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Dossier

Union membership strategies of the Polish trade union Solidarnosc

After our review of the strategies and activities used to boost union membership in the United Kingdom and Sweden, we now look at Poland, and in particular Solidarnosc, a European Trade Union Confederation affiliate since 1995.

Introduction

Because of its history, **Poland is different to the other examples** we have already examined in this dossier.

Fifty years of Communist domination and the recent democratic transition process have significantly influenced workers' attitudes to unions.

The rate of union membership is currently no higher than 15%¹. Further analysis of this figure shows that **most unionised workers in Poland (around 76%) are employed in the public sector.** This brings an **additional challenge** for unions, since **around 70% of Polish workers are employed in the private sector.** Likewise, **75% of employees work in companies where there is no trade union representation.**

The low rate of union membership limits unions' leeway in the drive to improve workers' living and working conditions. Abuses in terms of rights and pay (including even the non-payment of wages), blackmail and threats against those wishing to join a union are unfortunately quite widespread.

Fear of losing one's job, prejudice against unions and union members, and a lack of knowledge of the support that union membership offers are some of the causes of the low level of union membership in Poland.

In the face of these problems, **Solidarnosc has decided to react by launching a programme for the development of trade union membership** at national, regional and company levels.

Launch of the Union Development Department

In 1998, the National Commission of Solidarnosc decided to put in place a new structure: the Union Development Department.

The aim of this department is to promote activities in the field of union organisation and membership agreed by the political secretariat of Solidarnosc.

To attain its goal, the department is putting in place a **training system for regional union organisers** and a national-level **recruitment campaign** in companies.

Since its foundation, this new body has been attracting increasing attention.

While Solidarnosc had only one organiser in 1998, **eight years on it has a team of around 40 people**, five of whom work at national level, and the others in different regions of the country. The task of these organisers is to provide **support and coordination for workers who organise trade union action at their workplace.**

This **work on the ground** focuses primarily on sectors showing strong growth in Poland, in particular **private security services, mass marketing and supermarkets, the agri-food industry, hotels and cleaning services.**

¹Source: J. Waddington, [La syndicalisation en Europe](#), ETUI-REHS, July 2005

Action on the ground

Several stages are planned. The first aims to review and **identify the companies where the union will consider launching a union membership campaign.**

This phase of investigation and information-gathering involves **meetings with workers in order to identify their problems** and to find **trade union representatives in the company.** Subsequently, **trade union officials train these individuals, who take an active part in the organisation process.** The idea is to attract as many workers as possible.

Solidarnosc can list a number of actions that have produced concrete results, particularly in big groups such as Securitas, Carrefour, Volkswagen, Auchan, Géant, Jerenimo Martins and Tesco.

One example is the case of **Jerenimo Martins**, a mass marketing company operating at national level. It has **more than 800 supermarkets located in most regions of Poland**, and employs some **13 000 workers.** The organisers met more than **1 250 workers, of whom 440 decided to join**, i.e. a **success rate of around 40%.** These workers participated in union meetings and some of them attended basic union training. As a result of this work, **five new teams of union organisers and eight new union sections were created.**

Solidarnosc also targets the **private security sector** as part of its union membership strategy.

In cooperation with the UNI Property Services Federation, which co-financed the activity, **Solidarnosc put together a project to organise workers from the private security services sector in the Mazowse region**, which includes Warsaw. **Eighty trade union leaders met more than 3 000 workers from this sector.** The region was selected because of its high density of companies and workers (more than 25 000).

The project began in the second half of 2005 with a phase of **strategic study and planning of future campaigns.**

This information and planning phase was designed to **gather useful information and compile detailed knowledge of the sector**, particularly as regards the different companies, their structures, the institutions they protect and, above all, **their working conditions and systems.** After this initial phase, **eight companies were selected on the basis of their strategic importance in the region.** In January 2006, the approved action plan was put into effect.

A team of six organisers - four of them hired for the project - assisted by a researcher, a communications professional and a lawyer working for the Solidarnosc National Commission, developed the plan.

Coordination and monitoring is provided by the Development Department of the Solidarnosc National Commission and by a representative of UNI Property Services. At the end of April 2006, an initial meeting took place with representatives at the workplace. **This work on the ground represents a solid basis for the launch of the second phase, focusing on building trade union membership among these workers.**

Facts for reflection

In spite of some encouraging results, the **rate of union membership is not rising.**

Solidarnosc has decided **to step up its efforts with the aim of reversing this trend.**

Cooperation between national and regional bodies has been at the heart of this renewed drive. During the first half of 2006, a cycle of seminars entitled **"Trade union development strategy" was launched.** It brought together members of the national secretariat, as well as regional representatives and union activists responsible for trade union organisation. At the eight meetings, 126 participants took part in debates and drew up a consistent and integrated approach to trade union development, valid at both the national and regional levels. **The most recent Solidarnosc congress (28-30 September 2006) confirmed the commitment to union membership and organisation**, considered one of the priorities of trade union action.

The focus on increasing union membership among workers in expanding sectors, particularly services and trade, is an important element of this strategy.

Indeed, thanks to this approach, the trade union can enhance its presence and visibility among young people and women, who make up the majority of workers in these growing sectors.

A presence on the ground, guaranteed by the commitment of trade union representatives and of workers recruited into the union directly at companies, remains the cornerstone of Solidarnosc's approach to trade union membership and represents the basis for all future action.

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