
BFAWU Branch Secretary Network meeting October 2024

Overview of last meeting

We went over the points raised at the last meeting which led to a discussion about contribution collectors and the role they used to play in branches where workers haven't got bank accounts, could there be some structure like this again? It is being looked at how we can ensure no one is put at risk, how could contributions be collected in different ways without members falling into arrears or third-party platforms eating into the subs amount.

There was still an appetite for a national newsletter template that branches and regions could adapt to add locally relevant issues.

Could we use the Foodworker and other methods to raise the importance of submitting accident claims when they happen, members can be scared of repercussions especially when it is something that happens at work, but without raising a claim could be missing out on money that is owed to them.

Issues round the branches

BFAWU membership

The importance of sticking together as groups of workers was discussed at length, examples were given by branches of drivers being told they had to work overtime on a weekend, how some of them were ok doing this, but others absolutely did not want to have to work overtime on the additional days. The group came together and said they were not willing to be forced into it, that it went against the handbook and legislation, but if it were to be on a voluntary basis with premiums paid for the overtime hours some would consider it.

The importance of union membership and the difference it can make having a rep in a meeting with you, examples were given of members being supported in cases where others had received sanctions, yet the union member received an apology. Another example of a member being accused of fabricating an accident was also quashed due to the support of having a rep in the room. It was agreed that we need to find a way of shouting about these wins without breaching any confidentiality as these are day to day reasons of why union membership is important!

Heat Strike

There is an opportunity to have 'fun' with the campaign in workplaces that are hot – some employers have commented on the number of plastic cups and bottles that are being used in workplaces to keep employees hydrated, whilst they are being recycled, they are mounting up, this resulted in all workers being given a reusable cup by the company. Other initiatives around dealing with the heat, additional breaks, water, not being able to work at the same pace etc. are also bringing workers together from different groups where previous organizing activities haven't.

BFAWU Logos

It was reported that an employer had stopped the wearing of hats, jackets and t-shirts that have the BFAWU logo on, so the rep had purchased a watch with the logo on to ensure that the BFAWU logo was still visible on site for members and non – members to see, the group thought this idea was great, it would be good to know if there are any other ideas out there to keep the logo front and center in workplaces without putting activists too much at risk, especially those where we don't yet have recognition, or the company are anti-union.

Zero Hours Contracts

These are still a huge issue in the industry and allied trades, despite workers having regular hours every week, these may peak and trough in busy periods and reps should be pushing for proper contracts when this is the case.

It was recognised it was much harder to do this in non recognised workplaces, but when we get a win and contracts are given out, despite being unlikely to have a vote on it, we should be shouting about it so that other branches, reps and workplaces are empowered to push for similar. The LP position on Zero Hours contracts may help to support this.

Branch Meetings

Concerns were raised about the lack of attendance at branch meetings, even in some cases where significant issues are happening members aren't engaging and whilst it was recognised that this wasn't just a BFAWU issue, reps were concerned that it will ultimately be a barrier to new reps and branch structures going forwards as well as having a mandate to deal with issues at site.



One of the district branches had run some briefing sessions on things like Pensions which did attract more attendance to the quarterly branch meetings, it was agreed that we could and should try to do something nationally, briefings on things like the Employment Bill, Pensions and other things could be circulated for the branch then to use in the meetings and have on the agenda for members to see.

It was also discussed whether having the December quarter meeting, where elections should take place according to the Rule book and motions to conference proposed should be known as the AGM – annual general meeting, this could then be used to develop an organising plan for the following year as well as the rule book requirements of the December quarter meeting and may pull people into that meeting at least?

Other ideas that were floated were talking to different groups of members throughout a week in the quarter as the wording in the rule book doesn't specify that it should just be one meeting. This has proved in some branches to be an effective way of engaging with a large group of the membership to gather issues and ideas, though it may prove difficult showing that a vote has taken place, and a consensus reached.

Branch Mapping

Branches were asked if they had completed their branch mapping so that they could plan where to target in their branches, whether to increase members or reps, they were advised that the template can be tweaked so that it reflects their workplace as we have members working across the food industry and not all in traditional bakeries that are laid out on the document.

On district branch mapping it was agreed this was more complicated as this would be looking at workplaces to target, finding out whether there are unions already there and the potential for membership growth as well as how to start organising them.

There is a leafletting day in Plymouth and Falmouth being organised, where all workplaces will be hit, the National Shop Stewards Network and Socialist Party are supporting them.

Agreements

There was a discussion on substantive agreements and recognition agreements, the different things the documents may or may not contain, and that there are branches which don't have copies that is a concern especially when it comes to holding an employer to account.

There was general agreement that by having copies, especially in situations where we have a national agreement but local bargaining, can help to ensure there is consistency in our members terms and conditions across the sites, we have an ability if we have all the information to lift everyone up and challenge the employer if they have excuses.

Examples were given where different sick pay was paid at different sites in the same company and how others refer to the national company when it suits and the local site when it suits!

Code of Conduct/GDPR documents

Some attendees didn't have the reps GDPR pack, so it was agreed these would be circulated again with a reminder of the importance of all reps reading both sets of documents and returning the sign off sheets.

Under GDPR an issue regarding district branches was raised and how branch secretaries in them are not given the same information or receive branch secretary expenses like workplace branches do. This was challenged by the district branch secretaries as their understanding of GDPR did not prevent them having the information. It was explained that District branches are not in the rule book, that rule 2.1 clearly explained what constituted a branch and that members in district branches are highly unlikely to know the branch secretary who can't support them as a workplace one can. This is why FTOs have historically supported the branches, and they are administered by the regional offices.

There was a discussion about whether the application form could be amended for district branches to include a question about the branch secretary having information, though it was pointed out that we cannot force members to agree to this. It was mentioned that branch secretaries and activists in district branches could help train and support new activists, but none of this could happen until there were some sort of rules around district branches.

AOB

The Ginsters campaign is back up and running after a lull where the concentration has been on the sites in Leicester and Northampton so support would be welcome.

The Southwest TUC reps are gathering and BFAWU reps will be there.

A request for an article for the Foodworker was put out after a branch covered how they were sponsoring a football team in Kenya, providing a football and kits for 11 young people to be able to play and enjoy the sport.