

Motion on accountability (rs21 Steering Group)

This was passed at the June 2021 rs21 members' national meeting.

rs21 seeks to build and intervene in working-class movements against exploitation and oppression. We prioritise working class collective action over elections. Similarly, we have always placed a heavy emphasis on a rank and file strategy in relation to the unions.

As members of a revolutionary organisation, we should be accountable to each other and to our shared political commitments. This motion seeks to lay out what accountability would involve when comrades stand for or hold positions in trade unions and within political parties, local government etc. This cannot be a matter only for the Steering Group, so fractions and local groups have a big role to play.

A rank and file approach means that members should try to organise where they work and, if there are other union members, then try to get elected as a union rep, branch officer or similar grassroots leadership role. However, taking on roles in unions can lead to activists prioritising the union as an institution over workers' interests, preferring mediocre deals and partnership to conflict with managers they have built relationships with. Election to high office such as a union's national Executive Committee can also encourage a focus on the union as an institution and relationships with senior union officials rather than workers. That said, standing for election to such positions can be useful – if you can use it to be a voice for militant workers, to encourage the development of rank and file power, to push for democracy and accountability, and to build networks of militants.

Working for a union as an 'officer'¹ who deals with employers presents even greater problems. Officers aren't subject to the deals they negotiate and neither do they have to work alongside those affected. Their life is dominated by discussions with employers and the government. This is true to a greater degree the higher up the structure they get, but officers employed by unions are not workers – they are a mediating layer between workers and bosses, between capital and labour. As revolutionaries we aim to be on the side of the working class, not mediators between workers and their enemies, however well we think we might perform that role. Officers being subject to re-election, having a very democratic union and an active membership all help mitigate the risks to some extent.

¹ Note that different unions use different jargon. The term 'officer' is being used here to refer to people employed by the union and who deal with employers.

There are other jobs in unions which aren't as problematic. For example, many unions have organisers whose function is to help workers build stronger organisation rather than bargain with employers. While this avoids many of the problems with officers, most organisers are accountable upwards to senior union officers, not downwards to members, and can be instructed to do or argue things that would compromise revolutionary politics. There are also jobs in unions which don't carry the same risks – for example administrative, technical or research roles – the people doing these jobs are workers who just happen to be employed by a union, they have no mediating role between workers and capital.

The politics of election to Westminster, devolved parliaments, local authorities etc. are not the same, but there are parallels. In theory, revolutionaries can use such positions to act as tribunes for the working class, to force issues into the political mainstream, and to lend support to movements. But such positions are operating 'behind enemy lines', where nearly everyone either is managing the capitalist state we need to replace or aspires to do so. You are confronted every day with choices shaped by structures, laws and expectations that are determined by our enemies. It is common for socialists to enter parliament hoping to change it, but for parliament to change them instead. In all cases where revolutionaries are operating in the union or state apparatus they come under immense and unrelenting pressure to accommodate. Robust accountability to rank and file workers and to a revolutionary organisation are vital. Workers' own collective action, not representatives acting on their behalf, is the mechanism for achieving significant social change, let alone socialism.

This National Meeting agrees the following guidance for ensuring accountability:

For standing in elections or holding elected positions in the state apparatus:

- Members should discuss with the rs21 Steering Group and their local group before standing for elected positions in local or national government and not pursue it if a collective decision is made that it would not be in line with rs21's politics and strategy.
- Members in prominent positions (councillors, MPs etc.) should report regularly to the appropriate rs21 fraction, local group or other body.
- Members standing in these elections should only do so on a clear revolutionary socialist platform, or on a platform agreed by rs21 or a vehicle which rs21 is supporting.

For elected positions in trade unions:

- Members should discuss with the relevant rs21 union fraction and their local group before standing for positions in unions above workplace or branch level and not pursue it if a collective decision is made that it would not be in line with rs21's politics and strategy.
- Members should discuss key positions and decisions in advance with the relevant rs21 union fraction to inform their platform and activism, although if elected then they are of course primarily accountable to the workers they represent.
- Members should discuss with the relevant rs21 union fraction and the Steering Group before taking on union roles that involve more than 50% facility time or which are at National Executive level.

For unelected positions in trade unions:

- Members should inform the Steering Group before taking any job in a union.
- Members should never take unelected officer jobs in unions.
- Members working for unions in any job involving industrial relations should be ready to lose or give up their job if it would prevent them acting unambiguously in line with socialist principles including supporting the rank and file.

Across the board:

- Members holding any of the positions mentioned above should ensure it is recorded on the rs21 membership system and agree with the relevant group of rs21 comrades how to make themselves accountable to the organisation and to those they represent.
- Comrades who feel that another member is not following these principles should raise it within the local group or fraction. If there is no resolution to the issue the branch/fraction or member should inform the Steering Group, who may bring the matter to a National Meeting. (For the avoidance of doubt, nothing in this motion changes the fact that expulsion can only be agreed by a vote at a National Meeting or by a decision by the Complaints Group.)