

Feedback on the EPSU affiliate strategies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia

Notes from the 25th of February. – Dr Greg Thomson

This is a short summary of the comments I gave on the 25th of February.

1. A big thank you to everyone for sharing their strategies. All the participants showed real enthusiasm for organising and recruitment, as well as a strong appreciation of why it is so important.
2. Please bear in mind this is only the start of a process. EPSU has committed to providing long term support for affiliates to develop their strategies and implement them. Agnieszka, Milos and Artem are available to help.
3. Context is everything. Nearly all the presentations in this group emphasised to varying degrees that trade union membership was fragmented with the presence in the workplace of politically controlled unions, so called 'yellow unions' (i.e., employer dominated unions) and passive servicing unions. All the EPSU affiliates exhibited a strong commitment to independent representation of their members. Just to be clear, this is exactly what trade unionism should be about. In this context competition with other trade unions is usually inevitable and a strong focus on organising is even more important.
4. On the other hand, where there are other independent member representing unions, then cooperation and collaboration should be considered. Division only strengthens the employer.
5. Most affiliates had a written strategy. I would encourage all of you to ensure that you have a written strategy document that is reviewed and updated. If you share it with EPSU, this will help them to help you.
6. A written strategy in a short and accessible format should be used as a platform to get sign up to organising throughout the union. Not everyone has the same

understanding of the importance of organising that all of you showed. It is vital that you spread 'the word' through discussion, education, and training. This is a long term and continuous process.

7. Driving forward the organising agenda is best done through a Working Group. It is not a Committee activity, where all the work is delegated to one person. You need a group of people all of whom are actively working on organising. It was good to see that several affiliates are busy developing networks of organisers. It is vital that all activists, commissioners, and organisers are trained in organising techniques. This should be ingrained in the union education and training programme. So for instance, training on negotiating should emphasise how negotiations can be used to organise, and how important good organisation is to effective negotiation.
8. The essential tool for organising is a centralised computerised Data Base. It was notable that those affiliates that had such a data base were better able to target areas with the greatest potential for organising by comparing existing membership patterns with employment and labour market information. There was the added advantage that the Data Base made communicate with members easier. It was clear that while some affiliates only needed technical help with setting up a Data Base, others had problems with local gatekeepers. Establishing a Data Base should be a priority for all affiliates.
9. All affiliates understood that face to face recruitment and organising is most effective. During the current pandemic, this is more difficult than usual.
10. Social media should only be used to support face to face recruitment. Some affiliates were already using social media. It must be kept up to date and allow for two-way communication. All of this can be time consuming and should not be left to one person. Establishing an Editorial Group can spread the work around and help people to actively contribute when they may find other union work intimidating. Young members often feel more confident with social media and this can be a useful way of drawing them in to union activity.

11. Due to the competitive environment affiliates find themselves operating in and the difficulty of freeloading it is worth reiterating the central argument for trade union membership. It is worth getting workers to think about it from the employers' viewpoint.

Any employer faced with a few employees seeking fairer pay and conditions can safely ignore them.

If those employees get organised so that they can support each other, as in a union, the employer has a problem.

And if those few grow in number to become most of the workers then the employer can no longer ignore their demands.

Faced with this difficulty employers will often seek to undermine or sideline the workers leader.

But where most of workers with many leaders are pursuing fair pay and conditions the employer has no choice other than to listen.

In other words, freeloading or belonging to anything other than an independent representative trade union does nothing but help the employer. This message should be constantly repeated.

12. Some affiliates raised the possibility of getting legislation to ensure only union members benefited from improvements negotiated by unions. The danger is that this will be used by the same politicians, you would have to rely on to get such legislation to get such legislation, to support political or yellow unions or pressure independent unions. It is better to grow the union by emphasising our independence from the politicians than to have to rely on them for membership growth. Workers want and need free and independent trade unions that represent them.

13. The best way of bringing home to members your union's independence and how effective it is in representing them is to ensure that the union celebrates its achievements. So that the question is always not, why didn't we get more, but how much more could we have got with more members and activists. And this becomes even more evident where members have been involved from the outset in formulating the claim and taking action to support it, however limited.

Otherwise, the danger is that others will claim that they got the improvement for the workers even though they did nothing. By engaging your members from the outset, you make it clear that it was their union that got the improvement.

14. One affiliate put it very succinctly saying that trade unionism is about 'We' and not 'I.'

I hope these comments are helpful. Remember: -

- Put your organising strategy in writing and keep it up to date.
- Spread the word and spread the workload.
- Make sure you have a centralised computerised data base.
- Celebrate your successes.
- Explain the importance of independent representative trade unions - repeat.

Crucially this should be only the start. EPSU is there to help.