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Recruitment and organising – state of play and strategy

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Recruitment and organising State of Play and ETUC's strategy

Introduction

Ever since the Prague Congress, ETUC's member organisations have stated their willingness to implement actions aimed at 'recruiting and organising', in line with the adopted objective of "strengthening the ETUC and European trade union identity". Thus, the 2003-2007 Action Programme invites ETUC to "support trade union recruitment strategies, especially amongst underrepresented groups and young workers, who are the future of all trade unions".

Last year at the ETUC Summer School in Florence, this commitment was renewed, and the leaders of the European trade union movement were given an opportunity to communicate their concerns and expectations.

Accordingly, this document aims to list the analytic observations that can help us take a snapshot of the present situation and, more importantly, present an ETUC action plan of action between now and the next Congress.

Recruitment and organising: A complex issue...and a challenge for the European trade union movement

This snapshot draws on elements of the analysis contained in the document drawn up for ETUC by Jeremy Waddington.

Measuring fluctuations in the profile of ETUC's affiliates

Since 1980, the rate of unionisation has been declining in a large number of European countries.

Some estimates suggest that in the enlarged EU with its Member States the rate of unionisation dropped from 32.6% in 1995 to 26.4% in 2001. This drop was particularly noticeable in the new EU Member States, where trade union density plummeted from 42.7% to 20.4% between 1995 and 2001, whilst the rate for the EU as a whole slipped back from 31.0% to 27.3% over the same period (EC 2004). In fact, since 1950, the proportion of union affiliation in Europe has never been as low as it is today.

Although the rankings of countries in terms of their unionisation rate have remained pretty constant since 1980, the gap between the most highly unionised country (Sweden) and the country with the fewest affiliates (France) rose from 61.1% in 1980 to 68.3% in 2002.

In the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and in Belgium, the drop in the unionisation rate has been marginal, for these countries apply some variant or other of

the 'Ghent system', which gives the unions a role to play in administering unemployment benefit and unemployment insurance.

Within the trend of declining membership, there have also been marked and inter-related shifts in the composition of the unionised labour force.

The main changes observed here have been as follows:

- A growing concentration of union affiliates working in the public sector. In virtually all countries, the public sector is more unionised than industry, which in turn numbers more union affiliates than private-sector services;
- the proportion of women joining unions is tending to rise; indeed, in several countries (see annex), women now account for more than half of all affiliates;
- more pensioners and unemployed people are joining unions: recent data suggest that between 15 and 20% of union affiliates in the EU are either jobless or retired, the two extremes being represented by Slovenia, with less than 1% and Italy, with 49.3% (EIRO 2004a);
- in most countries there would appear to be too few young workers or workers of foreign origin to become affiliates, which is a limiting factor in attempts to revive the unions; furthermore, in many countries the average age of union members is considerably higher than the average age of the workforce;
- the proportion of union affiliates occupying management, executive and management associate posts is up; several unions and confederations representing affiliates in this type of job are tending to note that their member's profile is more individualist than collective, especially where wage-related issues are concerned; moreover, relations between the unions and their affiliates differ from those that characterise the 'traditional' organisation of manual labourers; consequently other forms of collective solidarity are currently emerging.

The drop in the rate of unionisation and the accompanying changes in the profile of unions' remaining members are having numerous consequences for the trade union organisation. In particular, the drop in the number of affiliates is going hand in hand with a decrease in material and financial resources, which limits the possibilities for implementing reforms that will rise to the challenges set out above. At the same time, within the larger, more heterogeneous unions, the changing profile of affiliates is necessitating reforms in the systems used to manage unions in an attempt to ensure that members from groups that used to be underrepresented are now properly represented, involved and committed. Since most such reforms entail relinquishing certain acquired rights, their implementation is proving to be long and arduous. Sometimes such reforms require periods of introspection during which the union in question devotes itself virtually exclusively to its internal management and tends to neglect issues that are of interest to potential affiliates.

Explanations for the drop in the rate of unionisation

Generally speaking, the explanations provide to account for the declining unionisation rate concern external threats and unions' internal shortcomings. However, it is worth noting the observation made by some researchers that potential affiliates are now more individualistic than they used to be and are consequently less inclined to join a union. The scale of this phenomenon has not been clearly ascertained, but certainly potential affiliates are more 'utilitarian' than they once were, meaning that if new members are to be recruited, the unions need to demonstrate that they generate added value. Another apparent observation is that many affiliates feel that they can perfectly

well negotiate directly with their boss, rather than be represented by a shop steward. Naturally, this line of thinking tends to make them steer clear of unions. Another aspect of such an individualistic outlook is the fact that unions have to show that they are targeting potential individual affiliates, by offering an array of services geared to their specific requirements. Consequently, all the services on offer have to vary in accordance with the respective company's geographical locations, the post occupied by the individual and the personal characteristics of the potential affiliate.

In addition, unions with an extremely heterogeneous profile are having to offer several sets of services to accommodate various groups amongst their affiliates, instead of just offering a single range of services.

So-called external threats are also playing a role in the difficulties encountered with respect to affiliation. These include:

- Rising unemployment. In most countries, unions don't many services to unemployed people. As a result, when affiliated workers lose their job, mostly they cancel their membership.
- Developments on the labour market. Labour is shifting from industry, where the rate of unionisation tends to be relatively high, to private-sector services, which are less unionised. Added to this shift is the spread of more and more forms of atypical work, jobs in small companies and new forms of labour relations. Trade union movements are still trying to adapt to this change, which explains why the number of affiliates lost in the industrial sector is higher than the number of new members recruited from private-sector services;
- Employers. More and more employers are increasingly becoming more anti-unionist than they used to be. And even if this trend is often linked to American employers establishing companies in Europe, all the same there is a growing tendency for European employers to question the need for a union presence, especially in the new Member States. The cover provided by collective agreements is also declining in many Member States (both new and old). On top of this, employers' attempts to decentralise collective bargaining have forced the unions to come up with new coordination mechanisms, which not all have managed to do, thereby making some affiliates feel increasingly far removed from their union when in the workplace.

The unions' internal 'mea culpa' also needs to be highlighted.

A very wide range of arguments has been put forward in this connection, indicating that it is crucial for the unions to implement essential reforms to adapt to the present-day (and future) context. In a nutshell, these arguments suggest that unions tend to be living somewhat in the past.

The unions need to update their image to convince their potential members that unionism has a rightful place in the modern world.

The examples cited to illustrate the lack of modernisation include the following:

- Union practices are too formal and outdated: this scares off potential affiliates, especially youngsters;
- unions are dominated by men in their fifties;
- in some countries, the persisting profile of a typical trade union member is a male labourer;
- representative practices and structures do not enable (or are not suited to) the participation of some groups of members;

- unions' managers are often deemed to be too 'out of touch' with the reality of daily life on the shop floor.

Defining the challenge

In short, the unions face three main challenges:

1. All too often, the situation that unions are up against is viewed only in terms of numbers of affiliates. If the unions are to attract and meet the needs of more heterogeneous groups, they will have to represent more workers in small companies and more workers with a higher job rotation rate, and also come up with more strategies for resisting employers. So if any approach intended to increase the number of affiliates is to bear fruit, it must implement measures designed to meet such requirements.
2. The recruitment issue will not be successfully resolved without the creation of union agendas and internal channels of representation that take account of the wide-ranging interests of potential members and the conditions with which they are faced, especially in private-sector services.
3. Decentralised, diversified service models, combined with the concentration of power in the hands of companies highlight the vital importance of maintaining and regenerating links between the various levels of trade union intervention (local, regional, national and international).

ETUC Action Plan and strategy

Our objectives

The steps to be taken with respect to recruitment and organising provide a lasting road map for trade union organisations.

Before planning the actual realisation of the objectives set out above, an initial European plan was launched at the beginning of the year and will end at the Seville Congress in May 2007.

ETUC is not the organisation that manages recruitment within companies and is regularly in touch with their workers. On the other hand, it *does* have a role to play in coordinating activities, meetings and exchanges between its member organisations.

Therefore, the present plan has **five main objectives**:

- to support recruitment strategies;
- to identify and collect good practices (within national confederations and European federations);
- to enable experts on recruitment within our organisations to meet up and exchange their views and experiences;
- to present the unions' image in a positive light, organise a European campaign and develop a 'toolkit';
- to develop a European recruiting network.

Our activities

We launched our activities in January 2006 by setting up an internal ETUC think tank involving all the relevant political, research and training departments.

Furthermore, bilateral meetings have already taken place at the request of various member organisations.

Our team is at the disposal of other organisations which may like to pass on their experiences and/or state their expectations.

In the very near future, researchers at the Institute and in the Training Department will be in a position to update and complete a study by adding elements of previous analyses, and also and above all able to draw up **a guide** that will try and list all the regional, national and European good practices with respect to unionisation.

By the end of the year, **a seminar** will be organised to bring together experts in this area from all our member organisations.

Whilst this work goes on, we will present the updated study, promote exchanges on reality as faced in different contexts, and above all focus on exchanging our responses to the challenge faced.

Working groups will be set up around identified public targets, namely women, young people, migrant workers and those employed under precarious conditions.

These groups will be set up at the seminar and will be able to start their work in early 2007.

In addition, the seminar will help us devise **a European campaign** that will be launched at the Congress. A catchy slogan, innovative graphics, and modern tools are essential. One campaign of this kind conducted by the ETUC Youth Committee featured this slogan:

*"The first time,
Alone, it's much more difficult.
Join a union".*

What is more, to guarantee better visibility, we are planning **a web page** specifically dealing with this issue which will be placed at the disposal of our member organisations and serve to showcase the various initiatives taken.

Finally, the **Congress** will also serve as a forum of debate on this issue. A specific activity, the format and content of which remain to be decided, will be devoted to it, and exhibition stands displaying good practices will be set up there.

Any contributions and suggestions by ETUC member organisations are welcome.