

# How to take part in local meetings

# Introduction

In AFSCME's *International Constitution*, The Bill of Rights for Union Members states: "Active discussion of union affairs shall be encouraged and protected within this organization. ... Members shall have the right to full participation, through discussion and vote, in the decision-making processes of the union." At the local union level, membership meetings are where this democratic expression takes place and members make decisions on what they want their local to do.

Membership meetings serve several purposes, including:

- Conducting union business
- Making decisions on the actions that the union will take on issues important to the membership
- Providing information to the members on issues and topics of interest. Information can come from such sources as local leaders, staff representatives, guest speakers, etc.

To conduct the union's business in a democratic, effective and orderly manner, it is important to have a set of rules to go by. AFSCME's *Constitution* and the constitutions of almost all locals and councils specify that "Robert's Rules of Order" be used to govern our meetings. Following are some guidelines to help you take part in your local union meetings.

## Making a Motion

If you want your local to do something – to take an action – the first step is to make a **Motion**. Motions can cover a wide range of actions – from routine business matters to major new activities you want your local to undertake. Getting your idea "on the floor" for discussion happens in three steps:

**Step 1:** To make a motion you must be recognized by the Chair. In most local meetings



that means raising your hand and being called on by the Chair. Then you make your motion. For example, if you want the local to start publishing a newsletter you would say: "**I move that our local publish a newsletter.**" Or if you think the local should have an education committee, you would say: "**I move that we establish an education committee.**"

**Step 2:** Before your motion is taken up, there must be a **second**. Some other person will



have to say: "**I second the motion.**" A second to the motion shows that at least two people are interested. If there is no second, the meeting will go on to other business.

**Step 3:** The Chair will then ask: "**Is there any discussion?**" At that point, you or anyone else can speak – but only about the motion on the floor.



## Speaking on a Motion

Once a motion is on the floor and the Chair calls for discussion, you or anyone else can speak on the motion. You can speak in favor of the motion or you can speak against the motion. The first step is to be recognized by the Chair – usually by raising your hand to signal the Chair that you want to speak. Then wait until the Chair recognizes you. Only the person recognized by the Chair may speak. By having only one person speak at a time, we get *a chance to hear what each person has to say*.

When you speak, keep to the subject being discussed. If the group is talking about a motion regarding raising money for PEOPLE, then you must talk about that topic. If you do not speak to the issue that is on the floor, the Chair will rule that your remarks are “out of order.”

## Offering an Amendment

Sometimes you may think a motion isn't clear, or it could be improved or made more specific. You might want to add to or change part of it. You can do this by offering an **Amendment** to that motion.



Again, the first step is to get recognized by the Chair. Then (using the newsletter example) you might say: **“I move we amend the motion to publish a newsletter once a month and distribute it to all members.”** Once again, any proposed amendment requires a second. Then the Chair will say: **“Is there any discussion on the amendment?”** At that point, you or anyone else can speak, but only on the amendment just offered.



When it comes to voting, the amendment is voted on first. The Chair will restate the amendment – so everyone is clear about what they are voting on – and then say: **“Those in favor say ‘Aye.’ [Pause.] Those opposed say ‘No.’ ”** The amendment must be supported by a majority of members voting, or more than half of those members who vote on the issue. If it passes, the Chair will say: **“We will now resume discussion on the main motion as amended.”** You then go back to discussing and then voting on the main motion, which now includes the amendment. If the amendment is defeated, the Chair will say: **“The amendment was defeated. Is there any further discussion on the main motion?”** Then the main motion is discussed and voted on without the amendment.

The purpose of an amendment is to make the main motion better, not to change it entirely. If you don't like a motion, the best thing to do is defeat it, and then make another motion. Amendments must be “germane,” or in some way involve the same question raised by the motion. If an amendment that is offered is not germane, the Chair should rule that amendment “out of order.”

## Ending Debate



If you think the discussion has gone on long enough and want it stopped, here's what you can do: First, get recognized by the Chair and say: **"I move we close debate"** or **"I call the question"** or **"I move the previous question."** They all mean the same thing: **Let's end the debate.**



There will have to be a second to your motion. Then the Chair will say: **"We are now voting on whether or not to end debate."** A vote is conducted, and this vote requires the support of two-thirds of the members present and voting.



If the motion to end debate is passed, the Chair will say: **"We will now vote on the motion that is on the floor."** The Chair will restate the motion – so everyone is clear about what they are voting on – and then say: **"Those in favor say 'Aye.' [Pause.] Those opposed say 'No.'"** Here the majority rules. The motion is either passed or defeated.

## Membership Meetings: What to Remember

Here are some important things to remember about participating in local union membership meetings:

- 1:** You have the right to express your opinion on the issues being discussed at your local meetings.
- 2:** You also have the responsibility to respect the right of other members to voice their opinions.
- 3:** If you follow those guidelines, you and your fellow members will make good, informed decisions that benefit the union and its members, AND you will help make your meetings a place where participation and involvement truly are valued and encouraged.

## Other “What-to-Do’s” in Meetings

Here are examples of some common things that may happen during meetings, along with “what to do” when they happen.

- **The meeting gets confusing and you are not sure what is going on.**



Stand up and state: **“I rise for a point of information.”** The Chair will then ask you what you want to know and you can ask the Chair your question.

- **You think a member is not speaking to the motion on the floor.**



Stand up and say: **“I rise on a point of order.”** The Chair will then ask for your point and, once you have stated your concern, the Chair must rule on whether the person’s remarks are or are not “out of order.”

- **You think the Chair has made a ruling that is wrong, and the error is serious enough that it should be corrected.**



Stand up and say: **“I would like to appeal the ruling of the Chair.”** The question of whether to uphold the ruling of the Chair or agree with your appeal is then put to a vote by the members. The members make the final decision by majority vote.

- **You believe that more information or time is needed for the group to make a good decision on the motion being discussed, and you want to postpone the decision.**



There are a couple things you can do. First, you can move to postpone the motion. After being recognized by the Chair, say: **“I move that we postpone this matter to \_\_\_\_\_.”** If there is a second, the Chair will call for a discussion and vote on postponing the entire issue.



A second option is to refer the motion to a committee. Get recognition from the Chair and say (again using the example of the publication of a newsletter): **“I move we refer the motion to the Communications Committee.”** This also requires a second BUT a motion to refer can be debated and amendments can be offered.



# Robert's Rules of Order: Chart of Motions & Procedures

These motions are listed in order of precedence. A motion can be introduced if it is higher on the chart than the pending motion.

| Purpose                                         | You Say                                          | Can Interrupt | Requires a Second | Debat-able | Can be Amended | Vote Required |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------|----------------|---------------|
| Close the meeting                               | I move to adjourn                                | No            | Yes               | No         | No             | Majority      |
| Register a complaint                            | I rise to a question of privilege                | Yes           | No                | No         | No             | None          |
| Lay the motion aside temporarily                | I move to table the motion                       | No            | Yes               | No         | No             | Majority      |
| End debate                                      | I call the question;<br>OR I move to end debate  | No            | Yes               | No         | No             | 2/3           |
| Limit or extend debate                          | I move that debate be limited to...              | No            | Yes               | No         | Yes            | 2/3           |
| Postpone to a certain time                      | I move to postpone the motion to...              | No            | Yes               | Yes        | Yes            | Majority      |
| Refer to a committee                            | I move to refer the motion to...                 | No            | Yes               | Yes        | Yes            | Majority      |
| Modify the wording of the motion                | I move to amend the motion by...                 | No            | Yes               | Yes        | Yes            | Majority      |
| Postpone the decision indefinitely              | I move that the motion be postponed indefinitely | No            | Yes               | Yes        | No             | Majority      |
| Bring business before the group (a main motion) | I move that...                                   | No            | Yes               | Yes        | Yes            | Majority      |

No order of precedence. These motions arise incidentally and are decided immediately.

| Purpose                                       | You Say                            | Can Interrupt | Requires a Second | Debat-able | Can be Amended | Vote Required |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------|----------------|---------------|
| Enforce the rules                             | Point of order                     | Yes           | No                | No         | No             | None          |
| Submit the matter to the group                | I appeal the decision of the Chair | Yes           | Yes               | Varies     | No             | Majority      |
| Suspend the rules                             | I move to suspend the rules        | No            | Yes               | No         | No             | 2/3           |
| Divide the motion                             | I move to divide the question      | No            | Yes               | No         | Yes            | Majority      |
| Demand rising vote                            | I call for a division              | Yes           | No                | No         | No             | None          |
| Ask a question about par-liamentary procedure | Parliamen-tary inquiry             | Yes           | No                | No         | No             | None          |
| Request for information                       | Point of information               | Yes           | No                | No         | No             | None          |

No order of precedence. Introduce only when nothing else is pending before the group.

| Purpose                        | You Say                       | Can Interrupt | Requires a Second | Debat-able                                | Can be Amended | Vote Required                |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------|
| Take the matter from the table | I move to take from the table | No            | Yes               | No                                        | No             | Majority                     |
| Cancel a previous action       | I move to rescind             | No            | Yes               | Yes                                       | Yes            | 2/3; or Majority with notice |
| Reconsider a motion*           | I move to reconsider the vote | No            | Yes               | Yes, if motion it applies to is debatable | No             | Majority                     |

\* can be made only by someone who voted for the prevailing side in the previous vote on the motion



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