

'We started talking and dreaming together'

Organising transport workers

Unionists know nothing can happen without organising. But as **Teresa Conrow**, **Alana Dave** and **Dina Feller** point out through four organising stories there is no one way of organising as each situation calls for different approaches. Yet despite these differences we can still learn a great deal from varied lines of attack across the globe.

In organising, the first thing we do is to share information with other workers to build deep confidence with each other and to build the real and deep solidarity of workers acting collectively. Organising is fundamentally about building the base of the union and the democratic structures. Organising helps make our unions more democratic.' (Arlete Gay, ITF affiliate, LAN Airlines Flight Attendant, Chile)

Many unions around the world, including South Africa, recognise that organising has to be a priority and debates on organising are emerging.

What can we learn from these debates and the experiences of other unions? Here we provide some concrete stories on organising. From these different approaches, a set of broader questions emerge concerning the politics of organising and the strategies that we might want to develop:

- How do we define organising?
- Who decides how and where to organise?
- Who participates in organising drives and campaigns?
- How can organising build and strengthen union structures?

- How can organising build worker leadership and democracy?
- How does union organising strengthen and connect with the struggles of the wider working-class movement?

Collectively the stories show us that organising is different in every union, and even within the same union different groups of workers organise differently. We cannot have one model of organising which fits all situations. Our organising strategies and methodologies must reflect the different realities that workers are facing, the real risks and dangers, as we work together collectively to improve conditions.

Worker organisations can take many forms and may vary from a traditional trade-union collective-bargaining model (see 'Women-led social movement union' on page 31). Many workers do not have a clearly identifiable company or government entity as their employer. But the fundamental contradiction between labour and capital remains. So many of the same basic organising principles apply regardless of the employment status of the workers – permanent,

casual, temporary, migrant or informal workers – and regardless of the sector or culture to which the workers belong.

Organising is taking place in different spaces, from international organising across borders in multinational companies, to organising a particular occupational group of workers within one company, to organising workers with no clear employment relationship. Most importantly, it is the workers who need to be ready for organising and drive and control the campaign from below.

There are many methods that unions use to communicate with workers. These organising stories reinforce the idea that the most effective method when workers lack knowledge about the union or are afraid is person-to-person contact.

We can see in all these experiences of organising, that education plays a central role. Education builds confidence and skills and enables workers to participate more effectively in their unions. As the old South African trade union slogan reminds us: 'Every organiser an educator, every educator an organiser.'

STORY 1: ORGANISING IN LATIN AMERICAN NETWORK (LAN) AIRLINES

Since the privatisation of LAN airlines, the company has pursued anti-union policies, avoiding negotiations with unions, and creating yellow unions and bargaining commissions. Union leaders have been put under pressure, and threatened with losing their jobs. Meanwhile workers have been rewarded for not being part of the union; they are offered prizes and bonuses.

In 2002, as a LAN worker in Argentina, my co-workers and I were afraid to be seen by our supervisor as 'the rebels' who organise and go to the union. We were afraid of losing our jobs, of not getting better conditions and of being put under lots of pressure. The union was totally receptive to us and once we started to attend meetings, we felt confident and supported.

The general secretary saw the organising potential in our little group and asked me to help contact workers from Chile and Peru who were also trying to build their unions in LAN airlines. In Peru, they were creating a union for the first time. This was only the beginning. With one to one contact, we started talking and dreaming together. And we had support from the ITF (International Transport Federation).

We planned very carefully

The ITF LAN organising project started in 2006. As project coordinator I am working to develop a clear strategy to do the work.

Our goals are to improve the working conditions of the civil aviation staff in LAN and to build union strength in order to impact on collective bargaining in the company. The project is directed at ITF affiliates who are organising workers in LAN airline companies in Chile, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador



LAN workers hold a strategy meeting.

and any other country that might, in the future, be part of the LAN.

We decided that union activists and members should be trained in organising methods through targeted seminars. We used the educational materials that are now part of the ITF organising manual.

We wanted to ensure that women aviation workers participated fully in these educational seminars and meetings, and were developed as union organisers.

We built confidence within the organising team

Our approach is to be honest, accountable and transparent in the work we do. We had to start by building trust in the organising teams, before we went and spoke to the workers. You can't do this kind of work on your own, and you have to know you can rely on the others in the team.

In Argentina, cabin crew from the unionised airlines, ex-LAN workers, and two anonymous LAN workers all joined with us to form an organising committee to reach out to LAN cabin crew. We explained to the union workers that it is important to organise LAN workers, because otherwise it drives down conditions in every company. Once we had a team in place, we were ready to reach out.

We found the workers

Social media can be really useful for organising, and we use sites such as

Facebook and Twitter. For example, Facebook with its profile pictures is a great tool for identifying people we want to speak to. But mostly we use the tried and tested method of speaking directly to workers one to one. No technology can replace human contact. There is no one better to speak to and organise cabin crews than other cabin crews. They understand the issues.

We eventually found eight LAN Argentina workers who were able to openly work for recognition of the union, which helped us make more contacts and expand our organising committee.

We organised one worker at a time

Organising is never easy. We had to do a lot of social work to get people interested. We held parties and barbecues, we organised football matches. It is a long slow process. We spent hours on the phone speaking to workers who weren't sure about joining the union, encouraging them and answering their objections. We began to win workers over, one person at a time.

We made arrangements for parents

Childcare is a really important part of our organising strategy. One of our goals is to organise women, and develop them as leaders. So in the organising campaign for LAN Argentina, we arranged

a crèche during meetings. We reinforced the no-smoking policy on the premises so that women could bring their children. And we created a space to display children's pictures in the union office. We are targeting not just mothers, but all parents, and we want them to feel that they are part of the union.

We won workers over

When I started working as a purser at LAN, the union was considered a dirty word. You risked being punished by management if you thought about being part of the union.

And workers themselves said they weren't interested, that they were happy to be working in the company. They believed the anti-union messages put out by the company and kept their heads down. There is still pressure, and a lot of misinformation, but we are able to talk more openly now.

Organising is an ongoing process and although we have made tremendous progress we still have much work to do. We are reaching out to more and more LAN cabin crew, building relationships and sharing information about the history and complexities of the company's labour relations.

We have won initial recognition and respect from the workers. Out of everything that we have achieved so far, I think this is what I am proudest of. We are brothers and sisters in the union wherever LAN flies – Chile, Peru, Ecuador and Argentina. We are proud to be part of the network of united LAN unions in South America.

Dina Feller, LAN coordinator

STORY 2: ORGANISING JORDANIAN AIR

When flight attendants from Jordanian Air decided to organise, we knew that face-to-face was the only way. The union had already tried just putting information and

forms in the crew mailboxes, only to find the literature thrown in the trash. The vast majority of the crew were convinced that nothing would change.

At the first organising committee meeting, only one person came, then two, and finally six. The six cabin crew began approaching flight attendants quietly and individually – often in the galley, also before the flight, while waiting for the transport bus, and in the crew centre before and after flights.

We often spent one hour talking to just one person. We asked friends to talk to friends. As we gained momentum, we



scheduled days off to talk to their co-workers. It took over three months of very hard work for us to develop enough participation to contact 750 people. At least 30% of the cabin crew are non-Jordanian, and we made an extra effort to ensure they were involved.

By the time we went to management, we already had the support we needed to win. Eventually, we negotiated the right to speak to all new flight attendants for 45 minutes during the company initiation programme.

Sawsan Ibrahim, ITF affiliate, Jordan

STORY 3: ORGANISING TURKEY'S SEAFARERS

There are 80 000 seafarers in Turkey, with 40 000 of them waiting for a job. The work is casual, usually with six-month contracts. None of the Turkish seafarers were in the union.

It took eight years to develop the team that would organise the seafarers.

One place where seafarers get together is in their training courses. Eleven trainers were our nucleus. Officers are trained for two years, which was enough time for the trainers to develop deep relationships with them. Each trainer recruited approximately 150 officers whom they kept in touch with over

the eight-year period by phone, email and during rest times.

We shared friendships, politics and helped each other with problems. There was no status, no money and no elected positions for any of us. By the time we were ready, we had a group of about 800 trained seafaring officers ready to act.

Last year, we were able to negotiate 152 collective bargaining agreements, and we now have 800 members who pay fees.

We understand that not everyone has eight years. Our advice is to spend the time on educating and training. You need a committed team that deeply trusts each other.

ITF affiliate, Turkey



Some of the Nepalese trekkers organised by Netwon who attended a basic trade union education programme in 2009.

STORY 4: ORGANISING NEPAL'S TREKKING GUIDES

Netwon (Nepal Yatayat Mazdoor Sangh) is organising trekking guides in the tourism industry in Nepal. The union made a significant achievement in lobbying the government for a tax on the tourists who go trekking. A portion of the tax is the workers' share, and the union will have input into deciding how it will be used.

There are about 9 000 licensed trekking guides, but there are many non-licensed guides. The government has not checked this trend. There is no compulsory system for official insurance for the trekking guides and no social security. The trekking companies do not provide the necessary equipment for the workers. There is no permanent system of employment in the companies.

The union organised a three-day education seminar to discuss problems in the industry, what a union is and what a democratic union is like. The 22 participants in the seminar then recruited 200 members by talking to their friends in the workplace. The union keeps in touch with the 22, and they came into the office every few days to meet and plan.

After about a year or more of person-to-person conversations with

workers, we will hold a founding congress, which will form a national organising committee. The newly elected leaders will hold a two-day education programme and continue to organise and educate more workers.

Ajay Rai, ITF affiliate, Nepal

STORY 5: ORGANISING BAGGAGE HANDLERS' STRIKE

We had a three-week strike at Air France of baggage handlers, check-in staff and all the ground staff. We have legal access to workplaces as long as we do not impede the work.

In France, we have one hour free to train workers in the workplace. The shop stewards contact the company to set the location and date, and then we post a notice regarding the topic and the location. We had lots and lots of these one-hour meetings to mobilise for the strike. We talked to workers in rest areas and lounges but not in front of passengers. We used this time to recruit members as well.

We had all three national union federations working together on the strike, with inter-union meetings, joint pamphlets and a joint strike date. We had 70% of the staff stop working. We won the strike and

there was more confidence and trust in the union.

Liliane Debeche, ITF affiliate, France

CONCLUSION

So as unions face the challenges of organising, we need practical tools to discuss and learn from each other about how to organise effectively. The ITF has produced an organising manual which brings together union experiences from around the world. It is a rich source of ideas and lessons which enables unions to strengthen and renew organising.

As a labour movement, we need to find a way of embracing the wide variety of approaches to organising within a common political framework based on internationalism, solidarity and working-class unity. **LE**

Teresa Conrow is a trade union educator and campaigner, Alana Dave is an ITF education officer, and Dina Feller is the LAN project coordinator, Argentina. They have worked together on Organising materials for the ITF. If you would like a copy of the ITF organising manual email: education@itf.org.uk