

Checklist of Basic Principles of Democratic Organizing

(adapted by Matt Noyes from *The Troublemaker's Handbook*, by Dan LaBotz, *Labor Notes* 1989)

"The practice of democracy in organizing is the organizing of democracy in practice." This checklist is designed to raise issues for organizers and activists. It is incomplete and debatable -- you will want to add your own principles, or change some that are here. Use this checklist to see if you are doing all you can to make your organizing democratic and participatory.

✓ Do you...

— Work with others?

Organizing means working together to make change.

Isolation and individual solutions are not paths to democracy and power. A one-person operation or a small clique is doomed from the start. There is no substitute for an organized, democratic group. Be patient and supportive and keep your eyes on the prize. Make it clear to your coworkers that you need each other, and that there is room for them in your group -- not just as foot soldiers, but as full, equal participants and leaders.

— Question Authority?

You want people to think and use their judgment.

Do people challenge the boss? Speak out in a union meeting? Do they demand accountability, and ask hard questions? Support others when they do this -- even when they are questioning you. In your group, encourage discussion, questions, and debate.

— Confront Management?

You want people to "speak truth to power."

Organize actions where people stand up to the boss. Use all the tools available to you -- grievances, work-to-rule, march on the boss, slow downs -- to get people involved in putting direct pressure on management. Teach people to be smart about it so they do not get set-up -- be a "model worker," obey first grieve later, etc. -- but take the fight to management in the workplace.

— Spread information, knowledge, and skills?

Give people the information they need, or--better yet--teach them how to get it for themselves.

Do you know how to get union officers' salaries? A copy of the contract? Answers about members' legal rights? Do you know how to file, investigate, and present grievances? How to run a job action? How to plan and run a meeting? Your group should be a school for organizing. Do not hoard knowledge or information, even if it takes time to spread it out.

— Get people involved in collective activity?

We learn how to act collectively by doing it. Start where people are and escalate--from wearing a sticker, to signing a petition, to filing a grievance, up to bigger job actions--always working together.

— Use creativity and make organizing fun?

Use cartoons, songs, costumes, contests for supervisor who commits most contract violations per shift—appeal to your coworkers' sense of creativity and humor. Ridicule can be a powerful weapon for undermining your employer's agenda.

- Practice democracy within your group? **This is what democracy looks like.** Use your meetings and actions to give people a working example of democracy. Encourage people to think, question, challenge each other, but also to reach decisions, take actions, and follow-up. Practice group-centered leadership -- where leaders help others participate and contribute to build a strong group.

- Bring in potential activists? **There are different levels** of knowledge and involvement—from the core activist, to the regular activists, to the passive supporters. Get your regular activists to play a more central role, and bring your supporters into some kind of activity. When you plan an action, think about who you want to reach and how you can bring them closer. Core activists need to turn over some of their work as the group grows.

- Build dialogue and unity across potential divisions? **Inequality and democracy do not mix.** Employers will try to split you up by race, gender, language, sexual orientation, job title, whatever they can find. The goals and priorities of your group and its activists and leaders need to include every group of workers. What issues do you share? Do you include people from the different groups in planning, organizing, leading, and taking action? Do you speak one-on-one with people in each group?

- Talk to coworkers one-on-one? **Use one-on-one all the time.** By talking person-to-person, you build relationships and learn about people's concerns, interests, and skills. One-on-one is mostly asking questions and listening. Make it part of everything you do: give a person a flyer and talk with her about it, instead of dumping a pile of flyers on a table.

- Organize the organizers: build a worker to worker network? **You will need to organize the one-on-one contact** so that one person is not trying to talk one-on-one to fifty people. Make a list of members, divide it up, and recruit people to talk one-on-one to a set number of workers, then report back. Keep a database of members with phone number, e-mail, address, job, shift, etc. and a note about their interests and talents. Use your network to spread the work around -- you will create more leaders and avoid burning out your core group.

- Think strategically and act methodically? **Be aware of every part** of organizing: brainstorming, analyzing, planning, assigning tasks, acting, and evaluating. Take the time to set clear goals for the long term, medium term and short term. Discuss the advantages and risks of actions you are planning. Have a backup plan. Be "SMART", make sure every task is **Specific, Measurable, Assigned to a person, Realistic, and Time-specific.** After the action, assess your work and set new goals.

- Pay attention to roles? **Look at your group: Who** decides? **Who** acts? **Who** has information? **Who** asks questions? **Who** answers? **Who** makes the plans? **Who** does the boring or interesting work? **Who** learns or teaches? **Who** is at the meeting? **Who** speaks for the group? The more people do, the stronger they become.