

### **Encourage opposition and discussion in the club**

Unity makes us strong. Try to decide what you want and fight for it together. That's something we tell our members a lot. But to get a solid unity, it's essential to have a free discussion where nothing is taken for granted.

We almost always use anonymous voting regarding both big and small questions. Sometimes members say that they think it unnecessary to write ballots, since we already know what we think. But using anonymous votes is a way of telling each and every member that we want to know what they think. In anonymous voting you can't listen half-heartedly to the discussions and vote like your buddy or the chairman. You have to think for yourself.

When we count votes, we often find that one or some have voted differently than the majority - even if we have seemed to agree in the discussions. That's an important reminder that there are many different opinions, and that we should always bring that to the surface and into the debate.

Imagine a meeting where a member argues for an opinion that is deviant from the opinion of the majority. The member is talked and voted down. Maybe he feels stupid after this, and won't have the courage to say something unpopular again. We try to fight that effect. When we make a discussion, we applaud - for the minority. We underline that everyone who comes with proposals and participates in our discussions and debates are coming with very important input for the club.

A lot of times, we reach new conclusions and decisions, because of the discussions we've had. With time, we might be shown that the minority was right.

### **Avoid being sucked into the 'union-world'**

We sometimes talk about 'pacifying union-courses'. That might sound provocative - knowledge is power, the saying goes. So can education really be pacifying? Yes, if you go to a bunch of union-courses where you aren't taught to trust your members and use grassroots unionism, then you are learning something else.

This something else might be the union-world that exists in itself and for itself - courses, tools, socialising with other representatives, the party.

'The union' becomes something you take a trip to, not the slow work back at your home-club with your grumpy colleagues. If that happens, you're fucked! The union-world must never be confused with union-struggle. Union-struggle is something you do with your colleagues, nothing else. Everything else is just frills. And those frills might grow into an air-castle if you haven't built a basis at work.

### **To sum it up - we're trying to make the union into an organisation for struggle**

This doesn't mean struggles and strikes every day, but fighting together for our interests.

We don't ask our colleagues about their political opinions. We take it for granted that since we work together and share the same conditions, we have common interests and will fight together. And when we have faith in people's common interests and common sense, that's almost always the way it ends up. It's with that faith and trust in each other that you win struggles. That is what you could proudly call unity on the basis of class-struggle!

It might sound as if we're sitting on high horses, but this are really simple things - its bread and solidarity!

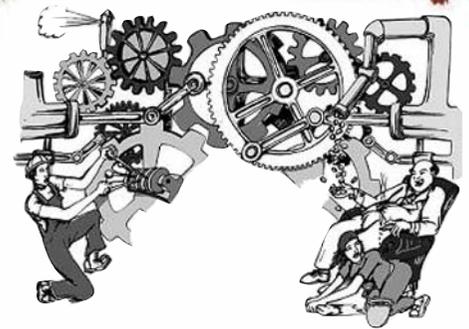
**Translators note:** *Finally got the translation of this text finished - there remains some idiosyncracies in structure that we have left from the Swedish text, but we have altered some of the terms to make it understandable to an Anglo audience. I'm really pleased we got it done, it's a really good text. The author is describing how she applies a grassroots unionism style to organising within a mainstream trade union and brings up some really interesting points - I particularly liked the criticism of 'the union world' (something that I think applies to mainstream and syndicalist unions alike), and the discussion of voting and organising with the whole workforce rather than just the 'most advanced' workers.*

#### **Text found at:**

★ Notes from the Swedish Workers' Movement ★  
[swedishzine.wordpress.com](http://swedishzine.wordpress.com)

#### **Contact:**

More copies can be downloaded from:  
[www.zabalaza.net](http://www.zabalaza.net)



# **Grassroots Unionism in the Workplace**



**by Frances  
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**W**orking conditions are getting worse and attacks on workers similar to what we on Bagarn (the Baker) had to go through in 1995 are nothing unique, on the contrary. And surely there are others fighting against it. But what is heard most of all is that nothing can be done, that such are the times. But it is that kind of spirit that creates such times!

### ***How come we took the struggle and won the way we did?***

I think the answer lies in the form of unionism that our club uses. Maybe we would have reacted and risen up against the harsh attacks, even without organising in that way. But would we have been able to resist the threats for such a long time? Would we who negotiated trust the members to keep going? Would the members have confidence in us struggling on? I honestly don't think so. We needed all the experience and all the methods we had gotten during several years.

### ***The most important experience we have is that you have to dare to trust in the members.***

We at Bagarn are just as fuzzy, slow, bickering and impossible as all workers are – and together we have the same enormous strength that all other workers have.

When we who lead the local union have had confidence in that strength, we have succeeded. When we have missed out on it, forgotten or not had courage to address the members, we've fucked up. We had enough experiences of both success and failures to handle a stretched-out struggle.

### ***We gained those experiences during the years we have tried to develop a struggling, independent union ruled by the members.***

Our method and our goal is that people should be active, in movement – that is grassroots unionism! The people should make the decisions and the people should act. The ideas we develop should come out of this movement. The organisation should be set in movement, going from experience to experience, from worker to worker, from members to the elected representatives and back again.

### ***Inform the members about everything – speak clearly***

We do this, amongst other channels of communication, through our info-paper *Livstecken* (Life-sign). It's a simple

A4-paper handed out to all members where we try to inform everyone about what's going on.

### ***Ask, don't guess, what the members think that the club should be doing.***

We use members-referendums, surveys and meetings where we discuss a single issue. When we develop our demands and suggestions, we often run them through a cycle of meeting, survey, meeting and referendum. If the company makes a move or comes with a suggestion, then we have to reach our members to the same extent, and ask them what they think about the company's latest move and how the club should act. Each time we have thought that we could skip this step, we have overlooked something important – and let our members down.

Not another referendum! Our colleagues sigh sometimes. But it's better that they complain about us nagging them, than us not asking them. We would rather ask too often than too seldom. And it is right to put demands on the members, to show them that everything depends on them. That it is strength for the club to have a members-decision to back it up, and to vote about the deals with the company, probably doesn't need to be explained.

We don't just ask what demands and suggestions our members have, but also how important the different demands are. If you ask – what do you want?, you easily get a bunch of tough suggestions. But you also have to ask – are you prepared to fight for it? What does this mean for the company, what will their countermove be? And then what, how far are we willing to go?

Questions like that can make the members soften up their demands – but we make people aware of the fact that we aren't getting anything else than what we are prepared to fight for!

### ***Don't underestimate the members!***

It's absolutely fundamental to speak with everyone, to build from the grassroots, and to avoid building a group out of likeminded people or the ones with 'the highest revolutionary awareness'. If you only focus on those forming 'the front' and race away with them, you'll be stretching the workers-collective out like a rubberband. It will break or lash back.

But if you succeed in getting those who are at 'the back' of the workers-collective to get moving, they will push everyone else in front of them!

We assume that all members can take responsibility for their colleagues and the club after their own conditions/pre-requisites. During some years, we tried that idea out by appointing each and every member to the role of

contact-person (contact agent, contact proxy, contact-ombudsman?). They took turns of one month each to be representative for a group of 12 members.

Everyone took on the task, even those who said they would never take on a union assignment – when the assignment was something that everyone took turns doing, their attitude changed.

But getting the time to gather and discuss with the 'contact-person of the month' turned out to be too hard, because of all our different working-hours.

That meant that what they were able to do as contact persons was quite limited, and they ended up mostly just distributing *Livstecken* (the union paper mentioned above). We gave up on our trial. But it wasn't because of the members, but because we failed to adapt the organisation to the members real capacity!

### ***When in negotiations – bring in the people whom it concerns***

When we negotiate we are much better off bringing people who know all the details of the issue from their own experiences. Then, we add experienced negotiators from the board of the local union and that gives us the best results. We also show that the union is the members' organisation. And being a part of the negotiations is the best school for future elected representatives – which is all of our members!

### ***Return to the members when things go badly***

In union education we are taught how to go to the ombudsman and to central negotiations. And yes, it does happen that we take things to a central level, and we have taken up conflicts in the labour court a couple of times, but that's not what's important.

When we say that we go to higher court, we mean the members. That's what we're supposed to do in any situation where we're in doubt on how to act – if negotiations grind to a halt, we're supposed to report back to our members and ask – are we gonna back off? Or stand our ground? What are you prepared for?

### ***Use all proposals and initiatives, including criticism.***

This should be obvious. But you have to remember this when you're all busy with what's already going on, and the members propose something. But you have to remember that there's always a reason for criticism, so be glad that you get to hear it – if you don't it's still there, but growing without any dialogue.