

Activity of Shop Stewards' Councils

By Laurie Carmichael, assistant National secretary.

A decision, vital to the future of our Union was taken at the 1976 National Conference — "To form a national network of area Shop Stewards Councils".

As soon as Conference decisions were ratified, steps were taken by the National Council and by State Councils to convene meetings of Shop Stewards, explain the purpose and to get the Stewards Area Councils elected and functioning.

The principal task now confronting us, is to solve the numerous problems of transforming the framework created, into a dynamic and effective force of activists.

It cannot be assumed that Shop Stewards Councils, can, of necessity, solve these problems themselves and certainly not in the shortness of time available to meet the unfolding viciousness in the strategy of exploitation and anti-trade union confrontation coming from the Fraser Government.

There is an urgent responsibility that falls upon all those who see the enormous dangers in the current situation, to also see the central significance of this rank and file organisation and to apply ourselves with real despatch in coming to grips with the problems of these new and therefore inevitably inexperienced Councils.

Solutions to the problems involved requires consideration of those skills and practices that have emerged from experience on past successful activities of the union including the experience of active Shop Stewards.

UNDERSTANDING "IN DEPTH" ABOUT UNION POLICIES AND CAMPAIGNS

All experience shows that the more Shop Stewards understand, not only the words of union policies and campaigns, but also the inner meaning of them, the more determined they become in creatively applying themselves to achieving the objectives and solving the problems involved.

This treatise can only provide some theoretical assistance but the initiatives of dozens of activists can effectively fill the gaps.

The principal starting points of activity at the present time are Defence of Jobs, Defence of Wages, Defence of the Unions.

These flow from an analysis made by the Union's National Council of the extending crisis in Australia. The effects of the multinational corporations' power when Labor was in office from 1973-75, of the commitment that the Fraser Government has to the super exploitation of the multinational corps., with the use of Government policies and agencies to assist in this exploitation, including a substantial shift away from manufacturing industry in Australia.

The Government is not only directly serving this process of exploitation, but is also well embarked on a vicious dictatorial destruction of anything that gets

in the way. Particularly the trade unions with a ramified program of amendments to the Arbitration Act that aims to make the unions an appendage of Government policy acting against their own members.

On the Defence of Jobs, the particular campaign projected by the National Council is the "Peoples Economic Program" which propounds grounds for an economic framework that can meet the needs of the Australian people.

On wages the main campaign projected is around the various awards and overcoming the restrictive effects of the hoax of "so called" indexation.

Defence of the Unions has to be intimately interwoven into Defence of Jobs and Wages but must receive distinct attention in itself in the course of dealing with the economy and living standards.

These campaigns are clearly in the workers' interest, they need urgent discussion and development in particular industries, social areas and localities.

This needs to be done in a way so that as quickly as is possible the workers can nullify the Government's strategy and can begin active prosecution of their own positive demands that go from defence to winning new advances.

Experience of Shop Stewards meetings and Councils already shows that the meaning of the situation in which the workers today find themselves is very quickly grasped. How the workers are affected in their own employment by Government policy and imports and how this is used by employers to attack wages, living and working standards.

To Shop Stewards, hearing the Union's analysis, the facts speak very quickly for themselves. Daily press, T.V., Government and Employer arguments are quickly seen as lies and deception.

They eagerly grasp the meaning but whilst some want to take immediate action, others doubt their own ability to convey the picture to their members. There is no doubt however that as further discussion and experience grows, the desire "to get on with it" will grow also.

In any case a capacity to "get on with it" requires consideration of "other" experience in addition to the necessity for determination.

This "other" experience relates to the "know how" of the way to work around campaigns. "How" to get moving and "how" to keep it moving on the job where the issue is finally determined as to whether any campaign can be brought to success.

HOW TO WORK AROUND UNION CAMPAIGNS

Experience gained in the widespread practice of many successful and effective union activists shows

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that the problems fall mainly under the following headings.

1. How does a union activist start around a matter.
 2. How is a matter handled to win a significant majority.
 3. How are proposals for activity advanced.
 4. What particular forms of action are appropriate.
 5. Developing activity one step at a time.
 6. How is a further step in activity prepared.
 7. How to raise numerous issues whilst maintaining concentration on a central issue.
 8. Tactics and policy.
- Discussing these problems one at a time:

GETTING STARTED

This should be done on the Shop Committee if there is one, or alternatively with those members that are known for their strong support for union campaigns and policies. It is not good practice to spring something onto the workers and ignore the necessity of "pre-action" discussion.

Use a Newsletter, an article in the Union Journal or newspaper. Show it to colleagues, ask them to read it and discuss it with them over lunch or a drink at the "local".

If there is a particular union call for resolutions, telegrams etc., ensure that there is "pre-action" discussion as to the reason why.

DEVELOPING DISCUSSION TO WIN A MAJORITY

It is important to develop "pre-action" discussion on as wide a scale as is possible. If this results in a debate we should welcome it to achieve even greater clarity. If issues remain unclear, further materials should be sought to assist in getting clarity.

It cannot be assumed that there will be clarity at first and discussion must not be impatient. We can be confident that if patiently but persistently explained, union policy or a campaign will win support because it has been formulated precisely to be in the interests of the workers.

There are several ways of generating and maintaining discussion and debate until adequate widespread clarity is achieved.

Utilise newspaper cuttings, newsletters particularly, cartoons etc. Also utilise an audio cassette from the union on the subject or get one made.

At a slightly more advanced level initiate a petition, questionnaire or a survey where members' opinions are sought. It is rare that these things achieve any results in themselves but their principal usefulness is their ability to create discussion, debate and clarity.

PUTTING FORWARD ADVANCED ACTIVITY

A point for more developed activity will not arise at all if the discussion is cut short too soon or if it is not sustained to the point where developed activity becomes possible.

A measure roughly is about two thirds support or

better and it somewhat depends also upon the character of the activity envisaged.

THE APPROPRIATE FORM OF ACTION

In general the appropriate form of action depends upon:

a) The level of discussion and conviction achieved

b) The issue being pursued

c) The particular circumstances —

(i) On the job itself

(ii) The overall and wider circumstances that have to be taken into account if not immediately, certainly at some stage of development.

This is discussed separately in material prepared by Bro. Max Ogden — in some detail.

DEVELOPING ACTIVITY ONE STEP AT A TIME?

There are two sides to this question.

On the first side —

As a general principle it is not a good practice to try and "jump" over stages of development and this requires careful consideration about what "stages" there are to be negotiated. Accurate estimation of the "stages" can be decisive in working through a campaign.

The **speed** at which it is possible to proceed from one stage to another is a different matter however, and depends upon how rapidly each stage is grasped by the workers and how anxious that somewhere around a 2/3 majority is "to get on with it".

Sometimes it may appear that moving forward a stage should be undertaken before something like a 2/3 majority has yet been won but again as a general principle it is **not** good practice.

This frequently produces tensions between some of the more impatient militant workers and those whose task it is to proceed in the most democratic and most effective manner possible.

These militant workers are very important of course but can be quite mistaken in their impatience. Efforts should be made to enlist their support in the essential task of winning a significant majority.

On the second side, if matters are not pressed forward with some sense of urgency some workers can "drop their bundle" and want to "give it all away" despite the daily reality of life which increasingly tells us that the workers cannot afford to "give it all away".

The pace of development of a campaign from stage to stage therefore is not set either by those workers most advanced in the union commitment on the one hand or by those who are hardly likely to have any at all on the other. Essentially it is set by the degree to which the most advanced workers are prepared to work together and win a significant majority at each correctly estimated stage.

PROVIDING FOR THE NEXT STEP

The seeds of the next following step in a campaign have to be included within a step being currently undertaken.

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In other words each step should logically follow from the one before it.

For this to occur it is necessary to have perspective about the likely overall direction of a campaign and its likely stages of development. This is a vital issue of very great importance.

The best way to come to this understanding is by consciously discussing the matter with the shop committee and strong supporters of union campaigning on the job and certainly with those Union Officers who are well experienced and committed actively in pursuing union campaigns.

Involving an Official directly in the actual conduct of a campaign is not always possible and if the number of plants to be covered that need to be acting in a campaign is taken into account it is clear that Officials simply cannot always be available directly.

Officials experienced in committed campaigning are available for discussion and advice. Exchange of experience in "industry" committees and at schools is invaluable in this regard and of course the very purpose of the Shop Stewards Councils is to provide the opportunity for discussion on this vital aspect.

ACHIEVING ACTIVITY IN MANY DIRECTIONS AND AROUND NUMEROUS ISSUES IN THE PROCESS OF PURSUING A CENTRAL CAMPAIGN

It is not possible to pursue a lot of campaigns at once. But on the other hand it equally is not possible to ignore the wide range of issues about which the workers should be active and having something to say if they are to adequately look after their own interests.

Experience has shown that the simplest and most effective way to deal with this complex problem is to take no more than a couple, or at the most three campaigns for main concentration at any one time.

In the selection of campaigns for continuous and developing attention at the job level care should be given to selecting a combination of an overall or general campaign along with a local campaign so as to provide balance in developing from immediate local (and therefore clearly understood) experience, to those issues of what is usually more important but at the beginning less tangible experience.

Campaigns are selected precisely because of their immediate relevance to the workers' needs, developing from this a relationship with other issues becoming more readily understood.

It is possible, given adequate explanation and sensible choice of proposals, to draw this relationship out of the experience of the main campaigns and to get activity or support on many other issues.

A variety of methods and actions needs to be adopted so that the leadership given is interesting and attractive.

It is also important to involve as many workers as possible around various issues. This also requires a creative variety of methods and forms of organisation.

The Shop Steward or Shop Committee that keeps everything rigidly in their own control cannot adequately develop campaign work which in every sense should aim at ever wider conscious participation of the workers, until every worker is involved and active.

TACTICS AND POLICY IN AN ACTION

Pursuit of union campaigns is not done in a vacuum. Our activity directly relates to how wealth is distributed in society and even how society itself should be organised.

This inevitably brings conflict with those who amass to themselves as much of the social wealth as possible.

It also inevitably means conflict with the various agencies, that the powerfully placed "sets up" to ensure their ability to amass the wealth of society.

Action and reaction in this conflict means that our campaigns, no matter how necessary they are to the social well-being of the people, have to be pursued in variable circumstances of advantage and disadvantage.

At times it is necessary to seize onto an opportunity and take the initiative moving through as many stages of development as quickly as is possible.

At other times it is necessary to be more measured in any activity.

At times it is possible to achieve significant results, at other times even small results can be forthcoming only with great difficulty.

It is necessary to understand both sides of the relationship and even more necessary to correctly gauge just what any situation is in this regard.

A correct estimate determines whether any tendency to under-reach or over-reach is avoided. Whether a compromise in one circumstance is equally applicable in another — whether a particular action should be stepped up or be more tempered.

The best way to make an assessment of any situation from this point of view is to discuss it collectively and to discuss it with experienced and committed officials.

It is also essential to ensure that any tactics should take into account any considerations of wider issues that can affect or be affected by any specific issue being pursued.

More important and overall considerations can be too readily ignored for a small advantage only to find that later on the workers are hit on the head with what it was they ignored.

Many overall policy matters are vital in this regard and it is necessary to have a good working knowledge and understanding of overall union policies and why they must always be taken into account in anything we do.

Union policies, laid down by the National Conference are published in booklet form and a library of the books of each Conference should be at hand for reference.

It is important to stress again that a good active Shop Steward has a working knowledge of these policies.