

Lifelong membership

lends German unions power

In South Africa trade union members lose their membership soon after retrenchment or retirement. **Dr Werner Rechmann and Till Melchert** highlight a very different practice in Germany and argue that the benefits of keeping on union members is great.

The inception of the labour movement in Germany goes back to the 19th century. In 1840 the first education associations of, and for, workers were founded. These associations provided an opportunity for workers to study further in their day-to-day jobs. Calculating, free hand drawing and handwriting were among the most enjoyed subjects at this time. It was only 30 years later that these education associations began to change and the founding of trade unions started.

The fight for better work conditions completed workers' education from this point on. The first wave of strikes erupted and

with trade union victories resulted in an enormous growth in membership. By the end of the 19th century trade unionism in Germany had become a mass movement.

Almost 140 years after the founding of the first worker movements in Germany, trade unions today find themselves in a critical period. The tendency towards individualism in society and socio-economic improvements have resulted in a huge loss of membership. After the unification of the two parts of Germany in 1990 there were 12 million organised workers. Only 8 million union members are left 17 years later. Only one out of five employees is still a member of a union in Germany.

Besides these employed members there is a large group of unemployed and pensioned members. In contrast to South Africa trade unionists do not automatically lose their membership when they retire from work. After retrenchment or retirement the decision to stay or to leave a trade union resides with the member. These unemployed and pensioned union members add up to 30% of unions' membership. This group has become an important part of the membership structure of German trade unions.

Unemployed and retired members and trade unions reciprocally benefit each other. But why don't the unemployed and pensioners turn their backs on their trade unions? And why do trade unions continue to provide a home for these members?

The core of trade union activities is to represent the interests of workers. First and foremost unions fight for employee participation in management decisions around wages and conditions of work. In addition to these core activities trade unions have established themselves as "lawyers of the people". They resist when it is necessary to stand up for the interests of the weak and poor on the political platform. Trade unions feel a social responsibility to raise their voice in a situation where people are too weak to do it themselves. In this regard the unemployed are special beneficiaries of trade unions.

In Germany the unemployed includes about 4,3 million people. One out of five unemployed is a member of a trade union. There are the same rights for active working members in the trade union as for unemployed comrades. The membership subscription is different for each category. Unemployed and pensioned members have to pay a membership subscription of at most R20 or 0,5% of their unemployment aid or their pension a month. The active working trade union members co-finance their jobless and pensioned comrades in solidarity. For example the unemployed and pensioners benefit from the legal advice offered by unions while fighting for state subsidies.

The German Trade Union Federation (DGB) finances an organisation that coordinates the work of unemployed groups of

German unions retain their pensioned and retrenched members.



Juergen Seidel

different trade unions. This platform makes it easier for groups to link to each other and to bring attention to their situation within, and outside of the union.

The unemployed as well as active working comrades have both benefited from the education offered by trade unions since the beginning of the labour movement. The education offered is often the only possibility for jobless members to keep, and improve, their qualifications while searching for a new job.

Trade unions are often criticised for only taking care of the active working class and not assisting the unemployed to find jobs. Unions in Germany try to counteract this by establishing unemployment commissions at all levels of their organisational structures. There are some areas that allow groups of unemployed to participate in collective negotiations in an active way. This makes sure that the interests of the unemployed are included in the process of collective bargaining.

The chance to articulate their interests in collective bargaining and to improve their skills as well as benefit from legal advice is an obvious incentive for unemployed members to stay in the union. But none of these benefits is enough to

console somebody for losing a job. Thus unions try to operate as a social cushion in times of high unemployment. Joint activities of the members and their families like picnics and excursions help to strengthen the feeling of togetherness as well as to cushion the feeling of despair at no longer being part of the workforce. The relationship with their comrades helps the unemployed to get re-motivated and to find a way back into the world of work.

The "reduced membership subscriptions but same rights policy" for the unemployed and pensioned union members puts a strain on the financial resources of unions. However, unions have decided to stick with the unemployed and pensioned. A closer examination of the decrease in union membership shows a clear reason why.

The crisis of German trade unions would be critical if members lost their membership automatically after getting retrenched. Out of 8 million unionists only 5,6 million would remain. This in itself wouldn't change anything. The bargaining power of employees compared to employers wouldn't be affected directly.

On the other hand, however, the loss of the unemployed and pensioned unionists would affect the political influence of the trade

unions in a powerful way. The loss of jobless and retired members would destroy the historically developed "community of solidarity" between old and young and employed and unemployed members. Such a loss would undermine the legitimacy of trade unions as the "lawyers of the people".

Trade unions in Germany take on a role of social responsibility and that is the reason for their privileged access to political decision makers. A great many of the unemployed and retired trade unionists represent unions in parts of the population which are traditionally difficult to organise. This would not be possible if trade unions cancelled membership after workers retired. In spite of all the problems German trade unions have to face, the strategy of retaining retrenched and pensioned workers is definitely worthwhile for the German trade union movement and it would be worthwhile for South Africa and other countries to consider this possibility.

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