CONDUCTING A LOCAL UNION MEETING

The local membership meeting is the heart of the democratic trade union, and its decisions are the pulse of the organization.

It would be hard to over-emphasize the importance and value of local union meetings. It is here that the union's membership makes decisions concerning the goals, activities, and direction of the local.

One of the most important leadership tasks is to make membership meetings interesting and exciting events, where members--new and old alike--feel welcome to attend and participate.

A membership meeting should be a forum to:

• Inform the membership (and learn from the membership) about what is happening, what might be happening, and why.
• Conduct union business by allowing the membership to discuss issues and make decisions on implementing the local's policies and programs.
• Build unity and solidarity within the local.

A Checklist: Productive Meetings

☐ Carefully plan and organize the meeting's agenda, ahead of time. This is the task of the President and the Executive Board.
☐ Provide the membership with advance notice. Use leaflets, newsletters, bulletin boards, public service radio & television--or a combination of methods.
☐ Be sure the meeting place is comfortable, convenient, and accessible to all members.
☐ Start the meeting on time!
☐ Run the meeting efficiently, smoothly, and democratically.
☐ End the meeting on time!

Parliamentary Procedure

One of the President's main responsibilities is chairing the local meeting. A meeting's business is conducted through the process of the membership recommending, discussing, and deciding on a course of action for each issue that is brought forward. This is all done by following a set of rules, called parliamentary procedure, which ensures that decisions are made in an orderly and democratic manner. (And though the President chairs most meetings, all union leaders should know the "ground rules".)

The foundation of parliamentary procedure rests on these four cornerstones of democracy:

• During a meeting, every member has the same rights--and responsibilities--as every other member.
Only one question is considered at a time--this avoids confusion.
The majority rules--always.
Individual members have rights that the majority cannot take away--namely, the right to be heard, no matter how unpopular the opinion may be.

Here is a brief description of how parliamentary procedure works:
A MOTION--seeking the local to take some course of action--is made from the floor.
The Chair asks if there is a SECOND for the motion. (For a motion to be discussed, it must be seconded from the floor).
The Chair asks if there is DISCUSSION of the motion.
When RECOGNIZED by the Chair, members may SPEAK TO (discuss) the motion.
When the discussion has run its course or has been CLOSED, the chair requests and conducts a vote on the motion.

During discussion, motions may be AMENDED by the membership--through discussion and a vote. Once made, all motions must be DISPOSED OF in some fashion--by being PASSED, DEFEATED, TABLED, REFERRED, or PLACED IN COMMITTEE.

(For more detailed information about parliamentary procedure, see Robert's Rules of Order; How To Chair A Meeting.

Making A Motion

The meeting has been opened. The minutes have been read. Business is halted. Everyone begins to speak at once. This would mean bedlam; so a procedure has been agreed upon to start the process and to keep it smooth. The minutes can only be accepted if a motion is made. Motions are the channels through which all business moves. To make a motion is to make a proposal. It is a verbal, orderly way of initiating action.

Thus, if a member wishes to make a proposal of any kind, he rises, is "recognized" by the chair through word or sign, and says, for example, "Brother Chairman, I move that we hear from Brother Jones’ Committee the facts about the change in the shift schedule and how it may affect our members."

In effect, this gives the meeting an idea for consideration. If someone rises to say "I second the motion," the meeting must discuss the proposal. If no one seconds it, it cannot be discussed and the meeting proceeds to other business.

A motion is "in order" if:
• It is related to the business present before the meeting.
• It conforms to the fixed order of business.
• It is in harmony with the rules of order. For example, a motion to give aid to Tom Jones, who is unemployed, is not "in order" during a discussion about the payment of bills.
If a motion does not meet these tests, the Chair should rule it out of order. But the Chairperson may be wrong; therefore, any member has the right to appeal the Chair’s ruling. To this Brother Smith says, "I rise to appeal the decision of the Chair."

Brother Brown says, "I second the appeal." At that moment, the Chair sheds its power. The Vice-Chair or Secretary must now preside. Brother Smith is then allowed to explain his reasons for appeal. The Chairperson is allowed to rise and explain the ruling. All other business stops. This motion is not debatable. The temporary Chair puts the question, "Shall the ruling of the Chair be sustained?"

This question is now voted upon in the usual fashion. If the Chair is defeated, the original motion is in order. If sustained, the meeting goes forward to new business. In any event, the chairperson does not preside over the meeting pending settlement.

The Role of the Chairperson

The ability to run an effective meeting requires more than knowing all the "Ins" and "Outs" of parliamentary procedure. The skilled chairperson learns, through experience and by using good old-fashioned common sense, how to apply those rules for the benefit of the membership.

During the course of any meeting, the chairperson must make many decisions when applying parliamentary procedures. In making those decisions, the chairperson walks a fine line. If the Chair is too technical and precise, members may feel intimidated and won't participate in the discussions. On the other hand, if the Chair is too easy-going and doesn't exercise proper control, the meeting can easily bog down and very little will be accomplished.

A Checklist: Chairing A Meeting

- Make sure all business is in the form of a motion (which must be seconded), and that all motions are stated clearly so everyone understands. If necessary, ask the member to restate an unclear motion.
- Be certain that members have enough information to make a decision on any motion.
- Keep the "long-winded" member from talking too much and dominating the discussion— if necessary, establish and enforce a time limit for each speaker.
- Protect every member's right to speak—even when he or she is expressing an unpopular opinion.
- During the course of a meeting, educate members about parliamentary procedure—don't let it be used to confuse them. For example, when a member speaks out of turn, don't simply say, "You're out of order." Explain why the person is out of order and explain when and how the member can make his/her point.
- If you wish to speak on a motion, turn the gavel over to the Vice-President until action on that motion is completed. This ensures the "neutrality of the chair."
Chairing A Meeting In 10 Easy Steps

The local President has the responsibility of chairing two types of meetings: membership meetings and Executive Board meetings. While no two meetings will have the exact same activities, here is a ten-step guide to conducting an effective and productive meeting.

**Step 1 -- Call to Order**
President: Rap your gavel and declare: "I call this meeting to order!" "Brothers and Sisters, a sufficient number of officers and members being present, I declare this meeting duly convened and qualified to consider and transact such business as may come before it that is recognized by the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes Division-International Brotherhood of Teamsters. All who are not members will please retire."

**Step 2 -- Roll Call of Officers**
"The Recording Secretary will call the roll of officers."
The Recording Secretary then calls the roll in a clear voice, providing pauses for each officer's response.

**Step 3 -- Reading of Minutes**
"The Recording Secretary will read the minutes from the previous meeting."
The Recording Secretary then reads the minutes in a loud, clear voice.
"Are there any additions or corrections to the minutes? (pause) If not, the minutes stand approved as read."
If there are corrections, ask for unanimous consent to approve the minutes as corrected; or ask "Does the Chair hear a motion to approve the minutes as corrected?"
The last phrase is used when a member has made a correction in the minutes. In a similar way, all reports made by members or by committees are "received" or are "accepted." To "receive" a report means simply to give it to the secretary. To "accept" a report is to furnish it with the approval of the whole body.

**Step 4 -- Reading of Correspondence**
"The Recording Secretary will read the correspondence."
Letters requiring action by the membership should be discussed by the Executive Board before the meeting. At the membership meeting, the Recording Secretary should read these letters along with any recommendations for action by the Board.
Ask "Does the Chair hear a motion to accept the recommendation of the Board?"
The Recording Secretary should summarize any lengthy or routine letters.

**Step 5 -- Officer Reports**
"We will now have the officers' reports."
The President's Report: Should include any actions taken by the Executive Board at its last meeting and the agenda for this meeting. Copies of the agenda and minutes of the most recent Executive Board meeting may be distributed. The President might also report on the local's priorities and what direction and action the local should take.

The Secretary-Treasurer's Report: Should be photocopied and distributed at the meeting. The Secretary-Treasurer then reviews the report and answers any questions.

Other officers: Reports should be provided by those (eg. the Vice-President or Executive Board members) who have responsibility for a particular activity in the local. After each report: "Does the Chair hear a motion to accept the report of the [office title]?

Step 6 -- Reports of Committees and Staff
"We will now have committee and staff reports."

Committee Reports: Committee chairperson should describe the committee's activities and/or progress on a project; the report may include a recommended action which the committee wishes the membership to take. After each report: "You have heard the report of the [name of the committee]. Is there a motion to accept the report?"

Staff Report [if applicable]: Should include current information of interest to the membership. Examples would be reports on grievances, contract negotiations, organizing, or Council activities.

Step 7 -- Unfinished Business
"Is there any unfinished business?"
This includes any items left over or referred from a previous meeting, which require action by the membership. A motion from the floor can be made which addresses a specific topic.

Step 8 -- New Business
"Is there any new business?"
This includes items raised at this meeting which were not necessarily on the agenda, but which require membership action. A motion from the floor may be made addressing a specific issue.

Step 9 -- Good and Welfare
"Is there any good and welfare?"
This provides the members an opportunity to discuss the general welfare of the union. Such activities as guest speakers, acknowledgments, updates on a member who is ill, etc. can take place during this portion of the meeting.

Step 10 -- Adjournment
The last of all motions is the motion to adjourn:
"Do I hear a motion to adjourn?"

Brother Jones : "I move that we adjourn."

Brother Hunt : "I second the motion."

President : "There being no further business before our Lodge, we will proceed to close. By virtue of my office, I now declare this meeting adjourned."

A motion for adjournment is not debatable. If passed, this concludes the membership meeting.