KEEPING THE MEMBERS INFORMED

At UE Local 1886's last membership meeting, Jimmie Higgins, the chief steward, complained that most of their members don't know a thing about what the union has been doing lately, and even worse, some couldn't care less. Vice President Rose Pesotta pointed out that the company's new shift schedule has made it harder for members to attend union meetings, and that the local hadn't put out a shop leaflet since they negotiated their last contract over two years ago.

Local 1886 isn't alone. With workers pressed for time now more than ever, fewer union members are able to attend union meetings. In addition, many UE locals have members spread out over large geographic areas, or working multiple shifts, making meeting attendance even more difficult.

UE has always believed that our strength comes from the members running their union. But to do this, the members must be fully informed of what's going on in their workplace, their union, and the larger community. Keeping the members fully informed is essential to developing and maintaining strong membership participation. Without it, what often develops is an "inner circle" of a few members who know what's going on — and an apathetic membership who knows little, and cares less, about the union. What's a local union to do to keep their members informed?

In UE many locals are doing great work of keeping their members informed, using a variety of communication tools. In this issue of the UE Steward, we will look at some of these communication tools.

Newsletters and Leaflets

It is not too much to expect every local to issue a newsletter or regular informational leaflet of some type. The form and format will vary, but a regular union newsletter adds much to the life of the union and how the members view it. Newsletters are also a way of "sending a message" to the boss.

Publishing a local newsletter doesn't have to be difficult. It can be elaborate and "professional looking" – or an easily-produced single sheet of paper with stories typed across the page. If members work together in a single workplace, printed newsletters can be distributed by hand (this is a great opportunity for stewards to check in with the members in their department). For more spread-out workplaces, distributing the newsletter using email or text may be more appropriate.

Don't be overly ambitious. Try something and stick with it. Members will start to look for new editions.

In addition to providing general news from your workplace, here are some time-tested ideas to consider:

- Grievance settlements;

- "Speak-outs" by members on workplace issues;

- A "Steward of the Month" column profiling different stewards in the local;

- A column of questions and answers about UE;

- A comic strip drawn by a member;

- A series of articles on political issues or union history.

For more information, see the UE pamphlet "Tips on Putting Out a Local Newsletter." It's reprinted at the end of Chapter 7 "Keeping the Members and the Community Informed" in the *UE Leadership Guide*.

Using Email and Text

With most members having smartphones these days, emails and text messages have become one of the quickest and easiest ways to reach the members. Email newsletters allow you to deliver all the local news directly to the members' inboxes — provided members check their inbox. Most people pay more attention to text messages, but using them requires a website where you can post the full text of your newsletter or update, and then send a link in the text message (see below for suggestions on how to set up a website).

There are a number of email newsletter services available for locals to use. A number of UE locals are using Mail Chimp. One of the best features of Mail Chimp is that you can send up to 10,000 e-mails per month to up to 2,000 subscribers for free! There are some other nice features of Mail Chimp:

- It has email tracking technology, so after an email is sent, you can see how many people in your list opened the email, how many times people clicked a link within the email, etc.

- It has a variety of pre-made templates into which you can copy/paste or drag/drop pictures and text, so the emails have a very clean professional look.

- It has embedded technology for sharing. One of the drag/drop features of the email templates is to add a link in your email that creates a Facebook/twitter-friendly version of the email. When people click the link on the Facebook page to read the email, Mail Chimp also tracks that number of clicks.

Action Network is the service used by the National Union. It has a small cost associated with it (the basic $10/month level should be sufficient for almost all UE locals). Action Network has most of the same features as Mail Chimp but also allows you to set up online petitions or "send a letter to the boss" actions. Unlike petition sites like change.org, you get to keep the email addresses of everyone who signed the petition.

Several UE locals use the text-messaging service Mozeo for sending mass texts to members. Mozeo costs five cents per message per recipient (sending one message to 100 members costs $5), plus a small setup fee.

Social Media

Social media services such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others have revolutionized the way working people communicate with each other, and the spread of smartphones has meant that many more people have access to them, and at all hours of the day (including, for many people, at work).

Many UE locals use Facebook pages to share information with members and the public. Some UE locals also use Facebook groups to promote discussion among members. Unlike pages, where all content is public, Facebook groups can be set to "closed" (only members of the Facebook group can see the content) or "secret" (only people who have been invited to the group can find the group itself). While this provides some level of privacy, you should assume that anything posted on social media will find its way back to the boss.

Setting up Facebook pages and groups is pretty simple and Facebook provides step-by-step instructions. Someone in the local will have to be the administrator of the Facebook page or group. The administrator is in charge of posting information and updates and monitoring what members are saying in comments and posts.

If someone in your local is skilled at making graphics, the photo-sharing platform Instagram can be an effective way to communicate with members, particularly younger members (Instagram users tend to be younger than those of other platforms).

Twitter is less popular than Facebook and Instagram, but is of special note for its importance to news media — millions of people look to it for breaking news. Most reporters and politicians are on Twitter, and tweeting "at" them (including their twitter handle in a tweet) can be an effective way to get their attention.

A word of caution on using social media: you have to assume that the boss will know what is being posted on your local's social media accounts (even in "closed" or "secret" groups), so be careful what you and your members post, and when you post it. (See the November 2018 *UE Steward*: "SOCIAL MEDIA – What to do if Your Boss Doesn't "Like" You.")

Web Sites

A number of UE locals have web sites. If you have one or more members who are very computer-savvy, ask them to contribute their time and talent. Web sites can range from very simple statements of "who we are and how to contact us" to complex sites brimming with information. A simple web site can be very inexpensive and easy to maintain; a complex site can be much more expensive and a lot of work.

The benefits of a web site will vary by local. If a significant number of local members use the internet then you've got another means of communicating with them. If you want to communicate with your members using text messages, you will need a place to post the information that you link to in the text message (and, since most people will be viewing the updates on their smartphones, your website will need to be "responsive," or legible on a smartphone).

If your local is going to have a web site, it's important to keep your information accurate and up-to-date. No one wants to visit a web site and see outdated information and "upcoming" events from last year. People soon lose interest in a site that's not frequently updated.

The National Union offers a "website-in-a-box" service for UE locals. If your local is interested in this, please contact your staff representative.

More information on setting up a local union web site is also available in the chapter "Trouble-making on the Home Page" in *A Troublemaker's Handbook 2* published by Labor Notes.

Tips About These Communication Tools

People love to see pictures of themselves. Any time you can use pictures of members, do! However, be careful not to use pictures that have a large file size in emails or websites or they won't load well. (Social media sites like Facebook will resize photos automatically, and Mail Chimp has built-in software for picture editing, including reducing file size.)

Try to frame posts in a positive way. Even if the boss has done something terrible, post the link to the local news story with a comment like, "I'm ready to tell Mr. Doe we're not going to take this anymore. Who's with me?" Then members can "like" the post as a positive choice to stand in solidarity against the bad thing, instead of just being angry at the bad news.

Encourage sharing of content. If the local's Facebook page has a new story, the local's officers should share it on their personal pages. This increases the story's reach.

Be careful about the timing of using any electronic communications. If you're not allowed to use social media at work, don't post or share links unless you're on a break! The boss can see the time stamp, and you may be in trouble.