### **UE Aims and Structure**

How Rank-and-File Unionism Works



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THIS BOOKLET has been prepared to serve as a guide in expanding the membership's understanding of the union's aims and structure.

From its beginning, UE has held the firm conviction that such understanding is vital to safeguarding the rank-and-file nature of the union.



# **Taking Aim**

### Some Background on Rank-and-File Unionism

We would probably think they were crazy today. Forty-three workers from as far away as Fort Wayne, Indiana

and Camden, New Jersey plowed through a March 1936 snowstorm to meet in Buffalo, New York.

### **High Hopes**

They represented only twelve local unions, most of which had organized in secret (if they were found out, the members would be fired and blacklisted, too). Only three locals actual-

ly had a *contract*. Hand-collected dues of pennies and nickels got them to Buffalo—hope and determination would have to do the rest.

Their goal? To set up a national union to organize the hundreds of thousands of workers in the electrical, and soon, machine tool industries—in a way that hadn't succeeded before, either. Instead of organizing only *skilled* workers, these workers wanted to organize *everyone*—

in the electrical industry alone, that meant more than 350,000 workers. The idea was pretty awesome. The fact that

it worked is even more awesome.

Let's see ....

The 43 of them thought they could start a brand new union?

What were they thinking?!

# A New Type of Union

The men and women who undertook this gigantic task were inspired by the need to build an *industrial* organization (meaning *all* workers could be part of the union), controlled by the members, with

complete equality for all who worked in that industry.

They were determined to avoid the bureaucratic, top-level control that was characteristic of the existing *craft* unions (where only skilled workers could belong). And, they were just as determined to bring into their movement the hundreds of thousands whose need for organization had been, up to that time, ignored.

Their guiding principles were summed up in the preamble to the UE Constitution, which remains a model of trade union democracy to this day.

Relying only on their meager resources, these UE pioneers for industrial unionism laid the foundation for an organization that has retained control by the rank-and-file as the guiding principle of the union's structure.

#### **PREAMBLE**

e, the Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE) realize that the struggle to better our working and living conditions is in vain unless we are united to protect ourselves collectively against the organized forces of the employers.

Realizing that the old craft form of trade union organization is unable to defend effectively the interests and improve the conditions of the wage earners, WE THE ELECTRICAL, RADIO AND MACHINE WORKERS (UE) form an organization which unites all workers on an industrial basis, and rank-and-file control, regardless of craft, age, sex, nationality, race, creed, or political beliefs, and pursue at all times a policy of aggressive struggle to improve our conditions.

We pledge ourselves to labor unitedly for the principles herein set forth, to perpetuate our union and work concertedly with other labor organizations to bring about a higher standard of living of the workers.

#### From the Bottom Up

UE's origins and development differed sharply from the other large, industrial unions which were formed at the time. Most were built from the top-down, depending on organizers, lawyers and outside financial help. This limited both their independence and involvement by members. To a far greater extent, UE was built by work-

ers organizing themselves,

local-by-local, from the bottom-up.

This gave our union a much different character. Locals were built on self-reliance, while the entire union depended upon the *democratic agreement* of its locals and members to organize and grow as a national union.

### The 21st Century

Now, over 80 years later, UE is a strong, vibrant, rank-and-file run union. We continue to organize new members and represent UE members in ways that few other unions can match. This booklet explains how it works.

### **UE Locals**

locals are the most important part of our union. As autonomous bodies, chartered by the National UE, all locals are responsible for defending UE members and advancing the needs of the membership on the job and through politi-

cal action. High levels of membership participation are encouraged and made possible by the structure of our local unions.

### **Constitution and By-Laws**

Each local adopts its own constitution, written and ratified by the members. The constitution spells out the rights and duties of the membership, how the local will be governed, and how the local's activities will be financed. Every member is welcome to read and become familiar with the local constitution and, if necessary, propose changes.

The only requirement: UE local con-



stitutions cannot be in conflict with the constitution of the National Union, especially in the areas of union democracy, finances, and the right of *all* workers to belong to the union—regardless of skill, age, sex, nationality, color, race, religious

or political belief or affiliation, sexual orientation, disability or immigration status. The reason? If union democracy is corrupted by excluding groups of workers from membership, true rankand-file control is also destroyed—and bosses are given yet another tool with which they can divide workers.

### **Membership Meetings**

Regular membership meetings are held where the rank-and-file acts on all matters affecting the operation of the local. This includes everything from the election of officers, to collective bargaining, to the decision to call—or end—a strike.

### **Local Leadership**

Each local union elects its own officers who make up the local Executive Board. Any member in good standing is eligible to run for office. Most UE locals hold elections for officers every year (at most, every two years).

The Executive Board is responsible for directing the activities of the local between membership meetings by carrying out policies adopted by the members.

Trustees, acting independently of the Executive Board, are also elected. Their duty is to safeguard the members' dues by regularly checking the local's finances. Full reports are made by the trustees at membership meetings.

# The Steward System

UE stewards are the backbone of our union—our "first line of defense." Stewards are elected—never appointed (as

#### **UE Members Vote:**

- on their own collective bargaining policy and strategy (everything from developing contract demands to defending the members);
- on all agreements with employers;
- to strike, not to strike, or end a strike;
- to elect all local officers, stewards, and trustees;
- to elect their own negotiating committee;
- to elect delegates to Regional Council meetings and UE National Conventions;
- on their local union finances;
- on legislative and political action programs;
- to decide all issues affecting their UE Local.

in some other unions)—
to actively fight for the rights of UE members on the job. As the main link between the members and their union, UE stewards play a crucial role in building unity and involvement—and maintaining the rank-and-file nature of UE.

Bosses have never liked strong steward systems and, indeed, unions have many agreed over the years to replace their workplace representatives with centralized and bureaucratic "grievance handlers." We've fought attempts to limit the number of UE stewards and have retained the best steward-to-member ratio of any union.

The members elect stewards to:

- Help enforce the contract in the workplace;
- Maintain a strong union organization;
- Fight grievances with the employ-

- er by organizing the members;
- Keep the membership fully informed of the union's program and activities.

# Collective Bargaining

Before negotiating with an employer, the local union develops a collective bargaining program which is discussed and ratified by the membership. Every member has a right to raise issues for consideration in negotiations. Local negotiating committees are elected by the members to bargain with the boss (see box at right).

No agreement with an employer can take effect without ratification by the membership. Strikes can only be called after a majority of the members vote to take such action. In each case, the decision is up to the local UE membership. Unlike most other unions, the National Union cannot force a local to accept or reject a contract, go on strike, end a strike, or withhold strike benefits to force a settlement. Likewise, local

### **Negotiating Contracts**

A negotiating committee *elected by the member-ship* presents the union's proposals and bargains with the employer. The committee keeps the membership informed about negotiations. There are no closed-door negotiations or "information black-outs" during negotiations. We don't use lawyers to negotiate contracts, either. Why?

We believe that the *members*—not outside "experts"—are in the best position to argue about their wages, benefits and working conditions—and only an organized, unified, and informed membership can win gains in these areas. No negotiator, no matter how gifted, can "make the boss give in" on something he or she doesn't want to. *A unified membership can—and does*. UE locals regularly win better contract settlements than those of unions in comparable workplaces.

leaders cannot make these decisions without a vote by the membership.

### **Local Delegates**

Members elect delegates to attend Regional Council meetings and the union's National Convention. These meetings are impressive because of their genuine rank-and-file nature only elected UE members can debate and vote on issues affecting the union.

Unlike many other unions, UE staff are not assigned to represent the mem-

bers at either of these gatherings.

(Note: Since all UE field staff are dues-paying members of a UE local, it is possible—but unlikely—that a member of the staff could be elected as a local union

delegate. The structure of the union does, however, make it impossible for the national union or regions to assign delegate status to a staff member.)

### **Making Democracy Work**

The Responsibilities of Membership

Since UE's programs and policies are designed to improve the living standards of our members, each member is directly tied to the success of the union. But our style of rank-and-file unionism can only be maintained if *each* UE local member, steward, and officer is actively involved. Important areas of participation include:

- Electing local delegates and encouraging interested officers, stewards, and members to attend each Regional Council meeting and National Union convention:
- 2. Helping stewards do their jobs, especially by showing solidarity and building unity in our workplaces;

- 3. Serving on a local committee and attending membership meetings. Propose ideas that will improve the union's work in carrying out UE policy. Discuss resolutions that can be brought to the Regional Council and National Convention—every member has the right and obligation to help formulate UE's policies;
- 4. Making sure that full reports of Regional Council meetings and the National Convention are made to the membership;
- 5. Helping in UE organizing campaigns. Members can speak from experience, with honesty, about the union—a powerful message to workers who are considering joining UE.

# **Regional Councils**

is made up of geographical Regions covering different parts of the United States, as outlined in the constitution. While the number of Regions and their geographic boundaries have changed from time to time (reflecting shifts in union membership and the location of locals), the function of the Regions has not changed since the beginning of our union.

### The Work of the Regions

UE Regions—officially known as *Regional Councils*—work with and provide help to locals in each Region, especially in the areas of political action, education and leadership training, organizing the unorganized, and collective bargaining. Because these issues affect all locals, Regions serve as important links in maintaining the structure of UE.

### **Regional Council Meetings**

The Council itself consists of elected

delegates from every local in the Region, meeting twice a year. Each local is encouraged to send their full complement, because here is where members can broaden their role in, and understandings about, UE. It's at the Regional Council meeting that local members and officers get to know each other, share experiences, and learn new strategies and tactics.

### **At Regional Council Meetings**

Delegates hear news from all around the union. Locals report on their activities, while political action reports, educational workshops and guest speakers inform members about important issues. A national union officer (either the General President, Secretary-Treasurer or Director

of Organization) attends the entire meeting to hear members' concerns and provide updates on the National Union's programs and activities. There's plenty of socializing time, too. In short, Regional Council meetings are fun, educational gatherings.

## Election of Officers

The Regional Officers, Executive Board and

Trustees are elected at the spring Regional Council meeting. The president, vice president, secretary and five atlarge members, elected at this meeting, serve on the National Union's General Executive Board. Each Regional President also serves as a General Vice President of the National Union. The Trustees elected by each Region also serve as National Trustees, and are responsible for auditing the books and records of

the regions and the national union three times a year, and safeguarding the property of the union. Any UE member in the Region in good standing is eligible to run for office, with a requirement of one year of membership to

run for the Regional Officer, Trustee and General Executive Board positions.

UE's bottom-up structure is evident in how Regions are funded—by its locals, not the National Union.

This keeps UE Regional Officers responsible to their members.

# Funding the Regions

Each UE Local contributes a monthly per capita payment to the Region from its dues money. The per capita amount is set by the national constitution. Each Region approves a yearly budget to govern how the money is spent.

This structure means Regions are financed by the locals, not the National Union. This is an important distinction, because Regional officers are made directly responsible to the members who elected them and who finance the Region. In many other unions, district or regional offices are funded by their national union—which can sharply limit accountability to the membership.

### **UE National Convention**

he National Convention, held every two years, is the highest decision-making body in UE. It is composed of rank-and-file delegates elected by members of their local unions, plus five delegates from each Regional Council.



### **Members Set UE Policy**

Each local, and Regional Council, is encouraged to submit policy resolutions for consideration by the delegates. The union's General Executive Board also submits proposals to the Convention. Following discussion and debate, delegates vote to adopt resolutions. Those that are accepted become the policy of the union.

Delegates also vote on any necessary changes to the constitution, which must then be ratified by a majority of all UE locals before they can take effect.

#### At the Convention

UE Conventions last a total of five

days and, by constitution, must be held in either August or September.

Delegates from each Region elect members to committees which guide the work of the Convention (see box, next page). Committees generally meet when the Convention is not in formal session, usually early in the Convention week.

While most of the Convention itself is devoted to the formal business of running the union (delegates debating and adopting resolutions and accepting or rejecting Committee Reports on the work of the union), guest speakers are invited to address the delegates on important issues. Convention-wide

### **UE Convention Committees**

**Credentials Committee** — ensures that each local is properly represented, has paid its per capita, and that each delegate's credentials are in order.

**Constitution Committee** — reviews and makes recommendations on proposed amendments to the union's constitution before they come to the Convention floor. All constitutional amendments adopted by the Convention are then returned to the locals for ratification before they can become effective.

**Rules and Order Committee** — recommends the rules required by the Convention to assure the fullest participation by the delegates.

Resolutions Committee — reviews policy resolutions submitted by UE Locals, Regional Councils, and the General Executive Board. Like all other committees, it is composed of delegates from all areas of the union. This committee has the power to combine similar resolutions into a final version to be presented to the delegates. Following thorough discussion, the committee makes recommendations on the resolutions to

the Convention. Resolutions are discussed and debated on the floor of the Convention before they are acted upon. Once adopted, a resolution becomes the policy of the union.

**Committee on Organizing** — reviews the union's organizing strategy and tactics with the Director of Organization, along with resolutions on organizing submitted to the Convention. A full report is made to the Convention, usually taking a full afternoon.

**Policy Action Committee** — reviews the union's priorities for the coming two years, discusses resolutions submitted to the Convention concerning these areas, and develops an action program for locals to use following the Convention.

Publicity and Education Committee — discusses the resolutions submitted to the Convention that deal with publicity and education and presents a comprehensive program to the Convention for discussion and action. This committee reviews the work of the UE's Publicity and Education Departments.

workshops are also held as part of the union's educational work. The Convention week is a great experience, but don't let anyone kid you—it's also a *lot* of work!

#### **Election of Officers**

On Wednesday, delegates nominate and elect the UE's three top officers (officially known as the *General Officers*).

Any UE member in good standing for a year or more is eligible to run for national office.

### **The Officers Report**

The three national officers (General President, General Secretary-Treasurer and Director of Organization) have the responsibility of giving leadership to and implementing the policies and programs adopted by the National Convention.

At the Convention, the officers report to the delegates on their stewardship of the union. Specific topics include organizing, servicing of UE locals, and administration of the union's Political Action, Education, Publicity, and International Solidarity programs.

### **Pay of Officers and Staff**

On the recommendation of the General Executive Board, delegates to the Convention also set the pay of the General Officers and UE Staff (Field Organizers and International Representatives) for the following years.

### **UE Salaries**

By constitution, UE's three national officers "shall be paid a salary not to exceed the highest weekly wage in the industry." To put it simply: UE officers can't be paid more than the members they represent.

This may be surprising, but we believe it's important for UE leaders to live like the members. We know that "boss-sized" salaries lead to "boss-like" points of view—and

union leaders who are out of touch with their memberships.

The other question often raised has been "how do you get the best leadership?" The answer is easy. Since pay has never been the reason to run for office, then the motivation must come from something else. Like dedication. We think that's a much better motivation than "doing it for the money."





(General Executive Board) Meets three times a year to handle issues between conventions. The GEB is: UE's National Officers plus Regional Officers and At-Large Regional Delegates.

UE National Convention

Members set UE policy at the union's national convention — UE's highest decision-making body. Elect National Officers (General President, Secretary-Treasurer, and Director of Organization)

### **National Union**

Carries out new organizing, servicing and education, as decided by delegates to the national convention. The National Officers direct the day-to-day work of the union.

UE is headquartered in Pittsburgh, PA.



### **Regional Councils**

Elect Regional Presidents, Vice Presidents, Secretary-Treasurers, Executive Boards, and Regional Trustees to one-year terms. Meet to discuss issues and set regional policy two times a year.



**UE Locals** Local members vote on dues and contract demands, to ratify contracts, to strike, and on all key issues. Delegates attend National Conventions and Regional Councils..



# The Role of the National Union

The primary function of the National Union is to *organize* and *unite* workers around the policies and programs of action adopted by the National Convention.

Our aim is to improve the working conditions and living standards of all workers by taking on the organized forces of the employers. We do this by organizing new workers into our union and by providing guidance and help to existing UE locals.

### It's Democracy— Not Anarchy!

In UE, the *members* direct the work of the National Union every two years at the UE National Convention by setting the union's policies and programs. The *General Executive Board*—which is made up of the General Vice Presidents (UE Regional Presidents), Regional Vice Presidents, Regional Secretaries, Regional Delegates and the three national officers—meets three times a year to decide on issues that come up between conventions. The day-to-day work of the union is directed by the

union's three *General Officers* (President, Secretary-Treasurer, and Director of Organization).

#### **How it Works**

Members at all levels of the union—from local leaders, to the General Executive Board, to the national officers—are responsible for carrying out the policies and programs of the union between the National Conventions.

It's important to think about the truly democratic nature of this process. Unlike other unions, UE policies and programs are *not* imposed on UE locals by the National Union. Rather, they are the result of UE local unions agreeing to work together; to take common stands and support union-wide programs.

### **UE's Foundation: Democracy**

Support for UE programs is not enforced. It's agreed upon democratically by UE locals attending the National Convention. Our strength as a national union depends entirely on how well UE locals live up to the agreement they strike with all the other locals in our union. This

is an impressive example of real democracy in action. A member of another union, while watching a UE Convention, expressed amazement at how it was conducted. "It seems like your President is encouraging debate," he exclaimed. "That would never happen in my union!"

Like any democracy, however, once the policies and programs are set, it's important that members agree to abide by the decision of the majority—and sometimes this is misunderstood. "The members run this union" by setting its direction and policies, not by opting to ignore decisions that are not popular or convenient at a particular moment.

The National Union

The role of the National UE, in carrying out the union's policies and programs, is to provide guidance and assistance to Regional Councils and locals and to coordinate their day-to-day activities. The National Union provides advice and assistance, so that members can make fully informed decisions on matters that affect their locals, and ac-

tive support when the members and locals need it. It also organizes new members, because we understand the fundamental reality that the wages and living conditions of all workers are directly tied to the level of unionization.

Responsibility for this work falls on

the union's national officers, who direct five key areas of UE activity.

Our strength as a national union They are: relies entirely on how well UE locals

**Organization** — The Director of Organization guides UE's organizational work—both in new organizing and in servicing UE Locals. Field Organizers and Internationational Representatives make up the UE field staff. A member

of the field staff is assigned to each UE local to provide help and assistance, when needed. International Representatives oversee the work of Field Organizers and, in turn, report to the Director of Organization. The field staff are also responsible for carrying out UE organizing campaigns—organizing new members into the union.

**Collective Bargaining** — The field staff, under the direction of the General Officers, assists UE locals in their col-

work to maintain

the agreement they

strike with all the

other locals in our

union.

lective bargaining activities and grievance handling. UE works to set national standards for contract negotiations and defending members' rights.

The General Officers indirectly over-

see all negotiations and participate in bargaining in cases where UE locals are facing particular difficulties.

UE bargains with a number of major employers, including both national contracts and coordinated contracts across multiple geographic locations. To ensure effective representation of our members, participate we with AFL-CIO other unions in coordinated bargaining where appropriate.

(Although we work with other unions on many levels—from strike and solidarity actions on the local

level to participation in Jobs with Justice nationwide—UE remains organizationally and philosophically separate from the AFL-CIO.)

**Political Action** — UE's General Officers work with Regional Presidents

and UE Locals to develop political action plans, based on policies adopted at the National Convention. UE Political action is issue oriented. Unlike most

other unions, the National

Union does not have a "PAC Fund"—we don't spend members' dues money on politicians. Rather, we depend on a mobilized membership to deliver our demands to politicians at all levels of government.

Education and Publicity — Education on issues affecting working people, as well as on our unique style of rank-and-file unionism, is an important part of the union's work. In UE, where the members have the determining voice on all vital issues, it is obviously important that they be well informed.

Since the views of big business and major corporations dominate our society, union education is critically important in helping develop working-class policies, understandings, and, most importantly, active stands on is-



The Organizational Work of the Union involves organizing new members while providing help and advice to UE locals.

### **The National Union** *Structure and Functions*

### National Programs and Departments

**Accounting:** Tracks UE expenses and income, including per capita sent by UE locals.

**Auditing:** Checks UE local books and records for accuracy. This safeguards UE members' dues.

**Conference Boards:** Coordinate locals who share the same employer or industry.

**Education:** Produces workshops, videos, books and pamphlets for local officers, stewards and members, helping maintain UE's tradition of militant. democratic unionism.

**International:** Directs UE's international solidarity work. Combats effects of the global economy by working to unite workers across borders. UE has relations with democratic unions in several countries.

**Legal:** Defends the rights of unorganized workers in UE organizing campaigns and provides help and advice to UE locals.

**Organizing:** Builds the strength and size of UE by organizing new members and providing help and advice to UE locals.

**Political Action:** Coordinates UE's independent political action work, based on UE policy (not party politics). UE takes direct, membership action to fight for workers' rights.

**Publicity:** Publishes the UE NEWS, along with books and pamphlets. Maintains the UE website, ueunion.org, and UE social media accounts.

**Research:** Provides UE locals and organizers with financial and other information needed for representing UE members and organizing new members into the union.

**UE Store:** Sells local and membership supplies and UE gear and publications to UE locals, UE members and the public through mail-order and the UE online store, **store.ueunion.org**.

#### **Officers & Executive Board**

**General Officers** (listed below) are elected at each UE National Convention.

**General President:** Responsible for the general administration of UE.

**General Secretary-Treasurer:** Oversees the union's finances.

**Director of Organization:** Directs UE organizing and local servicing through the work of the field staff.

The **General Executive Board** consists of the General Officers, General Vice Presidents (UE Regional Presidents), Regional Vice Presidents, Regional Secretary-Treasurers, and five at-large delegates from each region, and meets three times a year.

#### **UE Staff**

**International Representatives:** Experienced national organizers who coordinate the work of the field staff or are assigned to direct national UE programs.

**Field Organizers:** Provide help and advice to UE locals and carry out new organizing campaigns.

**National Office Staff:** Provide support services for UE locals, regions and organizers.

UE is an independent, militant, member-run union, founded March, 1936. Membership: 35,000 in some 100 UE locals nationwide.

The salary of UE officers can be no more than that of the highest-paid member and is set by delegates to the national convention.

sues affecting working people.

The General Officers carry out their responsibilities in this area through a variety of means. One important way is

through the UE Publicity Department, which pub-

lishes the UE NEWS and maintain's UE's website and accounts on major social media platforms. Another is by directing the work of the UE Education Department.

The National Union regularly sponsors workshops and seminars in local areas and online, and offers a variety of training materials for UE members, officers and stewards. New pamphlets, booklets and videos are also made available on a regular basis.

Information on these materials (and a variety

of other items including buttons and UE clothing) can be found in the Resources section of our National Union website at *www.ueunion.org*.

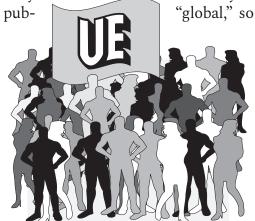
**International Solidarity** — Of increasing importance is our work to build cross-border relationships with workers in other countries. As the

economy has become much more "global," so has the need to stop

big business from shipping jobs from "high wage" to "low wage" areas at will—and from exerting a very strong, downward pressure on wages and living conditions in the U.S. UE has rich partnerships with unions in many

countries, including the F.A.T. in Mexico, Unifor in Canada, and Zenroren in Japan, that help us push back against the power of multinational corporations. We've engaged in coordinated organizing campaigns at employers in multiple countries. We've also jointly

fought bad "free trade" deals because they protect corporations, not workers. Some of our most valuable educational programming has included worker



The primary
function of the
National Union
is to organize all
workers around the
policies and
programs adopted
by the National
Convention.

exchange trips, where UE members visit workers in other countries or host union members from other countries at their workplaces.

UE is proud to be a founding union of the North American Solidarity Project, which aims to transform the labor movement across North America and advance fairness at work based on democratic, militant unionism.

In carrying out all of these activities, the National Officers are assisted by several national office departments and staff, including (in alphabetical order): Accounting, Auditing, Conference Boards, Education, International, Legal, Organizing, Political Action, Publicity, Research and the UE Store (see page 16).

#### Role of Staff

In a rank-and-file union, the staff hired by the National Union plays a special role. UE staff includes Field Organizers, International Representatives, and the people who are assigned to the UE National Office in Pittsburgh. In every case, there are two main responsibilities: to build the union and maintain a healthy UE structure. Of particular importance is what UE staff cannot do: run the union.

This means that UE staff members cannot dictate the internal politics of UE locals, regions, and the National Union. They can provide help and advice on programs and policies. But, ultimately, the running of our union is left to the members, as it has been since 1936.

### **More Information?**

To learn more about your union, read *Them and Us Unionism*, a 24-page booklet explaining UE's philosophy, *Them and Us: The Struggles of a Rank and File Union*, and *Solidarity and Democracy: A Leadership Guide to UE History*. The publication *UE Policy* contains the resolutions adopted by delegates to the UE National Convention. These materials are available from the UE National Office and at *www.ueunion.org*.



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