TROUBLEMAKERSAT.WORK

TROUBLEMAKERS AT WORK

GRASSROOTS TRADE UNIONISTS

HOW TO WIN A STRIKE

By Ian Allinson

A Troublemakers At Work briefing pack

www.troublemakersat.work

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1) INTRODUCTION

Workers go on strike because striking is an effective weapon against the rich and powerful. A strike can disrupt the production and distribution of products, the delivery of services, the flow of profits and the smooth running of society. It can give workers a taste of their potential power and undermines the power of unelected and unaccountable managers over workers. If run democratically and with high participation, it can educate and empower workers, drawing in new people to build strong union organisation for future battles.

Whether you are a first-time striker or an experienced activist, this briefing pack aims to help you make your next strike a success by drawing on previous strikers' good and bad experiences.

Strikes are not all the same. A small local dispute is different to a huge national one covering hundreds of workplaces. A first strike presents different challenges than if your workplace has been out recently. There are differences between public, private and third sectors and between different unions. So this briefing can't tell you what to do, but it can bust some myths, prompt you to ask the right questions, and provide some examples.

Troublemakers At Work opposes all anti-union legislation. Workers should be free to decide for ourselves when and how to strike, without interference from the courts (or from paid union staff). The legislation is intended to prevent workers winning strikes. It requires slow and bureaucratic processes, restricts the issues over which action can lawfully be taken, bans solidarity strikes and restricts effective picketing.

Despite the repressive legislation, workers do take action and usually win at least something. Sometimes workers ignore or defy the law. This can be very effective but carries increased risks of disciplinary action against workers and financial penalties for unions. The latter is the main way the legislation works, pressuring paid union staff to police members' compliance. More often, workers and our unions try to comply with the law. Unfortunately, risk-averse paid union staff often encourage "over compliance" rather than taking a realistic view of the risks.

This briefing covers both lawful and unlawful industrial action, but we indicate where something would be unlawful – you should make informed decisions.

Whatever your experience from your own strike, good and bad, please share it.

Troublemakers At Work is creating a version of this briefing for use as a presentation at union meetings. If you would like to invite a Troublemakers speaker to your meeting, please contact info@troublemakersat.work. We are also looking to produce printed and eBook pamphlet versions which will be more accessible for many people.

2) ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

Troublemakers At Work is a network of rank-and-file trade unionists in Britain, organised democratically and without affiliation to particular political groups or unions.

Our point of view is of the union rank and file, meaning grassroots workers rather than those employed by unions. We focus on building workers' own collective power and democratic control of our unions. We need to strengthen organisation at our own work and show solidarity with each other. Sometimes we need to oppose rotten deals or push for action despite obstruction within our unions. Those who want more effective unions may stand for positions, but "new faces in old places" isn't enough – we need to make our unions more democratic, inclusive and responsive. Our focus is on making trouble at work, but our lives and issues don't start and end when we stop being paid – and neither should our solidarity.

You can read more about us, how to join as an individual or affiliate as an organisation via troublemakersat.work/our-organisation/. Get in touch if you want to discuss anything in this briefing.

The AGM of Troublemakers At Work in January 2025 agreed to produce a briefing pack to promote approaches to industrial disputes aimed at helping workers win, while recognising that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach.

To implement the motion, Ian Allinson, one of the coordinators of Troublemakers At Work, ran *How to Win a Strike* sessions at the Troublemakers At Work public conference in July 2025 and at The World Transformed in October 2025, gathering input for this briefing pack. Drafts were discussed by the Troublemakers Team and at the Troublemakers AGM in January 2026, leading to various improvements.

As a workplace activist Ian was involved in leading strikes at Fujitsu (Unite) and Transport for Greater Manchester (UNISON). He coordinates strike solidarity for Manchester TUC and is author of Workers Can Win: A Guide to Organising At Work.

3) WHY STRIKES LOSE

In recent years, workers who go on strike usually win more than if they hadn't, even when the settlement falls far short of their aspirations. Occasionally we suffer an outright defeat, but it's more common that we win far less than we could have. There are many factors which can contribute to a poor outcome. In this section we introduce a few common ones.

NEVER GETTING STARTED

Anti-union legislation, including the 50% ballot turnout thresholds introduced by the Trade Union Act 2016 and which Labour promised to repeal in their 2024 manifesto, prevents many workers who want to strike from doing so lawfully. Occasionally unions have internal processes that refuse to approve strike ballots.

One particular barrier to action is a misuse of the concept of "structure tests" popularised by US writer and organiser Jane McAlevey. A structure test is an action where you record who takes part, helping you gauge support and identify strong and weak areas. Instead of structure tests being used to plan the next steps in a campaign, some union officials use them to justify inaction.

Organising to strengthen union organisation at workplace level, including by running local campaigns and disputes, makes winning a ballot much more likely. We should also campaign for the repeal of all anti-union legislation and for our unions to provide better support for workers who want to fight.

THE PLAN TO WIN

Section 6) talks about what you need for a good plan to win. The saying that "If you fight you may lose, but if you don't fight you will always lose" is often associated with Bob Crow, the late leader of the RMT union. When workers believe in a plan to win and the demands are worth fighting for, they are often willing to make great sacrifices in a strike. But if they don't know what the plan is, don't believe the plan will work, or don't think the demands are worth the effort, why would workers support a strike?

FAILURE TO ESCALATE

Sometimes your plan to win but it doesn't work. This could be because your action had less impact than you expected, or because you underestimated how determined the decision-makers were not to concede your demands. Just keeping doing the same thing sometimes grinds down your opponents eventually, but you are more likely to get a good result by escalating your action.

LACK OF PARTICIPATION

When workers don't support a strike, they often say they can't afford to take part or give some other reason to do with their personal circumstances. But it usually comes down to the demands and the plan to win. But money does matter, particularly if a dispute drags on. Section 8) covers fundraising and how you can use it to strengthen your campaign and the wider movement.

DIVISION

Workers are divided in all kinds of ways: between unions, workplaces, employment status, departments, occupations, grades and length of service as well as by gender, race, disability, age and so on. We need to overcome these divisions and build unity in action. We do that by tackling issues in a principled way, not by ignoring them, which only allows them to resurface at the worst moment.

Managers may try to present the union as only caring about certain types of workers – sometimes even telling the opposite story to different groups. We have to fight to include everyone.

Employers often exploit divisions in offers. They try to pitch an offer that will get enough support to be accepted without addressing issues which may be extremely important to some workers. In section 4) we discuss how you can try to prevent this when formulating your demands and in the course of negotiations.

ISOLATION

Public opinion doesn't determine the outcome of strikes, but it can help either side. To paraphrase Jayaben Desai, sympathy is like honey on your elbow – you can smell it, you can feel it but you can't eat it. To win, we often solidarity rather than sympathy. These days it's very rare (and unlawful) for people to take solidarity strike action. But they might join a protest, write to a councillor or raise some money. Section 8) deals with seeking solidarity.

SABOTAGE

It shouldn't happen, but it does. Sabotage could involve paid union officials refusing to call action, calling it off, withdrawing strike pay, or taking other steps to undermine the strike. Officials may fail to plan for a re-ballot, so that workers can't continue lawful action or can only do so after a long break, losing precious momentum.

It often isn't as stark as this, being more about lack of support and bureaucratic obstacles to a successful campaign. When workers are on strike it should feel like the whole movement is behind us, let alone our whole union. Yet union officials are often reluctant to publicise disputes, build wider support, or campaign around any political aspects of a dispute.

Workers can limit the risks of sabotage by doing as much of their own planning for the dispute as they can, and by building unofficial networks of support within their own union and beyond. Sometimes knowing who to call within your union can help stop or limit sabotage.

FAILURE OF INOCULATION

The term inoculation is used by trade unionists to mean exposing workers to a weakened version of the bosses' poison before they face the real thing. That means getting workers to think about and discuss how the boss may react to the campaign or to particular aspects of it – what they may say or do. You want them to understand that the employer will fight back – they want to keep power and control – but that when they do, this reflects badly on the boss, not the campaign. You are trying to prepare them, not freak them out, so you need to be ready to reassure them.

If we fail to inoculate workers adequately, management actions can really knock a campaign off course. At best, it can take a lot of time and effort to win workers back round to the campaign. At worst, it can be a fatal blow to a dispute.

OVER-REACH

Sometimes your plan may fail and you can't find a way forward. There is no shame in re-assessing and trying to reach a settlement before the employer turns a setback into a serious defeat. It is better to retreat in good order and live to fight another day than to plough on regardless.

4) DEMANDS AND OBJECTIVES

You usually have some demands well before any strike. Apart from anything else, they are often needed to define the "trade dispute" for a lawful strike. Even then, you often refine your demands during a dispute. You can consider:

Ambition?	If you ask for too little, workers won't feel it is worth making an effort to win. Asking for more than is achievable can mean your demands not being taken seriously by workers or the employer, and can lead to demoralisation. In thinking about what is achievable, don't just consider your strength at the start of a campaign, think about the power the campaign can build. If workers want something you won't be strong enough to win through this dispute, don't be dismissive. Instead, be honest with them about what they will need to do to build the power needed to win that demand, which includes making sure you win your current dispute. You may not win a demand in this dispute, but raising it may prepare the ground for future campaigning. If you are using demands in this way, it is important that members understand that, rather than raising false expectations.
Defensive or offensive?	Many disputes are caused by things management try to do – particularly in industries that have been around for a long time and where there is pressure to lower real earnings, intensify work, cut jobs and worsen terms and conditions. Even in a defensive dispute, it can be useful to include some offensive demands, so that a win leaves you in a better position, protects you against future attacks or helps you build stronger organisation. In many new industries with no history of unionisation, disputes tend to be offensive, with workers trying to establish basic standards that might be taken for granted elsewhere.

Breadth?	Section 244 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, usually known as TULR(C)A 1992, says a "trade dispute" must relate wholly or mainly to a short list of "bread and butter" points. Even if you want a lawful dispute, you can include items not on the list as long as it **mainly** relates to things which are. This can be particularly useful if you want to include issues of importance to allies. For example, some US unions have gained strength through what they call "bargaining for the common good". Linking trade dispute issues to wider social issues such as housing, racism, sexism, war or climate can motivate workers and build support while still remaining within the law. What about demands that shift the power balance in the workplace? Can workers democratically control work or shift allocation, get more say over their pensions, have better facilities to organise, or be represented on an ethics committee that can block work for objectionable clients?
Local demands?	We should be trying to negotiate about *everything* that workers care about, not just contractual issues like jobs, pay, hours. Workers are often strongly motivated by issues that can be decided by local management – from the behaviour of customers or an individual supervisor to working temperature and from flexible working to access to food and drinks. It is harder to bargain over local issues if you are in a giant bargaining unit. Can you include local demands alongside the national ones? You might be able to win on those even if a national campaign falters.
Precision?	Precise demands help your campaign messaging and can simplify negotiations. They help you know when you've won. Less-precise demands can offer more room for manoeuvre during negotiations, for example if you have several demands and could accept less on one if you get a lot on another. However, union officials and negotiators sometimes promote vague demands as a way of making themselves less accountable to members and making it easier to settle for a poor deal.

Universality?	Not all demands directly benefit every worker. For example, you might have demands focused on the lowest paid, people in a particular job or department, women workers, those working outdoors etc. Think about demands that benefit those in most need. For example, in pay disputes, fighting for a flat-rate increase instead of, or as well as, a percentage increase, rather than demanding a percentage increase alone, starts to reduce inequality because lower-paid workers benefit proportionately more. When you include demands for a section of the workforce, put some work in to ensuring everyone understands their importance, so the workers affected aren't thrown under the bus as soon as the employer pushes back. Historically, this has been a particular problem with equality issues – make sure that workers affected by them are part of the negotiating team. Putting non-pay issues first in negotiations can also help ensure they aren't forgotten.

Workers will be more committed to the action if the demands are ones they really care about and have been part of deciding, so maximise the involvement of workers in deciding demands and agree them democratically. You are strongest if you remove barriers which hinder participation – whether that is use of jargon, meeting in inaccessible venues or pubs, an intimidating atmosphere, or having meetings which shift workers or those with caring responsibilities can't attend. If you have multiple demands, try to agree in advance how you will deal with it when the employer tries to divide workers by conceding to some and being intransigent with others.

If you need to add new demands during a dispute, you need to be careful not to change the "trade dispute" used for the ballot, but you can position them as new ideas to try to find a resolution to the dispute.

Alongside demands on the employer for a settlement, it's good to think about any other objectives for the strike. Who will you mobilise? What allies will you involve? How will you improve the diversity of your union team? How will you increase the capacity of the union team? How can you build workers' power i.e. their ability to win what they want even when people try to stop them?

5) IDENTIFYING DECISION-MAKERS

Winning usually involves one or more decision-makers agreeing to what you want, so you want to be as clear as possible about who they are (individual names, not bodies) so that you can focus pressure on them. The people who represent employers in bargaining are rarely the key decision-makers, so don't be distracted by them.

Sometimes it is obvious who the decision-maker is, such as the owner of a small business. In larger organisations or those delivering public services it can be much less clear. For example, there may be politicians above a public sector employer's senior management, funders holding a "not-for-profit" organisation's purse strings, or a parent company above the employer in dispute. Sometimes there may be multiple people who can say "no", even if they can't individually say "yes".

If it helps, you can identify the key players and categorise them:

1. Takes the decision.
2. Takes part in the decision-making process.
3. Influences the decision-making process.
4. Can get the decision-makers' attention but have little influence.

As well as identifying the decision-makers themselves, your **primary targets**, it's useful to think about who has influence or power over them, which might be entirely unrelated to your dispute. For example, an employer might want support from local councillors over a planning issue, be bidding for a big contract with another organisation, or want to keep an important customer. An outsourcing company may be very vulnerable to pressure from a key client. A big supermarket may have huge influence over a food producer. You could think of these people as **secondary targets** – who could put pressure on your primary target if "suitably motivated".

Keep your view of decision-makers under review. Sometimes once you succeed in creating a crisis it becomes clearer who the real decision-makers are. If the crisis is big enough, your employer will find a way to resolve it with you.

Once you have identified your primary and secondary targets, you need to work out what they really care about. Again, this could be entirely unrelated to your dispute. A target might be hoping for a knighthood, be a fan of the local football team, care about their reputation at their local church, or be on the board of another employer.

Being clear about who has the power to decide what can also help you decide which demands you have the power to win.

Now you understand the interests of the targets, you can plan action to create a crisis for them, to force them to act.

6) CHOOSING ACTION AND ESCALATION

Conceding what you want normally carries a **concession cost** to the decision-maker, or they would have agreed it already. This isn't just financial: they may be ideologically opposed to what you want, be worried about setting a precedent, harming their reputation or career, or losing control or power. Personal factors tend to plays a bigger part in smaller organisations.

To win, you need to **credibly threaten** a **disruption cost** that is greater than the concession cost. Like the concession cost, the disruption cost may be more than financial: threatening reputation or control, for example.

Some disruption costs are "used up" – once you have staged a naked protest at the company's product launch, they have incurred the cost and can't avoid it by conceding. However, employers often don't believe their workers will really take action until they do. **Escalation** lets you demonstrate the credibility of the threat by taking some action, without using up all your threats at the outset.

There are many types of protest action you can use in a dispute. There are also various types of industrial action you can consider:

Who?	The strongest type of strike is **everybody out** together. This maximises impact and also builds unity and camaraderie amongst the strikers. If it's not financially sustainable to take everyone out for long enough to win, the other option is **selective action**, where just some of the workers strike. This could target workers whose action would have a disproportionate impact. Selective action can also be used for chequerboard strikes or rotating strikes, which involve all workers at different times, with the intention of causing a lot of disruption for fewer strike-days per worker. In some cases, workers not involved in selective action are asked to contribute part of their wages to support those who are, making it more sustainable. An extreme example of this was the 1989-91 "drive for 35" campaign for a shorter working week in engineering, which generally reduced weekly hours to 37. Workers across the whole industry contributed to a levy, supporting workers at targeted workplaces to take continuous strike action on full pay. As each employer settled, new targets for selective action would be chosen. In many circumstances selective action has the disadvantage that workers are being told to cross each other's picket-lines. This undercuts the political education work of a strike that "you never cross a picket line". If selective action is effective, employers may respond. They could **lock out** the whole workforce to increase the cost to the workers and union. Longer-term, they can reduce the power of key groups by automating or relocating vulnerable work; or they can buy peace with powerful groups, creating divisions from the rest of the workforce.

When?	A **continuous strike** or **indefinite strike** means you stay out until the dispute is settled. **Discontinuous strike** action means you take periods of strike action with work in between. When workers strike for the first time, they often hope for a result without having to take much action. Strikes happen when the two sides have different estimations of the balance of power or of the costs of settlement. Unions may call what are known as **demonstration strikes** which have little real impact but show the employer the level of support for action. Sometimes just a strike vote, the threat of action, or a demonstration strike is enough to demonstrate the credibility of the strike threat and move the employer. But sometimes a demonstration strike isn't enough and you need a more serious plan to win. A long dispute, whether continuous or discontinuous, may give the employer more time to make arrangements to mitigate the impact of the action. While continuous action allows no escalation in the strike itself (unless other groups of workers can join it), for many workers the impact of continuous action grows over time, more than offsetting the "using up" of the threat. For example, the employer may run out of stocks, debts may pile up, customers may lose patience, and managers may become too tired to cover essential work. As a general rule, striking for odd days spread out over a long period means you need more strikes in total to get the same result. But you have to consider your specific circumstances. In a factory producing large batches of soup, the employer didn't want to have to discard batches due to a strike part-way through production, and all the equipment had to be cooled, cleaned and re-heated between batches. So one-day strikes actually stopped production for several days. Some workers may want to target particular days for strikes. For example, bar workers threatening to strike on the day of a major sporting event, or transport workers threatening to strike during a major festival can have disproportionate impact. For some workers (e.g. in postal services), work just piles up when they are striking, and they may get overtime to clear the backlog once the strike is over. But if a strike goes on too long, the employer and customers make other arrangements. If your action is going to be lawful, the union has to give the employer at least two weeks' notice. Unlawful strikes have the potential to be far more disruptive because with little or no notice, the employer can't plan for them.

What?	As well as striking, you can consider **Action Short Of Strike (ASOS)**. This often includes action such as an overtime ban, working to rule or withdrawal of goodwill. Education workers have sometimes boycotted marking work, transport workers have refused to collect fares or check tickets, and airline staff have refused to serve food to first class passengers. Workers often think that ASOS is an easy option compared to striking. This is rarely the case. When you are on strike you aren't in work and you are acting collectively. Most ASOS requires individual workers to say "no" to their boss when told to do something, putting individuals under far more pressure. It is often harder to know whether colleagues are respecting the ASOS than it is to know whether they are working on a strike day. You generally need a higher level of organisation to make ASOS effective than you do for a strike. ASOS can be really useful alongside discontinuous strikes, making it harder for management to put pressure on workers to catch up with work lost on strike days by working harder, doing overtime or covering for each other. Employers may try to deduct part of your pay for ASOS or even refuse to accept partial performance of the contract and make 100% deductions. Unions may challenge this legally, but employers are least likely to make big deductions if they fear it could lead to an escalation of strike action, so it's rarely wise to take ASOS without being ready to strike too.

If you are discussing what action to take, you want the most powerful action that has a "working" majority behind it. For example, you might be able to narrowly win a vote in a meeting attended by the most engaged members for a very powerful action, but if participation in it would be low, that might be less powerful than something a bit less ambitious. You need to take members with you. Don't panic if people are cautious about what action they are willing to take at the start of a dispute – workers often become willing to do more once some initial action goes well, particularly if management's response winds them up (as it often does!).

On the other hand, don't assume your workmates won't be agree hard-hitting action early in a dispute, or even straight away. In the 2022-3 strike wave, disputes which began with sustained periods of action, or even continuous strikes, won much bigger concessions. Disputes based on short (e.g. 24 hour) strikes with big gaps between them often dragged on, took more action to conclude, and won less.

If possible, try to discuss, agree, and announce a plan for escalation before beginning the first strike. This way, the employer will know that, if they don't concede after the first strikes, further, harder-hitting, action will be coming. This requires a greater level of commitment from the workers involved at an earlier stage, but can put you in a much stronger position. "Waiting-and-seeing" after each round of action before deciding the next can slow a dispute down – not just by adding delays but also by allowing the employer to hope they can wait workers out.

When thinking about escalation, don't just think about more strike days. Can you involve more workers? "Secondary" strike action by workers from other employers is now unlawful, and there are also restrictions on selectively balloting other workplaces in the same employer. But other groups of workers may be able to take lawful action over *their own issues* at the same time in ways that strengthens your hand. For example, if workers at one bus depot are on strike, it will be much harder for the employer to cover the affected services if other local depots run by other companies, or other depots round the country run by the same company are also taking action. **Coordinating strikes**, even if they are unrelated, can help grab public, media and politician's attention, making them more powerful – as well as giving workers a morale boost and the sense they are part of a wider working-class movement. Consider forms of pressure alongside the strike itself too (see Other strike-day activities).

As with your demands, it's good to involve workers as much as possible in decisions about action plans.

During most disputes some workers will "have a wobble". They may say they can't afford to strike or give some other reason, but nine times out of ten the real reason is that they don't have confidence in the **plan to win**. Involving as many members as possible in democratic decisions about action and clearly (and repeatedly) communicating your plan to win, including any adjustments, makes your strike strong.

Sometimes reps aren't keen to involve members in decisions about action because they want to avoid giving the employer even more warning before any action. One way round that is for members to agree on the overall strategy, and perhaps on a number of days per month, but leave flexibility for reps to decide the actual dates for action. But if your action is lawful, the union has to give at least two weeks' notice, so there's not much "element of surprise" anyway.

7) PICKETING, STRIKE-DAY ACTIVITIES AND POLITICS

The start of a strike is really important – it often sets a tone for the whole dispute.

The employer will be keen to assess both the level of participation and the mood of strikers. Like an animal making itself look big before a fight, you want your strike to be big, well-equipped, noisy and fun right from the start – and for it to look like you are happy to keep striking as long as necessary. As the saying goes "The longer the picket line, the shorter the strike".

Some unions require members to register at pickets in order to get strike pay, which helps maximise turnout. That's less viable in workplaces where lots of people work from home and live far from workplaces – many people aren't going to be up for turning up to work more often than usual when they are on strike. It's still good practice to keep a register of members attending pickets and other activities on strike days, so you can track participation and use that to build and maintain it.

Think about any workers who may feel particularly vulnerable, such as those in probationary periods or with insecure visa status. What information and support can you provide to enable them to take part, or if you collectively decide that it is better if they don't? Can you use the dispute to educate the wider workforce about the issues facing insecure workers?

PICKETS

If a strike is a temporary stoppage of work by a group of workers to express a grievance or enforce a demand, a picket is a gathering outside a workplace or other key location to prevent workers, vehicles or goods entering or leaving. So pickets aren't aimed at employers or decision-makers – they are aimed at other workers. They are typically either trying to enforce a democratic strike decision on workers who might break a strike, or to spread a strike to other groups of workers.

The current legal framework in Britain is designed to prevent effective picketing. If you comply:

- Workers are only allowed to picket their own workplace (though union officials, whether employed by a union or not, can accompany members they represent picketing their own workplace). This is intended to stop pickets being used to spread strikes, as well as hampering strong workplaces supporting weaker ones.
- Pickets can only try to "peacefully persuade" people not to cross the picket line, rather than physically blocking entrances. At many workplaces, it's not possible to peacefully persuade people driving cars unless you can stop them first.
- The ACAS Code of Practice on picketing recommends that "*in general the number of pickets does not exceed six at any entrance to, or exit from, a workplace; frequently a smaller number will be appropriate*". While this is not the law, larger numbers would be taken into account by courts. The police have the power under section 14 of the Public Order Act 1986 to impose limits on numbers.

Most unions have their own guidance for organising pickets, often focused on legal compliance. Get hold of this in good time but don't treat it like a bible. While some unions "over comply", many have found ways to limit the impact of the legislation. It is common to have six pickets at an entrance, but unlimited numbers of strikers showing their support nearby, waving flags, holding banners and placards, leafleting the public etc. It is also common to simply ignore the six-picket recommendation.

And while (secondary) picketing at other workplaces is not within the law, there is nothing to stop strikers showing support near pickets at other workplaces to give them a boost.

There is a range of approaches to how pickets should treat scabs crossing a picket line. Where participation in a strike is high, strikers feel confident to ostracise scabs. But in (too) many cases, strikers are not an overwhelming majority of the workforce. To build real power they need to win over the rest of the workers, and polarising workers risks isolating the strikers rather than the scabs. At an absolute minimum, pickets should try to talk to anyone attempting to go to work and to persuade them to join the strike. There is little point in a picket that ignores people crossing the line and undermining the strike. So your picket needs to be at or close to the entrance, wherever is best to talk to workers considering going in.

Whether you should picket 24-hours a day, for 7-10 hours a day, or just a few hours depends on the nature of the workplace. You want your picket to be **effective** and **morale-boosting**, not a dismal and pointless chore. You should generally picket at any time when scabs may try to go to work - even a small lawful picket will be enough to put some people off scabbing.

Pickets can lawfully ask anyone trying to enter the site to visit their employer (e.g. deliveries, agency employees and subcontractors but not workers for separate employers who share an entrance). Despite the fact that these workers don't share the strikers' legally "protection" if they refuse to cross, many do. Some say they don't feel safe crossing a picket line 😉, giving them some protection under section 7 (a) of the Health And Safety At Work Act. Well-unionised workers (e.g. Royal Mail) often feel more confident to refuse to cross a picket line. In schools, it is common for support staff to refuse to cross teachers' picket lines. It is often useful to picket at times when goods may be coming in or out of a workplace. Some pickets are very visible to the public, so consider picketing at times with lots of footfall or traffic.

Contrary to information put out by some unions, non-members who would have been balloted if they had been in the union can lawfully join in a strike. It's best if they join though – for collective and any financial support, and to have a say in the conduct of the dispute.

Once you have decided where and when you will be picketing, communicate it clearly to members (including arrangements if people are taking shifts on a long picket) and submit it to Strike Map so that other trade unionists can come and support you.

Pickets and other strike-day activities help make a strike feel collective. Those sat at home, worrying on their own, are far more likely to have wobbles. Make the most of having people together by having a little gathering, either at the picket itself or somewhere nearby afterwards where people can get a drink or snack. These are great opportunities to give people updates on what is happening with the employer, future action plans, and for people to raise their concerns or suggestions. If the strike involves multiple workplaces you can update people on how it is going elsewhere.

Many unions also set up WhatsApp chats for pickets to share information, photos etc.

Workers are sometimes pleased to see members of the community blockading entrances, as members of the public don't risk disciplinary action by the employer. Strike Map have taken this further with their Mega Pickets in support of the Birmingham bin strikers, with supporters travelling from across the country to blockade bin depots. The police will often ignore local blockades if they don't last too long. Supporters of bus strikers have copied the tactic of "slow walking" in front of vehicles after anti-fracking protesters were acquitted. But without mass local involvement, such tactics can't be sustained consistently enough to make a decisive difference in disputes, even if they can raise the morale of strikers and the profile of a dispute.

(Very) slow walking in front of scab buses

We have to recognise that the effectiveness of pickets has been reduced in many industries by the spread of hybrid and remote working, which enables some workers to scab without crossing a picket line. If strike dates aren't clearly communicated then some workers may even scab by mistake, working from home and not realising it is a strike day! Remote working means that more of the work to make the strike solid has to be done by talking to workers in advance, rather than on the day. The same can be true if your workplace has lots of entrances and the public are coming and going in large numbers. For example, BMA resident doctors treat pickets as rallies for publicity and chances to meet up rather than as a means to stop anyone going in and out of hospitals.

PICKET PARAPHERNALIA

Many members will have equipment you can use, some can be obtained from your union, and you may be able to borrow some from other local union branches or a trades council (the local TUC body made up of delegates from branches of different unions in the area).

Things to consider:

- Hi-viz if you will be near traffic or in poor visibility.
- Some unions have armbands to distinguish six “official pickets” from the rest of you.
- A picket register.
- Where can people park?
- Where can people use toilets? If there is nowhere nearby, you may need to have people shuttling people by car.
- Flags, placards, banners.
- Union branded clothing e.g. hats, tabards, t-shirts.
- Rope, string, re-usable cable ties, scissors, sticky tape, pens, marker pens etc.
- Whistles, air horns, vuvuzelas.
- Leaflets to give to the public.
- Leaflets to give to anyone going into the workplace.
- Membership forms.
- Where can people get hot drinks? If there is nowhere nearby, encourage everyone to bring flasks of hot water and provide everything to enable people to make up drinks.
- Sound system.
- You could set up a playlist that everyone can add suitable tracks to.
- Bags or boxes to keep things dry.
- Camper van, shed or gazebo for shelter.
- Folding table and chairs.
- Fire pit, brazier, barbecue and fuel.
- Snacks or more substantial food – one picket line had a choice of hot meals!
- Buckets or tins for collecting donations.
- Festival truck(s) to carry gear to the picket line.

Try to identify where wet equipment could be dried out, batteries recharged and gear stored between pickets. If you have a lot of gear, which is more likely for longer periods of action and/or 24-hour pickets, it may be worth hiring a van to keep it all in. Don’t let all this daunt you – treat it as an opportunity to give lots of people some responsibility.

CHEP pay strike 24-hour picket line with brazier and shelters.

OTHER STRIKE-DAY ACTIVITIES

The strike itself is a powerful tactic, but it may not be enough on its own. Even if it is, you may get a better of quicker result by combining strikes with other tactics. Being on strike means you have lots of people available to do all kinds of things which may do more to help you win than just standing around outside your workplace. Other activities can:

- Pressure decision-makers and secondary targets;
- Build support and solidarity;
- Maintain morale;
- Build power; or
- Undermine the power of your enemies.

Examples of other strike-day activities include:

- Rallies.
- Marches (officially, you are required to notify the police if a march is planned in advance).
- Driving or cycling in a large group, possibly with flags, balloons, posters etc.
- Protests and lobbies at locations other than the workplace.
- Visiting other workplaces to raise support (see Seeking solidarity).
- Supporting other strikes or protests.
- Meetings of strikers.
- Training members (e.g. organising training).
- Activities for strikers' kids.
- Leafleting in public places.
- Leafleting other workplaces (e.g. helping unionise another workplace in the same employer – which pressures the employer as well as building power).
- Leafleting or protesting at suppliers or customers.
- Door-knocking constituents of target politicians.
- Photo-opportunities.
- Banner drops.
- Fun activities – from picket-line fancy dress to sports days or lawn darts.
- Writing letters to politicians.
- Making banners and placards.
- Phone-rounds of members not on the picket line.
- Solidarity days: with extra efforts to get supporters to visit the picket.
- Lobbying your own union (yes, this is sometimes necessary!)
- Virtual pickets, which are basically online meetings during working hours, so people who can't physically attend pickets (e.g. for health reasons) can be included in a collective experience on strike days.

If you do other activities on strike days, remember to keep a register of who took part, just like you would for a picket.

Media coverage can magnify the impact of some strike-day activities. Sadly, most news outlets don't regard workers' issues as newsworthy, despite the fact that they are shared by millions of people and that more people are members of unions than of any church, or run small businesses – both of which get far more coverage.

Your union should be able to put press releases out for you, but you can often speed things up and improve their quality by drafting something yourself. Take a look at previous ones on union websites to get an idea of what they should look like. You could ask for help from experienced local activists, or maybe the branch of the National Union of Journalists.

It's often easier to get coverage from local media than national, and doing so makes it more likely national press will pick up the story. Look on local paper websites for which journalists covered similar stories, particularly if the coverage was decent, and contact them. Many don't now share email addresses but can be messaged via Twitter/X.

There is now a wide variety of left-wing media which may be supportive. Their coverage isn't likely to put direct pressure on your employer in the way in more mainstream media might, but it can be useful to build support. Such coverage can sometimes result in some of their audience taking action which does put pressure your employer.

Strikers and supporters calling phone-in shows can be an easy way to get publicity, but workers need to be careful not to say anything that will get them in trouble.

POLITICS

Some disputes, particularly in public services (whether delivered by workers in the public, private or third sectors) have more obvious political dimensions, with any settlement being decided, approved or influenced by elected politicians. In these disputes, it is natural for campaign activities to target them. For example, if the employer pleads poverty, it may be useful to campaign for better funding, and to demand the employer joins you in that campaign.

Every dispute has political dimensions because strikes are shaped by the economy, the labour market, employment law and anti-union legislation.

You may have demands which ought to be a legal requirement for all workers such as a higher minimum wage, a shorter working week, premium pay for overtime, better maternity pay or higher redundancy payments; or which are already legal requirements that need to be properly enforced such as equal pay or workplace safety.

Disputes can illuminate all kinds of other issues for strikers, from the roles of the media and the police to the role of oppression in dividing workers and the discovery that members of "othered" groups such as trans people, Muslims or migrants may be sources of solidarity – as illustrated in the film Pride.

A strike is often a rapid learning experience about union politics too – who is supportive and obstructive, the roles of different factions and the union's paid "bureaucracy", sources of solidarity, and the strengths and weaknesses of different reps.

A dispute, particularly if run democratically and with high participation, can create a sharp contrast with dictatorial and often ill-informed management decisions. Some strikes lead workers to question what products and services they produce and for whom, who decides that, how and in whose interests. Why are some public services so badly resourced and some workers so badly treated?

While strikes may throw up all these questions, you can play a part in accelerating the process by which workers learn in a dispute. Political understanding is essential for a really strong union, so take opportunities for political education. It's good to invite speakers to your pickets and rallies who can bring solidarity and draw out connections. You can encourage broad discussion on picket lines and in strike meetings, or put on events about political issues relating to the strike. In higher education strikers sometimes organise "teach outs" with meetings on a variety of radical topics, involving workers, students and supporters. You can ensure that strike propaganda material makes connections between the dispute and some of the political issues.

8) SOLIDARITY AND FUNDRAISING

Solidarity takes many forms – from practical help and pressure on decision-makers to financial support and boosting morale.

The media often portrays strikers as selfish. Yet the drive for solidarity is so strong that the Tories had to outlaw workers striking to support other people's disputes, like the miners, engineers, printers and firefighters who struck for nurses' pay in the 1980s.

Society teaches workers to assume that nobody cares about our problems, so it is hard for most strikers to imagine the wells of solidarity just waiting to be tapped. As Tracey Scholes, a bus driver involved in the Go North West strike in 2021 put it "*It's been overwhelming. It's been so nice to see. I didn't think there were so many good people around, but there is.*"

Tracey Scholes during the strike, 2021

Another major barrier to solidarity is the aversion to begging or accepting charity. Solidarity is not charity – it strengthens the giver as well as the receiver. Workers who give solidarity often gain inspiration and learn lessons from other people's struggles. Most workers have never been on strike and many struggle to even imagine going on strike. The process of giving solidarity to other workers can help them see this as a possibility. The outcome of a dispute with one employer strengthens or weakens the position of other workers with their own bosses. Giving solidarity helps other workers win, so strengthens your own position. Organising solidarity from your workmates helps build collectivity. So when workers ask for solidarity they are doing other workers a favour, not asking for charity.

FORMS OF SOLIDARITY

Practical solidarity can include solidarity strikes; respecting picket lines; boycotting the employer; joining pickets, blockades, rallies and marches; bringing food or equipment to picket lines; or taking part in "phone blockades" of the employer. Lower impact actions include writing letters to decision-makers or secondary targets or signing petitions.

When raising money, donations from individuals or union branches are the most common but benefit the givers least. Taking a collection round workmates raises awareness of the dispute and builds collectivity, laying the groundwork for further solidarity action. A regular collection or levy is better still, as workers discuss the dispute every pay day. Public meetings or solidarity social events can be used to provide a focus for people to raise and bring money from different workplaces as well as building relationships and networks with your supporters. Social activities can be a good way to involve strikers' families too, which can help them be a source of power rather than a pressure to settle.

Sending solidarity messages to strikers can be a morale booster. So can posting on social media even if it has little or impact on decision-makers. Social media posts can also help raise awareness of the dispute and generate more solidarity. Support can be made collective by passing round a card for people to sign, or taking a group "solidarity selfie" with posters supporting the strike.

Whatever form solidarity takes, collective action by a group is more useful than individual acts.

SEEKING SOLIDARITY

Make it easy for people to support you. You could produce an "appeal for support" as a leaflet, shareable graphic and/or letter, including information such as:

- Basic information about the dispute (the employer, union(s), workers, key issues, action). Try to explain the issues in ways that other people will identify with, rather than including loads of detail and internal jargon.
- Why the workers need support.
- What you want the reader to do, such as how to donate (ideally both online and by cheque/post), where to send messages of protest or support, details of pickets or other events, how to invite speakers to meetings, and any website or social media links.

Some unions like donations to go to the national or regional union, which can mean that workers have little democratic control over how the money is used, or that it takes forever to reach the strikers. Ideally you want a bank account such as that belonging to the strikers' own union branch to act as the strike fund. To make it easy for individuals to donate, you may want to set up a crowdfunder as well. When you make appeals, ensure that the description of what the money is for is quite open – so that it can be spent on anything you need to win the dispute, not just alleviating strikers' financial hardship, and that the strikers can use any money left when the strike is settled.

Make it easy for people to show support by producing other materials – from poster designs for solidarity selfies to collection sheets. Some strikes have raised money by selling badges or t-shirts.

Your union may be willing to send an appeal to other branches. You could ask to address a relevant committee of your union to seek support, and for a special meeting to be arranged if one is not scheduled. There may be left or rank-and-file groups in your union or industry you can call on. If there is a local trades council, it may be able to circulate it. Other networks such as Strike Clubs or Unite Community (Unite's branches for members not in paid work) may be willing to help. Contact Troublemakers At Work if you need guidance.

You can leaflet the public or at movement events. Strikers can get family members and friends to circulate the appeal through their unions and social networks.

If you provide a public service, it is important to try to build common cause with service users. Better treatment for you will help you provide a better service. Involving service users undercuts one of the most common attack-lines of the employer – that you are selfish, your action is harming the public while they are standing up for them.

In many industries, forming links with workers in the customer or supply chain, or in competitor companies, will be useful.

No written appeal is as powerful as talking to people. Seek opportunities to speak at relevant meetings, rallies and demonstrations. On strike days, why not send small delegations of strikers to tour round unionised workplaces? If you can't arrange these visits in advance, you can just show up at reception and ask to speak to a union rep. It's best not to give details of what it's about, just say "union business". It's a good idea to take some leaflets and envelopes so you can leave some sealed up for them if they can't meet you. For most union reps this will be the most interesting thing that's happened all week – you can often get donations or solidarity photos on the spot, and more may follow. This type of "delegation work" is really important for building networks of solidarity in your local area – so make sure you swap contact details with those you meet. People are usually astonished at the extent to which their issues are shared by workers in completely different industries – they are class issues.

You could survey members to build a picture of their social networks – what organisations they are involved in (religious, sporting, social, educational, cultural, musical, political etc.) and who they know etc. You can use this to extend the social reach of the strike and build support.

You may want to create mailing lists or a WhatsApp chat for people wanting to support your strike, so you can share information with them. But if anyone plans to do anything you would need to deny all knowledge of, make sure that isn't organised in a chat where everyone can see your number – you don't want screen shots sent to your boss.

Though a strike can be exhilarating, inspiring and empowering, it is often a stressful time too. Making the leadership, decision-making and activity of the strike as much a shared responsibility as possible helps. So does creating space for people to talk about how they are feeling. An external solidarity network provides more people you can talk to, some of whom will have been through similar experiences. Don't be shy about using it - if you don't look after yourself you can't help anyone else.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR STRIKERS

Striking usually involves losing money, at least initially. If you are striking for higher pay, you will hopefully win more in pay increases than you've lost during the strike – especially as you benefit from higher pay as long as you work there, and in your pension. But the purpose of a strike is to win its demands, not to make a noble sacrifice. You can lessen the financial impact of a strike on workers by using strike pay or hardship payments, when helps workers take more sustained action and win both more and sooner.

Many unions have some sort of strike pay. The rules for who is eligible when, how much they get, how it is administered and who takes the decisions vary wildly. Find out how it works in your union as early as possible. Ask the union's paid staff you deal with, and also ask other activists you know. Try to find out how much scope there is to do something better than the standard and what the process would be to decide that.

Common requests for better-than-standard strike pay include:

- Eligibility from day one, if the standard is after a certain number of days
- Eligibility for new joiners, if there is normally a requirement for a certain length of membership
- A higher rate of strike pay (e.g. to match that of another union involved)

In most cases members will have to fill out forms to claim strike pay, which collect their bank details, personal details and when they say they were on strike. Some unions have extra requirements such as providing pay slips showing the deductions, or being on the register for pickets and other strike-day activities.

If your union's processes will involve huge amounts of admin for reps, get a small team together rather than leaving it to your treasurer or branch secretary to do everything. Depending on what part they play, they may need an official union position so that handling members' personal data is OK from a GDPR data protection point of view. You can design forms or set up special mailboxes for queries in good time. Some work, such as collating members' bank details, could be done in advance to speed up handling claims as they come in.

Money really matters – to win, you want the strike to be as powerful as possible, so you don't want any members feeling that they can't take part for financial reasons. You want money in members' bank accounts as quickly as possible.

Your fundraising can help you offer extra financial support on top of any official strike pay your union provides. Extra support could include money for anyone ineligible for strike pay, or hardship payments on top of strike pay. Create a small, accountable, and trustworthy team who will take any necessary decisions. Depending on the process you decide, this could involve considering sensitive information about members' personal circumstances. If your union doesn't provide strike pay, fundraising is even more important. In most cases you won't be able to give a high level of financial support to every member, so a fair and democratic way of taking decisions that members see as legitimate is critical.

Members are often reluctant to request hardship payments because they feel undeserving or because they see it as charity. It is important to explain that the purpose of these payments isn't really about them – it is to help win the dispute. You don't want people to claim if they can manage without, so that there is enough money for everyone who would otherwise be unable to participate in the action.

Some members will have been in financial trouble even before the strike, and may not have told anyone about it. You need to build the trust and have the conversations that make people feel able to talk about these problems, so they can be addressed.

You can enable and support participation by paying expenses for getting to pickets and other strike activities, and by providing drinks and refreshments to avoid people having to pay over the odds at coffee shops. The union could organise a raffle each day on the picket line with a cheap shopping voucher as a prize, which is a bit of fun, helps people financially, and encourages people to turn up.

In some circumstances, your union might ban you from giving financial support – for example if a member has been involved in action not approved by the union (e.g. refusing to cross another union's picket line, or action without a ballot). You may find other labour movement bodies that don't feel as restricted as your own union and are willing to accept donations and pass them on as required.

Another reason to raise money yourselves is that this helps workers retain democratic control over their strike. Though it is less common in recent years, when paid union staff or even senior activists control strike pay, they can use the threat of withdrawing that support to pressure workers into accepting a deal they would otherwise reject.

9) DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OF STRIKES AND TALKS

The ideal situation is where workers can discuss every issue in a dispute together and then vote on how to respond, and where workers themselves are putting their views to management. This doesn't remove the need for leadership – the level of workers' engagement will always vary and workers expect their elected reps to come up with plans, make recommendations etc.

A group of workers at a single workplace will know the reps they elect and can easily recall or replace them, there will be plenty of opportunities to raise things informally with their reps, they can have frequent in-person meetings, they can have chat groups (e.g. on WhatsApp) to share information and informally discuss things between meetings, they can elect strike committees that are broader than just their official reps, and at least some of them can usually be directly involved in negotiations.

Getting members used to taking decisions collectively is a big deal – so different from how the rest of our lives work.

We will explore the barriers to this direct democracy under four headings:

1. Practical obstacles to discussion for large or remote groups of workers
2. The process of negotiations
3. The role of union officials employed by the union (the "union bureaucracy")
4. Multiple unions

PRACTICAL OBSTACLES

While it's never as good as in-person, widespread access to video conferencing tools such as Zoom and Teams makes it much easier for remote workers to be frequently involved in discussions. But such platforms aren't great for discussion in large groups. Many people are nervous about speaking in big online meetings. Chat channels can get so busy that important points get missed. Some unions lock down interactive features, particularly for really big calls. If you want to take any decisions in big meetings, it requires really effective facilitation by people who are deeply committed to member control. If not, whoever controls the wording of poll questions has disproportionate influence.

For very large or dispersed bargaining units, some form of representative structure is necessary for many decisions – it's just not practical to discuss everything fully and poll everyone, even with the help of technology. You want this to be representative and legitimate in the eyes of members.

Where there are distinct groups (e.g. workplaces or employers), each with their own reps, there is a long tradition of those reps electing "combine committees" with representation proportionate to membership and (where applicable) to the membership of each union involved. This doesn't work where there isn't a developed rep structure covering every member, where it may be necessary to divide the bargaining unit (e.g. by region) and have members directly elect members of the combine committee. In either case it is possible to build in safeguards to ensure a diverse representation e.g. by gender, union, job seniority or whatever factors are relevant in your situation.

However you elect a local reps committee or wider combine committee, you can make it responsive to members by:

- Representatives holding frequent meetings with the members they represent to report back and get input
- Rejecting the idea of reps having "cabinet responsibility". Instead of all reps having to pretend they support every decision, they should have the right to give their own views alongside reporting the majority view, as long as they have first told the other reps that they intend to do this. This right must be exercised responsibly to avoid giving ammunition to the employer.
- The right to recall and replace representatives

THE PROCESS OF NEGOTIATIONS

When trade unionism was strongest in Britain, most bargaining was conducted by shop stewards on behalf of their workmates, with their manager – often dozens of times a year. The issues and outcomes were typically visible and understood by everyone, so there was a high degree of accountability even without any formal processes.

Union retreat since the late 1970s means that bargaining is over a narrower range of issues (often just "contractual relations" – jobs, pay, hours etc); is often no more than once a year; is often centralised, covering whole workplaces, employers or industries; and is conducted by (often unelected) officials employed by the union or a small subset of reps. All this makes negotiations more remote from and less accountable to members, discouraging member engagement with the process. Countering all this is vital.

Employers often demand that unions keep the content of negotiations secret, apart from any offer that emerges from them. Many trade unionists accept this as normal, but it puts workers at a huge disadvantage. While employer representatives can seek input from the people they represent at every stage, secrecy means that workers' representatives can't do the same. Being open doesn't prevent negotiators exploring options. It's perfectly possible to say things like "I don't know if this would be acceptable, but hypothetically if our side were to accept X, would that enable your side to offer Y?" Resistance from the union side to openness often reflects the mistaken view that outcomes depend primarily on the skill of the negotiators rather than on the balance of power. Of course a few things, such as any personal information that needs to be discussed in bargaining, do need to be kept confidential, but that is rarely a significant issue in negotiations.

Employers often try to claim they can't afford to meet workers' demands. Ask for detailed information to check their claims – 'open the books' is a demand with a long history. If you have union recognition there is a statutory right to information for collective bargaining under TULR(C)A 1992 section 181, with its own ACAS Code Of Practice. If the employer has already disclosed the information with confidentiality restrictions you won't be able to bring a complaint to the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) to force disclosure without the restrictions, so when you first make your request for information make sure you say that you won't adhere to any confidentiality restrictions unless you have agreed them up front. There are few cases where union officials or reps maintaining confidentiality is a good idea: how can union members take informed decisions without access to the information?

If the employer is genuinely in financial difficulties and workers can't see an alternative to concessions, you are faced with a big choice. You can either make concessions to ensure the viability of their employer, or you would need to escalate your demands e.g. for the operation to be taken into public ownership under workers' control and the cancellation of debts. It's all too common for organisations to be in financial difficulties because they are servicing unjustifiable debts such as those from a leveraged buyout or a Public Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme.

If you can get a member directly affected by an issue to explain that in the negotiations, more powerful and makes many managers more reluctant to be dismissive. Being present at negotiations and seeing how management behave is tremendous political education for workers.

The US organiser and writer Jane McAlevey has done a lot to popularise the idea of open bargaining (where any worker who accepts ground rules can attend negotiations) and big bargaining (with hundreds of workers in the room). These approaches help bring workers' collective power into negotiations. You can read more about these in the free Turning The Tables, or in the Rules to Win By book she and Abby Lawler wrote. The latter sets out 20 rules which can help you achieve high participation and power in negotiations. Most are equally applicable in Britain, and the strength of them is that they provide a framework to make your negotiations more participative and powerful even if you can't achieve fully big and open bargaining. Some elements need to be put in place before you get into a strike, but you can try to implement others even late in the day, such as:

1. A big, representative negotiating committee.
2. Members elect committees rather than them being appointed from above
3. Members ratify union proposals before they are made. This does not mean members agreeing "what's the least we would accept", which is damaging if it leaks back to management.
4. Create "article committees" of members who focus on each aspect of a potential agreement.
5. Issue negotiation bulletins which are simple but comprehensive and which come out before the employer's do.
6. Members should vote on any deal before it is settled.

THE UNION BUREAUCRACY

To run a big union over a long period of time requires a "bureaucracy" of paid staff. Many of these paid staff were previously worker activists, and their views are usually more radical than those of most members. Because union staff spend all day every day thinking about industrial relations, their views tend to become more entrenched than those of workers. Workers who saw their paid union officials as crazed radicals before a strike often come to see them as cautious and conservative once they start taking action.

The bureaucracy has interests which are not the same as those of workers. They are not directly affected by the outcome of disputes, and the interests of the union as an institution (its bank accounts, buildings etc) are much more important to them. They are often paid far more than the workers they represent, particularly at senior levels, and they spend their time acting as intermediaries between workers and bosses, coming under pressure from employers and the state. They often become risk-averse and prioritise a settlement over its content. A union's paid staff are usually accountable to their own management rather than to the workers on whose behalf they may be bargaining.

The centralisation of bargaining means that negotiations are often conducted entirely by paid union staff, or at least that they dominate the process. Their knowledge, expertise and experience can be useful. But you should always fight to ensure that as many as possible of the people in the room are workers affected by the outcome, elected by the workers, and that all decisions are taken by those elected representatives.

A strike educates many members about the role of the union bureaucracy, so it is an opportunity to make the case to democratise your union, including for the election of paid union officers and making them accountable to lay members.

Union retreat since the 1970s has meant that many elections of workers to union positions – as reps, branch officers etc – are uncontested. Many of the people occupying them have done so for years. Holding together organisation in difficult times can leave people tired and jaded. They are more likely to be older and in more senior positions, and some of them have lots of facility time (time off the job for union duties) which makes them more remote from the experience of other members.

To some extent, some reps heavily involved in a union may become bureaucratised too. You may find that you can work with some of the better paid officials to overcome obstruction from some of the worst activists. So don't ignore or write off the whole bureaucracy. To paraphrase Willie Gallacher, work with the paid officials where you can, but build the capacity of workers to act independently of the paid officials whenever they need to. Also, remember that the union bureaucracy isn't the main enemy. To paraphrase Farrell Dobbs, aim your fire at the bosses, not the bureaucrats; but be prepared to catch the bureaucrats in the crossfire if they stand in the way. Strong groups of workers sometimes refuse to allow paid officials into negotiations if they can't trust them to behave.

Getting members to vote on things is really powerful. Whether the problem is paid officials or conservative activists, it is much harder for them to ignore or dismiss what the members have voted for than it is to ignore what you say as an individual, no matter what your position.

A strike means workers who have never paid much attention to the union before start to do so. They learn rapidly about the issues and about trade unionism. Workers who trust their paid officials and reps at the start of a strike may come to question their approach. Because they come under pressure from employers, the state, and higher parts of the union structure, it's useful to remember a saying from the 1920s: "Watch your leaders".

A strike also makes some workers willing to get more involved. Maximising the opportunities for this increases the capacity of your team and the strength of your strike, and renews your organisation for the longer term. You can:

- Involve members in discussions, decisions and activity as much as possible
- Create lots of opportunities for members to take responsibility
- Create more tasks than the main reps could possibly cover so that people have to step up
- Set up strike committees to involve more active members in running the strike. Electing them gives a strike committee's decisions more authority, even other volunteers are allowed to take part in their discussions and work.
- Create teams for everything – for example finance, negotiations (maybe with teams for each issue), strike-day logistics and catering, campaigns and communications, building solidarity and political campaigning.

MULTIPLE UNIONS

Unions each have their own democratic structures, whatever their faults. Where a dispute involves multiple unions, there is a risk that there are no democratic structures or that relations between the unions are handled at the top, between paid union staff. This can subvert the democracy of each union and undermine your dispute.

Each union may put out press releases not mentioning the other union(s), and so understate the number of workers involved. An official from union A can say that union B will accept something, so you really have no choice, while an official from union B can say the reverse.

Solidarity, not destructive competition, is in workers' interests. If not everyone is cooperative, build relationships with those who are. Build communication and democratic cross-union structures at every level. This could include joint members' meetings and joint shop stewards' committees at workplace level, a joint combine committee across multiple workplaces or employers, and joint strike committees during disputes.

10) SETTLEMENTS AND SELL-OUTS

Within a capitalist society, strikes end with settlements. A deal could be a victory for one side but more often includes a degree of compromise. No deal is final – management are always under pressure to get more for less from workers. Strike settlements are like peace treaties agreeing new borders between warring parties – they reflect the balance of power at a particular time, and if either party thinks the balance has changed in their favour, they may try to push the borders further back.

How do we judge what is a win? It isn't very useful to think about the outcome in isolation. You could get an above-inflation pay rise from a highly profitable company without taking action when you had enormous bargaining power and it would be a missed opportunity. You could save a few jobs after a hard fight when a non-unionised company went bankrupt and it would be a great achievement.

Any assessment of an outcome should take account of the balance of forces and the impact of the deal on the organisation and future combativity of the workers. If you have fought as hard as you can and attempts to widen or escalate a strike fail, there is no shame in making concessions to "retreat in good order" to avoid a bad defeat. But we should never dress up a deal with serious weaknesses as a "good" one, but rather the best we can achieve this round, stressing that we will be back for the rest.

Your judgement of an offer shouldn't just be short-term. Employers often include divisive elements in offers, knowing that this will undermine future participation in union campaigns. Worst of all is the creation of a two-tier workforce, where new starters get worse terms and conditions. After a few years you can be sure the employer will become terribly concerned about how unfair this is for younger employees and want to "level down" everyone's contracts.

Look for opportunities to include people who aren't direct employees in any wins. For example, can you demand improvements for agency and subcontracted workers? This makes it harder for the employer to use them to undermine your power, and lays the basis for future campaigns to get them insourced, which makes you stronger.

The term "sell-out" is often used when people are unhappy with the outcome of a dispute. It comes from the idea that someone (usually the union bureaucracy) has "sold you out". The term can be justified if the agreement has been reached without the endorsement of members, if members accepted it when denied good information about their options, when official support was withheld or its withdrawal was threatened. Where workers haven't suffered a defeat but more could have been won with better backing from the union officials or more combativity from other sections, it could be described as being "sold short". But not every bad deal is a sell-out or a sell-short. It is just as often a reflection of our weakness.

After every battle there is a battle for interpretation. How workers understand what happened and what lessons they draw from a dispute shapes how well equipped you are for the next battle. That's why employers often put out comms after disputes pretending that they always intended to do the thing you fought for, or that they did it for some reason other than your action. They want to put workers off ever fighting again. We should celebrate our successes. The more involved workers have been in the struggle and the negotiations, the more resistant they are to management spin.

It is important to be honest about the outcome of disputes. Unions have a tendency to present almost every deal as a great victory. This makes the members involved distrust union communications, and misleads other workers who could learn something from the dispute. Some argue that this is better than undermining the confidence of workers by telling the truth, but false confidence is dangerous – if we

have weaknesses we need to understand and correct them. However, playing down what has been won because we aren't happy with an overall deal is also a mistake which does undermine workers' confidence.

Many deals could be described honestly something like this: "Workers are better off because we took action. We won A, B and C. Some aspects of the deal are not good: D and E are bad for some of us. We could have won more if F, G and H, so we are going to do X, Y and Z over the next few months so that we can win more next time, so get involved."

Unions are under no obligation to put every offer made by employers to a full ballot of members. Repeatedly doing this for offers which aren't likely to be accepted can waste lots of time and energy. Neither is there any requirement to suspend action while voting takes place, let alone for negotiations. Any suspension of action is a choice. It can be a useful bargaining chip, but it can also lose momentum in a dispute.

It's common for those leading disputes to recommend offers which many workers feel are worse than could be achieved. Whether or not you can organise enough opposition to reject an offer, it's worth trying. A campaign against a bad offer can be an opportunity to identify and organise those workers and activists who back a more militant approach. In the longer term, "building a side" like this can be the basis for a challenge to the current leadership, whether that is at branch level or nationally. In some cases you may be able to use union structures to coordinate opposition, for example by one or more branches calling a conference to oppose it. In other cases workers have had to create "Say No!" campaigns or rely on left networks to put leaflets in to workplaces. Whatever you do, try to build permanent networks of the "militant minority" which is trying to win over the majority, rather than just focusing on the immediate problem.

You need to create forums to discuss and agree alternative strategies being proposed by the current leadership, if they are not up to scratch. It's far more effective if you can challenge bad strategies and propose alternatives before or during a dispute, rather than just complaining about the outcome. However, putting most of your energy into battling rival groups within the union is a mistake. You build support by building the union and showing that you are more effective at taking on the employer. That is likely to mean working with the current leadership at the same time as organising to replace them. Someone from a radical group in the Chicago Teachers' Union said they "did what we thought the union should have been doing", which built enough support to eventually take it over and lead a successful strike.

If there are any concerns that the managers may try to pick on reps or other workers following a dispute, it is important to include a "no recriminations" clause in the settlement where the employer promises no detriment for any action taken in connection with the campaign, which could include things posted on social media, said in public, or done at pickets and protests. Such clauses can't offer total protection, but they make it much easier to mobilise support should the employer break them.

11) GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

This guide has referred to "union retreat". Union membership in Britain has halved since its peak in the late-1970s. Workers suffered enormous defeats in the 1980s and there have been huge changes in industries and occupations. One of the consequences is that union members often see their membership in "transactional" terms: as if they are buying a "service", perhaps thought of as "protection at work" from "the union", seen as a third party. During a dispute, workers may talk of what "the union" will "tell us to do". Union officials often encourage this way of thinking, which suits those with institutional power within unions.

We need to overcome this "service" mentality and replace it with one where workers see the union as a weapon in their hands. Workers' own collective organisation is the heart of a union, not its offices and staff. This change isn't easy, you are undoing years of damage to our movement. If you raise some of the ideas discussed in this guide, such as open bargaining, within your union, you may meet opposition or even hostility from existing union officials. Don't let that demoralise you. Get together with other people in your workplace, industrial sector, and wider union who want to see a more combative, democratic approach, and raise the profile and influence of these ideas.

Despite defeats and retreat, the labour movement remains the largest mass democratic movement in society. It is the only movement organised at the point of production, in the workplaces where value is generated in capitalist society. Workers make society move, and by organising where we work, we can change it.