

The Good Local

(an organizing tool)

Is there general agreement about what a “good Local” is? At first blush, this might seem a trivial question. It’s obvious what a “good Local” is – or is it?

When asked to think of attributes of a Local that make it “good,” we might make a preliminary list as follows:

- 1 a full and functioning Local Executive
- 2 good communications with the members (regular meetings, desk drops, personal contact, etc.)
- 3 a vibrant network of stewards
- 4 good communications with the Component/PSAC Regional Office and regional bodies (e.g. National Capital Region Council)
- 5 wide membership involvement/pride in their Local and their union

But let us look at each one of these in turn.

A full and functioning Local Executive

Simply filling positions is not enough. What does “functioning” mean? First and foremost, the Executive is responsible for linking members together and with the rest of the organization. Its leadership role is key to the success of the union as a whole. The Executive collectively needs to be completely aware of the role of each Executive member, and how to “fulfil the duties of such office”. This is a tall order, to put it mildly.

- Are skills lacking for Executive members where training could be of assistance?
- Is basic information lacking?
- What contacts with the rest of the organization are missing?
- What material resources are needed (e.g. pamphlets, etc.)
- Is teambuilding assistance required?
- Is organizing assistance required?
- Other needs.

Good communications with the members

What does this mean? Posting notices on bulletin boards and directing members to the PSAC Website, and having an Annual General Meeting? Or regular, face-to-face contact, frequent meetings where decisions are made, social occasions, involvement of members in working committees, a newsletter, a Local Website? How many Local Executives even keep their members regularly informed of who they are and how to contact them?

- Has the Executive communicated with all members, by e-mail, desk drop or telephone, the following

information: names of the Local Executive; contact numbers/e-addresses; Component service officer; Regional Vice-President; National Capital Region Council contact e-address?

- What means are used presently to ensure regular interaction between members and the Executive? (e.g., stewards’ network, newsletter, e-letter, meetings, parties, working committees, group projects, etc.)
- What percentage of members are in regular contact with their Local Executive?
- In the case of multi-worksite Locals, what measures are presently in place to ensure coordination between buildings/floors/different locations in the Region? (e.g. contacts, distribution networks, sub-Locals, etc.)
- What specific measures are taken in the Local to involve members in the collective bargaining process?
- Does the Executive put on educationals and seminars for Local members?
- Does the Executive encourage members to participate in the PSAC Education Program? How does it do this?

A vibrant network of stewards

Stewards are or should be both representatives and organizers. They are often the first link between the individual member and the “Union”. Much of the health of the Local depends upon them. Issues regarding stewards are: numbers, training and experience.

- How many stewards per member are in the Local?
- How many have taken the current BUS course?
- Are any groups of members (say at a specific worksite) without ready access to a steward?
- How are members “allocated” to a steward? Are members in regular contact with their stewards?

- How many stewards have actually represented a member on a grievance or other matter?
- How many stewards play other roles (e.g., communicating information to and from the Executive, helping to organize workplace actions such as desk drops, civil disobedience, Canada Labour Code, Part II walkouts, etc.)?
- Is there a steward coordinator/Chief Steward? How often do stewards' meetings take place? Do stewards network among themselves?
- What resources are available to stewards (e.g. legal advice, Component liaison, etc.)?

Good communications with the Component/PSAC RO and regional bodies

(e.g. National Capital Region Council)

The union is more than a member's worksite or Local. The member is a part of something much larger, and the union should be working to include him/her in that larger context. The member and the Local Executive need to have open, two-way, regular communications with the rest of the union.

- Do Local Executive members know how to reach their Component service officer and RVP? Are they in regular contact?
- Does the Local Executive have regular contact with the PSAC Regional office?
- Does the Local send a delegate to meetings of the National Capital Region Council? Is there a regular report-back to the Executive? To members?

- Are Local members involved in regional projects/committees, e.g. electoral work, community outreach/coalitions, equity issues, the Labour Day picnic, the Ottawa and District Labour Council/Outaouais Labour Council? Does the Local Executive keep members regularly informed of regional events and encourage participation?
- Are the PSAC and NCRC websites regularly used? Are members regularly reminded of this resource by the Executive/stewards' network?
- Are printed materials from the PSAC readily available and distributed to members?
- Are invitations given to the PSAC, the NCRC, equity and women's committees, etc., to address Local membership meetings?

Wide membership involvement/pride in their Local and their union

Of course, but it does not go without saying, the strength of a union is in direct proportion to the involvement and mutual support of its membership. The essence of unionism is members helping members: so, for example, if a member is being harassed, it is not sufficient to let that person contact a steward or Component service officer-his/her co-workers must also show active support.

- How many Rand deductees are there in the worksite(s)?
- What proportion of the membership attend membership meetings/AGMs/Local seminars/educational?
- Are new members introduced to their union by their steward or other Local official?
- Are new members specifically invited to membership meetings and formally recognized and welcomed there?

- How many members assist in the work of the Local Executive (e.g. working committees, information distribution, etc.)?
- What proportion of members attend regional functions (e.g., rallies, Labour Day picnic, demonstrations, picket line support)? Are there feedback sessions, post-mortems, other means of maintaining momentum?
- In the workplace, do members support each other (e.g., sympathy grievances where harassment occurs, group confrontation when there is abuse of authority or harassment, noon-time information pickets, Strike Alert buttons, Canada Labour Code, Part II walkouts, etc.)? How many are willing to question authority?
- How are union victories celebrated? (e.g. a party for a successful grievance, Pay Equity, etc.)

Answers to the above questions will provide a snapshot of the current state of Local organization. They will not simply measure Locals against an ideal standard, but, rather, they will provide an overall sense of the strengths and weaknesses of Locals, and form the basis of a needs assessment, as well as allowing for the sharing of best practices among Locals.

From there, Regional Office staff, leaders and activists from all levels of the PSAC can work together to develop and implement tailor-made strategies to build and maintain the strong Locals upon which the power of a Union depends. It is hoped, therefore, that this discussion paper, besides stimulating debate, will also prove to be a useful tool for Local Development.

Get in Touch!

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