

# ROBERTS RULES: A TWO-EDGED SWORD

Vol. 1, No. 3

May-July 1975

You're at your union meeting -- The president of the union, who is chairing the meeting, is only calling on people who see things his way . . . Your Business Agent is giving a report and you know something he said was not true . . . A new contract is being ratified by hand vote and the union leadership announces it passed when it looks like most people voted to reject it. . . You want to raise an important issue from the floor, but your chairman tells you to sit down because you're out of order.

In all these situations, a knowledge of Roberts Rules of Order -- the basic parliamentary procedures by which most union meetings are run -- is important. You need to know the basics if you are going to be able to insure your right to speak up. You need this knowledge especially if a union leadership is out to railroad something through over the heads of the rank and file.

While many union meetings are run loosely without strict adherence to Roberts Rules, once the rank and file begins demanding things the union leadership doesn't want, nine times out of ten the meetings will be run by rigid parliamentary procedures in order to hamstring and intimidate the membership.

Roberts Rules of Order are like a double edged sword. It's true they can be used to stifle discussion and questions. But, if the

rank and file is familiar with these procedures they can also be used to prevent the union leadership from pulling a fast one on us.

These rules aren't the mystery they've been made out to be. Here are the basics you need to know in order to speak up at any union meeting.

## THE AGENDA AND REPORTS

Each meeting should begin with the reading of a tentative agenda. It's the right of the membership to accept, reject or change the order of business at this time. Each agenda should have room for old and new business. This gives us the opportunity to raise unfinished as well as the newer more immediate problems that have come up since the last meeting. If you're not sure where a certain problem fits in on the agenda, ask the chairperson. It's their job to explain these things.

Don't let the chair sidetrack you or talk around your question. If you don't get a straight answer, ask again. In many cases the chair will be vague and act like you're thick-headed in order to embarrass you and shut you up!

Once the agenda has been adopted, the meeting will move on to the first order of business. Reports are usually made and quickly adopted at this time. Although these reports are usually pretty boring, some really important business is also included in them.

Listen carefully, even take notes, and ask any questions you have. This might be the only chance you have to question the local president's pay raise!

To ask a question, you rise and say, "Point of Information." This takes precedence and can interrupt another speaker. If when you get your answer you disagree with the proposal, you can rise to speak against it. Or -- if no formal motion has been made, for example "to raise President So and So's salary -- then you can initiate a motion. For example, "I move that the President's salary be lowered to . . ."

The purpose of these motions is to insure that only one thing is discussed at a time. Motions can be changed or amended at any time after the original motion has been seconded and before a vote is called. A second is required for all motions and amendments to make sure that more than one person wants to discuss a particular point.

## DEBATE AND VOTING

Once a motion has been made and seconded, discussion or debate is in order. Speakers should alternate for and against so that all

sides of an argument are equally heard. When a member feels that there has been enough discussion, he or she can call for the end of discussion by "calling the question."

If there is disagreement over whether or not to limit or end discussion, then a two-thirds vote will be needed to close debate. This means that if a minority of at least one-third plus one still needs more time for discussion, their right will be upheld.

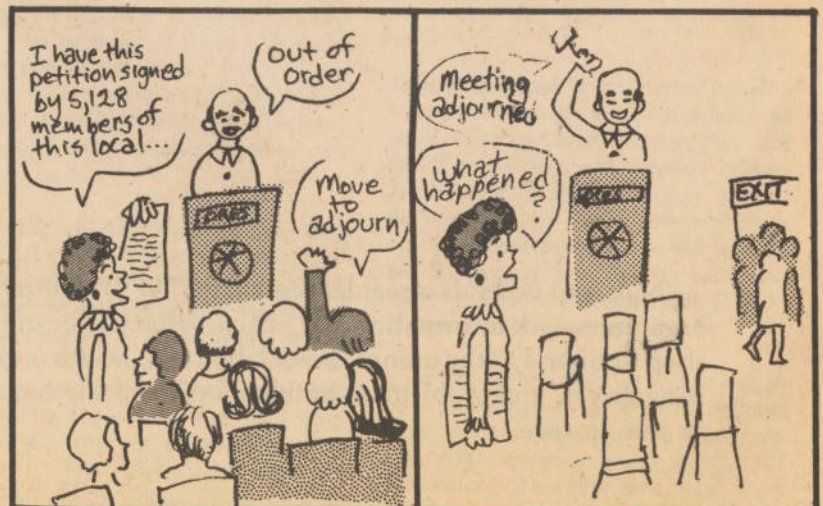
When there is agreement to end debate, the original motion or amendment should be stated again. A vote should then be called. Usually a voice vote is sufficient. But if there is any question about the outcome, you can call for a "division" -- which means an exact counting of a hand vote (this doesn't need a second).

If at any time a point of business is being decided which might put pressure on members to vote one way or another, you can call for a secret ballot vote; a simple majority can decide which way to proceed. The secret ballot was a hard won gain for our trade union forerunners, and we should never underestimate its value!

## THE ROLE OF THE CHAIR

It is important to keep in mind that the chair is to be impartial, and should never enter into debate. If you feel the chair has violated the rules, there are a number of ways to challenge them.

First you can rise to a "point of order" and criticize the chair as being out of order, and if the chair rejects this you can appeal or challenge this ruling by placing it before the membership. Discussion is in order on any question of appeal.

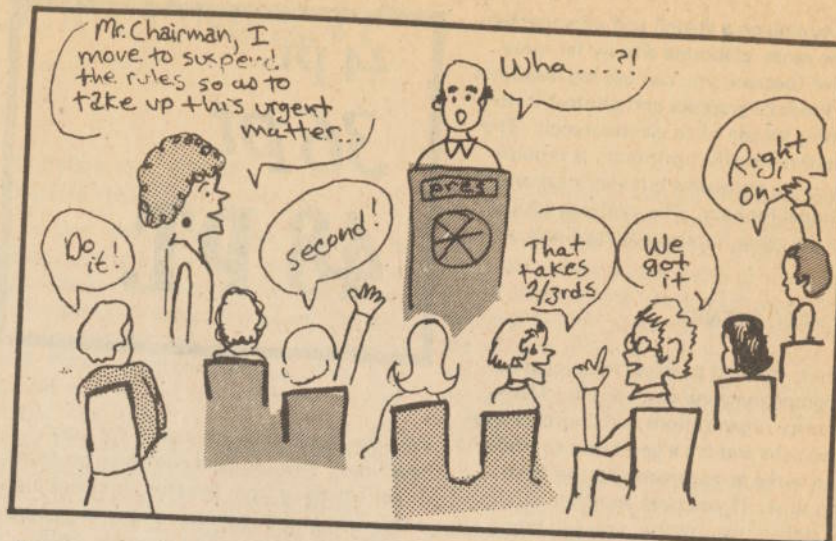


If the chair has decided that a member is out of order and there is disagreement, you can ask the parliamentarian -- the expert on the rules -- to make a ruling by rising to a "point of parliamentary inquiry." This, like a question, needs no second and is not debatable. Points of order and parliamentary inquiry can also be used to challenge fellow members.

### CHANGING THE AGENDA

At some point we may find a meeting running longer than we expected, and because of this we may want to change the agenda and move up an important item to make sure it gets dealt with. To do this we move to "suspend the rules." This needs a second, is not debatable, and needs a two-thirds vote to pass. If the motion to suspend the rules passes, then a motion to move an item up on the agenda is in order.

A motion to adjourn is needed to end a meeting. This is in order at any time that a vote is not in the works, it needs a second, cannot be amended or debated, and needs a simple majority to pass.



These are your basic rights at union meetings and they should be upheld. When you call for enforcement of the rules, you'll probably be criticized for delaying the meeting and wasting time. But don't be fooled by these charges! The only thing you'll be delaying is the dirty tricks that are coming down!

## HELPFUL HINTS ON PRODUCING A LEAFLET

Vol. 2, No. 3

June-July 1976

The printed word: it can carry a lot of impact, spread a lot of ideas to a lot of people.

The time will come—if it hasn't already—that the grapevine in your workplace just isn't enough. You have to speak to a lot of people all at the same time, clearly and forthrightly. It's time to put out a leaflet, or a whole series of leaflets.

In this *NUTS & BOLTS* we will explain how to put out a professional-looking, inexpensive leaflet—even if you have no experience doing this kind of thing before. This is the kind of skill that's easy to acquire and use often in your organizing efforts.

### WRITING THE LEAFLET

We can't really go into this aspect, as it is a whole subject in itself, but here are a few hints:

1) Make it short. It's the unusual person who will read on and on. 500 words is really enough for a two-sided leaflet (8 1/2 by 11).

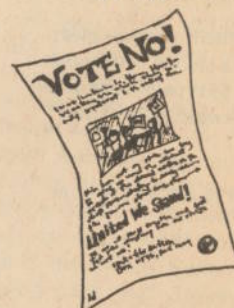
2) Don't write long rambling sentences. Make your sentences short and clear. Use plenty of colons, dashes, sentence fragments, lists, rather than go on and on in one sentence.

3) Write how you talk. Because it's being printed is no reason to attempt flowery prose and 500 dollar words. Write it as if you were rapping to a fellow worker. Be natural.

### THE HEADLINES

You need one catchy main headline at the top of your leaflet. Pick up on what people are likely to be thinking. If you are leafletting a ratification meeting, you might put

### A Typical Leaflet Format:



1. Headline
2. Text
3. Graphic
4. Text
5. Subhead
6. Text
7. Signature

"VOTE NO" right up top. If you're announcing a fund-raising event for your caucus, you could put "WHY SUPPORT THE RANK AND FILE ACTION GROUP?" If the grapevine has it that massive layoffs are coming up, it might be "UNITE TO SAVE OUR JOBS: Attend the union meeting Sunday!"

As you continue down the page, you need a few more headlines (or "subheads") to introduce the ideas presented and break up the text. Questions often make good subheads; for example, "What can we do about the layoffs?" So do exclamations or slogans, such as "We've had enough!" or "An injury to one is an injury to all!"

### PRODUCING THE LEAFLET

There are basically three methods we're going to cover. The first and most simple, cheapest, and quickest in emergency situa-