BUILDING A POWERFUL UNISON IN THE NORTH WEST

10 steps to successful organising
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The UNISON North West Region is working with members and activists to organise workplaces across the North West. An organised workplace has:

✅ Member participation in union activity
✅ Union activists who are workplace leaders
✅ A high density of union membership
✅ A highly visible union presence

The result is a strong and sustainable union where members work collectively to address issues of concern and win improvements for union members.

As the organised union grows in collective strength the balance of power shifts from employer to worker. As even more workers join and become active, the employer learns to work more constructively with the union. An effective bargaining machinery ensures that workplace issues are resolved, reducing the reliance on individual disciplinary and grievance proceedings.

Members set the priorities of the union, elect their workplace leaders and then commit to support them in campaigning activity. This way, the union grows in strength and confidence and can win for union members.

10 STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL ORGANISING

UNISON North West is directing energy and resources into achieving organised workplaces and building strong workplace unions. Here are 10 steps to successful organising. Do them all and you will achieve the organised workplace and union members will start winning.

1. Pick a target and campaign issue

Identify the areas where UNISON needs to be stronger. Think about what level of resources we have and where those resources could have a positive impact. Then go and engage with workers in those areas. Have as many one-to-one conversations as possible. Listen to the views and concerns of all workers, not just existing members, and use those conversations to identify potential organising issues.

When we have identified an area where the union needs to be stronger, which is a realistic organising opportunity, and where there is a widely, deeply felt issue that workers will come together to resolve, we have picked our organising target and campaign issue.

2. Assemble a workplace organising team

Start with existing activists. Explain what it means to achieve an organised workplace. Invite them to help with the planning and delivery of the organising campaign. Then reach out beyond the existing activist base. Who are the existing workplace leaders? Who do workers respect and turn to for advice and support? They might not be an existing activist. They might not even be a union member. Remember that “like-recruits-like” so we need to build a team that is representative of the target workforce. Identifying workplace leaders and bringing them into the union is key to achieving the organised workplace.
3. Map the target workplace

The team will need to identify the location, department, and job title of every worker. Then highlight the members and existing activists. Areas of union strength and weakness will become clear. Mapping is an excellent way to involve members and potential activists in organising activity, so the map should be developed in a clear and accessible format. Find a way to categorise the potential members and workplace leaders we need to bring into the union. Look at how workers interact. Who speaks with whom? When and where do workers get together? Don’t forget shift workers and those who work off site. As more members are recruited and new activists and leaders identified the map needs to be continually updated. This allows us to see the organised workplace taking shape and to identify where work is still needed.

4. Plan to escalate and win

A workplace will never become organised by accident. We need a plan. The overall goal is to build a strong workplace union. But we need to set specific and measurable objectives on the way, including getting a win on the identified organising issue. Our map shows the current state of the workplace union. Set a series of realistic targets for growth in membership and activism around planned activity and then place them on a realistic timeline. Start small. A petition, survey, or sticker day lets workers know that a UNISON campaign has started and provides a useful tool to initiate one-to-one conversations. However a petition or survey on its own will not shift the balance of power towards workers. Plan to escalate activity as the campaign progresses. Factor in regular reviews so that the team can monitor progress and take measures to address obstacles and challenges as they arise.

5. One-to-one conversations

A consistent theme throughout all of these steps is the one-to-one conversation. An organised workplace is built on hundreds, or thousands of conversations. It is how we identify issues, recruit new members, get members active, and identify workplace leaders. There is no substitute or short cut. There are some basic techniques that will help though. Be clear in your own mind what you want from each conversation. Anticipate likely concerns or objections and think about how you will respond. Most importantly listen, listen, and then listen some more. It is amazing what we can learn from people when we ask open questions and then just let them speak.

6. Develop a communication strategy

Members and potential members only know that UNISON is active if we tell them. Support the core strategy of one-to-one communication with social, digital and more traditional forms of media, such as flyers and brief but regular bulletins. If the organising team does not have these skills then we will need to reach out and involve someone who does. Develop a core message that is positive and easily and quickly understood. Restrict flyer text to 150 words to set out the key points. We can always provide a website link to further detail for those who want to know more. Make the issue real by including a picture and quote from an affected worker. Be careful not to use language that presents the union as an external organisation. Remember, we are the union. And most importantly include an action. If a flyer is not asking members to support a specific campaign activity then it is not helping to organise the workplace.

7. Be open and inclusive

UNISON exists for the benefit of members, but we cannot achieve the organised workplace unless we reach out to those who have not yet joined. Non-members need to know that they are welcome to join us. That means sometimes inviting non-members into meetings and events. Non-members are not entitled to support, advice, or a vote on union matters. However, any campaign should plan to give non-members an insight into what a great union we are,
what they are missing by excluding themselves, and how much stronger we would be if they join us. Unity is strength!

8. Support and develop workplace activists and leaders

An organising and campaigning approach attracts UNISON members who want to be active and involved. However, new activists will quickly lose their enthusiasm for the union if they are left feeling unwelcome or unsupported. Buddy up new activists with experienced and enthusiastic members of the branch or organising team. Set small, achievable but important tasks such as mapping their work area, recruiting some colleagues, distributing union information, etc. Make sure they are introduced to other UNISON activists and guided through the branch structure. Keep them active and enthused whilst awaiting their activist training and ensure that they continue to be supported and developed after their training. Before we know it they will be another invaluable member of the branch team.

9. Take the campaign outside of the workplace

Sometimes organising is the workplace is not enough. To win we may also need to identify an employer’s vulnerabilities outside of the workplace. That way we can identify potential allies to help exert additional pressure where it counts. As a public service union, UNISON is in a unique position to build community alliances with service users such as students, patients, and parents or other stakeholders such as politicians, local media, regulatory bodies and community groups. Community campaigning can never be a substitute for workplace organisation, but it can help the organised workplace to win the campaign.

10. Celebrate the win

Once we have completed the steps above we will have achieved an organised workplace and built a strong union. We may have won our campaign already. If not we soon will. When that happens - celebrate! An employer rarely admits it when the union wins. They find other ways to dress up the change. So we must actively promote our victory. Not just to those who have been directly involved, but to the wider union through social media and branch and regional UNISON websites. By celebrating our win we are not only congratulating our active members on a successful campaign. We are reinforcing our new found strength and confidence and publicising a union that workers will want to join.

Organising against privatisation

Since patient transport services in Greater Manchester were privatised almost 3 years ago, we have successfully recruited the new staff into UNISON.

During the recent re-tendering process, NWAS UNISON ran a huge postcard campaign to highlight the issues with ATSL who won the contract in 2013, asking the public for their support. Prior to the ATSL staff transferring back to NWAS, we were able to negotiate improvements to their terms, conditions and pay rates. Credit has to go to the hard working reps who have looked after our members during the period of privatisation.

- Jeff Gorman, NWAS Branch

Want to know more?

To find out more about the work of UNISON North West and how to get involved, or for advice and support to organise within your UNISON workplace or branch, please contact your UNISON branch or Regional Organiser via UNISON Direct on 0800 0 857 857 or visit the organising pages of the UNISON NW Website at www.unisonnw.org