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Developing and supporting activists is imperative for all IATSE local unions. It is also necessary for building our union. With the irregular work schedules common to the entertainment industry, it is often challenging for local leaders or members to attend courses and then to put their training into practice.

Therefore, the IATSE has developed this manual to encourage local unions and their leaders to get active and to help these leaders seek out their own member activists. This manual is to be used as a guideline to help union locals develop an activist culture and to assist locals in developing their own approach to campaigning. The manual discusses what forms activism can take, helps locals to identify potential member activists, and then offers assistance on how to conduct campaigns. To keep things manageable, the elements of a campaign will be broken down, and the tools to help ensure success will be covered.

I would ask that local union leaders read and use this guide as a tool to make your local an activist local. When we see changes that need to be made in the community, in the environment, or in the political arena, we need to band together and speak as one. If we are silent, we are complicit in what happens to us. I urge you to be proactive in finding opportunities to use your role as a local leader to do just that – lead. This means looking around and determining what it is around you that could or should be changed. It means building alliances where our interests align and gaining strength by joining with other groups for mutual benefit. It means seeking out other activists within your membership. It means ensuring that your local is an activist local, with a plan and goals.

Activism isn’t about winning every fight. It’s about getting out there and fighting.

In solidarity,

Matthew D. Loeb
IATSE International President
What Is Activism?

Very simply, activism is about getting involved. Activism is taking action to effect change.

This can occur in a myriad of ways and take a variety of forms. Often it is concerned with ‘how to change the world’ through social, political, economic, or environmental means. It’s possible to do this individually, but like the basis of the union movement, it is typically far more effective if done collectively. Our collective voice is louder than that of any individual.

In the labor movement, we often get caught up in political activism, but activists come in many forms, and activism is not something that should be restricted to politics.
Why Get Involved?

Activism is for extremists, or maybe just for young people, right? Nope. Getting involved benefits everyone. You live in a democracy, so activism is your right. Differences have been made throughout history simply by ordinary citizens practicing peaceful due process.

Activism is the means to accomplishing your goal – which is to try to right the wrong that got you active in the first place. That wrong might be increased fees at community centers, the polluting of a lake, or legislation aimed at hobbling unions. If the people in power don’t know that a given issue is important to their constituents, there is no incentive for them to make a change. That’s why working collectively is usually more successful. More people mean more votes – for or against a constituent.

The secondary effect is that it gives people outside the labor movement a much more positive view of unions and union members. We are not just there for the benefit of unionized workers – we have broader concerns and are able to effect change for the benefit of everyone. The more the labor movement is able to capture the attention of those outside the movement, the more successful we will be in educating people about who we are and what we do – and how strong unions are good news for everyone; unionized or not.

Why should you be an activist? Because activism works.

Activism within the IATSE

The IATSE has a long history of activism, but it has traditionally been something that has played second fiddle to many of the other day-to-day issues that local union leaders are juggling.
That culture is beginning to change. A vibrant, relevant and healthy union is one in which its members participate in the community. Our members now proudly run campaigns to assist their local food banks, collect coats for the homeless, participate in phone banks or go door-to-door during political campaigns, and have gotten onto their knees to spend hours polishing the stars on Philadelphia’s Walk of Fame.

Identifying the Activists in Your Local

Locals should be continuously on the lookout and recruiting new activists from the membership. Have a strategy for getting new activists. You’re with your members a lot; on sets or in theatres, in departmental or health and safety meetings (these members have already shown their willingness to be involved!), at negotiations, or at general membership meetings. Try to use these opportunities to spot potential activists. Make a note of who these members are, and then follow up with the member.

You may find potential activists through:

- Recommendations from fellow members
- An involvement the member already has in the community
- Observing what members are passionate about at general meetings – e.g. women’s issues, LGBT issues, starting a winter coat drive, raising the minimum wage, etc.
- Reviewing which members have contacted the local office about a workplace issue

Just because you’ve identified someone as an activist doesn’t mean that member will want to get involved in all of your local’s campaigns – someone’s interest in activism may range from issue to issue. You also don’t want to burn out those members who are interested in getting more involved.

Find out what motivates your activists and turn that passion into action. And always keep in mind that whatever the activity, keep it fun! People aren’t as likely to get involved in something that seems like a lot of work as they are with something that just seems like a lot of fun.
You’ve Got Your Activists – Now What?

1. Name an Activist Leader

At this stage of the game, you need to put someone in charge of activism in your local. In a smaller local, that might be the Business Agent or President. It could be a member of the Executive Board who has always been an activist.

For larger locals, you might want to name the staffer who is responsible for your education efforts, or you might consider hiring someone to head up your activism full-time, depending upon how many campaigns you want to undertake and how many members you would like to have involved.

Everything from here on in, including the rest of this manual, should be directed to the Activist Leader. This person should also act as your spokesperson. It is important that different people are not putting out different messages, so the Activist Leader should be the only person who speaks for the campaign.

2. Decide on a Campaign

Talk to your members and your activists and find out what they care about.

What does your local want to accomplish? What do your activists want to accomplish? Is it to right a wrong? Is it to help a group that needs it? Is it to establish goodwill for the local through good deeds for the community? Figure out what makes the most sense for your local and your activists.

Have an impact! Vision meets action in a variety of ways:

- Get involved with the labor bodies (AFL-CIO / Canadian Labor Congress / State or Provincial Federation of Labor / Central or Regional Labor Council)
- Represent the union point of view at your child’s school Job or Career Day or as a guest speaker at a high school, college or university
- Participate in phone banking and door-to-door visits for a political campaign
- Work with your local to attend pickets or rallies in support of other unions
- Speak to unrepresented workers about what benefits the union has offered you
- Participate in a fundraising event
- Donate money to the IATSE Political Action Committee (U.S. citizens only) or other workers’ rights groups
- Stay informed about topics of interest by subscribing to online news or newsfeeds
- Speak with co-workers or hand out material at work on an important issue
- Attend town hall meetings or rallies to support community concerns
- Boycott those businesses that undermine workers and lend your support to those companies that value their employees
- Engage in online activism through social media, email campaigns or petitions
- Send a postcard for a cause to a legislator or company CEO
- Make a phone call to one of your elected representatives
- Work behind the scenes with your local to help set up any of these activities!

### 3. Identify the Ultimate Goal of your Campaign

Be clear about the specific relief you are seeking, such as “The City of Happytown must not approve the construction of a Walmart in neighborhood ABC.”

Perhaps it’s a fight you know you are unlikely to win, such as when a political party holds a majority and you are asking them to change one of their policies. In that sort of a case, a more realistic goal might be, “We will ensure 500 emails are sent to our local representative, letting them know that many people are unhappy with this proposed legislation and offering a counterproposal.” Put this goal in writing.

Agencies and government are not set up to deal with complaints. They are set up to deal with solutions. You must be very specific about the redress you are seeking so that everyone understands what you want and can help you achieve it. For example, “We do not want a new mall built there, we want a city park.” If your proposal requires legislative action, ensure a specific proposal or piece of legislation is prepared. This also helps avoid conflict on your end. Sometimes the other side offers a resolution, but if your side isn’t agreed on what they’re willing to accept, the result may be dissension within your own ranks. You must stay united to achieve your goals.

Remember – the ACTION is what leads a campaign to success or failure. Action is phone calls, emails, or face-to-face meetings with decision makers, documentation on your issue that they can read and review, comments expressed by people at meetings where the decision makers are.

Everything else – petitions, social media posts, traditional media coverage, etc. – is great and serves a purpose, but these things are meant to support your campaign. The action is in the contact with the decision maker.
4. Draw up a Timeline with Specific Goals and Tasks

This should be a job the local leader(s) should do conjunction with the Activist Leader.

When do you want to have accomplished this goal? In a month? Six months? A year? Work back from the end point and figure out what has to happen to get there.

What are the short-term goals? A meeting with a government or city official? Drafting an email to be sent to your entire membership or even a wider group? Figure out where you’d like to be by the mid-point and set those goals accordingly. If you have to revise the timeline, do it.

Bumps will happen along the road, but that doesn’t mean you need to give up the campaign: revise and re-group!

5. Assign Tasks to Activists

The Activist Leader must identify specific tasks that a potential activist can get involved in, and ask for their help. Once each activist is clear on their tasks, make sure to keep track of their progress and continue checking in at regular intervals to see how they’re doing and if they need help or support.

Some activists will want to be very involved and have larger tasks, such as appearing at rallies, getting t-shirts made, organizing volunteers, or reaching out to like-minded groups.

Others are too busy or not interested in that level of involvement, but maybe you can count on them to design some memes for social media, or sign a petition, or send an email to your target.

The bottom line is: if no one understands what they’re supposed to do, nothing will get done.

6. Schedule Regular Group Check-ins

Once a week (or more or less frequently, depending on what stage your campaign is at and what type of campaign you’re running) schedule an informal meeting with the group.

Considering the industry we work in, a face-to-face meeting may be impossible, so try to limit those to only the times when they’re absolutely necessary. For regular check-ins, email is usually best. Poll
your group. Maybe they’d prefer most of the group communication via text. Because the bulk of IATSE members are freelancers, we have the advantage of being a very plugged-in group, in terms of technology.

The main thing is – it’s important that people continue to feel as though they’re a part of something larger. Feeling isolated will stop your group in its tracks. It’s also crucial that the other activists know what progress is being made, as this helps to keep people motivated.

7. Give Credit and Be Open to New Ideas

This can be a tough one, as we often get so caught up in the work we’re doing that we sometimes forget to take time out to thank the team.

We all work better when we get positive feedback, so don’t forget to give credit where credit is due. If one of your activists has seen success in a task, report it to the rest of the group with that person’s name attached to it. This not only makes the person being recognized feel good, it also has a ripple effect because others feel inspired when they see that their actions are making a difference.

8. Handle Conflict Effectively

It’s not uncommon to find that, as things get rolling, divisions start to happen within your group. Some people may be at the stage where they think the fight is no longer worth fighting, where others feel a few changes or concessions will get things back on track.

If the Activist Leader can get everyone together, hear their concerns and come to an agreement that sees a strong majority working toward the same goals, that’s the ideal. Trying to force people to care about something they simply don’t care about or having them work toward a goal they no longer believe in rarely works.

If you can’t get the group onside, you will need to consider either splitting into two factions (not a likely option, given our small groups and, typically, smaller goals – locals aren’t normally working alone to try to change federal legislation, for example), re-assigning the dissenters to another campaign that more closely matches their interests, or simply calling it quits and giving your activists a break, and then getting everyone together at a later date to tackle a different issue.

No campaign is a failure – it might just be a learning experience that will strengthen you in the campaigns to come.
Getting Your Message Out

Social Media

Social media is probably the most important tool you have for getting your message out to the wider world. For an in-depth guide to using social media you can use the IATSE’s Social Media Guide, available for free online: www.iatse.net/member-resources.

You can work with the local to use their social media accounts to show off the work you’re doing, or if it’s a longer-term campaign, starting social media accounts specifically for the campaign, as was done with the Save the Met campaign.

You may also want to consider starting a closed group on Facebook where the members of your activist group can communicate privately. The Activist Leader would act as the administrator for the group, so no one is admitted to the group without the Activist Leader’s knowledge and approval.

With social media (and even with signs at a rally or picket) messaging is crucial. The general public is far more likely to get behind a campaign whose message is “Save the Met” than they are with a campaign whose message is “We Need a Raise.” It doesn’t matter if what you really need is a raise, what matters is how that message is framed in order to garner the most support.

Hashtags are an important part of online activism, and they have expanded beyond Twitter to Facebook and even everyday conversation. In general, hashtags (such as #SaveTheMet) are able to bring your campaign to the attention of large segments of the population. What shines a light on a campaign could be the high number of mentions of a hashtag.

Most social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have analytics systems that track which words or groups of words are receiving a lot of attention through re-tweets or sharing, which is more commonly known as “trending.” Twitter and Facebook will show users the top trending topics in a given geographic region, such as a country or city.
Social media is also important because it allows you to reach out to a demographic that may be otherwise difficult to reach (such as retirees, stay-at-home parents, the disabled, or those who live in isolated areas) and get those people, who can not necessarily easily leave their homes or regions, involved with your campaign.

It’s important to remember that, more often than not, your targets also have social media accounts. In the case of one IATSE local being unfairly treated for years by a venue that decided to hire non-union workers (even though the union had offered to match the rates and conditions exactly), different memes were designed to embarrass the employer and event, and put out on IATSE social media accounts. A few lines of background were included, along with a request that members share widely AND post the memes to the social media accounts of the venue and the event. The home page of the local’s website was also updated to include more details on the situation, should anyone want more info.

If you intend to conduct that sort of campaign, ensure your activist team (and anyone else you’d like to include, such as the IATSE’s Banner For Good team – for more info on Banner for Good, contact the General Office) is aware of which memes you’d like sent out, and when.

Facebook allows users to schedule posts, so you can schedule a time when people are most active Facebook. There are also services (some free, some not – or some with both options), such as HootSuite, that will allow you to schedule your posts over different social media accounts and platforms.

**Traditional Media**

Depending on your campaign, you may want to develop a media campaign.

This could include drafting a press release or even conducting a press conference. Make sure you have the approval of the local before going public with anything, as this is the local’s name that is going out there to the wider world.

If you’re cleaning up a local park, major media outlets might not be interested, but there are often community newspapers that would be. A press release might not be published by the paper, but it can certainly go on your local’s website or be email blasted out to your members. If the members know what your local is doing, you are also increasing your chances of getting more members involved.
Photo ops are also great at clearly showing the positive work your local is doing, either in a community newspaper or even on social media. Make sure to keep a file of all media surrounding your campaign, as it can be used to your advantage with decision makers. Never assume they’ve seen your coverage. If a good story is written about your issue or campaign, send it to your target with a cover letter. If it’s TV news coverage, email the link.

When trying to get your media coverage to your target, figure out the best way to ensure they see it. It can’t hurt to email directly if you have an email address, but as discussed earlier, don’t bank on your target ever actually seeing it. It’s better to call the constituency office and ask who is responsible for communications and media and see if you can get an email address for that person. Then follow up once or twice to ensure that they received it, and that they viewed it.

**Email**

**To Possible Supporters**

Email is invaluable for spreading the word about your campaign to others. Most IATSE locals have a majority of their members’ email addresses on file, so if there is an “ask” you have for members, see if you can clear using the local’s email database to put it out there.

**Do not over-use email.** You can only go to the well so many times, so do not burn out the goodwill of your fellow members. Like all communication, the message explaining your issue should be brief, and your ask should be clear.

For example, “There is a proposal before the City to convert the ABC Theatre into condos. The ABC Theatre has been employing IATSE members for 20 years. Please sign this online petition to let the City know we value the arts and want to save jobs!” Feel free to provide links to more information on your issue for those who want to read up, but keep your own message simple.
To Your Target

Email is not always as powerful a tool as you might think when trying to reach decision makers.

Due to the nature of their jobs, these are busy people who tend to be inundated with emails. For that reason, they don’t normally read their own emails, but have staff to filter them. Unless you have a personal email address, you may have an easier time getting a decision maker’s attention using snail mail or fax.

These communication methods are not used often anymore, so your message will stand out more readily. The first exception to this is if you are targeting a small agency that doesn’t typically receive public input. The second exception is if you are conducting an email campaign. If a decision maker receives 1,000 emails on an issue, even if they don’t read them, they will certainly be informed by staffers that 1,000 emails have come in on a given issue.

Are We There Yet?

Did you reach your goal or did you decide to terminate this campaign and move on to something else? When your campaign is done, it’s done. Sometimes the end is obvious and sometimes it’s a judgment call – only you will know when your campaign is done.

You’re not going to win every fight. You might not even win most of them. The important thing is to keep trying.

It’s not a bad idea to alternate a tough campaign (such as trying to save a theatre from demolition) with an easier campaign (such as cleaning up a local park or marching on a picket line with another union that is striking) where it’s not a fight so much as community service and good public relations for your local. Your activists feel a sense of accomplishment and the community has a clean space to bring their children, walk their dogs, or just relax. Or the picketers you marched with know that they’re supported, and that they’re part of something bigger. Those are victories where everybody wins.

No person or group is too small to make a difference. Don’t worry about how well you’re going to do it – just do it!
Let Us Know!

Getting involved and active as a local union should be recognized.

If you have completed a campaign – let us know! Tell an IATSE Rep or email a short summary of what your local has accomplished to activism@iatse.net.

References

First off, a huge thank you and special recognition to Jim Britell’s “Organize to Win – A Grassroots Activist’s Handbook.” This guide was indispensable and formed much of what became the IATSE Activism Handbook for Local Unions.


IATSE Social Media Guide. www.iatse.net/member-resources


“Because it’s no longer enough to be a decent person. It’s no longer enough to shake our heads and make concerned grimaces at the news. True enlightened activism is the only thing that can save humanity from itself.”

– Joss Whedon