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Unionizing labour immigrants





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Summary

Figures from 2021 show that the unionization rate among resident labour immigrants is lower than in the rest of the Norwegian workforce. For example, the unionization rate among labor immigrants from Central and Eastern European countries is only at 23 percent, compared to approximately 50 percent among the workforce in total (Nergaard & Ødegård, 2024; Nergaard, 2024). The Norwegian labour market model is based on the organization of both employees and employers. A high union density and collective bargaining coverage have granted the social partners with legitimacy and responsibility for the development of the labour market.

The EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 created the largest immigration to Norway ever. The workforce from the newer Member States has generally been welcomed, but immigration has also placed pressure on wages and working conditions in parts of the labour market. Low unionization rates among labour immigrants has been a recurring topic and have raised concerns. Unionizing labour immigrants is, among other things, a central topic in the government's action plan against social dumping and labour market crime (Norwegian Government, 2022).

The figures for trade union density (Nergaard & Ødegård, 2024), are based on register-based employment statistics from Statistics Norway (SSB). In this report, we delve into the figures to better explain why the trade union density among labour immigrants is low, as well as the experiences union representatives and organizers have had with their efforts to unionize these groups of workers. The results are based on qualitative interviews with union representatives and organizers in the following industries: construction, hotel and restaurant, the fish processing industry, cleaning, and municipal health and care services. A total of 35 people were interviewed. There are also many workers with other immigrant backgrounds. These are represented in the interviews.

Many labour immigrants work in enterprises outside of the "organized" Norwegian labor market. This means that they work in enterprises without collective agreements or active unions. Furthermore, the proportion of unionized workers varies between industries and among different groups of labour immigrants. Many follow their colleagues' lead. This means that the workplace itself significantly influences whether an employee chooses to join a union. If the enterprise is bound by a collective agreement, the proportion of unionized labour immigrants increases.

The form of employment—whether one is permanently or temporarily employed—also correlates with the chances of becoming unionized. Permanent positions are often crucial for organizing people. At the same time, several of our informants point out that assistance in securing more stable employment can inspire individuals to join the union.

Length of stay in Norway also matters: the longer you have lived here, the greater the likelihood of becoming unionized. One impression shared by our informants is that the larger the network immigrants have outside of work, the easier it is to organize them.

This likely correlates with the length of stay and the degree of integration into Norwegian society.

There is no official Norwegian policy to integrate labor immigrants, neither in the form of language training nor other integration measures. Our informants report a large linguistic diversity and describe the lack of language understanding as a barrier to recruiting new members. This makes it challenging for union representatives and organizers to reach out to workers, but it also prevents workers from asking questions and standing up for their rights.

Cultural differences have various effects, such as a brought-in respect for the hierarchy in workplaces and surprise at how the parties (employers and employees) cooperate at the workplaces. Many labour immigrants are not familiar with unions from their home country, and therefore have little understanding of what it means to be a union member. Others have negative experiences and fear that a union membership might lead to retaliation from the employer.

Most of the representatives we interviewed, said that the union offers information and recruitment material in various languages, which is useful both for recruitment and for members who are not proficient in Norwegian. There are also examples of translations of collective agreements and tables that show the benefits of working in a company covered by a collective agreement compared to a company that is not covered by one. Artificial intelligence is also used to translate information.

However, there are differing opinions on the extent of translations. It was pointed out that it is important to learn Norwegian and that it is nearly impossible to function well in the country without mastering the language.

Our informants noted that many labour immigrants prefer to work overtime and earn more rather than attend Norwegian courses—often because they only plan to stay in Norway for a short period. Some unions have initiated efforts to help more labour immigrants obtain a Norwegian trade certificate, combining this with language training for members. Since the theoretical part of the trade exams is held in Norwegian, they must learn the language to obtain the certificate. Vocational Norwegian courses make the training feel more useful, and the trade certificate that "awaits" at the end increases the incentive to participate.

The way communication is conducted in the unions must also be taken into consideration. Several pointed out that the language can be abstract and difficult to understand. Many words and phrases make no sense to a foreigner. The Norwegian Union of General Workers (Arbeidsmandsforbundet) has for example organized courses led by sales and communication professionals to overcome some of these problems.

The price of the membership fee is a concern for many. Therefore, it is important to provide accurate and good information about what you receive for your money. The increased tax deduction for union dues has proved to have a positive effect. The insurance schemes that come with the membership are sometimes an advantage and other times a disadvantage, and several call for different types of insurances than those currently included in the membership. However, there was general agreement among our

informants that there is no need for separate or adapted memberships for labour immigrants.

Demanding union work without enough time makes many workers reluctant to take on a role as trade union representatives. Therefore, it can be extra tiring to inform and recruit foreign workers. It is mentioned as a concrete challenge that Norwegian union representatives are not so interested in including labour immigrants because it is so demanding. Several informants noted that foreign workers are more likely to go through union representatives with their questions instead of directly to the manager, which is resource intensive.

Workplace unrest and insecurity often prompt people to join the union. In the health and care-industry, a current important task for the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees (Fagforbundet) is to ensure that workers get larger positions. This is also important for recruiting new members.

Advertising help and support if you join the union can be a double-edged sword. It is reported that trade union representatives must lower expectations and be clear about what the union can do and not for the individual member. Experiences show that labour immigrants leave the union because their demands are not met or because they do not receive help with what are described as "impossible" cases. Another well-known issue is that foreign workers do not think about joining a union until it is too late.

Union representatives with an immigrant background can often have a positive impact. This is mainly due to language understanding. In addition, the representative can better understand the background and mindset of members and potential members, making it easier to trust them. One of the union representatives called this "cultural translation."

Union representatives with an immigrant background pointed out that the role can be challenging for them due to a lack of language and knowledge of laws and regulations. Meetings with employers can be marked by a feeling of inferiority because they do not master the language and argumentation at the same level as the manager. Competence in Norwegian laws and agreements, and language understanding were thus described as a balancing act—it is useful to know several languages to reach new and old members who do not have a strong command of Norwegian, but it is also important to have good knowledge of the Norwegian system.

In parts of the industries covered by this survey, there are challenges and often cooperation problems between employees and management. However, some describe employers as helping the union by being positive about recruiting new members and establishing collective agreements. It is more common to encounter resistance, and some union organizers are chased away when they visit non-unionized enterprises. There are also examples of employers threatening employees with dismissal if they unionize. Some have therefore chosen to be so-called "secret members." One of the union representatives pointed out that the number of secret members has decreased over the years. Another noted that this is most common in small enterprises.

Some informants also mentioned that more employers have become interested in entering into collective agreements in connection with the tightening of the hiring regulations so that they can hire labor from staffing agencies.

Many emphasize that it is often more important for labour immigrants than for native Norwegians to organize because they are more vulnerable to exploitation or job loss. Combined with many immigrants' lack of understanding and knowledge of laws, rules, and rights, this is the biggest overarching challenge. Security appears to be the most important membership benefit for many labour immigrants.

The importance of having local union representatives who are available and proactive is repeatedly emphasized. It is a warning sign that many say it is very difficult to get people to volunteer as local union representatives, especially since there never seems to be enough time.

The Norwegian working life being diverse is old news. That it is also mostly a good working life is also not new. But it is important to remember that there are very different challenges in the various industries, and that success may be measured by how well the most vulnerable groups are taken care of.

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