



COMMUNICATION

Key Takeaways

- The Union must effectively utilize communication mediums that distribute information concisely and predictably.
- The Union must democratize access to information.
- The Union must create more opportunities for meaningful conversations about union activities and governance.

Executive Summary / Introduction

While information is power regardless of the size or purpose of a community, its accurate and pervasive dissemination is especially important for unions, which are most powerful when members work collectively. UAW 4121 critically lacks the well-organized communication systems necessary for collective action.

As it stands, the Union's primary means of communication are ASE's personal emails, Slack, and predominantly online-only Union meetings. Both personal emails and Slack fail to efficiently and accessibly communicate information. These issues stem from the fact that neither method is effectively accessed by members. Personal inboxes go unattended when the Union has a member's personal email at all. Less than 20% of union members are on Slack, which is challenging to navigate and locks information behind a paywall after a short period of time. Accessibility and organization issues are compounded by the Union's overreliance on online-only meetings, making it difficult for members to engage with one another socially and create an unfocused environment. When the need arises for last-minute information to be quickly distributed, communication outside the aforementioned channels is done ad-hoc without greater structure to confirm the message's reach or content.

Intertwined with information inaccessibility is information concentration, which limits member participation and collective decision-making. The Union's leadership and committee members often have access to information that is not made readily available to other members, and decisions are often made in functionally closed forums. As a result, the only surefire way to know if or when an event will take place is to be among those who plan events. This information-sharing problem constrains participation by making meeting attendance a prerequisite to event participation. Additionally, it holds members to the extreme standard of constant participation, relegating members who cannot be completely immersed in the Union to inactivity.



Even opportunities meant as open dialogue spaces among union members are made inaccessible by organizers. When discussions are open to the broader membership, the setting is chosen by leadership, which has historically kept the space limited to Zoom and chosen meeting times that conflict with work hours. Restricting accessibility and choosing times within the 9 to 5 time period is particularly hard on members who face preexisting disadvantages. For example, members with the least restrictive working conditions (who are, in many ways, the members who least need what the Union has to offer) essentially gain privileged access to opportunities to participate in union governance. The Union's communication methods privilege and discriminate against various members in ways that reproduce the non-democratic features of work life that the Union should strive to oppose.

The above issues dovetailed on the May 14th, 2024 ASE strike, wherein the lead-up to and during the so-called "vibe check" was particularly egregious. This Zoom-only vibe check was supposedly an opportunity for Union members to voice their support for accepting the tentative agreement or for continuing the strike. Notification about this vibe check was distributed solely via Slack or by word-of-mouth. To make matters worse, one-third of striking members were unavailable at the time because the vibe check was held *during their strike shift*. During the vibe check, leadership took sole control of the mic, governing who could speak at any given time and even muting one member while they were speaking. Unsurprisingly, no well-informed, democratic dialogue occurred given the restrictive attendance and participation conditions. Lacking access to information due to poor communication and the inability to communicate with one another freely inevitably leads to a lack of solidarity within the Union.

The Union must move away from ad-hoc, volunteer-based information dissemination and develop regularized information distribution systems. These systems should prefer modes of communication that are more likely to reach their intended targets than the current methods of email and Slack, which transmit essential information in a way that can be easily recalled. Moreover, the Union must restructure membership meetings with deliberate attention to inclusivity and accessibility to maximize participation.

Extended Analysis

Lack of clear goals / Opacity of leadership's goals

One of the most consistent strategic failings observed during the bargaining period was the lack of clear goals presented by leadership. Throughout the bargaining period, the bargaining committee negotiated toward ends that were not apparent to the rest of the Union. For example, there was a general sense that the committee wanted to raise wages, but it never revealed the extent it wished to do so. Similarly, there was an idea, frequently reiterated by the committee, that



wage demands were occasionally lowered to ultimately secure the maximum possible gain. The extent to which the bargaining committee was willing to lower its demands, or why it was doing so in this instance and at this time, as opposed to in that instance or at that time, was opaque to the general membership.

The end result of leadership's unwillingness or inability to set clear goals and present them to members as the precise issues being fought over was ultimately catastrophic during the eventual strike. ASEs walked off the job without clarity regarding the aims they were fighting for. Consequently, they struck without an objective sense of when or why they would end the strike. Without a benchmark, the ASEs lacked a way to determine whether it was worth it to keep fighting and were at the mercy of a bargaining team that could claim any proposal it wanted was the most they could get. Moreover, there was little motivation, let alone a basis for the ASEs to push back against the bargaining team. While this may have worked in the bargaining team's favor in terms of providing latitude in negotiations, it also demoralized the strike from the get-go, especially after the bargaining committee indicated a willingness to substantially lower its sights. Had more explicit goals been set (preferably through a participatory, democratic process), there would likely have been much more willingness to extend the strike as long as needed to reach specific targets.

In future struggles, the Union must have a clearer idea of the specific goals it is trying to reach. Unless a consensus determines otherwise, these goals should be democratically arrived at and maintained. Having such goals will provide members with the motivation they need to fight for what they democratically decide that they want. Furthermore, they will serve as benchmarks for whether or not the Union has won its fights, thereby enabling objective reflection on the Union's capacities and insufficiencies.

Ineffective Mobilizing Structures

UAW 4121 was notable for its inefficient mobilizing structures, which, both before and during the bargaining period, lacked consistency, breadth, depth, and accuracy. Given these shortcomings, it is difficult to say that the Union maintained any mobilizing structures whatsoever. Indeed, throughout the authors' time at UW, Union mobilization structures have always been either low visibility or ad hoc.

Union mobilization has always primarily occurred through emailing members' personal email addresses. This mobilization tactic poses numerous problems:

1. The union does not have access to all ASEs emails, despite its contract guaranteeing receipt of contact information for all eligible unit members from the University (it appears the union does not grieve this clause). Consequently, many members and potential members are uncontactable through this primary method, a problem of *breadth*.



2. Many, and a gambling man would bet most, ASEs do not regularly check their personal emails. Instead, they primarily concentrate on their work emails, which regularly receive the members' most consequential correspondence but which the Union does not use for good reason. Consequently, members fail to receive mobilization requests in a timely manner, which is a problem of *consistency* and *accuracy*.
3. Members' personal emails tend to receive lots of irrelevant and unwanted communications from any number of parties, including police alerts from the University, email notifications from subscription services (Google Calendar, Discord, Slack, etc.), promotional materials from various companies, receipts for purchases, appointment reminders from service providers, and so on. Consequently, members are likely to miss emails from the Union amidst a flurry of other unwanted communications, a problem of *consistency* and *accuracy*.
4. There have been persistent problems with members receiving union communications via email even when they are on the lookout for them, as, to name one example, the ballot debacle for the most recent Tentative Agreement Ratification Election ("the Election") easily demonstrates. This is a problem of *consistency*, *accuracy*, and *breadth*.

The sum total of these factors is that the large majority of Union mobilization efforts are almost certainly missed by their intended recipients, if they are delivered at all. This results in a *shallow* mobilization.

Even when members receive *and* engage with the Union's email mobilizations, they obviously only do so digitally. This is a problem because digital engagement carries less psychological weight than human engagement. *It is much easier to cancel (or forget) an entirely digital RSVP than it is to brush off a commitment made to a real person.* Yet the Union maintains no permanent in-person mobilization structures. When face-to-face or phone mobilization occurs, volunteers do it on an ad hoc basis while facing a hard and imminent deadline. Several problems thus emerge:

1. Volunteers are always few (due to other structural factors discussed below), and the number of people to contact is enormous. The number of people mobilizing is always so small that it is *impossible* for them to contact all union members. Thus, problems of mobilizing *breadth* and *depth* appear. There are never enough mobilizers to contact everyone who needs to be contacted.
2. While attempts to solve the above problem by encouraging contacted members to engage in "chain mobilization" (i.e., please tell x number of people what I just told you, and ask them to pass it on as well), such mobilization lacks oversight and systematicity. The result is that there is no ability to ensure a) that the message *is* passed on or b) that the message



reaches a new person each time it is passed on. This creates problems of *breadth* (the message fails to reach most members) and *accuracy* (some people are mobilized multiple times, the rest are never mobilized at all).

3. Because mobilizers are always chosen on a volunteer, last-minute basis, there is **no** *consistency* of contact between mobilizers and mobilizees. Yet, mobilizers are unlikely to respond to unknown mobilizers. For one, the natural suspicion of strangers emerges: who is this person to ask me to interrupt my routine *for them*? What authority do they have? Why should I trust them? These questions earn heightened suspicion when contact is made by phone (a far more efficient method of mass mobilization than face-to-face contact). People are reticent to pick up a call from an unknown phone number (which, of course, raises *accuracy* problems).
4. “Existing” personal mobilization structures are inefficient at contacting members and routinely fail to produce accurate RSVP numbers or hold people accountable for following through on RSVPs. This results in difficulties gauging how many people have responded to a given mobilization and how many people are consistently mobilizable (let alone potentially mobilizable). Problems of *accuracy*, *breadth*, *depth*, and *consistency* therefore arise.

All the above problems were on full display during mobilization for the most recent strike and its accompanying series of direct actions.

Fortunately, the solution to the Union’s mobilization problems is simple, time-tested, and easy to implement: a phone tree. A phone tree entails that mobilizers take on long-term commitments to contact a set list of members whenever mobilizations are required. Thus, mobilizations no longer depend on the shallow email tool, nor do they proceed in an ad hoc fashion. Furthermore, regular contact between mobilizees and the same mobilizers builds trust, responsibility, and accountability. Systematicity, and hence accuracy and consistency, are improved too. Problems of missing contact information or unresponsive mobilizees suddenly have set people in charge of solving these issues. The number of mobilizers can be aligned with the number of mobilizees to ensure that all potential mobilizees can be contacted. A hope for chain mobilization (that either fails to materialize or creates contact redundancies) is no longer needed. Standard reporting measures of consistency of mobilization and responsiveness among mobilizees can be developed, allowing for accurate predictions of mobilizing strength at both planned and potential actions.

The best current option for establishing a phone tree is to designate union stewards as mobilizers for their departments. That said, this is not a permanent solution. Empty steward positions abound, and some departments have far too many ASEs for stewards to mobilize everyone effectively. Still, it allows us to implement at least a partially comprehensive mobilization structure while recruiting additional mobilizers to fill the gaps.



Information Centralization

Unions require all kinds of knowledge to operate, including how to engage in effective labor action, how to use a contract for the greatest advantage to workers, what resources are available to the union, and what is required, expected, or needed from each member. Crucially, this information must be decentralized, which is to say easily accessible to all relevant parties.

Information decentralization makes it easy for members to actively contribute to union functions, participate in union decision-making processes, and generally understand their place in their union and workplace. Because information is readily available, members know where and when they can plug in, how decisions are made, how their voices can be heard, and how the union impacts their lives (and their actions impact the union). Information centralization, conversely, disincentivizes engagement by confusing members who may be interested in further participation or simply making information on how to participate inaccessible. It prevents members from engaging in consequential self-expression, as they do not know where saying their piece could be efficacious. And it broadly makes it difficult for workers to understand their place in their workplace, potentially leading to instances of hermeneutic injustice. Indeed, information centralization has a structural tendency towards authoritarianism; the epistemic power obtained by those “in the know” is inevitably and invariably translated into material and political power.

At the moment, this information is highly centralized within UAW 4121 among a) leadership, b) committee members, and c) (when it existed) the bargaining committee. Unfortunately, these centers of knowledge do a poor job of transmitting what they know to other union members, a fact that was well illustrated in the Union’s most recent bargaining period. During this period, the BC primarily transmitted updates to other members via email. This was a poor way to distribute information for the reasons already discussed. Information transmission from the BC to the broader membership via email was further compromised by the emails’ brevity. Communications typically mentioned the major points that had been bargained on but failed to explain the process that was gone through in each session, the bargaining team’s logic for why it bargained the ways it did, and other events that happened at the bargaining table. Yet such information was crucial for the general membership to at least have access to so they could provide feedback to their delegates. Ultimately, there was great confusion as to why the BC accepted the proposals it did, what its alternatives were, and so forth. Lacking information on what occurred in bargaining or the thought process followed by the BC in formulating and pursuing its objectives, many union members had no choice but to accept what they were told uncritically.

The one structure the Union maintains for decentralizing communications is its Slack channel. Slack theoretically provides an accessible way for union members to communicate, ask questions, and share information. Yet Slack is ultimately an ineffective tool for information dissemination. Only about 20% of unit members are on the Union’s Slack channel, meaning that communications occurring on Slack necessarily reach only a tiny minority of members. Nor is it appropriate to identify registering more people as a solution to this problem of breadth because



Slack is often as much a barrier to accessing information as it is a tool for information dissemination. Using the app is difficult, with many non-intuitive features making it unclear how to find the information a member is looking for. The vast number of threads into which information is siloed are not neatly compartmentalized, nor is information always in the thread it might be most reasonably expected. Even when information is present where it “should” be, Slack’s presentation of this information can make it challenging to understand what is going on. In short, the Union’s main tool for decentralizing information is not particularly fit for purpose.

Overcoming information dissemination problems is difficult, though a mobilizing tree can be used for the task, at least to a certain extent. When appropriate, there is every reason to have mobilizers do structured outreach to convey important information. Beyond this, it is imperative that the union develop regularized information distribution systems and easily accessible and usable libraries. Reliance on Slack should be minimized, while creating a network of navigable information sources should be prioritized.

Lack of In-Person Meetings/Over-Reliance on Zoom

In-person meetings provide several benefits for any organizing operation compared to virtual meetings. First, it is well known that communication, even oral communication, involves bodily cues that convey meaning. These include cues from both the speaker and the audience, which silently yet visibly react to what is being said. In-person meetings allow people to read these cues to deepen their communication. Second, in-person meetings facilitate socialization before and after the meeting. Third, and related to the second, in-person meetings allow participants to engage in physical organizing activities (e.g., materials construction) that are impossible to complete in virtual meetings. Fourth, in-person meetings create physical spaces dedicated to organizing, thus ensuring that the focus remains squarely on organizing activities instead of being diverted to other tasks.

While virtual meetings have their benefits, particularly in terms of accessibility and convenience, they do not outweigh the rewards of in-person gatherings, especially when most meetings are currently limited exclusively to virtual settings. There are also several significant drawbacks to exclusively virtual meetings. For one, virtual meetings create a casual environment where participants’ focus easily strays. Participants often attend virtual meetings from familiar places, especially from their homes, in which multiple demands compete for their attention. Entirely virtual meetings also remove the possibility of pre- or post-meeting socialization. Physical organizing work is made similarly impossible. Moreover, virtual meetings make picking up on non-verbal cues much more difficult. Most participants remain invisible from one another throughout the course of the meeting (either because people’s cameras are turned off or the meeting room can only display so many people at once), thus preventing people from picking up on the atmosphere.

The biggest drawback of virtual meetings, however, is that the moderator receives authoritarian control. They can monopolize decisions over who can speak and when and even



silence speakers through their use of the mute function. They can unilaterally adjourn the meeting if they so choose, leaving participants suddenly disconnected in space, without their virtual connection, and *sans* the ability to protest. In short, it prevents people from continuing, irrespective of their wishes.

The moderator's power to exercise total control to detrimental effect was on full display in a virtual meeting that occurred during the most recent strike shortly before the bargaining committee accepted the tentative agreement. In this meeting, the bargaining committee, which was moderating the meeting, ended the Zoom session without warning, against the wishes of many, and with a stack still in the queue. This cut short an ongoing union-wide discussion, which the bargaining team should have let continue to gain information on whether they should accept the tentative agreement. That the bargaining committee did not allow the meeting to continue and, at the very least, abridged members' rights to provide democratic input into the bargaining process, potentially sending the committee into a closed session without a full deck of cards.

Presently, nearly all of the Union's meetings are held over Zoom. The Union must move to a model that prioritizes in-person attendance, even if online forms of attendance continue to be offered for the sake of accessibility. The downsides of virtual meetings for organizing purposes are apparent, and the undemocratic potentialities of Zoom are both real and realized.