

The role of the branch secretary (May 2018)

To be the secretary of a branch in a revolutionary organisation is an important responsibility. Secretaries in bourgeois workplaces tend to play a predominantly administrative role, but to be a branch secretary in a Bolshevik organisation involves much more than this. In our organisation, secretaries are the coordinators of the branch's work, and therefore play an essential political role.

Political tasks

Branch secretaries are required to have an overall view of the work of their branch, its strengths and weaknesses, and the contribution that can be made by each member of the branch to the organisation's work. The secretary must coordinate the work of individual branch members to get the most out of each of them, and thereby to develop the branch as a whole.

The secretary must set this overview of the work of the branch against the objective political situation locally, nationally, and internationally. The work of the branch should be determined by the needs of the objective situation, as well as by the branch's subjective strength. The secretary must have an overall view of both the objective and subjective factors, and maintain a sense of proportion.

Organisational tasks

The organisational tasks of the branch secretary flow from the political ones. The secretary should draw up a proposed agenda for every branch meeting, which should highlight the priorities for the branch's work. These must be circulated in advance and discussed at the start of each meeting to allow comrades to make comments and suggestions on the items to be discussed.

Minutes must be taken at each branch meeting. The minutes are a record of decisions taken by the branch, with the name of the comrade responsible for implementing the decision, and a date by which the decision should be implemented. These minutes should be promptly circulated after the branch meeting so that comrades can remind themselves of their allocated tasks in order to complete them by the due date.

The branch secretary should also maintain close contact with the national leadership, via local CC members and the relevant EC member at the national centre. This is to report on the work of the branch, ask for advice, and to discuss how the branch can implement decisions taken at a national level.

Working with other branch officers

The secretary coordinates the work of the branch, but this can only be done in conjunction with the branch paper organiser, the branch treasurer, and the branch education officer. Collectively the branch officers should develop a strategy for the development of the branch, with responsibilities delegated to the relevant officers for the implementation of this strategy. The responsibility for coordinating the efforts of the branch officers and individual comrades in this implementation lies with the branch secretary.

Delegating responsibility

Branch secretaries should look towards training up new people to be capable of fulfilling the function of branch secretary. For example, secretaries should be willing to delegate tasks such as taking minutes. They should take the time to discuss the overall view of the branch's work with newer comrades, to teach them how to coordinate work and maintain a sense of proportion.

This final point is perhaps the most important because, if we do our work correctly, every comrade currently in the organisation will one day be needed to be a branch secretary in a branch of their own. This is the perspective with which branch secretaries must carry out the work of building and developing their branches.

Branch secretaries Q&A (January 2020)

1. *How do we recruit, integrate and educate contacts in towns and cities where we currently have nothing?*
2. *Are there any tips for doing contact work?*
3. *What's the best way to advertise Marxist society meetings?*
4. *What's the best way to format branch agendas and minutes?*
5. *What are the best channels of communication for comrades to use in between branch meetings?*
6. *Should branches have an Annual General Meeting (AGM)?*
7. *What's the best way to raise criticisms of a comrade's political work?*
8. *How can we combat prestige politics and egoism?*
9. *What's the best way to encourage discipline and professionalism in the branch?*
10. *How can we get comrades to respond promptly to requests for information?*
11. *What's a branch committee and what's the best way to run one?*
12. *What exactly are the tasks that each branch officer position involves?*
13. *What should the division of labour be in branch meetings between chairing and taking minutes?*
14. *What should we do if branch meetings are consistently too long?*
15. *What should we do if branch meetings are consistently too short?*
16. *What's the best way to deal with a comrade raising differences in a hostile manner?*
17. *Are there any tips for integrating new people into the branch?*
18. *What's the best way to divide up branch roles among comrades of differing ability?*
19. *What information should be sent out each week in the branch reminder?*
20. *Should branch meetings be changed in any way if contacts are present?*

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Q1: How do we recruit, integrate and educate contacts in towns and cities where we currently have nothing?

A: This depends on what resources the branch can spare. Focus on the town or city where the branch is based. If the branch is overburdened with other work then the contact should simply be invited to attend branch if they can.

If some extra time can be spared then other measures can be taken. Regular phone calls to discuss political and organisational questions is the starting point. Visits to the contact's town or city to do a paper sale and have a political discussion is the next step. The branch could have a collection to help the contact attend an occasional branch meeting or regional event if travel costs are an issue.

The main things to remember are:

- The follow up of contacts in other places mustn't detract from building the branch locally
- Long-distance follow up of contacts makes for a more protracted recruitment, integration, and education process – don't be impatient
- Raise the contact's sights towards building a branch in their own town or city

Q2: Are there any tips for doing contact work?

A: The 2018 organisational resolution contains many tips on this question and comrades should re-read this (attached). The key points are:

- Prompt calling of contacts within 24 hours of meeting them
- Prepare what you want to discuss with the contact e.g. suggest some reading material, ask them to discuss a current events issue, or raise plans about an upcoming event with them
- Ensure the branch keeps a tight check on which comrades are following up which contacts
- A good political level is important for contact work, but so is enthusiasm about the organisation. The newest comrades can be the best recruiters if they are enthusiastic

Q3: What's the best way to advertise Marxist society meetings?

A: A multi-pronged approach is essential. This should include Facebook and other social media advertising. Leaflets should be handed out at weekly branch stalls and distributed around cafes and on campus. Word of mouth is very effective.

The most important thing is posterage. As many posters as can be put up around campus, in inventive places, is essential.

The weekly Marxist society email should be lively and interesting. See attached for an example. Mailchimp can be a useful tool for sending emails (see more info in the National Bulletin from 22 November 2019).

Q4: What's the best way to format branch agendas and minutes?

A: There's no one-size-fits-all. Consider the purpose of a branch agenda and branch minutes. They are tools for helping develop our work and strengthen the branch.

The agenda should reflect the priorities of the branch work, which is a political question. Some branches will have their political discussion first, others will do the business. There is no right or wrong way to do this – it depends on circumstances.

Branch minutes are a record of decisions taken. As a bare minimum they should include the task decided upon, the comrade carrying it out, and the date by which it is due to be carried out. Minutes should not be a record of everything that's said in a meeting, otherwise the tasks get buried. The minutes are a reference for comrades to check what their tasks are for the week. Branch minutes should be circulated promptly after the branch meeting.

Q5: What are the best channels of communication for comrades to use in between branch meetings?

A: There is no one-size-fits-all. Consider the purpose of this communication, and whether all comrades in the branch can access it (not all will have Facebook messenger for example).

As a general rule branches should have two separate channels of communication. One for important communications such as conference documents, branch reminders, and so on. And a second for less important or short-term communication, such as apologies for a meeting, to inform comrades you're running late, etc.

The most effective means of communication is a phone call. Circulars and messages are easily ignored, but a phone call is a quick way of getting an answer to a question or having a proper discussion.

All political discussion should take place through face-to-face meetings.

Q6: Should branches have an Annual General Meeting (AGM)?

A: Yes. An AGM is a chance to review the work of the branch over the last year and consider the next year's aims. It raises the sights of the comrades beyond the week-to-week routine of branch meetings. Branch officers should be elected at this meeting. The branch secretary should, if possible, prepare a written report. See attached for an example.

Q7: What's the best way to raise criticisms of a comrade's political work?

A: Leading comrades must be willing and able to help others develop by raising friendly criticisms of their political work where necessary. The work of the organisation must not be hindered by an over-developed fear of hurting someone's feelings.

However, diplomacy, tact and empathy are all necessary skills for a leading comrade. When we raise criticisms it is to build someone up, not put them down.

As a general rule friendly criticism should be raised one-on-one with a comrade, not in the branch. We should try to *explain* the issue to the comrade by reference to broader political questions and the overall aims of the branch and the organisation. We *never* adopt an attitude of "this is wrong because I say so".

Above all the criticism should be framed in a positive way. Instead of dwelling on how bad things will be if we continue down a wrong path, highlight how well things could develop if the comrade could change their approach to the work in the ways being discussed.

All criticisms of a comrade's work should be made to them directly. We have zero-tolerance for criticising or complaining behind people's backs as this corrodes trust and comradeship.

Q8: How can we combat prestige politics and egoism?

A: Prestige politics is poison in a revolutionary organisation. Not a single concession should be made to any expression of it. The primary way to combat this is rigorous political education, highlighting the history and sacrifice of the class struggle, and the genius of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.

Leading comrades should lead by example and avoid grandstanding in meetings, speaking for the sake of it, or adopting a haughty attitude or tone.

Where a comrade with a tendency towards egoism makes political or organisational mistakes they should be immediately and sharply corrected. We should avoid giving such comrades leading positions in the branch until we can eradicate all traces of arrogance.

At the same time, if a comrade does display these tendencies, we should not write them off immediately. People can learn and change. If they acquire a decent political understanding, this fault can be eliminated over time.

Q9: What's the best way to encourage discipline and professionalism in the branch?

A: The political importance of a Bolshevik attitude must be explained to the comrades. We are a proletarian combat organisation aiming to recruit and organise workers to lead the struggle to take power, not a lackadaisical student discussion group. If we don't take ourselves and our organisation seriously then how can we expect anyone else to?

We shouldn't make a habit of implementing inflexible rules for branch meetings, and any measures to improve discipline and professionalism should be discussed and agreed by all comrades, never imposed.

But some rules may be appropriate in some situations. For example, at the national conference of the Bakers' Union there's a £5 fine for anyone caught using their mobile phone while the conference is in session, with the money going to the union's strike fund. Perhaps we could adopt something similar in branches to improve concentration and professionalism?

In this, as in everything else, the tone is set from the top. Secretaries and leading comrades must hold themselves to the highest standards before expecting anyone else to do the same.

Q10: How can we get comrades to respond promptly to requests for information?

A: Ring them up individually. All experience at local and national level is that phone calls are the only reliable way to get information quickly from comrades. Counterintuitively, calling all the comrades in your branch about their attendance at an event will yield answers more quickly than a WhatsApp group chat which is easily ignored or forgotten about.

Secretaries should emphasise the importance of responding promptly to requests for information by reference to our general organisational aims. An hour or two's delay from one comrade might not seem like a big deal, but when this is multiplied by all the comrades in the branch, and magnified through local, regional and national layers of leadership, it adds up to a much bigger problem.

Q11: What is a branch committee and what's the best way to run one?

A: The role of a branch committee is not so much to think about week-to-week tasks, which should be covered in a branch meeting, but to think more broadly about branch development.

A branch committee should consider questions such as the integration and education of new comrades, the prospects for developing new fields of work, the strengths and weaknesses of the branch as a whole, and the mid-to-long term development of the branch.

The composition of the branch committee will vary from branch to branch. It should consist of the most experienced comrades and the branch officers, and these should be elected by the branch. It should be proportionate to the size of the branch (a committee of 4 or 5 would be sufficient for a branch of 12). Small branches don't require a committee and not all branch officers need to be on a committee.

The committee should meet as often as necessary for the pace of the branch's work. Normally a meeting of 30 or 60 mins per month, before the usual weekly branch meeting for example, would be sufficient.

Q12: What exactly are the tasks that each branch officer position involves?

A: There's no one-size-fits-all. It depends on the size of the branch and the abilities of the comrades. All branches should have a secretary, a paper organiser, and a treasurer as an absolute minimum. Where possible branches should also have separate education, Labour and student officers. Some branches also have a contacts officer.

These officers must discuss the branch's tasks as a whole, and what the best division of labour between the officers would be to fulfil them. Mostly the roles are self-explanatory, but there may be grey areas. For example with the collection of paper sale money (treasurer/paper); the organising of joint activity with the Labour student society (student/Labour); or the sale of books (education/treasurer). Ideally, clear lines of demarcation should be discussed to avoid confusion. If necessary these can be divided up based on the needs of the moment and the availability and competence of the officers.

The branch secretary is the glue that holds all the other officers together. Wherever there is slack, the branch secretary must take responsibility for rectifying this.

Q13: What should the division of labour be in branch meetings between chairing and taking minutes?

A: Both chairing and taking minutes are political tasks which require a level of skill and experience. It is not generally a good idea to rotate the comrades doing these tasks on a weekly basis. A longer-term rota could be beneficial as a way to train up several comrades in this skill by giving them a couple of months experience in the task. However, in general, the branch secretary should take on political responsibilities of this kind.

It is not generally advisable to try to chair and take minutes at the same time. Along with trying to listen to the discussion and think about your own contributions, this can add up to an overwhelming task. Having two politically experienced comrades, one to chair and one to take minutes, is usually the best way.

Q14: What should we do if branch meetings are consistently too long?

A: We must keep branch meetings to time. Some comrades make big sacrifices to attend a branch meeting and cannot afford to have it drag on beyond around 2 hours.

A firm chair is the key. The chair requires sufficient political experience to know how much time to spend on each agenda item, and sufficient political authority to ask comrades to keep to time.

Secretaries can include suggested timings for each agenda point so that all comrades can collectively take responsibility for keeping branch to time.

Instead of bringing up subjects for discussion in a random or half-thought-out way, comrades should put thought into their reports and proposals and bring them to the branch in a quick and business-like manner. This will prevent vague, time-consuming discussions. The prerequisite for this is that the branch secretary discusses comrades' reports and proposals with them beforehand, to help them prepare their contribution for the branch meeting in advance.

Q15: What should we do if branch meetings are consistently too short?

A: We must not artificially extend branch meetings if there is nothing else to talk about, simply for the sake of it. A small branch should expect to have shorter meetings. But if the branch is finding that it has more time, it should make the most of this.

Some suggestions include:

- Add an agenda point to discuss current events in some detail at the branch (in addition to the political discussion)
- Under the paper or education agenda point spend some time going through the current issue of the paper and discussing the articles
- Talk through in detail political questions that have come up on paper sales, in society meetings, or at labour movement events

This will give all comrades a chance to speak up in branch and build their confidence and political level.

To get the most out of the branch political discussion the secretary should circulate reading material and encourage comrades to come prepared with questions and contributions.

Q16: What's the best way to deal with a comrade raising differences in a hostile manner?

A: It's the right and duty of every comrade to raise sincere criticisms and differences if they have them. But this should always be done in a friendly and comradely way, with a view to raising the political level of all comrades in the branch.

The role of leadership, in the event that a comrade adopts a hostile attitude while raising differences, is to calm everything down. Secretaries and leading comrades *must never* rise to provocations or respond with rudeness and hostility. Such behaviour serves only to raise the temperature and obscure the political questions. We must highlight the political questions at the heart of a dispute. This requires a cool head, a calm and collected attitude, and taking all the time necessary to sweep secondary, personal and other petty squabbles aside so that the political issues can come to the fore.

Above all, we *must never* respond to political differences with bureaucratic or organisational manoeuvres. If there are differences then they must be worked out politically.

Q17: Are there any tips for integrating new people into the branch?

A: There are two main points to consider:

1. Allocate a cadre to the new comrade who is responsible for following up their education and organisational tasks with them in between branch meetings
2. Make sure the new comrade participates in the *informal* parts of branch membership as well as the formal ones. For example, going to the pub after a meeting or a demo where questions can be raised in a more informal way, or making a special effort to invite them to socials and introduce them to other comrades.

Q18: What's the best way to divide up branch roles among comrades of differing ability?

A: We must work with the material we have in front of us. It is very rare to find a branch with officers all perfectly suited to their tasks.

As a general rule we should play to the strengths of the comrades. However, there is something to be said for encouraging comrades to push themselves out of their comfort zones. If we explain to comrades what the branch requires and ask them to step up to the mark, we can find that people will quickly acquire the skills we need.

It is important for the branch secretary to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of all comrades in the branch, including their own. This way branch responsibilities can be appropriately distributed. This can only be achieved by a branch secretary getting to know their comrades, on a personal level as well as a political one. We don't have to be friends with everyone in the organisation, but it helps to get a grasp of the character of the comrades in order to get the best out of them.

Q19: What information should be sent out each week in the branch reminder?

A:

- A proposed agenda & request for any additional agenda points or proposed amendments
- Minutes of the last meeting
- Recommended reading material for the next branch discussion
- Request for apologies if comrades can't attend

It is worth highlighting the main points of discussion. For example: "This week we'll have the political discussion on Marxist economics, and we also need to spend a bit of extra time discussing our

fighting fund collection and the new issue of the IDOM magazine, in addition to the usual branch business”.

Q20: Should branch meetings be changed in any way if contacts are present?

A: As a general rule: no. If a contact attends a branch meeting which is totally different to the one they will attend after they join, then they will find this peculiar. Also, having contacts attending a branch can't be allowed to disrupt the normal functioning and work of the branch.

However, it may be a good idea, if a contact is present for the first time, to spend 30 seconds on each agenda point explaining *why* we have this point on the agenda. This is a task for each individual branch officer.

Having a contact at the branch should also give extra incentive to keep the business part of the branch meeting strictly to time. There's nothing worse than making a contact sit through 90 minutes of dry and routine branch business.

The role of a branch secretary during the pandemic (September 2020)

Recent months have taught us valuable lessons about the role of a branch secretary. For all of us to continue developing in this role we must make sure we understand these lessons.

1. Branch secretaries set the tone

The pandemic and lockdown could have been a serious setback for us due to the disruption to our normal methods of work. However, it turned out to be a huge boost. This was thanks to the determination and optimism of the branch secretaries, even in the face of difficulties and uncertainty. Secretaries are a leading figure for comrades and the one with which they have most frequent contact. Comrades will look to their secretary to set the tone.

Disorganisation, pessimism, or political confusion on the part of the secretary will seep into the rest of the branch. Likewise, enthusiasm, political confidence, and good organisation will be reflected by all other comrades in the branch. Every secretary must be extremely conscious of this over the next few months.

2. Organisational and tactical flexibility is key

The lockdown forced us to move all our activity online. This was achieved within two weeks and without much difficulty. Our ability to sell the paper, hold meetings, attend demonstrations, and other normal methods of work disappeared. But our tactics changed accordingly and we dramatically increased recruitment through online work, social media, and personal friends and family.

The patchy opening up of the economy will require continued flexibility. We may be able to put on our own physical branch or public meetings in some places, but some people may also want to attend online. We may need to have hybrid physical-online meetings, or live stream our public meetings. What works for one branch may not necessarily work for another. This also goes for our planned interventions and fields of work. One branch may be able to do Labour party work, another might have more possibilities among school or university students. We have many fields of work to cover now and branches must play to their strengths.

The secretary's job in the next period will be to guide the branch according to its own strengths and according to the national priorities of the organisation. Any lapse into routinism in the internal running of branches or in our public work would be fatal.

3. Responsible delegation is essential

The last few months has seen the organisation grow very rapidly. There is always a risk under these circumstances that new recruits can be left without a clear role to play in the branch. We have largely avoided this, evidenced by the rapid creation of new branches which allows space for new comrades to take on responsibilities and develop.

This will continue to be essential as we grow in the next few months. The delegation of responsibilities is crucial to building a new layer of leadership. A branch secretary who micro-manages or hoards responsibilities for themselves can be fatal to the growth of a branch.

However, one caveat is that delegation must be done responsibly. Do not give comrades tasks they are not able to complete as this can be demoralising. And do not give important tasks to people who cannot be relied upon to carry them out, as this can damage the work of the branch. The key is the *responsible* delegation of responsibilities.

4. Education must be efficient and thorough

Rapid growth raises the problem of education. We have risen to this challenge well with more reading groups than ever before over the last few months. An increased speed of recruitment must never be allowed to compromise the quality of the education given to new recruits. In the next period many of our recruits will come from student work and, as usual, they will be influenced by the postmodern ideas prevalent at universities. Others may have reformist or sectarian ideas. We can allow no compromise on these points. Secretaries must take ultimate responsibility for making sure new comrades are recruited on the right theoretical basis and educated thoroughly.

As we grow more quickly, we should try to make this thorough education more efficient. Secretaries should make sure we are not running three reading groups where one would do. Branch discussions should be of the highest possible quality so as not to waste a valuable educational opportunity. Focus on key Marxist topics and texts without getting side-tracked.

Theoretical education is paramount. But we must also educate new comrades in how to intervene publicly on demonstrations/picket lines or in labour movement/Marxist society meetings. New comrades should be encouraged to participate in this activity, under the guidance of a more experienced comrade, as soon as possible. And we should educate comrades in how our own organisation works – how to sell the paper, how to talk to a contact, and so on. Branch secretaries must ensure that these aspects of a new comrades' education are not neglected. They need to learn the skills at the earliest possible opportunity.

5. Secretaries need a human touch

The pandemic and lockdown have been a tough time for everyone personally, including our comrades. Part of holding branches together has been checking up on comrades to see how they're doing generally, not just politically. A level of empathy and understanding is essential for a branch secretary. Excessive rigidity or officiousness will create a bad atmosphere in the branch and can push people away. Comrades are not robots and secretaries must not treat them as such.

We are a serious and disciplined Bolshevik organisation. We expect a lot from our comrades and, if politically convinced, they are happy to give it. But secretaries must know when it is appropriate to appeal to the comrades' sense of discipline and firmness, and when to cut a comrade a bit of slack. Moving forward this will require secretaries to read the mood of the branch as a whole, and of individual comrades, and set that against the demands of the objective situation.

6. Attention to detail and a sense of proportion

The key to branch building is attention to detail. As we grow there are more details to pay attention to, and more risk of being distracted by everything else that's going on. Branch secretaries must be laser-like in their focus on the detail of the branch's work, and this should be reflected in branch agenda and minutes, as well as the weekly follow up of the tasks comrades are carrying out.

Rapid growth will always see several steps forward and a couple of steps back. As well as paying attention to the detail of how to run the branch, secretaries need to take a longer view. We cannot afford to have comrades knocked off course by this or that setback, nor lose their heads with excitement at this or that development. We are running a marathon not a sprint, and secretaries must keep a level head at all times. In the next period branch secretaries will be the ones motivating comrades by pointing out how far we have come and anchoring them by pointing out how much further we have to go.

Guidelines for the branch (Extract) (June 1989)

The branch is the key unit. As with the cell structure of an organism, our health nationally depends largely on the health of each branch.

This is not to say that the development of the branch is a purely organisational question. On the contrary, the branch cannot be seen isolated from the objective situation and the stage we are passing through. The present political conjecture has had a certain effect on the ranks, particularly those unintegrated layers, which in turn has affected our basic structure. The change in the political situation will assist us in placing the locals on a firmer foundation.

It is a duty for every comrade to regularly participate in the branch and its activities. This is not a fetish, but an essential prerequisite for revolutionary work. Every comrade comes under the pressures of capitalism and alien class ideas, particularly in the mass organisations. To resist them requires theoretical training, a thorough grasp of perspectives, as well as a firm character. But above all, it requires the participation in common work through the branch itself. As James Cannon, leader of the American Trotskyists, once put it:

“The surest way to lose one’s fighting faith is to succumb to one’s immediate environment.”

The branch arms the comrades with the necessary understanding and direction to combat the influences of capitalism. It inoculates the comrades against alien class pressures and imbues them with the method of revolutionary Marxism.

The struggle for power is the most irreconcilable struggle in history. Its success requires not a loose-knit heterogeneous circle, but a disciplined proletarian Bolshevik-type movement. In its ranks must be gathered the revolutionary class conscious workers who agree with the programme and are prepared to build its influence. The building of Marxism does not proceed in a straight line, but in a dialectical fashion: moderate progress, set-backs, leaps ahead, and so on. Such was the experience of the most revolutionary party in history, the Bolshevik Party.

However, the building of Marxism is a conscious task that requires a far-sighted leadership to galvanise the ranks at each stage of its development. A revolutionary leadership has to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the tendency in order to overcome deficiencies and lay the basis for further growth.

[...]

Marxism requires full conscious, critically-minded comrades capable of independent initiative at every level. We need however not to act as individuals (although individual initiative must be encouraged), but collectively. The branch is the basic unit that attempts to organise collectively our work on a local level, monitors its progress, and gives collective guidance to each of the comrades.

The organising role of the branch is essential in the building of Marxism. Our ranks are relatively small and our forces stretched. Only with planning and organisation is it possible to muster our forces effectively and give fruitful direction to the work.

Therefore, every comrade must belong to the basic unit – the branch. It necessitates a minimum of activity, established by the branch, and under national direction. The branch is thus responsible for all its comrades’ activities, their integration, and political development.

For us the branch meeting is therefore the most important meeting of the week. This must be imbued into every single comrade. If a comrade cannot attend then apologies must be given. If someone is missing then they must be seen immediately.

In reality, the branch is the first acquaintance a new comrade has with us. We have the responsibility to ensure that it is well organised and well prepared as well as welcoming to the new comrade. First impressions are always the most potent.

We must always bear in mind that workers, especially those with family commitments, have little time and value those meetings which raise their consciousness, stimulate them, raise their political horizons, and clarify the perspectives and their role in them. Comrades should come away from a branch meeting feeling that something positive has been achieved, that the work is going forward, that they feel part of the life of a thriving branch. Such a meeting requires planning and forethought by the leading comrades.

In the present period the importance of the branch must be stressed over the importance of all caucuses, bureaux, etc. That is not to say that the caucuses are totally abandoned, but are seen as auxiliaries to the branch.

[...]

What is a good branch? Unfortunately, a number of branches, because of their mundane approach have put off a whole number of new comrades. Of course not every comrade will remain involved, however we have a much greater chance of integrating and keeping new comrades if the branch functions properly.

To quote the experience of the British C.P. in the early 1920s:

"The new recruit enters full of enthusiasm for the ideas imbibed, and eager to take his part in the revolutionary struggle. In place of the revolutionary struggle he finds the jaded atmosphere of the branch meeting...A few branch meetings disillusion him and he drops out. The 'old band' remains, faithful to the last...This instrument will never achieve a revolution."

A vibrant, thriving branch is one that brings in comrades and systematically trains and educates them. It is an outward-going entity that does not always wait for national directives but seizes their own local opportunities to build and extend their influence. Such a branch has a majority of youth. It has a majority of builders. It is capable of consolidating. It has a thriving political and social life of its own. It is not an armchair study circle but the cell of revolutionary Marxism.

New comrades are but raw material for Bolshevism – nobody enters the ranks as a ready-made Marxist. Our task is to mould and train this material into a fully conscious cadre. This requires time, patience, and great effort. There is a skill to train and educate someone. The starting point is the will to build and the patience to train up the excellent raw material that has entered our ranks.

The early CPGB used to welcome new comrades. We should do likewise. Regular informal discussion should be held with them to clarify any doubts or hesitations.

We need to build upon the initial enthusiasm of the new comrades who have had their eyes opened partially to the vision of a new society. We have to inspire them. We have to educate and train them. This work must be done through the branch and its activities. A stale, dull branch will dampen the initial fire of the new comrade. They will see a contradiction between the vision and the means. This can turn into disappointment and disillusionment; leading to inactivity and apathy.

The leadership – especially at a local level – must not only be good organisers, inspirers, etc. but have an eye for psychology! They must develop the ability to keep people, get the best out of people, save people politically. They are a 'jack of all trades, master of all trades'! How else can we develop a Marxist organisation made up of workers subject to the pressures of capitalism?

[...]

The efficient organisation of the branch is extremely important. We must tighten up the meetings. All branches must have the basic organisers: secretary, treasurer, paper. Proper minutes and book-keeping must be instituted. The training of good organisers, as Trotsky explained, is a vital task of the revolutionary movement. Slipshod methods and poor organisation lead to tens of thousands of pounds being lost. A loosely organised branch has negative effects on all aspects of the work. The number of new comrades, papers sold, finance collected, etc., directly flow from the state of the branch. The branch secretary must regularly consult over the direction of the branch itself.

[...]

The integration of new comrades is a complex task. The atmosphere of the branch and the attitude of the leading comrades is vital. Above all it is a political question. But they must feel part of the branch and its successes.

It is likely, in period of rapid growth, that some will not be sufficiently integrated and will fall by the wayside. We must have a friendly and patient attitude to those who become inactive. It is not necessarily the case that it is the individual's fault.

The building of the Marxist organisation is an art. A patient attitude (not laid back) is essential in developing the life of the branch. This is particularly so in handling those who are going through a difficult patch. The key question is then: how can they be saved for the revolutionary movement? What measures need to be taken in order to keep them, and draw them back into our work?

It is too easy to reduce them from the ranks (unless of course they have become hostile or done harm to us) to tidy up the books. Although we need a meticulous attitude towards details, we must avoid an administrative approach to comrades. As Trotsky explained many times, party workers are precious who have had an enormous political capital invested in them. We must not squander our limited resources; they are too valuable.

At the branch the leading comrades must project a feeling of advancement and progress, however partial. We must not take things for granted, and make the most of our gains. Every step forward must be shouted from the roof-tops!