

# ORGANISING WOMEN INTO TRADE UNIONS

## JOINING A TRADE UNION WHAT WILL IT MEAN FOR WOMEN?

### Women workers have the right to join a trade union on an equal basis with men.

A strong trade union can protect and promote women's rights but it can only do so if the women members are well organised and active.

If a woman joins a trade union, here are some of her rights.

- Be invited to meetings of the union, which should be arranged at times which are also convenient to women;
- Express her own point of view;
- Be consulted about her pay and working conditions before her union holds negotiations with her employer on her behalf;
- Know who is her union representative and how to contact her or him;
- Take part in the election of union representatives;
- Be represented by the union if she has a complaint, or if she is in trouble with her employer;
- Take part in discussions about the policies of the union;
- Take part in trade union education and training programmes.

### How can you participate in your union's work?

You can do the following:

Put forward the views of women workers more forcefully in discussions with management;

- Take up cases of unfair treatment from employers;
- Take part in negotiations for better pay and better working conditions, particularly for the lower paid workers who are often women;
- Identify and put an end to policies and practices in areas such as training and job evaluations, which discriminate against women;
- Negotiate with employers for improved maternity protection and child care facilities;
- Promote improvements in health and safety conditions at work;
- Take up cases of sexual harassment at work;
- Learn about workers' rights and women's rights so you can better defend your colleagues;
- Work with other organisations to promote women's rights in the community.

## HOW CAN YOU ORGANISE MORE WOMEN INTO YOUR UNION?

Women need to know how unions can help them and the best way is through personal contact with a woman unionist.

A recent trade union survey shows that many women are often not clear how joining a trade union can help them - or indeed, just what the role of a trade union is.

Furthermore, regional and national women's networks and liaison councils help in the implementation and development of new campaigns, strategies, activities and programs that help train and empower women.

## SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Get the union discussed at the work place, by taking up issues that matter to women workers.
- Hold discussion or study groups to find out what issues are important; carry out research or conduct surveys.
- Identify an issue that has a good chance of getting solved and consider how to start a union campaign to address the issue.



# HOW CAN YOU ORGANISE MORE WOMEN INTO YOUR UNION?

## KEEPING IN TOUCH:

Think how best to reach your target group, through information sheets or simple leaflets like this one. If unions are not well known, you can consider trying a more informal approach with a lunch time meeting, a children's clothes sale, or an issue of interest, such as women's health.

Make sure you follow up on your contacts and remember that it is important to discuss what unions can do for women workers, not only with the potential women recruits but also with women and men in the union, with spouses and the local community.

Make sure your union sends out frequent press releases or regular information sheets on the various activities of the union.

Make sure that the union information material demonstrates ways in which trade unions can benefit women workers.

## CREATING A CLIMATE OF CONFIDENCE AND TRUST

Make sure that your union provides clear information to all its members about how its leaders are elected, including:

- How to nominate union members for leadership posts;
- When and where the elections will take place;
- What were the results of the elections.

Make sure that your union provides regular information about the union finances, including:

- the amount of membership dues received;
- how the income is shared between the union branch and the national union;
- how the income is spent and accounted for.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN A UNION FOR A WOMAN WORKER?

Unionised workers:

- Earn more money than non-unionised workers in the same job;
- Have more job protection than workers without unions;
- Enjoy better benefits, such as health benefits; pensions; paid maternity leave; parental leave; flexible working time;
- Gain recognition of the rights of equity-seeking groups (e.g. youth, migrants, ethnic minorities, older workers, lesbian and gay workers and workers with disabilities)

## WHAT CAN UNIONS DO TO HELP WOMEN WORKERS?

- Provide protection against arbitrary management decisions;
- Negotiate pay and employment equity plans to improve wages and access to jobs for women and equity seeking groups;
- Negotiate protection against discrimination and harassment of workers on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability;
- Provide educational and training opportunities for members;
- Provide the opportunity for collective action on issues of community concern.