

Building confidence and a more powerful delegate structure



This leaflet is about a critical issue — the important role that good, effective, principled delegates will play in the rebuilding of the Queensland Branch of the MUA.

On another level it is about the rebirth of MUA members having the *confidence* to take whatever action is needed to defend and improve our working lives. I am under no illusion about how difficult things will be, but I guarantee all members that your working life will vastly improve under the new leadership and the changes I am proposing. It is why I seek your support in the upcoming election.

Delegates are diamonds. Three union-friendly researchers chose that statement as the title of a study of the experience of union delegates across different industries, and they were right.

Diamonds of high value, but not as in decorations — as in the hard cutting edge of drill-bits designed to cut into material as obstinate as the port and seafaring bosses. And the power behind those drill-bits has to be well-informed and well-organised union members.

If workers have good delegates, they will be well-informed and well-represented. We won't win every battle, but workers can be sure that the union

will respond quickly and honestly to their concerns, and do it best.

The job of a good full-time union official is not to substitute for or overrule the delegates, but to give them the back-up they need to do their job. That is what I will do as branch secretary.

This leaflet sets out some of my ideas about how. The ideas are based on a lot of experience, but you may have better ones. Both in the period up to the branch secretary election, and if elected secretary, I want your ideas — ideas from both delegates and from ordinary members — on this issue.

1. I think we should make it easier for new delegates to come forward. Create a cadetship position for rank-and-filers to get a one-month secondment off the job to go and find out how to become a good delegate. Spend time with an elected official of the union. If you are a seafarer, you spend a period of time on the wharves to find out what the wharfies do, and if you are a wharfie, you spend a

period of time at sea to find out what the seafarers do. Spend time with other organisers on jobsites from other unions like the ETU or BLF. Find out about the wider union movement. Go back to work as a better delegate.

2. I will make defence of delegates against management victimisation a union priority. If a union can't defend its elected delegates, it can defend nothing. That is why we will throw everything (including the kitchen sink) at any delegate who is victimized.

3. I will make sure all delegates hold regular report-back meetings with the members they represent. Along with the importance of a delegate's role is his or her responsibility in reporting back to members at every opportunity.

4. I think we should train and encourage delegates to "collectivise" grievances. Sometimes an individual grievance just has to be dealt with as an individual case, unconnected to other grievances. But most grievances raise issues of concern to everyone on the job. Dealt with that way, they strengthen union organisation and make workers more aware of their rights, more willing to stand up for their rights.

5. I will make it a union priority to win proper facilities for delegates, and the right for different delegates on each site to meet together regularly.

6. I can guarantee that delegates can always contact the branch secretary or another branch official when they want to. If I am elected branch secretary, you

will find that branch officials are much less often away at expensive overseas conferences or interstate meetings. I believe that international and interstate links are very important: I have worked as an International Transport Workers' Federation inspector. But many conferences cost the union much more in fares and hotel bills than they return to the rank and file. I will have the branch use telecommunications much more, so that flight expenses within Australia and internationally are severely curbed.

7. If possible, I would strongly argue for the opening of an office in Gladstone staffed with a full time organiser. I first raised this in 1997, but the current branch secretary would not have a bar of it.

8. We will explore as many ways as possible to improve communications between members, including members from different industrial sectors. For example, organise a major annual social function on 7 April each year (the beginning of the 1998 Patrick's lockout) for all members and their wives, girlfriends, or partners, and of course retired members.

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