

"A worker is a worker": the trade unions organising migrants

Migrants are an integral, if often exploited, part of the European workforce, and trade unions across the continent are making efforts to organise them. However, they face a complex set of challenges, particularly if the workers are undocumented. Trade unionists from four different countries talk about their initiatives, revealing a remarkable diversity of approaches.

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Trade unionists from FLAI-CGIL head out into the fields to talk to migrant labourers.

Image: © Pietro Ruffolo



Eva María Jiménez Lamas is a busy woman. She has been running a service for migrant workers at the Brussels branch of the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (*Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens*, CSC) since 2012. In the second-most cosmopolitan city in the world, with 62% of the population foreign-born, this means Eva always has plenty of work on her plate. People come to seek the union's advice and support on issues ranging from unpaid wages to obtaining work and residence permits. "We are very well organised and very well known," she says, not without some pride. No stranger to the migrant experience herself, Eva came to Belgium as a child from Spain, and she is passionate about her work. There is one aspect that she is particularly enthusiastic about: the union's inclusion of undocumented migrants, who due to their precarious legal status are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers. The CSC offers not only political support for their cause but also membership – something not all unions do. "What sets us apart is that we actually organise undocumented workers within the union," she explains. While many organisations provide invaluable support services to migrants, Eva feels there is an important case to be made for trade union action: "Supporting isn't the same as organising."

She's not the only one who thinks trade unions have a crucial role to play in empowering migrant workers. Not far away from her office, on the other side of Brussels city centre, Mercedes Miletti, policy advisor at the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), coordinates the Union Migrant Net network.

Her work may be a little more removed from the frontline than that of Eva's, but she has the same goals in mind. The network connects trade unions in different EU countries that offer services to migrants, providing contact information to newcomers seeking assistance and facilitating the exchange of best practices between trade unionists. Her position on the issue is clear: "The trade union movement should be organising migrants and consider all workers as workers." It's a conviction that lies at the very heart of international trade unionism: a worker is a worker, wherever he or she is from. But how can unions put this principle into action?

Not all workers have the same needs

Migration has become the subject of particularly heated debate in Europe in recent years, with much of the political and media attention focused on the so-called "irregular" arrivals of refugees by land and sea. These numbers have actually diminished since their peak of over a million in 2015 according to data from the International Organisation for Migration – just under 69 000 were recorded in September 2019 for the year so

far. Nevertheless, migrants, from both within and outside of the EU, are still very much part of our societies. Figures from Eurostat (the EU's statistical office) show that at the beginning of 2018, there were 22.3 million non-EU citizens living in the EU, which is 4.4% of the EU28 population, plus 17.6 million EU citizens living in a different Member State than their own. For those people who do not have the necessary papers to work or reside legally in the country where they live – the clandestine population of "undocumented migrants" – figures are harder to come by, but their number has been estimated to be in the millions.

Trade unions face a few challenges in their efforts to organise these populations. First of all, migrant workers are often to be found in partly informal sectors such as agriculture, construction and domestic¹ and care work², where exploitation is rife. They can therefore be harder to reach, because they are not based in the workplaces and forms of

1. See also Berta Chulvi's article on migrant domestic workers in Spain, p. 25.

2. See also Jean-François Lebrun et Aurélie Decker's article on migrant female domestic workers, p. 22.

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employment where unions tend to be strongest. Language, culture and community are also factors that may create some difficulties. "Some communities are very close-knit, and you need to gain their trust – it's a work of years," says Mercedes. "Their primary objectives are often: 'I need to earn some money to send to my family'. They are often only available on Sundays due to heavy work schedules. They don't have time to come to your meetings. Then, for some groups, it may be hard to make them understand the importance of the trade union movement."

Finally, there is the issue that, even once recruited, migrant members may have needs and concerns that warrant particular attention. In their study on trade unions and migrant workers,³ researchers Stefania Marino, Rinus Penninx and Judith Roosblad outline one of the main dilemmas facing unions if they have chosen to recruit workers from abroad, which is whether these members should receive "equal" or "special" treatment. Should all members be considered in the same way, with common interests, or should unions develop "targeted policies" to help migrant workers? This question is particularly pertinent when it comes to undocumented migrants. Franca van Hooren, assistant professor of political science at the University of Amsterdam, studied attempts at union organising of undocumented migrant domestic workers in the Netherlands. She found that these workers sometimes had different priorities from the union. One campaign, for example, focused on achieving better employment rights for all domestic workers and the formalisation of the sector, but for the undocumented workers involved, their legal status in the country came before all other

concerns. None of the recognition gained for their work counted for anything if they didn't have resident rights. "This was a recurring theme, recognition," notes Van Hooren. She discovered that just the fact of having a membership card meant something to the workers she talked to, as they used it as a form of ID. "Above all, they wanted a voice, to be heard."

Back at Migrants CSC Brussels, the fight for regularisation is front and centre. The CSC estimates there to be up to 150 000 undocumented migrants in Belgium, almost solely concentrated in Brussels. "People talk about a twentieth district," says Eva, referencing the nineteen municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region. "Some workers have been here for ten years and never been regularised." They have fallen victim to a "hostile environment" created by restrictive government migration policies and by inconsistencies in national legislation on residence and employment rights, particularly as regards the application of European criminal and migration law. The Migrants CSC Brussels unit has two main objectives: raising awareness and campaigning to change the law. This involves political lobbying and media attention-grabbing demonstrations, but also organising the workers themselves, informing them of their rights and about how to record evidence of exploitation and mistreatment by employers. The unit covers many fronts, with an action committee of undocumented workers, a league of female domestic workers, a legal advice service, activist training, and research and communications sections. When it comes to seeking justice for undocumented workers, "the legal is linked to the political and to collective action," says Eva. This is a doctrine that can be found in numerous other trade union initiatives to organise migrants, undocumented or otherwise. As Mercedes Miletta (ETUC) points out, it's not just undocumented migrant workers who need attention from unions: "All kinds of migrants are in vulnerable situations to one extent or another."

Organising workers on the margins of employment in the UK

Originally from Ecuador, Maritza Castillo Calle came to the United Kingdom in 2013 after having lived in Spain for seventeen years. "I found work as a cleaner for a company that the University of London was outsourcing to, but the conditions were terrible," she says. "These zero-hour contracts?... It's really bad here, worse than in Spain." However, she soon joined a small, independent union called the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB). The IWGB has made headlines in recent years for its loud, vibrant and

3. Marino St., Roosblad J., Penninx R. (2017) *Trade unions and migrant workers: New contexts and challenges in Europe*, ILERA and Edward Elgar Publishing.

4. "Zero-hour contracts", common in Great Britain, place the worker at the disposal of the employer without guaranteeing a minimum number of hours and thus without guaranteeing reliable payment. To read more about this subject, see the ETUI policy brief *Regulating uncertainty: variable work schedules and zero-hour work in EU employment policy* (2019), Agnieszka Piasna (ETUI), available to download for free on <http://www.etui.org>.

media-friendly campaigns featuring direct action, boycotts of university buildings, and a fair bit of Latin music on street protests. And the University of London (UoL) happened to be the epicentre of much of this action, as several of its member institutions came under fire for outsourcing their cleaning and support staff to companies that offered them worse pay and conditions than what they would receive in-house.

The IWGB specialises in organising workers on the margins of formal employment who, according to Danny Millum, secretary of the UoL branch, "slip through the gaps of traditional union organising. They are an invisible workforce." Migrants have been integral to the union since its inception, particularly at the UoL branch which was born out of the "3 Cosas" campaign for sick pay, holiday pay and pensions for outsourced university staff, many of whom were immigrants. Danny points out that "migrant workers were the ones who were most set on doing something about it." The workers set up the branch themselves in 2012, despite the university's refusal to officially recognise the union.

Amongst the union members, the cleaners are primarily from Latin America or Portugal; the security guards are generally from African countries. With such a diverse membership, language can be a big issue. "It's another level of difficulty, which is hard to overcome," admits Danny. The IWGB offers language courses and holds workshops giving basic legal advice, which can be a huge burden on resources for the small, independent union. Far from being voiceless members, migrants are part of the union's structure, which aims to be as democratic as possible. Decisions are made at mass meetings (held in Spanish and Portuguese as well as English) rather than in committees, of which there are

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none, and the IWGB tries to ensure balance in representation. Maritza is now the chair of the UoL branch. "It's a union for the workers," she proclaims. "A union for the people." Like many of her fellow members, she still doesn't have a British passport, as she uses her Spanish ID. But Brexit (the UK's pending exit from the European Union) is now looming over them, threatening to destabilise the rights they do have under EU free movement rules. "Every day, I meet with the workers and they ask me: 'what's going to happen?'"

A Polish union for Ukrainian workers

An even smaller and newer trade union can be found in Poland. The Intersectoral Trade Union of Ukrainian Workers in Poland was set up by Yuriy Karyagin, a Ukrainian economics professor, amid a wave of escalated immigration of Ukrainians fleeing the conflict and political unrest in their home country. Estimates have ranged from 800 000 to up to two million Ukrainians currently living and working in Poland, which has been cited as the largest migration wave to a single European country in years. In 2018, Ukrainians received 81.7% of all work visas issued by the Polish government. Replacing the labour shortage left by Poles moving to western Europe, the newcomers often find themselves in sectors with little regulation, labour protection or trade union presence, such as construction, agriculture and domestic care. "Their working conditions are very bad, often working 10, 12, even 15 hours a day," says Yuriy, who has himself been working in Poland since 2009. While he estimates around 90% of these workers to have the necessary legal papers to be in Poland, Yuriy has discovered that many of them don't have proper work contracts. "The employers convince them that they'll be paid higher wages if they don't have an agreement."

The union's skeleton staff and reliance on the occasional help of volunteers means that Yuriy, as its president and driving force, has had to focus on individual casework. He offers free legal advice to members in difficult situations with work and residence permits, informs labour inspectorates about unscrupulous employers, and liaises with factories and employers he knows to be fair in order to help find work for Ukrainian newcomers. The union may be small, but its membership is growing, currently standing at just over 1 000. Yuriy has done his job of attracting the attention of the media, and, with deliberately low membership fees, at this point he doesn't even need to actively recruit workers. "They call him at night!" laughs Katarzyna Duda, international officer at the All-Poland

Alliance of Trade Unions (*Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych, OPZZ*). The much bigger and more established confederation has given its support to the fledgling union, which has filled a gap in the trade union recruitment of Ukrainian immigrants, made difficult by the language barrier. Yuriy has his office at the OPZZ headquarters and the OPZZ's Vice President Piotr Ostrowski is also the secretary of the Ukrainian workers' union. However, the Intersectoral Trade Union of Ukrainian Workers remains independent. Yuriy may have to forego uninterrupted sleep a little while longer.

The trade union on the road in Italy

While Yuriy doesn't need to step out of his office to recruit members, Monica Ceremigna of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, CGIL*), has found that it is sometimes necessary to take the trade union to the workers. Italy has made the news in recent times with harrowing stories of labour exploitation, trafficking and abuse of migrant workers, often from African or eastern European countries, particularly in its agricultural sector. Seasonal field labourers in the southern regions have been found to be living in makeshift camps, forced to rely on the whims of illegal "hirers", the "*caporali*", who act as middlemen between local farmers and the workers for a cut of their wages⁵. One aspect of the CGIL's approach has thus been to push for legislative reform. This they have achieved to some extent, with Italy passing a law in 2016 that criminalises the *caporalato* system. "For the first time, the link between exploitation of workers and mafia crime was highlighted," says Monica, who is a project officer in the CGIL European and international department. "But it's still always a fight, as legislation needs to be enforced at the regional level."

Another big part of the union's work on this front, however, is trying to organise the workers themselves. The agricultural branch of the CGIL, FLAI-CGIL (*Federazione Lavoratori Agroindustria*), champions a strategy it calls the "*Sindacato di strada*". It's a concept that could be translated as "trade union on the road". The idea is for trade unionists to travel throughout the country, going directly to the meeting points where workers gather or where they are hired by the *caporali*, and informing them about their rights, advising them on employment contracts, and making the union known to them. "You have to go where they are," says Monica. "We are always in the field, trying to empower these people."

5. See also Angelo Ferracuti's article on migrant agricultural labour in Italy, p. 16.

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Technology has played an important role in this approach, says Monica. "Years ago, trade unionists used to give workers water bottles that had information about the union underneath the label. Nowadays, it's a bit easier to get in touch, but it can still be complicated." WhatsApp was used to map out the territory and geotag the workplaces and pick-up points of the labourers. The campaign has boosted the union's membership, but Monica stresses it's not just about recruiting migrants but involving them too. Undocumented workers can be union delegates, and many of the CGIL officers are themselves of foreign origin and so can communicate with the workers in their own language. Amidst what has been an increasingly hostile political environment in Italy, with the country at the frontline of the debate on immigration into the EU, Monica is adamant about one thing: "Human rights have no border." ●

More information

Union Migrant Net:
<https://www.unionmigrantnet.eu/>

Confédération des syndicats chrétiens, Bruxelles:
<https://www.lacsc.be/csc-bruxelles>

Independent Workers Union of Great Britain:
<https://iwgb.org.uk/>

Intersectoral Trade Union of Ukrainian Workers in Poland:
<http://www.mpupp.kit-sleuth.in.ua/en/>

Federazione Lavoratori Agroindustria:
<https://www.flai.it/campagne/sindacato-di-strada/>