

Organising basics for European Works Councils

Recommendations to EWC/SE coordinators and worker representatives

Brussels, January 2022



Introduction

Organising is key to building trade union power. Stronger unions are able to negotiate better collective agreements, improve wages and working conditions, ensure a safe and healthy workplace, and solve problems when they occur, thus building solidarity among workers.

IndustriAll Europe's sectors are dominated by multinational companies. We encourage our affiliates to focus on membership in their sectors in each country, but also to build partnerships for organising workers through coordinated transnational actions.

European Works Councils (EWCs) can play a useful role in building these partnerships. Though they have not been conceived as trade union bodies, but rather as vehicles for information and consultation on a wide range of transnational matters, it is clear that trade unions play a crucial role in the establishment and functioning of EWCs. This makes them the ideal tool for building cross-border trade union networks and developing strategic cooperation, including organising.

Organising action is led by trade unions at national, regional and local level. Nevertheless, we want to motivate the more than 600 EWCs active in industriAll Europe's sectors to support the unions in organising non-unionised sites and increasing density in weakly unionised locations. A stronger local trade union basis will no doubt contribute to a more efficient functioning of the EWC and result in more meaningful information and consultation processes at all levels within the multinational group.

With these recommendations, industriAll Europe wants to provide some ideas and assist EWCs in identifying a supporting role in organising actions. Obviously, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' proposal for all EWCs. But one point should be made clear: EWCs, and especially trade union members in EWCs, should reflect on how to increase trade union membership in their companies throughout Europe.

This is not a stand-alone document, but should be seen as a contribution to the implementation of industriAll Europe's Organising Programme ([available online in several languages](#)).

These recommendations have been prepared with industriAll Europe's affiliates, including members of the Company Policy Committee and members of the Building Trade Union Task Force. I would like to thank everyone for their contribution and, in particular, all trade union colleagues engaged in the fundamental work of building trade union power across Europe. We all have a role to play in making this a success story and I hope that EWCs will use these recommendations for initiating discussions on the role they can play for the benefit of workers in their companies and supply chains.

Luc Triangle
General Secretary
industriAll European Trade Union

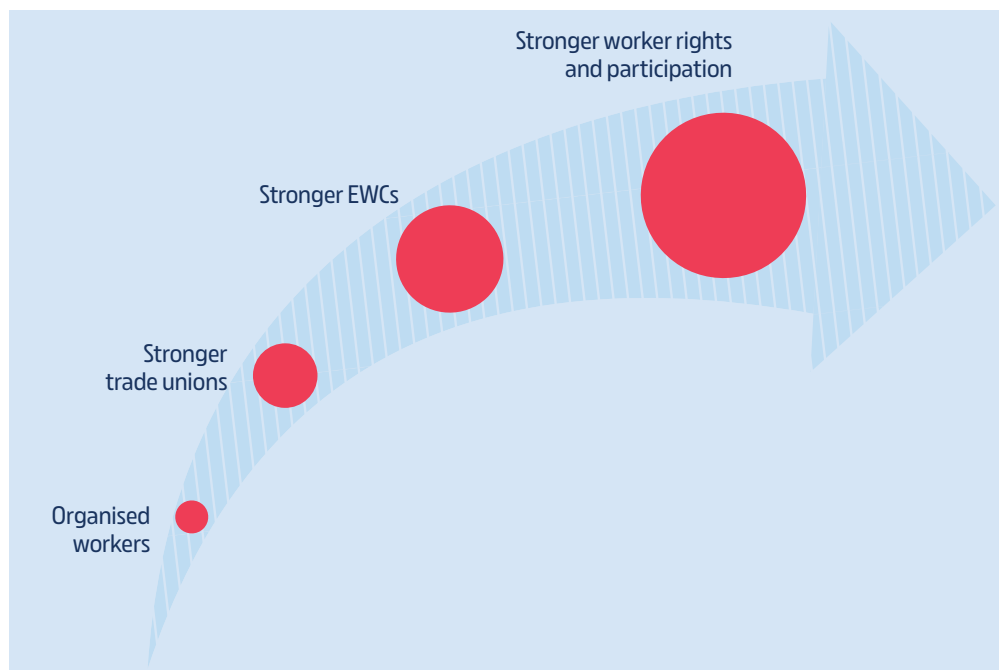
1. What are the benefits of organising?

IndustriAll Europe’s Organising Programme spells out the benefits of organising on a company level:

- **Organising means empowerment:** Recruitment and retention of more members helps to build and mobilise workers’ power. Greater membership involvement means more engagement and a sense of ownership of the union.
- **Organising means better agreements:** More active members means greater strength and leads to better collective agreements, fair pay, and healthy and safe working conditions.
- **Organising means greater influence:** Building collective power through strong unions and bargaining is the only effective protection for workers’ rights.
- **Organising works everywhere:** Organising and mobilisation works no matter what the national context, legal framework, sector or union culture may be.

The power base of both trade unions and European Works Councils is the workers they represent. Over generations, committed and united workers have won rights that are today established in international ILO Conventions, European directives, including the EWC Directive 2009/38/EC, and national labour legislation.

High unionisation rates help to build stronger unions, but they also strengthen EWCs in their information and consultation tasks. The management listens more carefully to EWCs which have the backing of workers and unions. This power connection leads to stronger worker rights and participation.



Whenever EWCs decide to be involved in an organising campaign, they will find a role to play. That is what these recommendations are about.

2. What is industriAll Europe's support for Building Trade Union Power?

The affiliates of industriAll Europe have singled out organising and building trade union power as one of their key priorities.

IndustriAll Europe is promoting organising at four different levels.

- **Mainstreaming**, by including a membership focus in all our policy areas, sector networks and specific target groups, and offering affiliates support to develop concepts for establishing an organising culture
- **Sectoral level**, by initiating discussions in sectoral networks to encourage affiliates to prioritise sectoral collective bargaining campaigns and their own pilot projects, like the one on organising, collective bargaining and living wages in the South-East European garment and footwear industries
- **Specific target groups**, by providing training for young leaders in organising principles and supporting our White-Collar Working Group to develop a tailored action plan

And last but not least, on

- **Company level**, by providing affiliates with support and training in organising methods and strategic research; encouraging them to build partnerships for organising transnational companies and **motivating European Works Councils to support the organising of non-unionised sites; and increasing density in weakly unionised locations**

3. Organising workers in a multinational company: who does what?

Organising is about much more than convincing a worker to fill in a membership form. It is about building a collective voice for workers, ensuring democracy at work within each company, and increasing the influence of trade unions in society. A successful campaign therefore involves many different actors.

Generally, **the national unions take the lead**. They decide about the necessary human and financial resources to be dedicated to organising actions, which can include cooperation with the unions of the headquarter's country.

The trade union expert organiser leads the organising campaign on behalf of the national trade union. The organiser is responsible for carrying out actions at all stages of the campaign, in cooperation with local activists. He/she will inform other union actors and involve them where and when appropriate.

IndustriAll Europe's strategic organiser should be involved at the earliest convenient stage. This helps to ensure a better leverage in the campaign when it comes to building solidarity with other trade unions across borders.

If so desired and agreed upon, the **industriAll Europe EWC coordinator and/or the unionised members of the EWC** can also be involved. The actual role can be very diverse and needs to take into consideration the wide range of the EWC’s cultures. One possibility is to set up an **EWC organising support team**, made up of trade union members of the EWC, who work in close cooperation with the national trade union’s expert organiser, industriAll Europe’s strategic organiser, and the EWC coordinator.

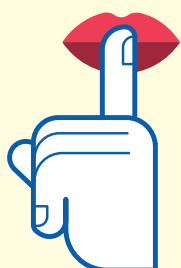
4. What are the different phases of an organising campaign?

The success of organising workers depends on many factors. Designing an organising campaign and putting it into practice takes several months – it is a marathon, not a sprint!

First of all, the national union must make a **commitment** to put together a strategic organising plan and to allocate the necessary staff and financial resources. Trained expert organisers have the skills that are needed to convince workers of the benefits of uniting their forces in a local union.

A well developed organising campaign consists of **two different phases: the ‘silent’ one and the ‘open’ one.**

The **silent phase** includes the pre-campaign, preparations and base-building. In the pre-campaign stage, the union decides where, with what resources, and whether at all it wants to organise and campaign. Preparations include a lot of information gathering: employment numbers and categories, locations and structure, weak/vulnerable and strong sides of the target company, but also the union strength in the different plants and on a country-level. During the base-building stage, the organisers make contact with workers, and especially the potential future activists.



CAUTION: In the silent phase, no information about the organising plan should be passed to the central or local management unless specifically requested by the trade union expert organiser. Should the EWC already be involved in this first phase of the campaign, then make sure no EWC member leaks any information, either inadvertently or intentionally. It is advisable not to share any information (yet) with non-unionised EWC members about the campaign during this phase.



The **open phase** is about consolidation, the public launch of the campaign, escalation in cases where the demands will not be fulfilled immediately, and ensuring success. It is about broadening our activist’s base and showing people how they can organise their workplace.

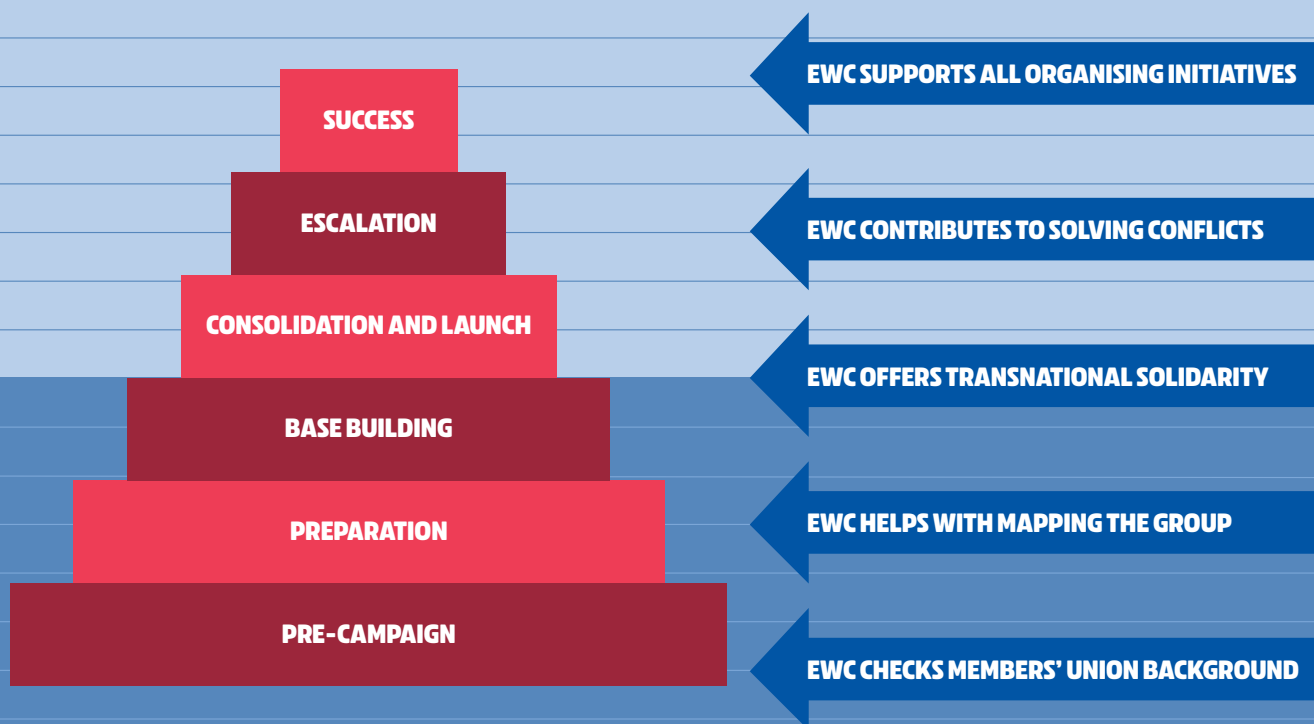
A successful campaign contains an escalation strategy, which needs to be carefully planned. This is about strengthening the organisation, fighting back against repression, mobilising external support and making an impact on business partners, shareholders and customers. Ensuring success means showing the employer that workers are committed to supporting their chosen representatives in negotiating solid collective agreements.

5. What role for the EWC?

The European Works Council can play a useful role at every stage of the organising activity. EWC members can help with the research and mapping in the silent phase. During the open phase, the EWC can offer transnational solidarity and contribute to solving possible conflicts, which often occur in an organising action.

OPEN PHASE

SILENT PHASE



Role of the EWC during the 'silent phase'

As a general rule, it is advisable to regularly check the level of unionisation among the members of the EWC. Who is affiliated to a trade union? Is it a member organisation of industriAll Europe? This will allow for the identification of any weak spots in the group and where a future organising campaign might be useful. As part of its basic information, the EWC should also ask management to provide an exhaustive list of all the company's plants and operations in Europe, as well as a clear view of the structure of the group.

Such preparatory work will make it easier to assist with mapping the group when an organising campaign is being considered by a national union. Questions that can be raised internally to support such a mapping exercise include:

- What is the employment situation on each site (staff numbers, temporary and subcontracted workers)?
- Is there a trade union presence? If yes, which unions (national federations, independent company unions, employer influenced organisations)?
- How many workers are unionised?
- How have the EWC delegates been appointed? What was the role of the trade union, if any?
- Are the workers in the different sites covered by a collective bargaining agreement? If so, was it negotiated at company, sectoral or regional/national level?
- Is there any form of structured local worker representation (works council, shop stewards, health & safety committee...)?
- Have there been any previous attempts to organise workers at plant level? If so, what was the result?



TIP: Discuss the 'trade union situation' in your Select Committee and put the subject on the agenda of your internal preparatory or debriefing meetings. This will spark an interesting discussion about trade union presence in your company and the importance of trade unions for the EWC. Having poorly organised locations makes it easier for management to pit workers against each other. Unity through organising and activation of workers helps to improve working conditions at all sites.

Role of the EWC during the 'open phase'

At some point, the organising project will be consolidated and publicly launched. This means the campaign has reached the 'open phase'. It is up to the trade union expert organiser who is leading the activity to consider, in cooperation with the target company's organising team, the opportunity of involving the EWC.

The start of the open phase is a good moment to build international solidarity and showcase the campaign. The EWC can announce its support for the organising activity, together with trade unions from all over Europe. It is also in this phase that a decision can be taken to set up **an organising support team within the EWC**, which can then take up a more active role, in close cooperation with the national unions. This can include media actions, organising meetings in the target country, or any other initiative that is jointly agreed.



TIP: The EWC could ask for a discussion about the company policy regarding **Corporate Social Responsibility**. The right to join a union or 'freedom of association' is part of the fundamental rights at work, as protected by Conventions 87 and 98 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Companies. **Your company may even have signed a Global Framework Agreement (GFA) with IndustriALL Global Union, referring to these ILO Conventions.** Note that a GFA signed by a multinational company might be binding for the suppliers and the sub-contractors of that multinational company too. Very often the freedom of association is mentioned in non-financial reports and Codes of Conduct. If that is the case, the EWC could insist that management take immediate and effective measures to ensure that these fundamental rights are respected in all countries and branches of the group.

The EWC could be a helpful tool in resolving possible conflicts. Once the organising action starts yielding results, and union presence is growing in the target country, local management might respond quite aggressively. If this happens, the EWC can confront central management with its responsibility to stop such anti-union behaviour. Central management has leverage and authority over local management. If they support good quality social dialogue at the headquarters company, then this should be replicated in all locations and countries. EWC members may use both their formal and informal contacts with top-level management to raise organising issues. This can even include paving the way for local negotiations or the request for a direct intervention towards the local management.

Organising workers & the European Works Council: a win-win combination

TIP: Use your right to visit all company locations and the obligation that you have to report back to all workers about the activities of the EWC and to organise a meeting of the Select Committee (or even the plenary EWC) in the target country of the organising campaign. This will allow you to demonstrate your solidarity with local workers and the trade union organisers.



EWCs have a lot to gain from supporting organising campaigns.

Very often, the efficiency of the EWC is obstructed by the absence of unionised representatives or, worse even, the presence of members that have been appointed by local management. More organised workers lead to stronger trade unions and a stronger EWC, which, in turn, can contribute to improved workers' rights, working conditions, and a more active and empowered workforce, throughout the whole group.

EWCs must be able to fully play their role in anticipating and managing change in the company through information and consultation on transnational matters. But there certainly is potential to do more. Having a stronger trade union basis will no doubt contribute to having more vocal and competent members, allow for a much more proactive functioning, and force management to take the EWC more seriously.

IndustriAll Europe and its affiliated organisations are here to support you. We are very interested in hearing about your past and future experiences, and lessons learnt from EWCs that have played a role in organising actions in a multinational company (the dos, the don'ts). For all questions and suggestions, please contact:

Your national trade union organisations

Please liaise with the national officer(s) responsible for organising and supporting trade union members.

Your industriAll Europe dedicated team

Ildikó Krén

industriAll Europe Strategic Organiser

Ildiko.Kren@industriall-europe.eu

+32 475 924 893

Bruno Demaitre

industriAll Europe EWC Policy Officer

bruno.demaitre@industriall-europe.eu

+32 476 540 990



www.industrial-europe.eu



@industriAll_EU



@industriAllEU



@industrial_europe