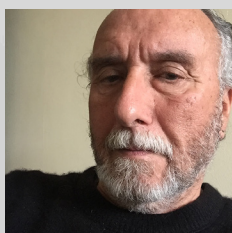




# Building the union – winning for members





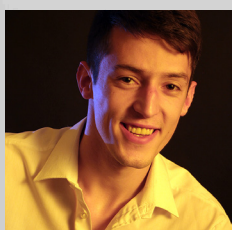
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# Building our unions

Over the last five years EPSU has significantly stepped up its work around organising and recruitment. We know that this is a crucial challenge for all our affiliates who want to strengthen their organisations by increasing their membership and number of activists. This will give us voice in our workplaces and sectors. It is key to building our power so that employers respect workers' rights, abide by collective agreements and give workers the decent pay and conditions they deserve.

This short guide focuses on the main issues that trade unions should address in a recruitment and organising strategy. We have included several examples from our affiliates in Central and Eastern Europe who have been taking steps to develop and implement such a strategy.

It is very encouraging to see the efforts being made and EPSU is determined to provide the advice, support and training to affiliates who want to start or take further steps in building their union power. We have an excellent team in place to help affiliates with this work and we look forward to close co-operation over the coming years. Please contact us and we look forward to reporting more of your success stories.

I thank Greg Thomson, former head of strategic organising at UNISON in the UK, for his contribution to this guide and for his help with our organising and recruitment work. Thanks also to our affiliates for the examples and to our team for its support.

Let's go out to recruit, organise and build our public service workers' voice and power.



**Jan Willem Goudriaan**  
*EPSU General Secretary*



## From local campaign to national strategy – health union CZECH REPUBLIC

Jan Szusta worked in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at the Nemocnice hospital in České Budějovice. Following participation in training courses run by EPSU and the ETUI, he began recruiting workers to the union, reaching out to close colleagues and then gradually to other ICU staff. Over 70 joined up and he used contacts in other departments to further increase membership. Jan explains: “I undertook proactive recruitment in the first two years after taking up the post of union chair, clearly preferring face-to-face contact. In May 2017, I was released from my hospital duties to work full-time as chair. We now benefit from the fact that other shop stewards and workplace activists have developed the campaign and continue to build the union.” Since 2015, membership has grown steadily from 200 to 600 by 2020, with one in four employees a union member. Jan is now responsible for organising at national level and is trying to introduce these methods in other local unions.

# Building the union – winning for members

EPSU affiliates across Europe regularly win improved pay and conditions for thousands of workers in the public services. They also provide protection and support on many issues not least health and safety. However, most unions operate in a challenging environment and those with a growing and active membership are best placed to deliver for their members.

While EPSU affiliates recruit hundreds of thousands of new members every year this doesn't guarantee increased union power. It is not only about ensuring that these new recruits outnumber those who leave but about creating an active membership, one which can be mobilised to strengthen the hand of the union in its campaigning and negotiating.

Trade union membership has been static or in decline in many countries, while the average age of members has steadily increased as recruitment of younger workers has stagnated or declined. All trade unions need to act before it is too late and mobilise their members and resources now but for some the situation is critical.

To reverse the decline in membership unions need to develop new strategies and tactics. Organising means, getting members active and recruiting more members, so that the union can exert power and influence on behalf of its members in the workplace.

This may involve focusing on new areas of recruitment as public services develop and particularly where they are increasingly provided by private and non-profit organisations.

This short guide sets out what actions need to be taken to build an organising union with two key elements: developing an organising strategy and using organising techniques.



# Getting the strategy right

An organising strategy is about ensuring that organising is prioritised throughout the whole union and that effort and resources are targeted where they will have most effect.

Trade union members and activists face multiple challenges in the workplace and so there is always a danger organising will be crowded out. It can only be prioritised when activists and members understand that effective organising makes the union stronger. This requires both explicit policy support and dissemination through education.

## Actions:

1. Agree policies prioritising organising at every level of the union, from national conference through to branch meetings.
2. Ensure that education and training programmes for members, activists and staff emphasise and explain the importance of organising.



## A high-profile strategy – childcare union CROATIA

Organizing public events, rallies and protests with clear demands is a great way to recruit union members and activists. This was central to the strategy of the SOMK union for childcare, media and culture. The union was started in 2010 with just 13 people and now has more than 2700 members, mostly in childcare where they represent 25-30% of the total workforce. The public gatherings raised crucial problems faced by childcare workers that had not been addressed before. Workers recognized this and the union received more and more calls from workers wanting to join up. SOMK responded by going around the country establishing new branches. This rapid growth enabled them to influence state policies in the childcare sector. Clear demands that reflect the real problems of workers, work on the ground, public gatherings and follow up with the workers are all elements of SOMK's successful recipe.



## Importance of data collection and analysis – health union

### MOLDOVA

Up-to-date information on union membership is crucial for effective recruitment and organising. The Sanatatea health union in Moldova is a good example of a union with a well-functioning database. The CNSM trade union confederation has a well-developed system of collecting data on a yearly basis and Sanatatea, as a Confederation member, is obliged to collect data on number of members (including sex and age) and number of local unions. Additionally, it analyses information on changing staffing levels, general employment in the sector and employment of young workers, etc. The union also collects information on issues such as achievements, problems and solutions. All these are then published in their annual report and help the union plan and implement its organising strategy.

# Essential data – mapping the workforce

An effective organising strategy requires an understanding of the union's strengths and weaknesses, together with an evidence-based assessment of where there is the greatest potential for growth.

It is essential that the union knows how many members and activists it has and where they work. It also needs to know about potential recruits – mapping the non-members and evaluating employment trends to understand where the workforce is likely to grow. This means understanding specific changes that are taking place that could be related to many factors such as digitalisation, privatisation and the aging of the population.

### Actions:

1. The union should have an overview of workforce developments nationally and locally, so that longer term opportunities and threats can be readily identified.
2. Existing and potential membership need to be mapped, showing the union's strengths and weaknesses, and identifying where organising resources can best be deployed. This can be done at national, sector and local level.
3. An effective membership record system should cover details such as job, workplace, employer and pay band; personal details such as age, sex and contact information and union details such as branch and any position held in the union.
4. The union needs to be able to answer key questions, including: is it recruiting more members than it is losing? Where are most new members joining? Where and why are members leaving? Where and why are young members joining? Where is the biggest potential for growth?

# Educating and supporting activists

Trade unions must become more agile and learn to change to meet new challenges and strategic decisions need to be based on sound intelligence.

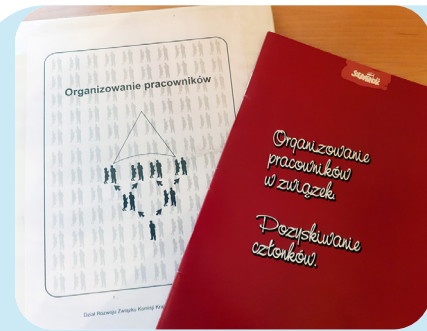
Research and targeting are only useful if the union has the resources to organise. The most valuable resources a union has are its existing people, in other words, the membership, activists and staff. Education and training are essential to ensure that they all understand the importance of organising, not just for its own sake, but in order to deliver the union's policies as determined by the membership.

Saying that organising is important is not enough. What activity is valued and rewarded? Where are most resources put? In most unions the priority is negotiating and this is what gets rewarded and talked about. The essential connection between organising and negotiating a good deal for members is often lost.

## Actions:

1. Education and training in the union needs to emphasise at every level the vital role organising plays in strengthening the union and ensuring that it can get a good deal for members and fight for fairness in the workplace.
2. Organising needs to be recognised and rewarded at every level of the union.
3. Organising successes should be publicised internally in the union's own publicity.

Organising activity should be a process of continuous learning. All organising strategies and campaigns should be subject to rigorous review. What works and what doesn't work, should be clearly identified, so that strategies and campaigns can be improved and lessons learnt for the future.



## Training, coaching and education – Solidarnosc POLAND

Education and training on organising in NSZZ Solidarnosc has been a top priority for over 20 years. Educational activities take place on regional and branch level – and this is where activists of the Public Employees' Secretariat get their training. There is close cooperation between regional educational and organising departments and the National Trade Union of Police Employees has benefited from this co-operation with education and coaching from the organising department helping them to grow from 10 to over 300 members in just a few years. Yet, this is only a start, as one of the regional organisers from the Gdansk region said: "it is not enough to help workers to organise themselves and set up a trade union in a non-unionised company/institution and move on to set up another. It is a long-term commitment - you have to be there for them for a few months till they become stronger".



## An organising union and its campaigns – public administration union ROMANIA

The Columna trade union, representing workers in public administration, has a recruitment and organising strategy that involves all five employees of the federation. They map potential membership and visit towns where they have no members. It has run two campaigns recently. The first was at county level where they have been looking for independent unions to try to convince them to join the Federation. If they do then the federation's organising team helps the new affiliate to grow as they did in the city of Arad, where a small local independent union joined and grew from 150 to 450 members in just few months. Alternatively, the union seeks out a core group of workers in a local council to build a union organisation from scratch. The other campaign focused on social assistance workers in Bucharest where there was no membership but the union has managed to establish several local trade unions which are now growing.

### Actions:

1. Responsibility for regularly reviewing the success of organising strategies and campaigns should be clearly identified.
2. Analysis of the strategies and campaigns should be evidence based. This means regular reports on the overall numbers of new members and activists recruited, together with the number of members leaving the union. In other words is the union growing in size, and if so where and how does this relate to the organising strategies and campaigns?
3. Lessons learnt from this review process need to be quickly disseminated.

### Examples:

One affiliate looked at national demographic and employment trends and identified a growth in the numbers employed in social care. Most of these workers were women in the private sector. Membership trends had started to reflect these changes. But by reprioritising this target area the union was able to make significant membership gains.

At a local level, it is about understanding workers' needs and not assuming that the union knows best or that it is just about better pay. In one case a union managed to recruit a group of migrant workers employed as street cleaners because it listened to their need for English language training. In another case, an organising campaign in a hospital developed from the union delivering on basic demands on toilet paper and workplace clothing.

Organising can help mobilise members around a particular campaign but it should also be part of the day-to-day business of the union.

Lessons from what is happening elsewhere can be useful, but will never provide the whole answer. Each union has to find what works for it, and recognise that a range of different approaches are likely to be effective.



# What the union can deliver

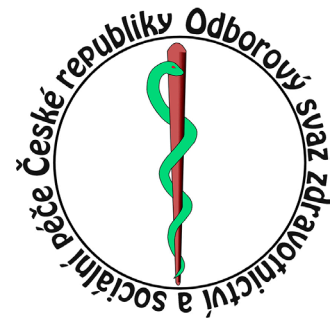
Essentially a worker will decide to join a trade union if they believe that it is in their interest. They are not buying a physical asset, like groceries, when they sign up to the union nor are they buying a defined contractual service like insurance, although the evidence is that many workers think of union membership like an insurance policy. Some people say that a better analogy is gym membership. In other words union membership only works if you use it by participating.

Nearly everyone wants to be treated fairly at work. That means they do not want to experience discrimination, prejudice or bullying by their manager or employer. Trade unions have a proud record of fighting for fairness in the workplace. This can be important in attracting workers to join and become active in trade unions. But workers need to see the union is committed to fairness and understand that the union can only achieve fairness in the workplace if it has their active support.

The essential point is that union membership requires an element of trust. Trust that by being a member of the union the worker will benefit. Trust that the union will advance their interests. And trust that when times are hard the union will be there for them. For most workers, the people they trust most are their colleagues at work, so the more workplace activists a union has the more likely other workers are to join. And they are more likely to trust an organisation that talks about the things that matter to them, not just pay, but equality and fair treatment at work.

## Actions:

1. Getting members and activists to promote the union in their workplace is one of the most effective ways of organising.
2. Workplace activity, where the workers see the union being active on their behalf is an important part of organising.
3. Workers tend to trust other workers who are like them. So it is sometimes said like recruits like. If you want more young members, get existing



## Building trust – health union CZECH REPUBLIC

Miroslav Vacha, vice-chair of the Emergency Medical Services Trade Union explains how he has developed recruitment and organising work in the union. I started on the local level trade union committee in 2016 – full of energy, enthusiasm and desire to change things and to create a stronger and bigger union. After a few years I managed to increase membership by about 60% by gaining trust through personal conversations and building relationships with employees. I never push them. I just explain the benefits of union membership to them. What they can get. And if they are not part of trade union, what they are losing out on. The reasons for organising success are:

- active, motivated members of trade union committee;
- good relationship with colleagues at work and earning their trust;
- clear explanation of what the trade union is and why it is important to be part of it; and
- giving workers a feeling of security and safety as part of a strong trade union family.



## Focusing on women members and activists – transport union ROMANIA

Since setting up its women's committee in 2017, the ATU has done a lot to encourage women to join and become active in the union. It has looked into the impact of digitalisation on jobs, campaigned for more childcare, taken initiatives on gender-based violence, supported actions on International Women's Day and provided training so that women can develop their roles both within their companies and in the trade union. The ATU underlines the importance of boosting women's confidence in their abilities and showing more courage to engage in union activity. Luminita Smeu, president of the women's organisation says: "Working as a team, we are doing everything possible to make women become more involved and influential in trade union activities."

- young members active in recruiting. Women often make up a large proportion of the public sector workforce. It is essential that more women are encouraged to become active in the union.
- 4. Organising depends on conversations in the workplace, where organisers don't talk at workers but listen to their concerns.
- 5. It is important to ensure that workers – both members and non-members – are aware of what the union has achieved for them. Union successes should be widely publicised.

**EPSU is providing advice, support and training to affiliates who want to develop their organising strategies and techniques. It is encouraging closer links between affiliates through a network that will exchange information about recruitment campaigns and other initiatives to recruit and retain members and build active workplace organisations. Further information and the latest news can be found [here](#).**





### **Persistence in private healthcare organising – health union** **BOSNIA & HERCEGOVINA**

Workers in Fresenius dialysis clinics had tried on several occasions to establish a trade union. They have been unhappy with the company and its decisions but have also been confronted with heavy pressure from management and threats of dismissals. However, when management reduced wages and other benefits, the workers had had enough and decided to start a union. Support from the Healthcare and Social Protection union was vital. The union president had been in touch with the workers over several years and had provided support in earlier organising campaigns. This time he got the workers from two clinics to establish the union. The union then visited all the Fresenius clinics and they now have more than 150 members out of a total of 220 employees. Fighting cuts to working conditions in the private sector and maintaining contact with workers over the long term were key elements in this case.



### **Mobilising members and non-members – administration union** **BULGARIA**

In November 2019, the PK Admin union started series of campaigns and protests, leading finally to strike action in the government's Agency for Social Protection. They wanted to involve as many workers as possible and so they reached out to non-members as well – via a Facebook page opened specially for workers in this agency. Many non-members became involved, joined the FB page and supported the union demands, with some also joining the union.





**EPSU** is the **European Federation of Public Service Unions**. It is the largest federation of the ETUC and comprises 8 million public service workers from over 250 trade unions across Europe. EPSU organises workers in the energy, water and waste sectors, health and social services and local, regional and central government, in all European countries including the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. It is the recognised regional organisation of Public Services International (PSI).

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