

Base and Strategic Organising. What's the difference?

The Organising to Win strategy (OtW) defines organising in UNISON, so we can be clear about what type of organising we are referring to:

- **Base Organising** - the routine development and maintenance of a strong and functional union at workplace and branch level.
- **Strategic Organising** - building member participation and power within an escalating plan to win a specific material change.

Both aim to increase membership and activism through outreach to workers who are not currently members, and members who do not currently participate in union activity.

Which methodology we deploy depends on the circumstances, goal, scale of ambition and available resources.

It is a fundamental principle of OtW that we use consistent organising best practice, based on what works. This means that both base and strategic organising share best practice organising techniques including:

- **Anger/Hope/Action** conversations to identify natural leaders, collective issues and recruit new members.
- **6-step organising conversations** to recruit and develop new activists.
- **Objection handling** to help encourage participation (including joining the union).
- **Collective workplace meetings** and developing organising committees.
- **Identifying strongly widely felt issues** and developing a UNISON solution that increases membership and participation.
- **Coaching** of new and pre-existing activists in organising techniques.
- **Reflective practice** (individually and with peers) alongside the testing and measuring of different techniques.

But whilst base and strategic organising may rely on the same best practice organising skills and techniques, the goals and methodologies are different, as is the level of resourcing required.

Base Organising

Base organising goals for the routine development and maintenance of a strong and functional union at workplace and branch level, are set out in the UNISON code of good branch practice:

UNISON Code of Good Branch Practice 1.5 The Organising Branch – A Standard

This code and associated guidance will help branch officers and members to ensure theirs becomes an organising branch. So what would it look like? This standard is aspirational – something to strive for, but which can be achieved little by little if we plan, commit our resources, work in a partnership involving branch officers, staff and members, monitor and review our progress, celebrate our successes and learn from our failures.

A standard for branch organisation

Membership

- *UNISON recognition and membership levels of no less than 50% with its primary employers*
- *An organising plan to expand membership into unorganised employers engaged in delivering relevant public services, and to achieve recognition*
- *new employees are quickly approached by the UNISON steward.*

Organisation

- *the majority of workplaces, departments and workgroups have a steward, a health & safety representative, and a learning representative; the numbers are increasing and all are recorded on RMS*
- *the branch uses RMS to map the membership and plan campaigns. All stewards know who their members are and can identify non-members | there is a branch support structure for trained and active UNISON learning representatives*
- *the branch works to a development and organising plan.*

Participation

- *100% of members on the branch distribution system*
- *quarterly informative and relevant mailings/newsletters sent to members*
- *a branch structure with regular, effective, participative and well-attended meetings, and*

that takes account of geography and the diversity of employers

- participation by all members regardless of sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, age or their working hours and their employer
- a quorate branch AGM or significant participation in branch elections / regular branch attendance at Regional Council and National Conferences, including self-organised group, young members and retired members conferences
- proportionality and fair representation among branch office holders and delegations (see section 4.4). Representation and bargaining
- active bargaining machinery with all employers that is used to take forward UNISON members' agenda, not only to respond to employer demands
- all members consulted on all bargaining issues relating to them / conditions of service, policies and procedures are subject to joint review and are broadly better than other similar employers
- all representatives trained to Stage 1 / disciplinary and grievance cases (other than complex cases) are dealt with by the branch up to and including final employer level
- the branch supports a Labour Link section that is actively engaged in representing UNISON policies in Labour Party organisation
- the branch maintains dialogue and builds relationships with key decision-makers, opinion-formers and potential allies at employer level, relevant political level, and the wider community including user groups and local media; and campaigns for policy and political changes that will benefit members (in accordance with UNISON policy), making use the General Political Fund where appropriate.

Branch administration

- a system of communication with, and support to, its representatives to ensure that all parts of the branch work together towards achieving its objectives
- a system of mapping and monitoring equality in participation and service delivery in accordance with UNISON's equality objectives as outlined in Representation: A UNISON Guide
- efficient processing of membership applications and maintaining accurate membership records

- use of IT for communications, managing RMS and other key functions.

OtW recognises base organising as a vital priority for UNISON as it is how we build our base

and maintain our organisation and strength. To do so effectively we must deploy consistent best practice organising techniques, to deliver tangible specific measurable objectives, linked to the standard as defined in the code of good branch practice. Evaluation and reflection is required to ensure the continuous improvement of our organising skills, tactics, and strategies.

The Organising to Win impact assessment has been developed as a planning and evaluation tool to support organisers and activists to build base organising and equalities objectives into routine union activity that provides the opportunity to engage with members and potential members [UNISON OtW Impact Assessment](#).

Strategic Organising

Strategic organising recognises that whilst base organising is vital to meet the objectives of the union, base organising alone will not build the power necessary to win significant change on the big collective issues faced by members.

UNISONs strategic organising planning document is the UNISON Five Phase Plan to Win, which sets out a strategic organising methodology within which to apply the best practice organising techniques to achieve a specific win. [UNISON Five Phase Plan to Win](#)

Strategic organising is very targeted on a specific group of workers, collective issue, and decision maker/s, and requires a far higher level of organiser resource than would normally be deployed for base organising activity. The most successful UNISON strategic organising activity in recent years has aimed for 1 full time organiser per 500 or so workers. This level of focus and resource is necessary to build member confidence and participation in an agreed "plan to win" and ensure we can build momentum within an escalating campaign that will ultimately create a crisis for the decision maker that exceeds their cost of settling the dispute – getting them to say yes, when they would rather say no.

Strategic organising is not without risk or consequence and requires significant resourcing, particularly in the latter phases. It also cannot on its own, deliver all the base organising objectives

outlined above. But some targeted strategic organising activity is necessary to deliver significant collective wins for members and provide the wider “narrative resource” of a union that takes action and wins.

Base and Strategic Organising Overlap

Inevitably there is overlap. As outlined above, both use the same fundamental best practice organising techniques. All strategic organising must begin and end with base organising activity. Phases 2 and 5 are base organising phases in the wider strategic organising plan.

Similarly, the most effective base organising activity will incorporate elements of strategic organising. Outreach and engagement to identify the right collective issue, bring on natural leaders, and develop a plan to win will result in far higher base organising outputs than standing behind a workplace stall handing out leaflets.

But there are key differences of scale and resource. The depth of organising strategy and resource required for success is directly linked to the scale and ambition of the campaign aims. A local base organising plan to build member engagement in a bargaining campaign around a relatively low cost, local issue such as a roster change will require best practice organising techniques but can win and deliver good organising outputs with relatively low leverage and pressure. A multi-million pound pay rise however, will require a full 5-phase plan for success.

In Conclusion

The OtW challenge for every organiser is to:

- **Practice, test, reflect and become expert in the craft of organising – using OtW best practice organising techniques to consistently apply methods that work.**
- **Recognise the vital and equivalent importance of UNISONs base and strategic organising methodologies.**
- **Apply the methodology that will result in the greatest organising outputs for the circumstances, goals, and available resources at that time.**