

An underutilised resource: the revitalising promise of new trade union members

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[Trade union membership prospects](#) has declined in 24 out of 32 European countries in the period 2010–2017, compared to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Yet, even though union membership is overall declining in most countries, workers are still joining trade unions every day for the first time. Also, since the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, some unions have reported considerable increases in their membership. Clearly, economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic, as well as growing concern over workplace health and safety issues, have, in certain industries, driven more workers into the arms of unions. There are, of course, reasons to be cautious. The economic fallout of the pandemic is causing mass layoffs and redundancies, which means unions should expect drops in membership as unemployed workers leave. Nevertheless, new members offer significant opportunities for unions, particularly in their attempts to ‘revitalise’.

There are at least two good reasons why it is important to give some attention to new trade union members. First of all, most members that decide to leave the union do so in [their early years of membership](#). Any retention strategy regarding union membership should thus primarily focus on this period. Secondly, new members joining a union for the first time have not been influenced by any previous *direct* union experience or socialisation. They are newcomers, and [most of them are young](#). This means that there is a great potential for creative energy, fresh ideas and imagination amongst them – what better aid to union revitalisation?

My research has found that a critical mass of newcomers has in fact shown a willingness to be more involved in union activities. In a survey of first-time members of a Belgian union, no less than 41 per cent professed themselves to be (quite) willing to carry out at least one small task aimed at reaching out to potential members. The belief that one’s personal involvement will make a difference in the union is, in particular, a strong, intrinsic driver for taking on small union tasks. Those findings suggest several policy recommendations on union membership recruitment and retention.

First, tasks vary time-, skill- and stress-wise. **Unions should therefore test what kind of tasks appeal to which member categories.** Helping the union in drafting a flyer on a union campaign or action is different from distributing that flyer in a public space.

Second, boosting member-union ties via union tasks is more successful when underpinned by an articulated political vision and long-term objectives. **Stimulating worker self-organisation or empowerment does therefore not only require training but also mentoring and political education.**

Third, unions need to consider a ‘developmental’ perspective on union participation, meaning a step-by-step approach that over time builds mutual support between (over-stretched) union representatives and members who are willing to offer their services to the union.

Finally, it is key to **identify and address newcomers who are potentially interested in activism** – in either more or less demanding forms. In this respect, including a question in the registration form that asks the person to rate the extent to which they believe they can make a difference in the union could be very revealing. Responses to this question could be the basis for developing retention strategies and targeting specific member groups to engage in organisational learning. **Newcomers showing a strong conviction about the value they can bring to the union are low-hanging fruit – they can be put on a fast track to carry out more demanding tasks. But the ones with a weak conviction also need attention, perhaps even more so.**

This blog is based on Vandaele K. (2020) Newcomers as drivers of union revitalization: survey evidence from Belgium, [*Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*](#), 75(2), pp.351-375.