

06/04/2024

Response to the suspension of the ACORN Sheffield committee

This response has been written by the former committee and the active membership of ACORN Sheffield who have lost all confidence in ACORN's leadership due to the events described in this letter.

On Tuesday, 26th March, all 5 members of the ACORN Sheffield committee were suspended and the All Member Meeting cancelled hours before the vote on the branch's motions for conference. The reason given was "[a reported breach of democratic procedure in relation to conference](#)". The reported breach was the secretary submitting a motion after the deadline the secretary had set. This is a minor procedural breach which those of us who have served on committee would not consider remarkable.

The secretary submitted 2 motions late. The Sheffield staff organiser allowed late submission of the other motion by the secretary which did not concern reforming ACORN. The motion that sparked the incident was a motion to make the Head Organiser position an elected position (links to said motion: [link1](#), [link2](#)). We believe that the suspensions were due to the content of that motion. Due to the timings of the committee suspensions, we believe that the staff organiser suspended the committee and sought board approval after the fact.

Following the suspension and the cancellation of the AMM, the members decided to meet to ensure continuity on existing member defence cases and to discuss the day's events. Members were informed by a regional board member that this would not be an official ACORN meeting, which was accepted by those in attendance. Cases were discussed and an action was planned. The staff organiser was invited in order to account for the decisions made, and arrived with Nick Ballard.

Nick attempted to hijack the agenda, and was wholly dismissive of the impact of the suspensions on the running of the branch, or that the matter might have been mishandled. We feel Nick's behaviour was provocative and not consistent with a good faith attempt to address the concerns of members. Nick went on to show a lack of respect towards attendees of this meeting, including towards former committee members who have put hundreds of hours into this branch, many of whom were directly recruited following the [previous collapse of the Sheffield branch](#). Several members therefore submitted complaints to the board, but these complaints were [dismissed outright](#).

Following this meeting, the board suspended the membership of six members, including the entire former committee pending investigation. The investigation commenced with [clearly biased questions](#), further undermining the faith of members in the process. No attempt was made to discuss what kind of questions suspended members would consider relevant, or to establish the validity of the timeline sourced from staff members. This conduct clearly underlines the importance of democratic accountability. We have no faith in the integrity of these 'investigations' due to past precedent that this will not be handled constructively. Some of us

have chosen to engage for personal reasons while others have resigned outright, but we are all in agreement that a new union is needed to enable us to more effectively advocate for Sheffield's renters without interference from ACORN's senior leadership.

We have set out our case so that the current board, branch committees, and members of ACORN are fully aware of what happened in Sheffield. This incident is consistent with information we have received regarding [past conflict](#), both in Sheffield and elsewhere, displaying a pattern of implementing processes punitively to clamp down on attempts at reform. We are aware of historic concerns relating to conditions for junior staff and staff hiring practices as well. We seriously question the organisational ethics of accepting this level of conflict, burnout, resignations and disaffiliations. We urge the organisation to recognise and openly discuss what is leading to this pattern and to seek more transformative and collaborative methods of mediation and resolution.

ACORN presents itself as member-funded and member-led. We believe that this can only be fulfilled when branch democracy leads the principles and priorities of the organisation. It is inconsistent to meet concerns about policy and procedure with appeals to "do things via the rules" when decision-making processes are subject to interference by staff. We accept that staff have a role in setting up and guiding branches and local groups. However this cannot involve lobbying members to oppose specific motions, directing branches away from targeting particular politicians, or taking complete control of local organising strategy to the with total exclusion of members. We urge the organisation to live up to their claim that this is a member-led organisation.

To these ends;

- a. We demand that provision be made for members with active member defence cases who wish to stay with ACORN Sheffield. It would be unfair and potentially harmful if their cases were undermined or abandoned due to the board's decision to suspend the committee.
- b. We call for a reform of internal investigations, including:
 - i. a transparent process which is truly independent of staff concerned and unbiased
 - ii. An investigation into whether decisions to suspend the Sheffield committee and cancel the meeting were taken by the board, or rather made by staff and ratified after the fact
- c. We call for true member-led democracy including:
 - i. A limit on staff control over branches. Members are not paying fees to be lobbied on their own motions.
 - ii. For the CAC, NEC and a general secretary role to be elected directly by members, with the latter in place of the current unelected head organiser role.
- d. We have no confidence in the senior leadership of the organisation, or in the proper functioning of the Board as a truly independent and democratic body. We

call on Nick and any board members who support this status quo to consider their positions. At the least, Nick should apologise for his behaviour.

We recognise that ACORN is a powerful organisation with talented, hard working activists who do good work. We firmly believe in ACORN's aims and are proud of the work we have done in this branch over the last few years. When we criticise ACORN and try to reform it, we are doing it from a place of love. We are disappointed at the treatment we have received and are deeply saddened to be leaving. We will continue other organising efforts in the city. To comrades who will carry on working within ACORN, we will be open to working with you.