampdown on some trivial rules about uniform? A new manager? A machinery breakdown? A problem with a contractor?**
- What are the big issues about working conditions? This year's pay talks? A new, harsher disciplinary regime? An attack on the union? Worries about possible job losses?
- **What issues came up at your last union meeting? Don't 'switch off' during reports from other sections or grades. Note them down and perhaps ask the person for more details afterwards.**
- Provide updates on previous stories. What was the ballot result? Have you successfully forced management to sort out your safety complaint?
- **Individual grievances usually arise from more general issues, and need a collective response. Is the employer treating one of your colleagues particularly badly? Unfairly docked her sick pay? Subjected him to racist discrimination? Blocked a transfer or promotion?**
- Give workers ammunition against their boss. Has a manager been excused for a mistake that workers would be severely disciplined for? Are there agreements that are not widely publicised but which workers can use to assert their rights?
- **Prioritise topical stories, but do not ignore 'timeless' issues. If the discipline policy, or the state of the building, is awful, say so - even if it has been that way for years. We want to convince workers not to accept the way things are "because they have always been like that" - and not just to react defensively to attacks, but to fight for improvements.**
- Look for good examples of workers taking action and winning. Has the union won the re-instatement of a victimised worker? Have workers in one section forced management to act over safety by refusing to work in dangerous conditions? Has a local strike in another part of the industry won an improvement in workers' conditions? We should spread news like this to boost workers' confidence.
- **Tell workers information that no-one else will tell them. Spread important news between the different departments. Tell them about the management cock-up that has been covered up.**
- Any elections, or ballots, coming up? Who do you recommend workers vote for? Should they accept or reject the deal that is on offer?
- **Challenge any bigoted, sectionalist or other divisive attitudes that you think might be taking hold amongst the workforce. If there is a problem brewing, tackle it head on.**
- Look for stories about workers who might otherwise be ignored or considered 'peripheral'. eg. catering staff, cleaners, temps or agency staff, contractors. The best source of material: talk to them!
- **What was discussed at the last union/management negotiating meeting? Perhaps you are the union rep. If not, ask the rep, or check the minutes. Read union newsletters, circulars, noticeboards.**
- Read the employer's publications too. You may find good stories - and you will probably find stupid quotes that you can ridicule.
- **Monitor media coverage of your industry. Check the papers; set up an e-mail 'News Profile' (or similar) that sends you any news reports about a subject you specify.**
- Any conferences or meetings worth reporting on?
- **Consider having a 'Marxism at Work' column - each issue addressing an issue such as wages, new technology, overtime, profits, etc.**



a socialist workplace bulletin: *statements exercise*

'building on the rank-and-file revival' ♦♦♦ october 2002

Discuss the following questions and statements:

1. You are the editor of the union branch newsletter. It is widely read and you can publish anything you like without fear of reprisal or criticism - including articles about wider politics and about socialism. So you don't see the point in producing a socialist workplace bulletin.
2. We sell and circulate socialist publications - eg. Solidarity - at work, so there is no need to publish a workplace bulletin too.
3. The bulletin should be published as and when there is enough going on in the workplace to make it interesting. Sometimes there is nothing really happening in the workplace worth reporting on.
4. Our comrades in the workplace always come up with enough interesting and witty articles for the bulletin, so we don't bother expending energy in fruitless attempts to get our work colleagues to write stuff.
5. The front page article should be written by the comrade who is the most politically educated and the best writer.
6. The workplace stories get workers interested, then they get the real politics from the front-page editorials.
7. We should not bother with trivial, local workplace matters. Big politics and important union business only.
8. Reporting on local workplace issues puts comrades' job security at risk. We should not print these stories - instead, we should concentrate on general points about the industry and the union, together with outside political issues. Then we can distribute the bulletin more openly.
9. We want the bulletin to be a broad, rank-and-file publication. So it should not say that it is published by socialists.
10. Articles should be written in language understandable to workers - no long words or difficult concepts.
11. Everyone should send their articles to the editor, who then puts the bulletin together.
12. The bulletin should look as professional as possible.
13. How can the bulletin be distributed?
14. How should the bulletin be financed?
15. How can different left groups and individuals work together in producing workplace bulletins?



arguing socialist politics at work: *statements exercise*

'building on the rank-and-file revival' ♦♦♦ october 2002

Discuss the following statements. What do you think?

1. Any worker who is interested in socialist politics will get involved in the union. We can meet and talk to them at union meetings, so there is no need to talk about politics at work.
2. My workmates know that I'm a socialist: they can come and ask me about it whenever they like.
3. If you talk about politics all the time at work, people think you are a nutter - or, at the very least, boring.
4. At work, we are always moaning about the managers, the pay and the anti-social hours. But there's a big gulf between that and talking about Marxism.
5. People at work only talk about politics when there is an election on.
6. I am really bored of endless conversations about football and TV programmes. I want to talk about real politics.
7. You wouldn't want to admit to being a socialist where I work.
8. If I talk about politics too much, management will mark my card as a trouble-maker.
9. If I challenged every reactionary opinion I heard at work, I'd spend my whole time having a go at people. And everyone would think I was intolerant and had no sense of humour.
10. People want to read The Sun in their tea-break. They wouldn't want to read a socialist newspaper.
11. Quite a few of my workmates have got opinions, some quite left-wing. But they are not politically active, so they wouldn't be interested in going to protests or political events.
12. The left is seen as a joke: divided, old-fashioned and irrelevant. It would be embarrassing to admit to being in one of the little left groups that people laugh at.
13. I have to work very hard, and if I get any spare time at work, I use it to catch up on union work. There is no time for hanging around having chats about vague political issues.
14. I am the union rep. Everyone wants to talk to me about their annual leave request, or the poor air conditioning in the office, or what the manager said to them earlier. They might want to talk about some union politics - eg. who to vote for in the election for President - but never about political issues outside work.
15. I can usually win a political argument at work. I'll tell someone what I think and what I know about the subject, and they will usually end up agreeing with me.
16. There is a Tory in my office. We are always arguing, and most of our colleagues usually side with me (except about asylum seekers). But sometimes I wonder if our arguments are just an entertaining sideshow.



a socialist workplace bulletin: *scenario & group exercise*

'building on the rank-and-file revival' ♦♦♦ october 2002

Scenario:

You work at a postal delivery office. You publish a bulletin called 'Red Letter', and distribute it alongside the national bulletin, 'Postalworker'. All permanent postal workers in the office are members of the union. You all work a six-day week.

It is early December. The weather is getting nasty, and postbags are getting heavier - much of it commercial mailouts ('junk mail').

Casual staff have been taken on to work over the Christmas period. They do not get sick pay or other benefits. The union rep says that they are not eligible to join the union unless and until they decide to stay on and get permanent contracts.

The staff canteen has recently been taken over by a private company, Sodexo. It has been redecorated in a style that everyone hates. The quality and choice of food is poor. There is a fast turnover of canteen staff, none of whom is in a union.

The line manager of your section, Ms Jessop, is a disciplinarian bully, much worse than those in the other sections. Everyone hates her: some people make derogatory comments about her being unattractive, and/or wanting to be a man.

The trolleys keep breaking. There have been minor injuries to workers using the trolleys, but management say they can not be replaced, as the budget is spent: although they were bought only six months ago, they are supposed to last two years.

There is a Council by-election in your area early in the new year. All candidates will have an election address delivered by the Post Office. The Council is Labour, and has privatised old people's homes and made parks staff redundant. The Labour candidate uncritically supports the Council's actions. The local UNISON branch is considering standing a candidate, as is the local Socialist Alliance. The BNP has declared its intention to stand.

The people who work in the office where non-deliverable mail is held for collection are dealing with an increasingly heavy workload. Some are blaming the posties and drivers, saying that they are not taking the parcels out or not waiting long enough for people to answer the door.

Management want to reduce the number of walks (delivery rounds) in your area, increasing the number of addresses that the remaining walks have to deliver to.

One of your workmates is off sick, and has had her sick pay stopped, as management claim she sent her medical certificate in late.

You have received two letters from workers to 'Red Letter' in the last fortnight. One complains that the Council's new 'congestion charge' will unfairly penalise people in your office who have to drive to work because they start so early. The other slams 'Red Letter' as the mouthpiece of loony left trouble-makers which will just make life at work worse for everyone.

The union rep has just agreed to management relocating the tea-making facilities further away from your department, without informing union members that this proposal was being discussed.

At a city-wide union event last week, you found out that at an office two miles away from yours, workers have an additional day off work every three weeks.

On a large local estate, there is a persistent problem of posties being mugged, with giro's and other valuables taken. One worker punched his assailant, and has been suspended pending an investigation.

Group exercise:

- Decide on a main front page article, and a second front page article.
- Decide on one person to write each (or at least to make notes on the approach and content of the article).
- Decide on another person to write a short piece on 'who we are' to appear in a box on the bulletin.
- The other people should put together the back page, writing short articles and deciding on anything else to include.