

# Organizing white-collar workers



Workers stronger together



Building union power through organizing is a key priority for IndustriALL Global Union. Organizing helps to achieve our key goals, including a living wage, limits on precarious work, respect for human and trade union rights, healthier and safer workplaces, and more equitable societies.



There is a transformation of industrial work underway as we experience the effects of the fourth industrial revolution (Industry 4.0). Digitalization, connectivity, artificial intelligence, and advanced technologies such as 3-D printing, nanotechnology and biotechnology mean that more and more workers will be paid for their knowledge of these technologies and fewer will be paid for their physical skills. One way of describing this transformation is that labour is becoming more white-collar. **If the trade union movement is to remain relevant and effective in the future, we must become successful at organizing the growing numbers of white-collar workers.**

Only seven per cent of the nearly three billion workers around the world are members of free and independent unions, and union density in private-sector white-collar occupations is even lower. Even fewer are active members of their unions. **IndustriALL’s white-collar sector includes approximately 12.5 per cent of its total affiliated membership – and every indication is that this percentage is growing.**

While there are exceptions, unions in many countries have seen declines in membership and influence in recent decades. The percentage of workers who are union members in OECD countries (34 of the wealthiest countries in the world) has decreased from 33 per cent in 1980, to 17 per cent in 2013. This is partly due to attempts by many governments and multinational corporations to undermine unions and attack workers’ rights.

Declining union presence in recent decades has led to increasing economic inequality throughout Asia, Europe, North and Central America and parts of Africa and South America.

In order to reverse these trends, unions around the world must organize more and more effectively than ever before – and if white-collar workers are an increasing percentage of the global work force, then their importance to the trade union movement is obvious.

## Building workers’ power means making organizing a key priority

This requires a culture change in unions. Unions must invest more time, effort and resources into recruiting new members and retaining existing ones. It also requires unions to focus on building solidarity and actively involving their membership in all union matters.

## What is organizing and why should we organize?

Organizing means growing union membership, building solidarity among workers, and increasing the participation of workers in unions.

Recruiting and retaining members are key to organizing. Capital and corporations have more money than unions, but unions’ power comes from their members.

But only increasing a union’s membership is not enough. Organizing also involves building **solidarity among workers** and getting them involved and active in their union, working together to achieve common aims.

**Unions are stronger when they organize and can gain the power and resources to:**

- ▶ achieve better wages, benefits and conditions for membership
- ▶ bargain effectively with multinational corporations
- ▶ limit precarious workplaces
- ▶ have healthier and safer workplaces
- ▶ protect workers against unfair dismissals and victimization
- ▶ better provide services to existing members and recruit new ones
- ▶ network and campaign for workers’ rights worldwide
- ▶ hold larger pickets and strikes

Unions that increase their membership, members' solidarity, and member activism also gain political power. They can mobilize larger political demonstrations, have more impact on political decision making, and have greater influence on legislation affecting workers and unions, for example by lobbying from a base of power. Political influence is a result, rather than a prerequisite, for union power. Worker power must come first. White-collar workers' rights to safe and secure work, and to organize and bargain collectively, are regularly violated. The recognition of workers' rights always follows worker action and struggle, it never precedes it.

**Economic inequality is generally lower where unions are well organized.** Union organizing helps build strong unions and economies with fairer distributions of wealth and power.

**Members are a union's greatest resource. The more members, the more powerful the union can be.**

## IndustriALL organizing support

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IndustriALL supports organizing projects around the globe, with a focus on encouraging and enabling affiliates to develop a permanent organizing culture and to run their own organizing programs.

Together with affiliates IndustriALL holds workshops, conferences, workplace visits and training to discuss and develop organizing plans. Support is provided for affiliates' organizing drives including research, mapping, publications and materials. In some cases, particularly in the global south, IndustriALL projects provide financial support to fund organizers' work.

IndustriALL represents workers in 14 industrial sectors, plus white-collar workers, each with a sector action plan. All sector action plan include building union power through organizing as an objective. Each sector pursues this objective differently.

Focusing on organizing and gaining union density as well as supporting an organizing project covering six Asian countries is part of IndustriALL's ICT, Electrical and Electronics sector action plan.

IndustriALL supports global union networks in over 20 multinational corporations. Some of these are World Works Councils, which are generally global union networks that the employer formally recognizes and is active in. Many global union networks commit to organize at workplace within their company where there is no, or weak, union representation. They also mobilize solidarity support during organizing drives at their company. It is worth remembering that all of these multinational corporations employ significant and growing numbers of workers who could be described as white-collar workers.

Organizing has been a priority for the global union network in aluminum company Alcoa. The network repeatedly raised concerns with Alcoa's CEO about management opposing attempts by Alcoa workers in Virginia, USA to organize with IndustriALL affiliate United Steelworkers (USW). Unions in the network also supported these workers during global days of action. In June 2015 the organizing drive was successful when the workers voted to join USW.

IndustriALL does outreach to companies and countries and when necessary coordinates campaigns against them to support organizing. Affiliates frequently notify IndustriALL of companies and countries committing organizing rights abuses. The response generally begins with a letter to the company management or responsible government official demanding that workers' organizing rights are respected.

If the abuse continues, tactics to pressure companies and countries to respect workers' organizing rights are used. This can include mobilizing solidarity support from other unions or from the company's European Works Council, communicating with the company's customers, online petitions, protests at the company's annual meetings, and filing complaints at the International Labour Organization (ILO) and with the OECD.

White-collar workers need this kind of support, as do all workers. In the past, some may have believed that white-collar workers had good working conditions and wages without the need for trade union representation, or that they ought to be automatically considered part of the management team. This was never really true, but today **it is painfully obvious that white-collar workers experience violations of their rights, production pressures, precarious employment relationships, attacks on wages and benefits, and occupational health and safety hazards** as much as any workers.

**With the support of IndustriALL organizing projects, unions around the world have organized hundreds of thousands of new members.**

IndustriALL has supported organizing through campaigns at some of the world’s largest corporations including LafargeHolcim, Rio Tinto, Gerdau, Tenaris, and Caterpillar.

IndustriALL works with affiliates to negotiate and implement global framework agreements (GFA) with multinational companies. These agreements put in place high standards of trade union rights including organizing rights, creating opportunities for unions to organize across a company’s global operations and their suppliers. IndustriALL has currently signed over 50 GFAs.

Examples of IndustriALL GFAs that unions have used to achieve organizing victories include BMW and Daimler in India, Bosch in Malaysia, and Solvay in the USA.

IndustriALL is building relationships with many brands and retailers, primarily in the textile and garments sector. GFAs with brands are used to promote organizing rights of workers at factories the brands source from. This increases the likelihood that factory owners will not oppose union organizing drives, and if they do brands can be asked to intervene.

IndustriALL is a founding member of the ACT (Action, Collaboration, Transformation) Initiative between international brands and retailers, manufacturers and trade unions. ACT addresses the issue of living wages in the textile and garment supply chain. IndustriALL will use ACT to promote organizing in the sector.

## Key principles for organizing

IndustriALL promotes these key principles with affiliates to lay the groundwork for organizing success.

### 1. Build strong structures

#### Strong union structures start in the workplace.

This can be an organizing committee, steward structure, women’s committee, health and safety committee, network of workplace communicators and activists, or whatever workplace union structures are needed. These structures provide opportunities for workers to actively participate in the unions and build solidarity, even before the trade union is finally and formally organized or certified, and are critical for recruiting and retaining members.

Strong union structures are also required outside of the workplace to organize effectively. Individual workplace-level unions that are not part of larger union structures are weak in a global economy. Federations of unions are stronger, and national unions can be stronger still as they better enable unions to mobilize the resources to run large, effective organizing programs.

The Korean Metal Workers’ Union (KMWU) was long a federation of enterprise-level unions. A large majority of the unions’ resources were kept at the enterprise level. Leadership of the union then consulted with members and built support for transforming into a national union. This enabled KMWU to shift resources toward regional and national organizing strategies. As a result, the union has been able to achieve organizing victories at giant, anti-union companies including Samsung and has organized thousands of precarious workers.

When there are multiple unions in one sector in a country, they can often become stronger through merging into a sectoral union. In some cases building strong unions with organizing power has been achieved through merging across multiple sectors.

GLOBAL FRAMEWORK AGREEMENTS



IndustriALL affiliates like Unite in the UK and Unifor in Canada are the result of multiple mergers. Representing workers in numerous sectors, Unite and Unifor are able to run powerful, national organizing campaigns and organize thousands of new members every year.

In many countries where IndustriALL has several affiliates, they come together to form a national council. **These councils provide a platform for affiliates to meet, discuss issues of national relevance and plan joint action.** Many national councils decide which sectors are priority organizing targets and where organizing projects should be developed.

IndustriALL affiliates in for example Argentina, Botswana, Cameroon, Chile, Colombia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Mozambique, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uruguay and Zambia are building unity and organizing capacity through national councils.

## 2. Be democratic and transparent

**Workers are more likely to join unions and be active union members if the union has clear rules, inclusive structures, regular meetings and elections, and operates democratically.** Unions can increase transparency and organizing success through regularly communicating with workers about the activities of the union.

Travailleurs Unis des Mines, Métallurgies, Energie, Chimie et Industries Connexes (TUMEC) is leading a shift in Congo (DRC) away from small, inactive unions to a large union that serves workers. It runs a member education program including frequent workshops with union leaders and activists. They then share what they learn through frequent meetings with members. Topics include key issues such as health and safety, effective member representation, and why recruiting members is important to building a powerful union. TUMEC has organized thousands of members over the last couple of years.

## 3. Include

Unity is a fundamental principle of unions. **Workers are strong when they're united.** However most unions have historically ignored or marginalized large segments of the workforce. These include white-collar or non-manual workers, women, precarious workers, youth, and migrants.

The composition of the workforce has changed, but not all unions have adapted to this change. Unions must adopt active strategies to include and organize these emerging and marginalized groups. This often requires modifying existing structures or creating new ones.

**In order to be effective in organizing white-collar workers, unions must be credible and relevant to these workers.** Today, white-collar workers include many women, precarious workers, youth, and migrant workers, therefore the union must also be relevant to these groups and include them in all union structures, like leadership roles, staff, committees, and steward structures.

Unions must also focus on issues that are significant to these marginalized groups. When members of these groups are included in all union structures and programs, unions are better able to do this.

Sometimes unions must change their statutes to remove barriers to precarious workers joining. In Germany unions established bargaining associations for temporary agency workers in order to recruit these workers and achieve equal treatment for them in collective bargaining agreements. Through a strong focus in improving their condition, IG Metall gained 38,000 new members in 2012 among temporary staff.

The constitution of the Confederation of Industrial Labour of Thailand (CILT) specifies that at least one-third of the confederation's executive must be women. Monthly meetings of CILT affiliate TEAM always have a discussion of women's issues on the agenda.

4.

**Cooperate and coordinate**

**Workers and unions are stronger when they work together in solidarity.** Unions can organize more effectively when they cooperate, coordinate and support each other’s organizing work.

IndustriALL affiliates in Uganda formed a national council and signed a memorandum of understanding committing themselves to cooperate and coordinate, including in their organizing work.

Unions can also increase their organizing success by working cooperatively with the broader community. Showing how union organizing success benefits the broader community and offering direct solidarity support increases support from the community.

US affiliate the United Auto Workers (UAW) has worked extensively in the southern USA with the civil rights community, which fights for the rights of blacks and other ethnic minorities. Many of the workers in the auto industry that UAW is organizing in the USA south are black. Civil rights groups regularly hold actions in support of UAW organizing drives there.

To organize groups of white-collar workers, it is especially important to reach out to and be visible within their communities. As an example, try to connect with social and environmental movements that are relevant to the hopes and dreams of white-collar workers - who tend to be younger, better educated, and more diverse than workforces have been in the past. Hours of work and rates of pay remain central issues, but they are not enough. **Today’s workers tend to care about issues such as the environment, human rights, gender issues, and equality. They want their union to care about these issues as well.**

5.

**Don’t compete**

**Multiple unions representing workers from the same sector should not compete to recruit the same workers at the same time at a workplace.** This wastes limited resources and only leads to increased rivalry and conflicts between unions. This disunity can also damage the credibility of unions in general. Unions should reach an agreement to not compete with one another in this way. In almost all countries, there is no shortage of workers and workplaces to target for organizing.

The Ghana Mine Workers’ Union, Ghana Transport, Petroleum and Chemicals Workers Union, and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Ghana have formed a national council and are discussing ways to limit competition in organizing with each other. They are working on a memorandum of understanding to formalize a non-competition agreement.

In India, unions are historically divided along political lines and different national centres, with capacity to represent the same workers. Unions in the Indian steel sector have a long history of competition with one another, but little success in organizing in the private sector. The Steel, Metal and Engineering Workers’ Federation of India and the Indian National Metalworkers’ Federation reached a non-competition agreement. The unions have since organized thousands of workers in the Indian private sector steel industry and the agreement has now been extended to the unions in the Energy and Mining sectors.

## 6. Become self-sustaining

IndustriALL supports projects that help unions around the world improve and increase organizing. However, it is critical for unions depending on IndustriALL support to become self-sustaining. Membership growth is often critical for this transition, but not enough on its own.

**Becoming self-sustaining requires that unions develop and maintain an effective program for regularly collecting dues, enough dues to run the operations of the union at local, regional and national levels, including a strong organizing program.** It can also require increasing dues paid by members, or even decreasing dues for certain workers in order to get them to join the union. Sometimes unions are so small that being self-sustaining can only be achieved through merging with other unions.

Unions participating in the India steel, energy and mining organizing project have agreed that unions that increase their membership through the project will increase their financial membership to IndustriALL. The unions also commit to provide for the funding and functioning of the new project offices set up in the states where the organizing project is implement.

IndustriALL affiliates from Brazil, South Korea and South Africa have gone from depending on international support to being self-sustaining and supporting other unions abroad, an ideal transition for building union power globally.

## Get prepared for organizing

Whether the aim is to organize a new union at a worksite, recruit more members at a worksite where there already is a union, or increase member solidarity and activism, it is important to be prepared.

### Target

There are a number of factors to consider in deciding which workers to target for organizing. Unions should prioritize organizing targets that:

- ▶ help build the union’s power - this could for instance be a large employer that has an impact on working conditions across the sector
- ▶ are not already represented by or being targeted for organizing by other IndustriALL affiliates
- ▶ are winnable, i.e. that the union has the resources and ability to achieve organizing success at

Unions should choose organizing targets with the aim of achieving density. Density refers to the fraction of a workforce that are union members. **The higher the density, the more powerful the workers and union can become.** In many countries, if a certain percentage of the workers at a worksite are union members, management must recognize the union and bargain with it. In other countries, management only bargains with the union if the union has the power to have an economic impact on the company. Often that power comes as a combination of high density and a large number of active members.

Building member density means not only organizing a large fraction of a worksite’s regular, full-time employees. It means organizing a large fraction of all the workers, including precarious ones.

If a union organizes at a dozen workplaces and recruits just a few members at each, it won’t build power. If the union instead targets fewer but strategic workplace and reaches high member density at them, it can achieve real gains for the workers.



**Being realistic and prioritizing winnable targets does not mean targeting only permanent workers. IndustriALL affiliates around the world have succeeded in organizing precarious workers, a necessity as they are a large and growing part of the workforce.**

Many of today’s white-collar workers are working under alternative work structures. They may be platform workers, improperly classed as independent contractors or free-lancers. Traditional union organizing is aimed at achieving a sufficient number of members to become certified as the legitimate, or legal, collective bargaining agent in a workplace or workplaces. Sometimes, uncertified unions representing a minority of workers in a workplace, or similar workers distributed over many workplaces, have been effective and have been able to achieve significant gains. Consider the characteristics of the workforce: what percentage would be necessary to have an impact? Can critical union density be achieved for these workers?

### Map

Prior to deciding what worksites to target for organizing, it is important to map the sector and area in which the organizing will take place. This includes identifying worksite locations, numbers of workers, gender distribution of the workforce, other unions present, major customers, and other relevant information on the companies owning or sourcing from the workplaces.

Some workplaces have international links that can make an organizing drive more winnable.

Unions should seek answers to the following questions before deciding on the organizing target and before beginning the organizing campaign.

#### Does the potential organizing target have:

- ▶ a GFA? If so, IndustriALL may be able to prevent the target from opposing the organizing drive. Companies commit in GFAs to respect workers’ organizing rights.
- ▶ a customer with a GFA? If so, IndustriALL may be able to get this customer to pressure the target to not oppose the organizing drive. Companies often commit in GFAs to ensure that workers’ organizing rights are respected in their supply chains.

- ▶ a customer that is a major brand? If so, IndustriALL may be able to get this customer to pressure the target to not oppose the organizing drive. IndustriALL has relationships with many brands that commit to respect workers’ organizing rights in their supply chains.

The Bangladesh Accord, initiated by IndustriALL Global Union in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, is an example of the use of brand names to put pressure on employers in their supply chain.

- ▶ a global union network? If so, IndustriALL can seek support from the global union network in the organizing drive. IndustriALL has active networks with dozens of multinational companies.
- ▶ a relationship with IndustriALL? Search IndustriALL’s website; IndustriALL has built relationships in which dialogue is possible, with over 100 multinational companies.
- ▶ workplaces in other countries? If there are unions present at these workplace, they could offer support in the organizing drive. So could unions at other workplaces of the company in the country where the organizing may take place.
- ▶ more than one workplace or location that could be an organizing target? If it is possible to initiate organizing campaigns at more than one department or worksite at the same time, the employer’s union-busting resources will have to be divided between multiple targets and may be less effective.

Organizing is strengthened when supported by strategic corporate research. This research analyses companies and identifies ways to put pressure on them to grant workers’ demands. Contact IndustriALL Global Union for information on how to do this research.

If the potential organizing target does have any of these links, IndustriALL may be able to help take advantage of them. This could be through putting the organizing union in touch with other unions at the potential organizing target, or through outreach to the brand or to the company with the GFA.

STOP PRECARIOUS WORK



ACTION ON BANGLADESH



## Develop a plan

Once a union has mapped an area and selected an organizing target or targets, it should develop a plan for the organizing campaign. The plan should identify what needs to be done, who is responsible for what, and when they need to do it by. It should also identify what resources will be needed to carry out the plan.

The more workers that participate in developing and implementing the organizing plan, the more powerful the plan. Spreading the work around to more people also ensures nobody is overloaded.

The organizing plan should include benchmarks, or goals to be achieved by a specific date. These include for instance the number of workers to have as supporters by a certain date, the number of workers to have contact information for by a certain date, etc. clear benchmarks help to determine whether the organizing campaign is on track or whether adjustments need to be made.

Organizing plans must be flexible so that they can be adapted as unexpected situations arise. The union or organizing committee should periodically review the plan and adjust it as needed.

### Components of an organizing plan

- ▶ identify worker leadership
- ▶ build organizing committee

Identifying worker leadership and building an organizing committee are closely related. It is essential to identify who - among the group of workers you hope to organize - has the potential and motivation to lead an organizing campaign. Build an internal organizing committee around these leaders. Organizing is almost never successful if run by outsiders. With an established committed core organizing committee within the workplace, the union can work through that committee to educate other workers about collective action and solidarity.

## Develop list of workers

Identify the workers or group of workers you are targeting. If at all possible, try to obtain a contact list. If none is available, create one as you contact people - and there is no substitute for personal contact. Social media is important, particularly to white-collar workers, but unions are not organized over social media. Recognize that no matter how carefully you identify your target group, the employer will challenge it.

- ▶ Organize meetings
- ▶ Identify issues to mobilize around

Union organizing campaigns are frequently won on issues. Successful organizing of white-collar workers starts with identifying the issues that workers will mobilize around. What are the goals of white-collar, or non-manual, workers? Do white-collar workers see issues like mobility, parental leave, education, accommodation or health differently than blue-collar union members, or perhaps only with different levels of priority? How can the union help them achieve their goals?

Make the union relevant to the workers: understand their issues, their problems, and their hopes and dreams; and be prepared to explain how the union can help them solve their problems or achieve their goals. While the union cannot solve all problems or achieve all goals, the key difference between a unionized worker and a non-unionized one, is that the union ensures that workers have a voice that will be heard by the employer, and that divisions and competition between workers will not be used to silence that voice. The workers must believe that the union truly represents, and speaks for them. If a winning issue presents itself, which may or may not be specifically about working conditions, be prepared to run with it. It is a truism that the employers whose workers we wish to organize often place the tools in our hands, by doing something that angers their workforce.

## Education program

Teach solidarity by example. This is how the union gains credibility. Employers frequently try to divide workers by shop, job description (including blue collar vs white-collar), class, race and religion. Their goal is to weaken the union organizing effort. Live by the old slogan, “an injury to one is an injury to all”. Visible support from the union to a worker or workers in need is, by itself, a powerful education program on solidarity.

## Communications

Effective communications to organize white-collar workers means that your target group receives regular information about trade union activities, particularly successes. Engage your potential members in the struggle: for example, have them sign IndustriALL’s petitions, and keep them informed about union actions with an electronic newsletter. However, do not promise things that can never be achieved. Guard your credibility - in the end, it is the only thing you have got. Always think about any planned action or statement in terms of how it will affect your, and the union’s, credibility - and reject it if the damage to your credibility is too great. **The greatest promise a union can make is that the workers will have a voice.**

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Getting people involved in the planning increases their commitment, and results in a more active, organized membership.

IndustriALL affiliates around the world are stepping up to the challenge and coming up with innovative organizing solutions in diverse environments.

The Japan Automobile Workers' Union (JAW) facing a shrinking and increasingly non-regular workforce, has developed a multi-year organizing plan targeting both regular and precarious employees.

The Ethiopian Textile, Leather and Garment Workers' Trade Unions (IFTLGWTU), with few financial resources compared to the companies operating in its sector, is leveraging IndustriALL's relationship with German clothing brand Tchibo to gain access to workers at a factory for union organizing activity.

The Malaysian Electronics Industry Employees' Union Coalition (EIEU) is responding to an increase in the number of migrant workers with organizing campaigns targeted specifically at them. It is working with migrant workers to address issues they commonly face such as underpayment of wages, and is providing special legal services to educate them about their rights.

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With only seven per cent of the world's workers members of free and independent unions, and even less active members, organizing can seem like an overwhelming task.  
**IT IS NOT.**

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Let's organize white-collar workers more effectively than ever before. IndustriALL is ready to offer support and the time to organize is NOW. As always, workers are stronger together!

## Head office

### **IndustriALL Global Union**

54 bis, route des Acacias  
1227 Geneva Switzerland  
Tel: +41 22 308 5050  
Email: [info@industriall-union.org](mailto:info@industriall-union.org)

## Regional offices

### **Africa office**

Physical address:  
North City House  
Office S0808 (8th Floor)  
28 Melle Street, Braamfontein  
Johannesburg 2001 South Africa  
Tel: +27 11 242 8680  
Email: [africa@industriall-union.org](mailto:africa@industriall-union.org)

Postal address:  
P O Box 31016  
Braamfontein 2017 South Africa

### **South Asia office**

16-D, 16th Floor  
Atma Ram House  
No.1, Tolstoy Marg  
New Delhi - 110 001 India  
Tel: +91 11 4156 2566  
Email: [sao@industriall-union.org](mailto:sao@industriall-union.org)

### **South East Asia office**

809 Block B, Phileo Damansara II  
No 15, Jalan 16/11  
46350 Petaling Jaya Selangor Darul  
Ehsan, Malaysia  
Email: [seao@industriall-union.org](mailto:seao@industriall-union.org)

### **CIS office**

Str. 2, d.13, Grokholsky per., Room 203  
12090 Moscow Russia  
Tel: +7 495 974 6111  
Email: [cis@industriall-union.org](mailto:cis@industriall-union.org)

### **Latin America & the Caribbean office**

Avenida 18 de Julio No 1528  
Piso 12 unidad 1202  
Montevideo Uruguay  
Tel: +59 82 408 0813  
Email: [alc@industriall-union.org](mailto:alc@industriall-union.org)