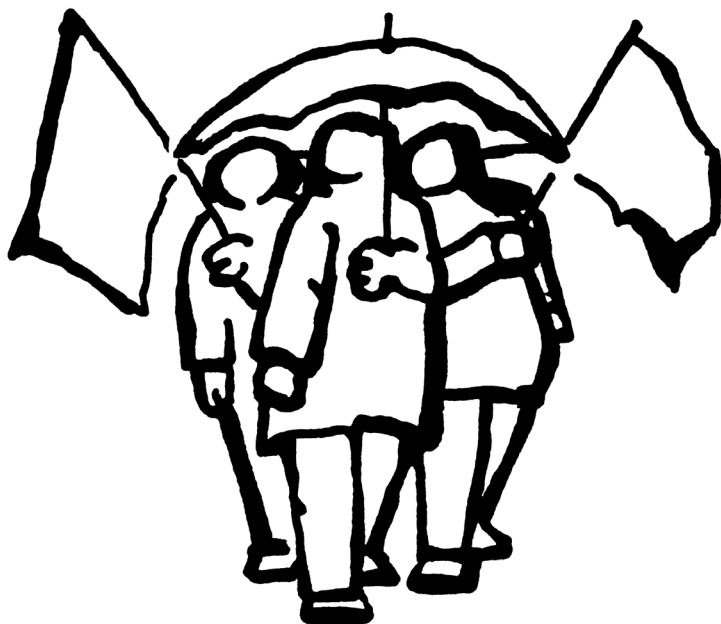


COMMUNIST PARTY OF AUSTRALIA

Turn Our Branches into Centres of Political Activity

March 2014



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For many years the Party has been encouraging our branches to develop as centres of political activity. There have been some steps forward but the majority of our branches have not yet managed to achieve this.

This booklet is intended to provide some pointers for branches to discuss their work and to adjust it so that they consciously work to develop campaigns and become centres of political activity.

Turning your branch into a centre of political activity will take much time and patience; it is a brick by brick process. It doesn't just happen because you say it's going to happen. It's a result of attention to detail, recognition of the particular needs, worries and concerns of the people we come into contact with in the course of our work.

What do we mean by Centres of Political Activity?

Our aim is to build each one of our branches into a publicly respected and influential political force in a community, industry or workplace.

Activity to achieve this must become the primary content of discussion and planning at branch meetings.

For Party branches to become centres of political activity and a source of working class leadership they must carry out, and work within, campaigns. This requires working with individuals and groups who are struggling and campaigning around similar issues. We have to find out just what people are thinking, what drives people to do what they do, how we can best assist them in resolving their particular concerns. Branch members must pay attention to and organise activities in support of the smaller issues which are important to many people, particularly in the branches area(s) of work.

Working at community or local level will necessarily mean working with people with whom we have ideological differences. Working in this way allows us to be more effective in fighting the day to day battles of the people and also gives us opportunities to speak to a wider audience, an opportunity to argue our position and raise politics to a higher level.

To be a centre of political activity, a branch must be active – and more than this it must be active with the people, with a particular emphasis on the working class, it must be involved with the people in their struggles, it must be seen by the people as giving help and leadership to struggles that people are involved in and

concerned about. This applies in workplaces, unions, community organisations, solidarity work and all forms of mass organisations and fronts.

Branch activities such as education and social functions should be seen as part of the branch's work as a centre of political activity and should be integrated with the branch's other work such as campaigns and production of bulletins and leaflets and distribution of the *Guardian*.

The branch should not only become involved in local organisations and activities that already exist but initiate these where there are sufficient resources and cadres to operate effectively.

Branch meetings should be a time when the branch works out plans for activity by the branch as a whole and by individual branch members, and discusses how to draw wider numbers of people into these activities.

Types of Branches

Branches can exist in many different forms but are all governed in a similar fashion and have the same links, rights and obligations as prescribed in the Party's constitution.

Some different forms of Party branches are:

Workplace and industry branches

Workplace branches exist in single workplaces. The CPA needs more workplace branches but also recognises the historical basis of workplace branches being based in large scale manufacturing

industries. Many of these industries have declined but this form of Party branch remains viable and is ultimately essential for us to achieve our aims. Industry branches operate across entire industries encompassing many workplaces. Industrial branches may work in specific geographical areas but they may act more broadly across regions or national industries. These branches have a particular importance in their potential links to the organised working class and trade union movements.

Locality branches

Locality branches are based on our local communities. A branch could be in a suburb, a region or a city. Locality branches present many opportunities for campaigning and struggle.

Community branches

Community branches may work in specific cultural communities such as in the Greek community or Latin American community.

Choosing issues

Too many of our comrades focus solely on the big issues – anti-war struggles, anti-racism campaigns, industrial relations questions, democratic rights movements and so on.

These are important questions, but too often we neglect the smaller issues which people around us are concerned about or dealing with. Quite often local issues are viewed as less important. This can apply in all forms of Party branch.

As a result, our campaigns can lack relevance to the everyday lives of the majority of people.

We should not counterpose the big political issues against local and community work. Instead we should work hard to make the link between the local issue and the big political issues.

For example, a branch could campaign on staff shortages at a local hospital and during the course of the campaign could introduce the need for a nationalised health system.

Deciding on priorities, allocating scarce resources

The allocation of resources is an important issue. It would be nice if we were able to do all the things we think need to be done and allocate comrades and finance and equipment to carry out those objectives.

The reality is that we're too thin on the ground and we have limited resources at our current stage of development. It's important for us to be able to assess the areas where our work can most fruitfully be applied and provide the greatest opportunities for the development of the Party.

Of course we don't have to constantly work in an area to be part of a movement. For example, a comrade working in a trade union can raise important environmental issues.

There is a tendency for comrades to want to be involved in every committee but it is important to determine what we can really manage to do, to prioritise and then to devote maximum effort towards that particular goal.

Branches which run after every issue and may have up to a dozen different issues on their agendas are usually the ones who complain that they have too few members or are too busy to take up Party campaigns.

A way to overcome this is through the branch plan adopted at the AGM. The plan should be realistic, focus on local or workplace issues and prioritise. Its implementation should be carefully discussed before it is adopted. And the branch should not then forget about it – it must be a guide for action throughout the year.

The branch plan is also an important resource for solving the problem of membership being too scattered to be able to develop local campaigns.

Careful planning, discussion and agreement on priorities, flexibility among comrades can all contribute to a locality or area branch becoming effective around important local issues. This can assist branches in coordinating comrades from wide areas becoming active in campaigns and to start building centres of political activity.

Campaigning

Some years ago, our Central Committee adopted a new approach of more specific and detailed guidance and began to ask Party branches to become involved in campaigning as the most effective way to become centres of political activity.

A campaign is a planned struggle to achieve a specific objective.

Public campaigning is a powerful forum for the Party to be active and effective in the battle of ideas. Campaigns allow us to bring our explanations, our analysis, our solutions to the people.

The Party's ideas are put forward while winning support for struggles and building a movement. In the context of campaigns the Party's ideas are likely to be more effective since they are concrete and specific, rather than generalised and abstract.

Successful campaigns require the mobilisation of the most people possible and of other organisations.

Each stage of a campaign should have a goal and demands, which people will support and help work towards.

We should be fighting for demands on corporations or governments (State, Federal, local) and mobilising people to raise their voices in support of such demands.

Campaigns are the main vehicle for the Party branch to become known and recognised as an influential and respected political force in a community, industry or workplace.

Campaigning takes many forms – letters, leaflets, posters, stalls, public meetings, rallies, pickets, demonstrations, badges, radio interviews, letters in newspapers and so on. A variety should be used in any one campaign.

There are different kinds of campaigns. They can be national – like the campaign for the public health system which the Central Committee adopted in 2011. They can be local – like the campaign against plans for a rubbish dump adopted by one Branch.

They can be popular campaigns, uniting a wide range of forces – the protests against attacks on workers rights and coal seam gas are good examples. They may initially not be popular – like an effort by one branch to support the establishment of a half way house for women prisoners.

Campaigns are much more than just handing out propaganda. We have to go much deeper than this and initiate and participate in activities of all kinds.

They popularise the CPA's policies and strengthen the links between the Party and the people.

Campaigns are intended to help us prioritise issues, to respond quickly on issues, and to translate our decisions into practical activity.

They contribute to consistency in Party work, helping to maximise our impact. They help us to develop activities we can publicise, contributing to putting the CPA on the map.

Experiences of such work can build confidence in our own comrades to argue for our vision of a new type of government, build our confidence to paint a picture of a better society which we can struggle for now.

It will build our confidence that we can convince people that we must struggle together for a socialist future.

Well planned and organised campaigns can bring branch members into activities that are meaningful and enjoyable.

We still have too many members who talk but do not act. This happens partly because some comrades think they can't be part of a movement unless they are constantly working in it. This isn't true, of course, but it encourages inactivity instead of positive, creative responses to Party campaigns.

Trade union comrades, for example, can raise important environmental issues in the union and try to win support. In some cases this may be a better contribution to the environmental movement than participating in a local environmental group.

It is important for branches to select, plan and organise their campaigning carefully and effectively. However, it is also important not to spend so much time on this that the branch never actually starts campaigning.

There are no “perfect” campaigns – politically or organisationally. And campaigns evolve and change over time. The important thing is for branches to get all their members involved and active so some of the people's demands are met and the branch becomes known, influential and effective.

Working in other organisations

For a branch to become known and influential it must be where the people are. Branches need to give more attention to local

organisations and issues of all types, deciding which ones to concentrate on, allocating members to work in (or with) the organisation, and giving assistance and guidance to those comrades on a regular basis.

Turning our branches into centres of political activity means many more comrades will have to become active in organisations (most importantly, trade unions) concerned with local problems and needs.

The key focus of our work in these organisations is to build and strengthen them and help them to achieve their aims.

We will be campaigning for reforms, but that doesn't mean that our perspective is limited. As communists we're working to try and introduce more developed ideas and to win support for our position.

In this work it is important that we avoid two common mistakes.

We must never adopt a sectarian approach – that we are just in there to push our own barrow and recruit members for our own party.

The sectarian approach also means trying to foist unrealistic advanced demands on the organisation, thereby narrowing its base of support.

The other mistake is to enter an organisation and just drift along with it, hiding the Party's face and never trying to develop the group's political perspective.

We often hear “S/he is working in the xyz community.” But too often this means that the comrade just happens to be a member of a community committee (or peace, environmental or union committee) with little or no Party impact.

Does the comrade argue for a Party stall at major events organised by the community or other organisation? Or organise for a Party speaker to address the organisation on a Party campaign? Too often not.

Our way of working should be to try and unite all the political tendencies within a group working around what is the main issue and at the same time arguing for our political viewpoint – but never at the expense of the group or organisation.

We should set winnable objectives in a campaign, but always point out the limitations of capitalism and the two-party system and raise the need for alternative political forces to unite and build the movement together.

If we win leadership in an organisation, it has to be because we’ve played a good role in that group, not because we’ve dominated that movement with numbers of people and pushed out others who don’t have the same views as us.

The importance of unity

The question of unity is one of the most important facing the working class movement as a whole and facing our Party.

Communist Party branches must, as a matter of priority, work to draw together all the local forces and organisations in campaigns around issues that are important to local communities.

Our work in some areas demonstrates that it is possible to work in such a manner. In this context the real success of branches has been to build local alliances, some formal, some informal, with a broad range of groups and individuals. Diverse groups can develop productive working relationships.

In our campaigns we have worked with conservative and religious people as well as small business people. Our work with them has managed to advance their thinking. We have helped them to look at issues in a more progressive way.

To challenge the power of monopoly capital and to start to make fundamental changes in Australian society, united, strong and effective movements must be built.

United campaigns at local and community level can make a significant contribution beyond the resolution of local issues by helping to build a united national movement. They can also provide good lessons for Party members in unity building.

A long road to success

In September 2012, Auburn Branch was able to have a comrade elected on to Auburn City Council – but only after nine years of consistent and locally focused work.

Early 2003 a small number of comrades working in an Auburn based anti-war group formed the Auburn Branch of the CPA.

From an early stage the Auburn Branch had a local focus with its involvement in a campaign to stop Veolia building a rubbish dump in our community.

Local work also focused on a campaign to save a dental clinic from closing at the Auburn hospital.

In both these campaigns the NSW Labor Government was working against the interests of the local residents.

Our local work nearly suffered a major setback when one of our branch members decided he could singlehandedly assume leadership of the anti-dump movement without the necessary respect and long term credibility needed from our allies and supporters in the community.

The branch responded quickly to nip this problem in the bud and this helped to win us trust in the local community. Better to alienate one comrade than alienate our community.

This episode taught us an important political lesson – shortcuts end in disaster and hard and persistent work are the only way to move forward.

Our early attempts at a locality bulletin *Battler* were clumsy and we failed to gauge the political level of our community and pitched our political message way too high. Despite this the *Battler* earned a reputation for being fearless and telling it how it is and won a small band of supporters.

In 2004 we were part of a council election campaign and one of our allies was elected as a Councillor. A branch comrade headed the same ticket in the second ward where we gained a very modest vote.

At this time the branch decided to focus its work on the second ward and four years later a much more skilled and experienced branch was able to more than double our vote in the 2008 Council elections.

The difference was that we began to build a significant base in Berala, a part of the Auburn local Government electorate.

The Global Economic Crisis handed us a gift in Berala when a local developer went bust and left local residents without shops and services and a large hole in the ground for years.

We were able to lead a local campaign exposing the corruption of the major parties on Council and eventually we were able to force a solution to the local people's problems.

During this time our branch was given an old printing press and taught how to use it by a semi-retired printer. Becoming self-sufficient and being able to respond and initiate action around local issues made all the difference to our work.

We have a slogan above our printing press: This machine kills our political opponents.

The printing press enabled us to become more focused on specific issues impacting our community.

We see our major task as introducing working class ideas, analysis and solutions in a subtle way.

Our main political role is to replace Labor as the political force that represents working class people in our community. Our mantra is to challenge the ALP for leadership of working class people.

In September 2012 we were finally successful in having a Councillor elected. Nine years after our first attempt, our local work is expanding and we are spreading our influence outside our traditional support base. Local people come to us with issues and ask for our support.

Party supporters play a key role in our local campaigns, helping us with the production and distribution of the *Battler*, helping us to organise in the community and spread our political message.

Our goal is to make our narrative the mainstream narrative amongst local working class people.

We can see this happening in small ways. At local public meetings we hear our arguments and messages being repeated by local people, the same message that is written in our *Battler*.

We are convinced that with the decline in manufacturing and the big workplaces, the party and our branches need to concentrate on where we find large numbers of working class people. In most cases that will be working class communities.

We need to focus on issues that have a direct impact on people's lives and then we can introduce people to a class analysis and develop a class narrative.

No longer can we afford the luxury of working on the periphery of society in a left/progressive comfort zone that has little impact on most people.

Branches need to become relevant to the society around them. We can win back our rightful place as leaders of working class people but we need branches to become centres of ideas and actions.

Conclusion

Experiences of work to develop a branch as a centre of political activity can build confidence in our own comrades to argue for our vision of a new type of government, build our confidence to paint a picture of a better society which we can struggle for now.

This kind of branch work can build foundations for bigger alliances.

All this is a part of our overall struggle towards the transformation of Australian society.

