



**Membership counts:
strategic navigation through the
various meanings of organising**

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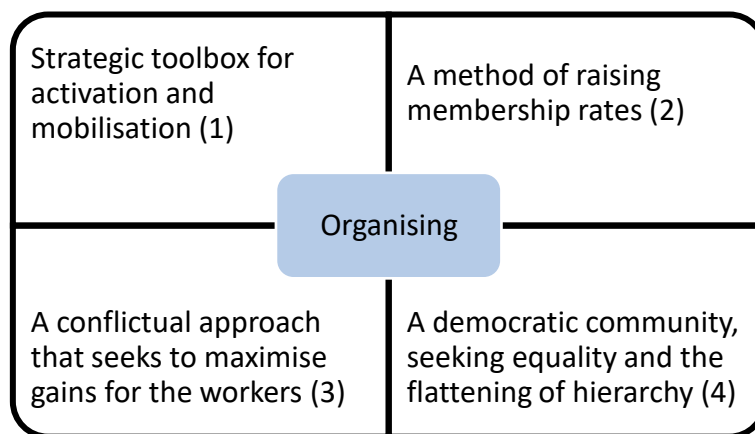
Generally, organising has *something* to do with gaining new membership. It is vital in countries where unions rely primarily on the formal support of membership. But even for unions in countries that succeed in maintaining their institutional power, reflected by high collective bargaining coverage rates, declining membership rates are also of great concern. Membership counts

- for financial reasons
- for gaining power
- for securing legitimacy
- for ensuring the vitality of the unions' ideological mission.

But what is the connection between membership and the various ideas of organising?

Organising is not a fixed concept, and different views on its objectives reveal internal tensions, and sometimes even contradictions. The following matrix illustrates four ways in which union officials and organisers view the essence of an organising approach.

Figure 1 – Four views of organising



Source: Mundlak (2020).

So, how do trade union insiders describe the objective of organising?

Some trade unionists emphasise the relationship between organising and reaching out to individuals (*numbers correspond to the matrix*):

- (1) **Organising is about mobilisation of the workforce.** Inducing workers to be personally committed to the union's objectives and to be active, whether in industrial action, in persuading their peers, in negotiations, in resolving disputes, or in talking to the media.
- (2) In comparison, in the vision of **organising as a method of increasing membership rates**, workers may be willing to be members, but only some are willing to take an active part in the union's activities.

It would be too easy to claim that organising should simply aim to do both. Sometimes that works. But servicing individuals (by extending economic benefits and gains, or providing aid for individual issues) may attract a different kind of membership than calling for active participation. Some organisers refuse to define their objective as increasing membership, pointing instead at the need to change the story of what unions are, and bring back activists who have gradually sought to place their energies elsewhere in the 'new left' (for example, in feminist and gender identity organisations, aid to asylum seekers, or climate activism). Others, however, suggest that numbers are power: employers are made aware of the number of supporters, and the idea of the 'power of many' attracts the media. They realise that high demands for active participation may deter those who are willing to show support in a more 'passive' way.

Other trade unionists link organising to community-building:

- (3) **Organising is associated with a strong demonstration of the union's commitment to the workers:** *'We fight for you'*. Organising should demonstrate that a trade union not only bargains at the top level with employers and the state, but is also ready to roll up its sleeves and actively engage in advancing workers' interests. Some organisers and officials reject the conflict-centred perspective of organising. Conflict is not a goal, but a means, which is sometimes necessary and other times can be avoided. Others emphasise that creativity is key to raising public awareness.
- (4) **Democracy-building** in the organising unit is essential for breaking down hierarchies that large unions have developed over time. **It brings the labour movement back to the street and the workplace – in other words, to the people.**

Conflict and democracy are related. Conflict creates a strong bond among the 'us' who are facing the 'them'. It strengthens the sense of community. Workers on the picket

line and in demonstrations, or the communities and families backing workers during periods of conflict, are an essential part of mobilisation. But conflict and democracy can also be a source of concern for the central actors in large trade unions and federations. Can conflict undermine the image of 'responsibility' the union tries to present? And to what extent should organisers mediate the union's goals and those of the workers? Are they the voice of the workers, or part of the union hierarchy that guides them?

Crucially, the many meanings of 'organising' and the strategic questions they raise for unions can take attention away from other membership-based strategies that deserve equal attention, namely *recruitment*. This term covers numerous methods of raising membership rates

- in sites where workers are already covered by collective agreements,
- among young apprentices and students,
- among minorities
- others

This ongoing process of reaching out to workers is more mundane, and does not enjoy the visibility and energy associated with creative organising strategies. However, this everyday work is essential for bringing members to unions.

Conclusions: Finding the right place for organising and recruitment practices in the big puzzle of union activities can be an immense challenge. Organising teams and union officials reveal that these are actual dilemmas in day-to-day practice. These dynamics require organisational learning to be developed in trade unions, which should involve reflecting on gains just as much as on problems. Finally, organising approaches need to be in constant evolution, not dictated by the hope for a fixed and simplified protocol.

This blog is based on Mundlak G. (2020) [*Organizing Matters: Two Logics of trade unions representation*](#), Cheltenham/Geneva, Edward Elgar/ILO.