

So You Wanna Practice Picket? Here's How We Did It

by Dane Rohl

A row of people in UPS outfits with signs seen from far away block the road to some kind of facility, a gate is visible behind them.

Practice picketing is a way to show the company, the public, and your co-workers that you are ready to stick together and win the contract you deserve. Teamsters in Local 135 in Bloomington, Indiana conducted a practice picket as part of their contract campaign. Photo: IBT Local 135.

For the first time since I started working at UPS 15 years ago, it feels like unions across the country are on the rise. UPS Teamsters mobilized for a massive contract campaign to win the best contract we've ever had. Now it's the Auto Workers' turn.

Like in the Teamsters, UAW members recently elected new leadership that will stand up for you—and more importantly, actually allow members to stand up for yourselves.

I've been following the contract fights at the Big 3 automakers. You're fighting for a lot of the same things we fought for: ending two-tier, a fair raise, and control of your time. I hope our wins at UPS can inspire UAW members, like I've been inspired by others in the labor movement.

WHAT IS PRACTICE PICKETING?

The best part of our contract campaign at UPS was practice picketing. We had never done anything like it at our building in Bloomington, Indiana, and I was amazed at how well it went. Nearly everyone on my shift showed up and felt energized afterwards.

It not only put pressure on the company, but also brought us together. "Doing practice picketing was so cool yesterday," one of my newer co-workers told me the next day. "I actually felt like I was a part of something bigger, for the first time at a job."

Practice picketing **is not** a strike line. You can't stop working or tell others to stop. You should also be sure to be on time for your shift.

Practice picketing **is** a way to show the company, the public, and your co-workers that you are ready to stick together and win the contract you deserve.

HOW TO PREPARE

Take initiative. Strong unions need engaged leaders working from the

bottom and the top. In my building, rank-and-file members played an active role in planning the practice picket and coordinating turnout.

Choose a time and place. We chose Thursday morning, 45 minutes before drivers' shifts begin. Thursday worked best for us because it allowed us to spread the word early in the week, and we knew that everyone would be scheduled for a shift that day.

For the location, we chose the sidewalk across from our entrance, because it was public property, close to the building, and visible to people driving by.



Once we had a plan, we communicated with our local union and they worked with us to bring supplies and food.

Build a team to spread the word. I am a steward in a building with close to 100 drivers. It was crucial that it wasn't just me or my local union rep trying to get the word out to everyone.

Instead, I talked to people in different groups on my shift and got them to spread the word. In my building, drivers with more seniority typically hang out with other high-seniority drivers, and newer drivers do the same. Get your chatterboxes talking, and they can help spread the information organically.

To get good turnout, I found people with different levels of seniority who are widely respected, and got them on board first. Look for the kind of people who make others think, "If that person is going to show up early, then I'll show up early too."

Communicate using social media and texting. After building a team to

get the word out, I used Facebook as an extra round of outreach. Our local designed an online flyer that we could post, and I also shared pictures and videos of other Teamsters across the country doing practice pickets, to get people excited.

You could also use a text group or wherever the most of your members can be reached electronically. Make sure not to talk only online, though. The most effective outreach is an in-person invitation from someone you trust.

Follow up! You can't expect someone to show up from just one conversation. In the week before our practice picket, I brought up the event in every conversation I had with someone. During these follow-ups, I was more assertive, saying, "I look forward to seeing you there on Thursday!" instead of passively asking, "So, do you think you might be able to make it?"

By the day before the event, everyone in my building knew about the event and was talking about it. If you have a list of phone numbers for your co-workers, I also recommend sending final confirmation texts or making calls the night before.

THE DAY OF ACTION

Show up early with your core group. I asked the same people who had helped with outreach to show up 15 minutes before the time we had asked everyone else to arrive. When others pulled into work, they saw that people they respected were there already—so they went over to join.

It's even better if these early birds include leaders you wouldn't normally expect to attend union events. This will encourage others who are also less involved.

Don't forget the supplies. We coordinated with our union local to make sure we had practice picket signs and megaphones for the event. We also had donuts and cold Gatorade to keep spirits high.

Bring the energy! A practice picket shouldn't feel like work—it should be energizing. We started off with a pump-up speech from our new local union president, and made sure everyone understood the ground rules.

Then everyone grabbed a sign and marched in a circle that went around nearly the entire block. People yelled and joined in union chants. The company got the message: we were united, and if it came to a strike, we would be ready.

[Dane Rohl is a UPS package car driver out of Teamsters Local 135 in Bloomington, Indiana.]