

17/10/2022

A letter of demands from the ACORN Oxford committee and membership for the attention of the ACORN National Board of Directors

Our ACORN branch in Oxford was set up by a group of members in January 2020. Led by local members, our group grew to a branch of 300 by January 2022: running several successful city-wide campaigns, regularly winning member defence cases, and running member-led organising drives in working class areas of our city. Between January 2021 - January 2022, the branch committee and local members worked closely with our staff organiser. Open lines of communication enabled members to participate and meaningfully shape the direction of our branch.

However, since our organiser left our branch in January this year we have faced increasing obstacles to running our local branch and making progress in our city. The Oxford committee and local leaders have been put under huge pressure while being left without resources. Many of us are women who dedicate the majority of our time outside of work to the union. The situation we have been put in has damaged our mental health and capacity to take political action.

Over the last six months, our members have had to use our limited resources to respond to the following, instead of being able to focus on building power in our city:

- The ACORN Oxford whatsapp group chat being surveilled and questioned, and genuine questions from branch members about national structures or decisions being used to interrogate and discipline elected leaders
- Campaigns slowed down or delayed by remote staff demanding multiple meetings with members involved and then pushing those back repeatedly despite the time pressures of each campaign
- Weekly calls between the secretary and the regional manager involving questioning around any branch activity deemed 'in bad faith'. These made the secretary feel undermined, harassed, and under suspicion
- Member defence cases being repeatedly delayed while waiting for the regional manager's contact and approval, with some deemed too risky to take on despite similar cases having been won in our branch
- A pattern of increased staff intervention in setting AMM agendas after the branch submitted conference motions. Staff insisted on filling AMM time with

basic trainings. Members reported back that they felt less able to participate democratically and our attendance records dropped

We have felt that our local organising has been purposefully undermined and impeded by union staff who are not based in our city and are not familiar with our branch. Our branch submitted a statement disputing the way that our annual conference's right to make rule changes was taken away undemocratically this year. After this, our members felt under surveillance and treated with suspicion by national staff. This included weekly interrogatory phone calls with the secretary, who was told that it was her job to represent the national structures downwards and not to represent the branch within the national structures. She was told that she was insulting her 'colleagues' by 'allowing' the branch to discuss and present this objection. This has been replicated in the national response to the Palestine motion, also submitted by our branch. We have heard directly from secretaries and committee members across the union that staff arranged 1-1 meetings with them to influence and intimidate them into voting against the motion and telling their local members to do the same.

We also stand against the recent suspension and forced resignation of the board member for our region based in Oxford. A complaint was submitted against her which included references to the statement on rule change motions mentioned above, questions and criticisms raised by general members in the WhatsApp and AMMs, and a strategic disagreement around a campaign. This was a disagreement between the regional organiser and a team led by the board member, around whether to expand a campaign to a working class block of flats in a target area. Having carefully considered both sides, the branch committee followed democratic process and voted to take up the campaign. The board member was subsequently suspended for a period of over 2 months, with no justification or timeline provided to the committee or branch. This seriously derailed the organising drive, which members had put months of work into. We were later informed that she had been told to either resign or be expelled from the board. The board member has been punished for defending members' democratic rights in the union - to question, discuss and make their own strategic decisions.

Although a staff member is now employed locally, they are currently instructed not to communicate with the committee or work to support the branch.

Without a branch bank account, our treasurer has to engage in constant back and forth with overstretched national staff members. This means that reimbursements to members and to local venues end up months overdue. We have nearly been barred from our regular meeting venue and have developed a bad reputation among the limited number of available venues in the city. One elderly member had to wait months to be reimbursed for expenses, despite this being raised repeatedly. This is unacceptable in an organisation for low-income people. The lag in communication

could have been avoided if the branch had its own bank account. We believe that we should be trusted to make these payments directly within an agreed allocated budget.

We feel that without significant change in how national structures relate to our branch organising, our branch will continue shrinking instead of growing. Members will continue to feel disaffected and disempowered within their union. Our branch has been successful in the past because members were trusted to actually participate in and shape it.

We, the undersigned, make the following demands, which we believe are necessary for the branch to function in future:

- For the branch to have its own designated bank account and budget which is managed by the branch treasurer
- A defined timeframe for when our local staff organiser will start working directly with the existing branch and supporting the committee
- For the branch to be permitted to organise with members in other branches nationally, including the ability to make group chats and communication channels with other branches without staff oversight
- For the branch committee to have a say in local organising strategy in communication with staff working locally. This includes:
  - The committee having an official say in local organisers' priorities (for example where and when organising drives happen)
  - 1-1 staff and secretary catch ups to be limited to matters of branch organising and strategy, and not to interfere with branch democracy (such as by trying to persuade the committee to make statements against motions leading up to conference)
- For the branch to be able to operate without a culture of fear, where members are able to participate meaningfully and discuss ideas and our union's structures without facing interrogation or reprimand from staff. Therefore, we demand that the members who have signed this letter are not suspended in response.
- For there to be greater transparency around the process and reasons when a member is suspended from the branch:
  - The reasons for suspensions of members should be clearly defined and limited to matters of harm and safety, used to protect the safety

and wellbeing of members and staff and not open to political interpretation (for example, reputational damage can currently be used in response to disagreements in strategy)

- The branch committee is given a clear and limited timeline for specific members' suspensions and for when the decision regarding the member is to be made
  
- For the Board to stop using suspension as a standard part of the complaint process (for example, in response to a member says something critical) unless the complaint is concerning serious abuse

We all are members of ACORN Oxford and sign this letter in support. Please send any communication in response to [oxfordacornmembers@gmail.com](mailto:oxfordacornmembers@gmail.com) rather than contacting us individually.

[Signatures removed]