Organising and trade union recruitment
The future of trade unions in danger

Trade unions have a long and proud record of achievement which risks becoming no more than history. We face an existential crisis. Either trade unions recruit new, young members in considerable number, or within a matter of decades trade unions will no longer exist as mass membership organisations: if the current deunionization trend continues, unions will lose more than 11 million members at least, i.e. 26 per cent of the current members, in the next 10 years.

In at least 25 out of 31 European countries there has been a decline in trade union membership from 2006 to 2016. Of the six countries showing an increase over that period, two countries show a decline in membership in more recent years.

There is a slow but almost continuous decline in trade union density in most countries – in 27 out of 31 European countries over the period 2005-2015.

The median age of union members has increased between 2004 and 2014. Many members are in their mid-40s to early 50s. The percentage of people under 25 joining a union has fallen at least since 2004 or before. This worrying because there is a strong association between joining young and remaining a member – people who do not join a union relatively young are much less likely to join later. Recruitment of more young people is therefore crucial for the survival of the trade union movement.

Collective bargaining coverage rates have remained relatively stable in many countries. However, there have been substantial declines in some including Romania, Greece, Slovenia and Hungary. Organising and recruitment: an urgent priority

At the ETUC Paris Congress trade union growth and increased union density became an ETUC priority. An Ad Hoc Organising Committee was set up to support affiliates’ organising and membership strategies.

That committee, and other trade union organisers, have very clearly expressed • A deep concern for the future of the TU movement given membership trends • A strong sentiment that declining membership requires more discussion and action by all trade unions • A conviction that trade union leadership need to do more to prioritise organising, development and membership recruitment and retention

The ETUC cannot recruit or retain members – that can only be done by local unions organised in and around the workplace. It is not possible or appropriate to impose, or propose, a single model for doing so. It is not possible to identify a single strategy for unions given their very different national and sectoral situations, and their very different structures, traditions and legal frameworks. ETUC/EC225 3

Many organisers officers are assigned the task of “recruiting members” without overall strategic thinking on union activity and future prospects. How to recruit and retain new members must start with a shared analysis of the opportunities for and threats to trade union membership in a specific local and/or sectoral union, and identifying and making strategic choices.

Unions cannot be forced to have such strategic discussions, and cannot be obliged to take organising and recruitment more seriously. This his has to come from the entire union’s leadership team, and have the full backing of union federations and confederations.
The ETUC is not able to revolutionise trade union strategies alone. But it can take its part in this huge effort and support, together with the ETUI, trade unions willing to launch innovative development strategies. Next actions

Following a joint ETUC/ETUI work, the ETUI Education Department proposes a new strategic training offer on organising.

The ETUI can train trade union staff/representatives to: • initiate and lead such strategical discussions among local and sectoral trade unions leadership teams, • understand different tools and methods for organising workers, and • plan organising activities with a project management approach.

In brief, the ETUI proposes to train around 500 people from national and sectoral unions in 3 phases from early 2018 to end 2020. It will be up to unions to enrol appropriate staff/representatives.

Phase one would be to train 60 people who could initiate and be facilitators in the discussions in unions leadership teams on analysing organisational capacity and making strategic organising choices for recruitment and retention.

Phases two and three would train 320 and 160 people respectively in tools and methods for organising, action planning and best/worst practices, case studies and problem solving – phase two being higher level (in terms of content) and phase three somewhat simpler (in terms of content and being only online).

Phase one would involve a 3-day residential course for 20 persons each – done 3 times to train 60 people. Phase two would involve an online course for 80 persons followed by a 2-day meeting – done 4 times over 2 years to train 320 people. Finally, a 3rd phase would be online only for 80 persons – done twice to train 160 people.

This approach would largely renew ETUI training activities on organising.

The ETUC proposes to continue at least annual meetings of the Organising Committee to provide a European platform for organisers to exchange good practices, to share experiences and disseminate information (and receive feedback) on what is being done at European level by the ETUI, ETUC and ETUFs in this field.