

Expanding your congregation of Fellow Workers

HOW TO HOLD A GOOD MEETING



RUSTY'S RULES OF ORDER

An article by Colin Bossen about membership growth and how the IWW might deal with it.

If you have been active in the IWW for a while, you have probably come across a pamphlet called “Rusty’s Rules of Order”— the pamphlet that serves as a guide to running effective union meetings. It attributes the following pearl of wisdom to Rusty, “an old Wobbly,” who served as a mentor to many younger Wobblies in the 1970s and 1980s: “Always conduct your meeting as if there were 100 people there, to be ready when the time comes when there are 100 people there.”

The IWW’s growth over the last decade has caused me to think a bit more about these words. The union now has more than twice the membership it had 10 years ago. More importantly, the union’s level of labor organizing has increased dramatically. In the last few months alone, we’ve seen pickets and a strike in the Twin Cities, a successful union election in Grand Rapids, Mich., a victory in a struggle for back wages in Portland, Ore., and a wage increase for cleaners in London. What’s more, all of this growth has been matched, or maybe fueled, by the creation of new IWW infrastructure. Since 2000, we have created the Organizer Training Committee and the Organizing Department and revamped the Work People’s College. In addition, the Industrial Worker has become an important place to reflect on organizing theory and methodology.

All of this is great, but it still has me thinking about Rusty’s advice. Why? Because in my time with the union, only rarely have I attended any sort of meeting that was designed for 100 people. Most meetings I have attended are exactly the opposite. They are run like discussion groups between friends. The rules of debate are frequently opaque and difficult for newcomers to follow. New members are seldom instructed on how to participate. Long-time members often dominate the debate.

If the IWW is going to continue to grow, our meetings will not only have to be designed to accommodate 100 people but hopefully 1,000 someday. Maybe that is optimistic thinking. Or maybe it is good planning. The Occupy movement attracted thousands to democratically-run encampments in New York, Oakland and other major cities. I meet more politicized and militant workers in their teens and 20s now than I ever did when I was that age or even in my early 30s. Recent upsurges of organizing by fast food workers and others who have long been considered unorganizable by business unions suggests that the possibility of a revitalized labor movement is on the horizon.

I hope that the IWW will take a major role in this revitalization. In order for that to happen, we will need to think seriously about how we behave organizationally. We will need to ask questions like: What does an IWW branch with 500 members look like? What does one with 2,000 members look like? How are branches of this size different from branches of 10, 20 or even 50 members? How can a branch with 10 members grow from 10 to 50 to 500 members? It might seem strange, but one place I suggest we look to for answers to these questions is the religious community. Organizations like the Alban Institute focus much of their energy on helping congregations address the organizational challenges they face at different sizes and figuring out how to transition between sizes.

There are two things that the institute has observed that might be particularly useful for members of the IWW when thinking about the culture and growth trajectory of branches. First, folks at Alban have noted that different size congregations have different kinds of cultures. Broadly speaking, they have identified five types of size-based congregational cultures: family, pastoral, program, corporate and mega. Each of these cultures has their own characteristics. The description of the family sized one might sound familiar to some Wobs because it “functions like a family, with appropriate family figures... matriarchs and patriarchs [who] control the church’s leadership needs.” While the fit isn’t exact, this might describe many smaller branches where long-time or founding members set much of the agenda and make it difficult for new members to integrate or develop in leadership roles.

The second thing that the people at Alban have observed is that organizational culture is generally stable. Religious communities face developmental tasks if they are going to grow from family to pastoral size for example. Most of these tasks are centered on creating new leaders, increasing programming and developing infrastructure for integrating new members. They are also usually accompanied by conflict. People who had power in the smaller congregation are asked to share it with the new members of the now larger congregation. The details are probably irrelevant for the IWW’s purposes, but the point is crucial: for a branch to grow, intentional changes in culture and infrastructure are almost certainly necessary. And those changes are usually accompanied by conflict. If those intentional changes are not made, or if conflict is avoided, then growth will almost always be temporary, and the organization will revert to its stable, smaller norm.

If we were to apply these observations to the IWW, we could study the different size branches that exist in the union and look at how their cultures differ. We could try to figure out if there were particular patterns of conflict, cultural or organizational change that occurred when branches moved from 10 to 50 or 100 members. And we could begin the process of imagining the kinds of conflict and culture change necessary to grow a branch from 100 to 500 members.

So maybe Rusty’s advice shouldn’t be taken quite so literally. Instead of thinking about how a meeting with 10 people should be run as if it were a meeting with 100 people, maybe we should be thinking about how to grow a branch with 10 people to a branch with 100 people. That might mean we are intentional about how we function within branches of both sizes.

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