

'A worker is a worker' : the trade unions organising migrants across Europe

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A conviction that lies at the very heart of international trade unionism is that a worker is a worker, wherever he or she is from. But how can unions put this principle into action when it comes to migrant workers ? With over 22 million non-EU citizens living in the EU in 2018 ([according to Eurostat figures](#)), which represented 4.4 per cent of the EU28 population (now EU27, following the UK's departure from the European Union on 31 January 2020), plus more than 17 million EU citizens living in a different member state than their own, migrants account for a significant part of the European workforce. This is without even counting the people who do not have the necessary papers to work or reside legally in the country where they live ; figures are harder to come by on these 'undocumented' migrants, but their number has been estimated to be in the millions.

Often finding work in partly informal sectors such as agriculture, construction and domestic and care work, where exploitation is rife, many migrant workers would benefit from trade union support - but they are also an important source of recruitment for unions, who are facing declining membership across the continent.

Trade unions, however, face a few challenges in their efforts to organise these populations. First of all, the concentration of many migrant workers in the above-mentioned sectors means that they can be harder to reach, because they are not based in the workplaces and forms of employment where unions tend to be strongest. Secondly, language and culture can pose significant barriers in communication and recruitment, depending on which countries the workers come from and what their perceptions and experiences of trade union action are. Furthermore, it may be difficult for many migrant workers, struggling with heavy work schedules and low pay, to make time for trade union meetings when they have to prioritise the immediate need to make enough money to send home to their families.

Finally, there is the issue that, even once recruited, migrant members may have needs and concerns that warrant particular attention. In a [2017 study on trade unions and migrant workers](#), researchers Stefania Marino, Judith Roosblad and Rinus Penninx outlined one of the main dilemmas facing unions if they have chosen to recruit workers from abroad, which is the question of whether these members should receive 'equal' or 'special' treatment. Should all members be considered in the same way, with common interests, or should unions develop 'targeted policies' to help migrant workers ?

Not all workers have the same needs. In the particular case of undocumented migrants, for example, obtaining legal status in the country they live and work in may come before all other concerns. Without fundamental resident and employment rights, these workers are less able to enjoy the fruits of trade union struggles, such as improved pay and conditions. In many cases it is NGOs, rather than unions, that step in to help deal with these more immediate concerns.

Different approaches to organising for different contexts

However, some examples of migrant organising initiatives by trade unions from around Europe showcase the many different approaches that can be taken within this variety of contexts.

The Brussels branch of the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC), for example, has a 'migrants' unit' specifically dedicated to organising, supporting and advising [migrant workers](#). The Migrants CSC Brussels unit engages in political lobbying and media attention-grabbing demonstrations to raise awareness, but also organises the workers themselves, informing them of their rights and about how to record evidence of exploitation and mistreatment by employers.

The unit covers many fronts, with an action committee of undocumented workers, a league of female domestic workers, a legal advice service, activist training, and research and communications sections. A notable aspect of the union's approach is its inclusion of undocumented migrants, who due to their precarious legal status are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers. The CSC offers not only political support for their cause but also membership - something not all unions do.

Another, rather singular example can be found in Poland, where a union was set up solely to cater to migrant workers. The Intersectoral Trade Union of Ukrainian Workers in Poland was established by Yuriy Karyagin, a Ukrainian economics professor, amid a wave of escalated immigration of Ukrainians fleeing [the conflict and political unrest](#) in their home country. Replacing the labour shortage left by Poles moving to western Europe, the newcomers often find themselves in sectors with little regulation, labour protection or trade union presence. Language is an additional barrier to recruitment by the major unions, hence Karyagin's more targeted approach.

The union's skeleton staff and reliance on the occasional help of volunteers means that Karyagin, its president and driving force, has had to focus on individual casework. He offers free legal advice to members on obtaining work and residence permits, informs labour inspectorates about unscrupulous employers, and liaises with factories and employers he knows to be fair in order to help find work for Ukrainian newcomers. The union may be small, but its membership is growing, currently standing at just over 1,000. Although independent, it is supported by the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ) and has its office at the bigger union's headquarters.

Finally, moving further south, the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) is taking an innovative approach to [recruiting and organising seasonal field labourers](#) in the southern regions of Italy, who are often from African or eastern European countries.

Italy has made the news in recent times with harrowing stories of labour exploitation, trafficking and abuse of migrant workers, who have been found to be living in makeshift camps and relying on the whims of illegal 'hirers', the caporali.

To overcome the difficulties created by the often severe isolation and vulnerability of these workers, the union's agricultural branch, FLAI-CGIL, champions a strategy it calls the '*Sindacato di strada*', which could be translated as the 'trade union on the road'. The idea is for trade unionists to travel directly to the meeting points where workers gather or where they are hired by the *caporali*, with the aim of informing them about their rights, advising them on employment contracts, and making the union known to them. Technology has played an important role in this approach, with WhatsApp being used to map out the territory and geotag the workplaces and pick-up points of the labourers.

[Inclusion and integration of immigrants within the union are key](#) : undocumented workers can be union delegates, and many of the CGIL officers are themselves of foreign origin and so can

communicate with the workers in their own language. The campaign has also boosted the union's membership, demonstrating that it is not only migrant workers but also the trade unions who can benefit from such initiatives.

These are just a few examples of how trade unions can produce innovative strategies to support, organise and recruit a group of workers who are often, depending on the context, less accessible to them, whether because of language barriers, physical isolation, precarious legal status, informal employment or extreme vulnerability and exploitation. 'A worker is a worker' may be a universal principle, but there is no 'one size fits all' approach to the practicalities of organising.

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