

TRANSFORMING HOW WE ORGANIZE

From its creation in 2012 IndustriALL Global Union has put special efforts into organizing. It is an indispensable part of all union programme, campaigns and activities.



global worker special report

At its 2nd Congress, IndustriALL Global Union defined its mission as building union power and defending workers' rights in its sectors. Increasing union membership and getting members more active in their unions are among the most important activities IndustriALL promotes and supports.

The task is enormous. According to the International Trade Union Confederation at the global level only 7 per cent of workers are organized in free and independent trade unions.

REDISCOVER ORGANIZING

Before focusing on organizing, Finnish Metalworkers' Union faced the dilemma of an inactive and dwindling membership in a rich European country. By the 1970s trade unions had been instrumental in improving labour standards and had achieved a binding national collective agreement across the metalworking sector. 40 years later, the union's position was much less strong.



ASLAK HAARAHILTUNEN, head of organizing at Finnish Metalworkers' Union, Metallityöväen Liitto r.y.

"In 2012, our Congress decided to focus on organizing. We started from small-scale campaigns at 20 to 30 work sites to get the basic message of unions across."

The union started with a mapping exercise. One of the first discoveries at the smaller sites was that conditions did not meet the standards in the national agreement. The union decided not to act in the traditional way, which meant sending a union representative from the national headquarter to demand the employer to immediately deal with violations, or if not go to court. Instead the union helped workers set up an organizing committee and elect shop stewards, so that the local union could lead the fight themselves.

Teaching the workers and finding out what they wanted to change was a challenge. An important discovery was that the workers' concerns in the workplace often differed from issues covered in the collective agreement.

Haarahiltunen says that things that seemed minor, like the date when salaries are paid out or the number of parking spaces, could actually become key issues, allowing workers to decide themselves on the priorities and run powerful organizing campaigns around those priorities.

Organizing is not an easy task and the availability of resources and a dedicated union leadership are decisive factors. Haarahiltunen says that is needed from the start, as so much can go wrong.

For the Finnish Metalworkers' Union, the organizing drive has resulted in a more active membership and 13,000 new

special report

Text: Alexander Ivanou

Photos: IndustriALL

members, around ten per cent of the total union membership.

The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers (IBB) is facing declining union membership and power in North America.

According to Tyler Brown, executive director of the industrial sector at IBB, only seven per cent of private sector workers in the US are unionized.

"IBB Construction locals in the western United States agreed to start an organizing fund that will allow hiring around 15 new organizers within the next year or two. It is a pilot project, but if it proves successful it can be used in other parts of the United States."

Boilermakers are successfully revitalizing organizing in both the US and Canada. The union is using new legislation issued by the US National Labor Relations Board, allowing them to enter into facilities and organize smaller groups of workers.

Traditionally, the industrial sector allowed only for organizing of the entire facility, which meant that a majority was needed for unionization. Under the new conditions, the union can start organizing from smaller groups with the aim to expand the union later.

ORGANIZE TRANSNATIONALLY

In 2015, German union IG Metall decided to put more resources into organizing transnationally. Many German companies, particularly in the auto industry operate on a global level and employ more people abroad than in Germany. Maintaining union power in those companies requires building strong unions wherever they operate.

IG Metall joined forces with US union United Automobile Workers and the metalworkers' union VASAS in Hungary. Together they developed a fast track communication system enabling them to and help partner unions to organize workers at German companies abroad. The project focuses specifically on auto suppliers in southern USA and western Hungary.

Through the project, trade unions in the US and Hungary will get support in their organizing drives at German-owned auto companies, and at the same time IG Metall helps to ensure it has a strong union partner at German auto companies' operations abroad.

INDIA

In 2015, 19,200 new workers in the steel, mining and energy sectors were organized, using trainings on union building, workshops on occupational safety and health, rallies and gate meetings.

ZAMBIA

IndustriALL's union building project aims to increase and better target organizing. In 2015, this resulted in 8,440 new members.

INDONESIA

In 2013, Indonesian affiliates organized some 12,000 members in the metal sector. In 2014, thanks to the organizing project over 15,000 members were organized, and through the Organizing sustainable metal and mining unions project another 6,500 new members joined IndustriALL in 2015.

KYRGYZSTAN

IndustriALL affiliate Mining and Metallurgy Trade Union of Kyrgyzstan (MMTUK) has recruited 12,000 workers since 2008. By a targeted approach to organizing, membership has gone from 8,000 to 20,000. One component of the organizing was a string of one-day training and consultancy workshops organized by IndustriALL regional office.



ORGANIZE WITH INDUSTRIALL

Based on affiliates' experience, IndustriALL has developed a set of key principles for unions to practice as a basis for successful organizing:

- Build strong union structures
- Be democratic and transparent
- Include all types of workers in your organizing work
- Cooperate and coordinate with other unions
- Don't compete with other unions to organize the same workers
- Become self-sustaining

These principles are helping to guide IndustriALL organizing work, including support for IndustriALL organizing projects. IndustriALL

runs organizing projects around the globe, primarily in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Focus is on encouraging and enabling affiliates to develop a permanent organizing culture and to run their own organizing programs.

All projects are aimed at action and unity building, while cultivating an inclusive organizing culture involving women, non-manual, youth, precarious workers and migrants – parts of the workforce that unions have historically marginalized or ignored but which they must focus on in order to stay relevant.

In 2014-2015, IndustriALL projects helped affiliates organized over a quarter million new members into their unions.



SÖREN NIEMANN-FINDEISEN, trade union officer at IG Metall, Germany.

"We see a power shift in what we do and it is time to organize on a global scale."



WASSILA NAFTI EP CHERNI, Tunisian General Labour Union.

In many countries union organizers and activists face tremendous challenges in their work, and women are increasingly taking a lead role in fighting back.

A strong and dedicated union activist for the last 14 years, Wassila Nafti Ep Cherni, from the Tunisian General Labour Union, UGTT, was dismissed three times before the Arab Spring started. When offered a blank check from the employer to quit her job, she rejected it by saying:

"Who is going to defend workers if I leave?"

Listen to organizing stories from around the world.

