

Short Manual for Founding a Local “Mittelbau-Initiative”

How to get it off the ground?

There is no default procedure for successfully establishing a Mittelbau-Initiative, but in our experience the following has proven useful:

I. First Steps: Constitute Yourself

It can be useful to not try and launch your Mittelbau-Initiative with some big mobilizing event but to sit and exchange with a few interested people over commonalities, views, demands, local grievances, etc. This also provides opportunity to establish levels of knowledge on discussed issues, on local structures or on the academic system at large, and to identify areas that require additional information. Slow growth of an initiative carries in our experience greater potential of creating sustainable structures. It is of key importance to find and assemble a group of 3-5 colleagues who want to engage in building a Mittelbau-Initiative that transverses various institutes. Direct colleagues make for as good first contacts as do Mittelbau-sections in the uni's governing bodies or their representatives in specific institutes and departments. Do consider the disciplines, backgrounds and objectives that come together in your Initiative. Do you perhaps already have contacts with or even people among you who have functions in the Uni's committees/governing bodies?

II. Developing Ideas

Possible preps and first questions:

- Who all belongs to the [Mittelbau](#)? Who do you want to address?
- Which goals and demands will you pursue?
- How are you planning to address your colleagues and win them over for your cause?
- What are currently the most pressing issues reg. working conditions at your uni?
- Get inspired by the work/demands of other Inis. Don't hesitate to contact them in English ([Erfahrungsbericht UniKasselUnbefristet](#), [register of existing Mittelbau-Initiatives on the NGAWiss-website](#))

III. Having Productive Meetings: How Does It Work?

During the initial meetings developing ideas should be taking center stage. At first, size and structure of the group are likely to be a little messy, yet even these meetings require good preparation and moderation.

Central aspects are:

- Regularity of meetings, for instance every two weeks, at a fixed place (or even digital/hybrid) and ideally also on a fixed day
- Precise time window, like 1,5-2 hours. Nothing deters people more than endless meetings.
- Agenda with a clear time window for each item
- Defined moderation and, if necessary, list of speakers
- Readiness to listen and to give others space
- Acceptance of different knowledge levels: Potentially address topics without expecting prior information. Individuals who are only in the process of familiarizing themselves with the uni's structures

and governance, with committee work or even with the academic system itself are prone to be deterred by too detailed discussions/shoptalk.

- Minutes of the meetings to ensure that a commonly reached level of discussion is accessible to participants and even those who could not attend the meeting.

IV. First Steps Towards A Larger Constituent Meeting

Let's assume you're about five people, and after a few initial meetings you have developed some first clear ideas of where working conditions go wrong at your uni and what other actors and initiatives with similar topics and goals are around. Also, demands and approaches that characterize your group have begun to crystalize and can function as a compass for an extended group. Now set yourselves a date for a constituent event. It might be helpful concentrate on two (or at least few) aspects/problems you decide to be of prime importance. Oftentimes, crisis shows in many places (clusterfuck), and to try and address too many seemingly 'overwhelming' problems can appear frustrating for potential new supporters from the start. To define one concrete local problem as a hook for the constituent meeting, by contrast, offers an opportunity for exchange and discussion, raises everybody's attention and is hence more promising than general calls to engage in university politics.

Preps for the Event:

- Address all colleagues in your immediate workspace.
- Create/use an e-mail distributor/intranet/social media channels to advertise the event.
- Print flyers and posters.
- Look for funds: unions (GEW, ver.di), the local General Students' Committee (AStA)
- Are there other initiatives close by? Start networking and extend solidarity with other status groups at your uni (students, admin staff etc.).
- Contact NGAWiss to get further networking options (mail[at]mittelbau.net). We are happy to connect you with people to exchange with.

At the Event:

- Start with briefly presenting yourselves, your work so far and the key problem(s) you have identified.
- Allow for ample space to discuss the problem(s).
- Suggested format: [World Café](#)
- Invite members/representatives from other Inis or from NGAWiss who can speak about their experiences. Individual accounts often meet with better resonance than a mere rational problem analysis would.
- Consider preparing a survey or suggest doing one at the event.
- Try and take everybody along according to their respective resources. Even low-key or passive support helps!

Possible Results:

- Working groups with clearly distributed responsibilities such as: coordination, demands (developed, for instance in the World Café), public relations/social media, survey, events, campaigns, structural planning...
- An identification for interested folks, for instance through the naming or the key demands of your group (read these paper for example "[Excellent Dequalification. The New Academic Precariat](#)" by Britta Ohm or "[In Itself, But Not Yet For Itself – Organising the New Academic Precariat](#)" by Peter Ullrich); is your teaser the deficient Now or a better Tomorrow for academia?

Overall is key: Remain realistic! Do not overload the Initiative and the participants with too many working groups, tasks and ambitions. Better proceed step by step so as to ensure that the tasks actually do get done. Frustration and potential conflict over too many tasks initiated but not seen through can have paralyzing and counterproductive effects especially on a small initiative!

V. Towards Further Steps After The Constituent Event (In Working Groups)

Potential points are:

- to develop and solidify your organizational structure;
- to create e-mail and press distributors (ideally in cooperation with the ASTA, unions, political parties, groups already active in university politics);
- to set up public relations by identifying addressees for the press;
- to pursue analyses/collect data;
- specify demands (potentially in connection with another event) and keep in mind that you do not have to re-invent the wheel: get inspired by the demands of [NGAWiss](#), the unions ([GEW zum Wiss-ZeitVG](#)), [#IchbinHanna](#) or other [Inis](#);
- to prepare for verbal confrontations through developing convincing (counter-)arguments (our [Argumentationshilfen](#) are a helpful source here but we lack an English version, unfortunately!)
- to organize campaigns/local activities/protests;
- to draft a press statement on the founding of the Initiative (incl. quotes, names, and contacts of ready addressees);
- to call the local press/local journalists so as to generate broader attention for your cause; the local and regional press are generally much more accessible than academic remits of the national media.

Organizational Structure

Building a sustainable and well-oiled Mittelbau-Initiative requires a clear-cut organizational structure that is transparent to all involved. To develop and institutionalize such a structure is time-consuming. You should consider carefully when and why a particular task is required and needs to be institutionalized. For example, you do not need a spokesperson if you're still a group of two or three or there is no consent on the demands as yet. Generally: *form follows function* – and what function exactly is required and which tasks the group wants to accomplish should be clearly identified and decided upon together. Only a decision that has been commonly, democratically arrived at carries sufficient legitimacy and represents a basis for upcoming tasks to be pursued collectively and responsibly.

General Principles of Organizing

In our experience, principles that characterize a good organizational structure are:

1. the ability to agree upon upcoming and pressing tasks **collectively and democratically** and to distribute the work load fairly. Depending on the size of the group, the majority principle may be more useful than the principle of consent. The assembled members of the Initiative represent the plenum under the principle of one person-one vote.
2. **to outline tasks in a precise manner and to pin down fields of action in writing:** So as to enable a culture of responsibility to grow, it needs to be established who will and should be able to do what. The fields of action/task fields should thus be collectively discussed and be fixed in writing. In considering the workload it is useful to add a profile to each field of action (a check list of weekly/monthly tasks

with estimated workload/working time). Regular feedback on the internal working structure allows for room to improve structures and processes according to experiences and critique.

3. **to attach key responsibilities not to people but to 'mandates'**: All too often Initiatives are being carried by particularly dedicated individuals. However much this generally makes for a very important factor in helping the Initiative succeed, it also proves to be an Initiative's Achilles heel once these individuals drop out, for instance because they shift university. It is thus crucial to make sure that responsibilities are not attached to individuals but to institutionalized mandates, equipped with a task description. This ensures that responsibilities and related knowledge can be easier circulated.
4. **the imperative mandate**: Key tasks should be agreed upon collectively while entrusting particular members with an imperative mandate to see them through. Which means that members interested in taking care of a thus established key task can be mandated, through election, to accomplish it. They are then accountable to the Initiative, which in turn can withdraw the mandate at any time.

Task Fields

Which task fields/mandates exactly you create, and how you differentiate between them, also hinges on the individuality of the members, the size of the group, and the process of building it. The following six task fields, however, are likely to become relevant at some point:

1. **Internal organization**: encompasses preparing the Ini-meetings (incl. the timely call for items for the agenda), sending out the invitation for the meetings (incl. pleasant address, time and location, agenda with brief annotations the items to be discussed), taking care of including new colleagues, and identifying 1-2 persons who are answerable to questions regarding the internal structures and processes.
2. **'Outer' organization**: looks after networking within and beyond the uni. Those responsible take up contact with existing groups and bodies that either have similar goals or operate in relevant fields of action. These can be union groups at the uni, the staff council/Personalrat, Mittelbau-committees in particular institutes or departments, or, outside the uni, NGAWiss, unions etc. (determine 1-2 persons).
3. **Technical infrastructure**: concerns the setting-up of all relevant channels of communication: e-mail lists, Wiki, Twitter/X/Mastodon, Facebook, etc. (determine 1-2 persons).
4. **Organizing**: looks after the growth of the Initiative, particularly through developing an organizing strategy that inquires into current problems and burning issues at the uni and aims at winning the support and active solidarity of as many colleagues as possible (determine 2-4 persons).
5. **Public relations**: refers to the drafting of texts for publication (i.e. for Twitter/X/Mastodon, a Facebook-page, for notices/posters, invitations, the group's own website) as well as responding to requests and questions to the Initiative, and coordinating statements, for instance to the press.
6. **Finances**: takes care of the bills and the tally, for example in the context of events, and looks out for possible funders, such as the ASTA, unions, NGAWiss etc. (determine 1-2 persons).

E-mail lists/distributors

Some suggestions for creating your group's e-mail list/distributor:

- Collect e-mail IDs. Comb the websites of the uni's different institutes and departments (Lehrstühle and Fachbereiche) and pool the addresses of the admin offices/secretariats. Circulate invitations with the request to forward them further.
- The staff councils/Personalräte usually have access to the uni distributor. Try and find out whether they'd be willing to circulate your invitations.
- Check who else might be having efficacious distributors (your institute/department, GEW, ver.di, other uni groups)

Activities

Especially at the outset the following informing and mobilizing activities are useful:

- info stall
- public speech/talk
- discussion round
- film screening
- surveys

Activities with a higher degree of escalation are:

- lawsuit
- demonstration
- strike
- blockade
- occupation
- intervention

Workshops are the obvious choice to train the own members and to advance the Initiative.

Materials and Further Reading

<https://www.mittelbau.net/positionen/leseempfehlungen/> has a host of key texts on 'academic capitalism' and precarious employment, annotated and organized according to data and facts („[Academic freedom and precarity in the global North: free as a bird](#)“ by Asli Vatansever and Aysuda Kölemen) (1), analyses/intersectionality (2), conditions, strategies, and concepts (3), and forms of [organizing](#)