

DIGITAL ORGANISING– YES WE CAN!

Telework, remote work, crowd work, isolated work are all here to stay. Unions need to learn how to organise workers online and address their concerns. Experience from the time of the COVID-19 pandemic shows that it is possible, but requires unions to rethink some of their working methods and ways of communicating with workers.



Teleworkers must be able to enjoy the same rights as all other workers, including the right to join a union, collective bargaining and training. By using innovative means of communication, unions can reach teleworkers, initiate collective action, gain recognition and unionise workers.

During the first lockdown prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, nearly 40% of workers in the European Union [were reported](#) to have switched to telework. A recent [report by the OECD](#) suggests that “widespread telework may remain a permanent feature of the future working environment”.

This change will not only touch upon the public sector and services, but also industry. As an example, car manufacturer PSA has announced that it will be moving all its employees who are not engaged in production into telework. This affects 80,000 workers out of a global workforce of 200,000.

Workers who operate fully or partially outside factory or office premises will also need the protection of a union and a collective agreement. But how should teleworkers be organised and how should we communicate with them?

Successful digital organising

Last year, the Finnish Industrial Union showed that organising was also possible online and tells the story:

“We built an organising team and mapped 29 workplaces of a media and printing company. We used phone calls and online group meetings to come up with a survey and petition sent to the employer, thus building collective power and pressure. In Corona times, this proved successful even by using digital tools only. We reached 70% union density, and finally the company agreed to recognise the shop stewards and to join a sectoral collective agreement.”

In Czechia, OS KOVO developed its organising campaign at an automotive company during online meetings. It set up a closed Facebook group and website. An online survey and phone calls with workers helped identify workers’ concerns and created a spirit of being stronger together. The union doubled its membership in the company and reached a collective agreement.

But how can we reach workers who operate from home? Getting workers’ contact details is labour-intensive and takes time. ds. **Having a proper contact list is even more essential for organising teleworkers** than it is for workplace organising, because you cannot meet in person at the work place. Creativity is often needed.

IER Nezavisnost and other organisations are using social media (e.g. Facebook) to successfully search for the contact data of individual workers., the search can be rolled out in a snow-ball system from the first contacts the unions get.



Germany's IGBCE union is trying another method. It has taken a sport goods manufacturer to court, demanding that the union obtains all the official email addresses of employees working at the headquarters. Alternatively, the company can provide a collective address for all employees. IG BCE is also demanding a presence on the company's intranet. A court decision is not expected before June.

The IT Union SITT, from Romania, used an online (Facebook) survey to find out more about the targeted work place and to activate workers. The result was remarkable: During the pandemic, SITT unionised a completely non-organised work place and negotiated a collective agreement in 2020.

Once this problem is solved, it should be possible for unions to reach even broader circles of workers. The pandemic has prompted a steep learning curve and people are now used to digital communication and online meetings.

New ways to communicate

In the UK, the National Education Union (NEU) managed to get 70,000 members join Zoom calls with its General Secretary. The union also used a Call Hub app as a two-way tool. Staff were given training in how to hold organising conversations, with a script prepared by the union's training team. Since March last year, 50,000 new members have joined the union, seeking help and support. The pandemic has provided ideas about how unions should develop their ways of working in a new world where telework is increasing. It means changes to the way in which unions communicate with existing and potential members, organising, collective bargaining and training.

Trade Unions in Finland are jointly working on the development of an app for organising new members, while the Romanian Petrom Energy Union has already implemented an app for retaining and serving members.

There are plenty of opportunities showing how joining a union can make a difference and which address questions that teleworkers often report, such as health and safety, working hours, and the right to disconnect.

[The Friedrich-Ebert Foundation](#) encountered a number of challenges that unions need to be aware of.

- lack of internet connectivity, particularly in rural areas or outside city centres without internet infrastructure
- lack of smart phones, computers and other gadgets
- an uneven capacity of union members to use digital/online tools
- economic difficulties due to the increased expense of digital communication

Global Union Federations (including IndustriALL Global Union) were able to tackle a number of the challenges, by:

- using available online and offline platforms and methods, and holding half-day trainings on how to use Zoom for communication.



- developing online platforms to conduct a whole range of trade union work, such as union meetings; planning and strategising; campaigns and advocacy; negotiations; mobilising; and internal or external organising.
- Developing software applications to assist affiliates' work in organising and political strategising. Developing podcasts in multiple languages; making webinars more interactive.
- using online tools to organise workers as the pandemic highlights specific challenges facing certain job categories.
- Developing an online application for organising, which can establish, track and offer union services (i.e. decent work, social protection) for non-standard workers

The [Unions 21 report](#) summarises some of the key lessons learned from the pandemic year 2020, as follows:

- New forms of effective online communication enable unions to engage with more workers, listen to their concerns, and understand their needs
- Unions need to rethink their communication methods, upgrade and refine their infrastructure, and train the staff and union reps
- Making it easier to join the union should include a user-friendly online joining system
- Integrating social media (particularly Facebook Messenger) into the union's formal communication channels is a recognition of the fact that increasing numbers of members contact the union in this way
- Email remains the quickest and most effective way to share information with workers. This requires a comprehensive and up-to-date register
- Retention work is valuable: going through a list of recently resigned members and calling them led to a healthy number re-joining the union
- Visibility is important: lots of people have joined because they have been impressed by the role the union has played in fighting for the industry

Organising works when people realise that their membership in the union serves their interests and when they themselves can contribute to actively shaping their working environment. Telework does not change this. Large numbers of workers turned to unions for advice and guidance throughout the pandemic. Now the challenge is to keep that momentum and the bonds created.

