

from

## Democracy is Power

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A Labor Notes Book [www.labornotes.org](http://www.labornotes.org)

# Appendix 4. Simplified Rules of Order

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Virtually all unions use Robert's Rules of Order. Yet few people who chair meetings understand and follow the rules, and only a tiny part of the membership understands more than the barest outline. This defeats the number-one democratic value of having rules—that everyone knows how to accomplish their goals and what to expect.

Here is a set of rules that will serve most local union meetings. They require only a few pages and can easily be distributed to all members. Although Robert's Rules is a whole book, the Simplified Rules include most of the rules and concepts that unions, in practice, actually use from Robert's. In addition, these rules emphasize democratic practices and remove some of the undemocratic features in Robert's. The emphasis is on helping members be involved.

It is usually not worth the affront to tradition to try to formally amend the local union bylaws to adopt these rules. Instead, the rules proposed here could be adopted as the informal "short form." In most locals, the interpretation of Robert's is quite loose anyway.

One way these rules are simpler than Robert's is through the consistent use of majority rule, rather than two-thirds or more, on all motions. (The exception is those issues on which the local bylaws require a larger majority, such as amending the bylaws.) Rules requiring more than a majority vote (two-thirds, three-fifths, three-

quarters, unanimous) are intended to protect minority rights, but in practice, they multiply the power of already powerful minorities so much that they can thwart majority rule. In the long run, minority rights can be protected only by the care and respect of the majority. So in these Rules, instead of requiring a two-thirds vote to end debate, for example, a majority is allowed to do so, but only after the chair asks who and how many still wish to speak.

These same rules, slightly modified, can be used in very large meetings and conventions. The main changes would be (1) to require seconders for motions and when calling for a vote count, (2) to require submission of motions in advance, and (3) the use of a "convention committee" to sit throughout the convention and make recommendations for adjusting the agenda or other procedural problems. Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) has used such a set of rules at its national conventions for twenty years.

## Simplified Rules of Order

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### I. Purpose

The purpose of these rules is to allow the maximum democratic participation in meetings.

In meetings, as in all phases of union democracy, leadership is an essential part. The chair is the leader of the meeting. Therefore the main job of the chair is to help the meeting and its members conduct business and accomplish goals. The rules are a way to achieve these goals and are not an end unto themselves. Therefore the chair and meeting attenders should be allowed considerable flexibility in proposing implementation.

### II. Agenda Preparation

#### A. The proposed meeting agenda will be made up by the executive board or through a procedure established by the board.

The proposed meeting agenda will include all motions submitted to the board by members in advance, unless the member withdraws the motion before the meeting. The board may recommend time limits and limits to debate on such motions as part of the agenda proposal. The executive board will set an order for the agenda as appropriate, except that items held over from previous meetings take precedence over any non-emergency new business.

The proposed agenda should include the full text of short motions and brief descriptions of longer motions and reports. The agenda may include proposals for procedures, such as time limits for specific discussions and how to handle voting.

### B. Availability

The main points of the meeting will be provided with the announcement of the meeting, and the full meeting agenda will be available before the meeting.

Committee reports and background material should be available before the meeting.

### C. Approval

Adoption of the agenda is the first order of business at the meeting. A member may propose to amend the agenda to change the order of business or the procedures. There may be one speaker for and one against each such amendment. The chair may allow a second person for and against.

Amendments and adoption of the agenda will be by majority vote.

## III. Voting

### A. Methods

1. Voice vote
2. Standing or hand vote (on request of any member)
3. Count. Because a vote count takes so much time, this will only be done when the chair finds a standing vote too close to call, or when at least ten percent of the members attending second the call for a count.

### B. Definitions

Unless otherwise provided, all motions, both substantive and procedural, require a simple majority for passage.

A simple majority is achieved when more than 50 percent of those voting vote yes. (Examples: if there is a tie, the motion is defeated. If 31 vote yes, 30 vote no, and 50 abstain or do not vote, the motion is passed.)

## IV. Main Motions

Unless another arrangement has been made, one motion is considered at a time. If someone makes an amendment, it will be dis-

cussed and voted on before going back to the main motion or other amendment. (There may be an amendment to an amendment, but there may be no third-level amendments.) However, when two or more motions or amendments are directed to the same point, procedures may be proposed by the executive board or chair, subject to approval by the meeting, to consider two or more motions or amendments together.

## V. Discussion

### A. Individual

Unless otherwise provided, each speaker will be limited to three minutes. No speaker will speak twice on the same motion when others are waiting to speak for the first time. The chair may ask someone who has already spoken to answer a question if it would clarify matters, and the person who made the motion may be allowed to sum up.

### B. Total

Where no time limit for the total discussion has been proposed as part of the agenda, the chair must propose one.

### C. Content

The discussion should be relevant to the motion on the floor.

## VI. Other Motions

Like all other motions, those below require only a simple majority to pass. Where a motion is normally non-debatable, the chair may suggest some limited discussion if there appears to be substantial confusion in the body.

### To Table

Not debatable.

Postpones further discussion and decision indefinitely (can be reintroduced in a very short time, or never). (Tabling is not used for sending a motion to a committee or for changing the time for consideration. See To Refer.)

**To Refer** (for example, to a committee) or **To Postpone** (to a specific time)

Limited debate (e.g., two speakers for and two against a proposal).

### To Reconsider

Must be made by someone on the winning side.

Limited debate unless the procedure is suspended.

### Procedural

For suggesting a procedure to handle a certain point (for example, to extend the time for discussion, or to consider two motions together).

Not debatable except on recommendation by chair.

### To End Debate and Come to a Vote (“to call the question” or “to move the question”)

Must be made by someone who has not yet spoken on this motion.

Not debatable.

Before taking the vote on ending debate, the chair must first ask for a show of hands of those who wish to speak, so members may make an informed decision.

### To Adjourn or Recess

Not debatable.

The chair may ask or answer questions regarding pending business, to help members understand what they are cutting off if they adjourn the meeting.

The chair may entertain non-debatable motions for referring pending business before holding the vote on whether to adjourn.

The chair may entertain motions for setting the next meeting, if not already scheduled.

The chair must first ask for a hand showing of those not wishing to adjourn before taking the vote.

### To Overrule the Chair (also called “to overturn” or “appeal the ruling of” the chair)

Must be called out immediately after the chair’s ruling, before other business is conducted.

The chair does not have to step aside.

The chair should explain her ruling, the person appealing speaks, the chair responds. If the matter looks very controversial, the chair may take speakers for and against before her final reply.

The vote is then immediately taken in the following way: “All those in favor of upholding the ruling of the chair, please say ‘aye.’ Opposed, say ‘no.’”

The chair plays an important role in keeping the meeting moving along by suggesting procedures and making rulings in ambiguous situations. Normally the chair should be allowed this authority and flexibility. The check on this authority is the motion to overrule.

## VII. Quorum

The required quorum will be established in the bylaws. (If one is not specified, there is no quorum requirement.) A call for a quorum may not be shouted out or interrupt a speaker, but must come after being recognized by the chair. The chair will check for a quo-

rum by show of hands or count, in the same manner as voting. A call for a quorum is out of order for ten minutes after a previous quorum call. If a quorum is lacking, the following business is still in order:

Motions directed toward getting enough members for a quorum

Motions about when to meet again

Motions to refer business to the executive board

Good and welfare

Motions to adjourn or recess

## VIII. Miscellaneous Points

Normally, people will speak in the order that they are recognized, by raising hands. Certain circumstances make it necessary to get recognized more quickly. This is accomplished with one of the following points. All may be made by shouting out. However, you may not interrupt someone while they are talking except for Personal Privilege and a Point of Order to appeal a ruling of the chair. If the chair feels an individual is abusing these points, she does not have to recognize the abuser.

### A. Point of Personal Privilege

To be used only when there is difficulty in participating in the meeting, such as inability to hear, too much commotion, smoke, etc. May not be used as a way of getting the floor to answer a criticism, even if you believe you were misunderstood or misquoted.

### B. Point of Procedure

To be used to move to change the procedure (e.g., to propose that we have two speakers for and two against this motion).

### C. Point of Order

To be used to call attention when it is felt that the chair or the body is deviating from the previously adopted procedure (for example, “Our procedure calls for our coming to a vote at this time.”) May also be used to challenge a ruling of the chair.

### D. Point of Information

To ask a question of the chair. May not be used to ask a question directly of another member (There is no such thing as a “point of clarification” or any other special way to give information, except to be recognized by the chair in the usual manner.)