Growing Strong Branch Officers

A paper from the PPTA Southland region



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Recommendations

1. That the paper be received; and
2. That the PPTA reaffirms the central role that branches and branch officers play in the PPTA; and
3. That PPTA Te Wehengarua undertake research into strategies and actions to address the challenge of declining branch participation and engagement, with findings and recommendations reported back to Executive; and
4. That PPTA Te Wehengarua considers through the 2027 claim development process the inclusion of a claim to reflect the provisions of section 18A of the Employment Relations Act 2000.

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1 Why Branches matter

1.1 Under the model for school governance brought in under Tomorrow's Schools, a large number of the decisions that affect teachers rest with school boards and principals. Boards and principals decide everything from how often to have staff meetings, to how teachers are compensated for being over hours, to the shape of the school's curriculum1. Many decisions that shape teachers' working lives are made at their school level and so the most effective form of collective action is at a branch level.

1.2 This is one reason that branches are vital to the strength of the PPTA, because that is where members can push back against ill thought-out decisions by senior leadership. A strong branch can ensure that teachers' voices are heard by senior leadership, and that teachers have input into their local workplace conditions.

1.3 Branches are also vital to the strength of the PPTA because they build engagement in other areas and parts of the PPTA. Annual Conference makes its best decisions when delegates have been well-informed by robust discussions at their regional meetings, and likewise those regional meetings are most effective when they were preceded by hearty discussions about the papers in local branches. Many good regional officials came from experience at a branch level - the same with Executive, Te Huarahi, and all the many committees and groups in the PPTA.

1.4 Branch officers welcome new members to the union and support them in understanding the PPTA and unionism more generally. Branches are the lifeblood of the union, and it is so important that we support and develop them.

2 From where have we fallen?

2.1 In the 1970s, it was not unusual for Branch Meetings to be held monthly in many branches as part of the meeting cycle in a school. These meetings were historically well attended and resulted in high participation by members in the affairs on the Association (PPTA was not a union at that stage).

2.2 It was the case that attendance at the bimonthly Regional Executive meetings was restricted.

2.3 Using the Southland Region as an example, each Branch was entitled to have their Branch Officers attend plus one voting member for every 10 Branch members.

2.4 Full Regional meetings were held approximately three times per year, with the AGM being the premier meeting, which was characteristically attended by about 25-30% of Regional members and was held in the evenings.

2.5 Contrast that with the contemporary situation where, rather than have a well-attended after-hours meeting, we are heartened to be able to appoint Regional Officers and then run a meeting which reaches a quorum.

[1] At least for now

3 Why do we need a plan?

3.1 The situation is serious.

3.1.1 For many, the only Collective aspect we share is that we have a Collective Agreement, and that members subscriptions are automatically deducted from their fortnightly pay. PUMs and industrial action are the exception to this.

3.1.2 If the unfortunate threat of refusing Novopay deductions ever eventuated (ACT Party Policy), there is no question that a drop in membership would follow. Active, strong branches would be the best and instant response to that challenge.

3.1.3 Current lack of membership participation results in major policy of PPTA reflecting only the views of a minority of members. No explanation is needed here on the inherent dangers of this. Yes, the members "should" participate, but they don't.

3.1.4 The issue of "cold" branches is one that many regions are dealing with. Some schools have many PPTA members, but there are no branch officers willing or able to talk to the information fed through from Executive, neither are they able to talk to issues that may be present inside their own schools. Issues in Branches may often involve supporting members in meetings with management as they deal with employment issues. Whilst Principals are often relaxed with and may indeed encourage Union participation, there are also cases where it is stated that "becoming Branch Chair will not be helpful to your career in this school!" . This is an obvious disincentive to nominating for the position. There is a need to address these issues at National and at Regional levels to support Branches

4 Why is a financial incentive appropriate?

4.1 As a union we frequently talk to the government and the media about the need to have appropriate salaries to help 'recruit and retain' teachers. So why not our branch officials?

4.2 While it is not a widespread approach, there are other unions that do use this as a method to recognise the work done by activists within the union. The Teaching Support Staff Union in Canada (https://www.tssu.ca/committees/) offers stipends for participation on their committees.

5 Details of a financial incentive

5.1 We do not suggest in this paper all the details of how we propose a financial incentive for branch officers should work; instead, we are recommending that the Executive be tasked with developing this.

5.2 One area that Executive would need to specify is precisely who this would cover. Our starting point is to suggest that this would be for a couple of officials per branch, as these are the key leaders in each branch. Our region is not suggesting this would cover regional officers, executive members, Te Huarahi members, or other committees' members (unless, of course, they are also a branch officer). But that is obviously something that could be changed at the will of conference.

5.3 Questions around the implementation like how deductions would operate are an area that would need appropriate staff input. Other questions to consider would include whether there are any conditions that need to be met to be eligible for a reduction, e.g. a branch AGM each year, or attendance at at least 3 regional meetings.

5.4 Because these are fine-grained details of implementation, we believe these are more appropriate to be developed by Executive in their role of implementing the directions of Annual Conference.