

ITF ORGANISING MANUAL

ARBOLITOS

(WORKER NETWORKS)

Worker networks, also known as “arbolitos”, are small. No more than five to seven workers are assigned to one person, the communicator. Communication is person-to-person and one-to-one.

Worker networks help us identify and develop leaders and hold these leaders or communicators accountable for a small but most

important task: communicating with their co-workers. You will need to designate at least one person to co-ordinate and keep in touch with and support the communicators.

Worker networks are called “arbolitos”, or little trees, by ITF unions in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador and Peru. This name helps us remember that worker networks

Learning from each other

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. 30 per cent 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

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require a lot of gardening and patience. There are lots of branches, and there is a constant need for pruning. Trees start small and trees grow.

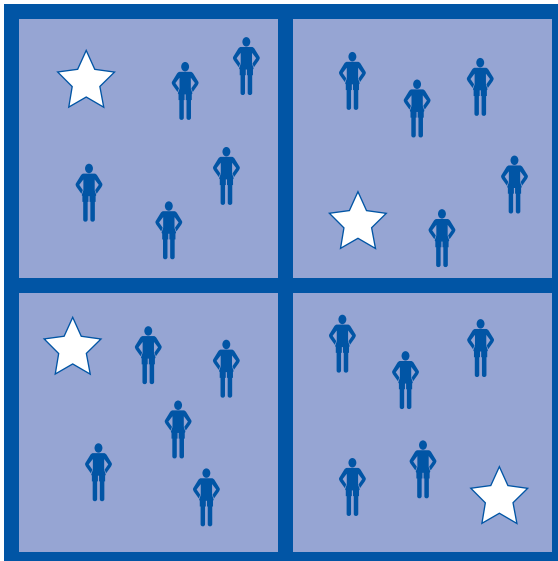
In union workplaces, usually the largest group of workers are the uninvolved workers, not the anti-union workers or the union activists. These uninvolved workers are the ones we need to reach.

There are many methods that unions use to communicate with

workers: newsletters, leaflets, websites, telephone calls, email messages, text messaging, social networking websites, media, meetings and person-to-person contact. **The most effective method when workers lack knowledge about the union or are afraid is person-to-person contact.**

** What do you think your benchmark for arbolitos should be?*

ONE COMMUNICATOR FOR 5 TO 7 WORKERS



To form arbolitos, we can sort workers by home address or postal code, work teams, who knows who, work area, transport to and from work, shift or type of work.

Arbolitos strengthen and structure our person-to-person contacts with workers. We will need communicators, the people who will keep in touch with five to seven workers. If our arbolito is large enough, we will also need coordinators, the people who will keep in contact with the communicators.

One of our key benchmarks is for arbolitos:

___% one-to-one contact within 48 hours.

If you do not have an anti-union environment, but you want to increase the level of worker involvement in the union (perhaps in preparation for a difficult set of negotiations or a problem that workers will need to take action on), you will want to set benchmarks for your arbolitos. Asking workers to communicate with a small group of their co-workers is a simple and clear

Learning from each other

Arbolitos (little trees) were developed by South American unions to describe the person-to-person, five-workers-to-one-organiser communication-network system of organising.

Arbolitos emphasise the constant need for gardening, nurturing and fertilising of worker communication networks.

Dina Feller

ITF affiliate, Argentina

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leadership task. Later, these “communicators” might take on other leadership roles in the union – delegate, steward, works council member – but begin by allowing workers to participate at a less intense level of commitment.

Accountability is critical. You will want to get regular reports from all communicators. Find out the total number of workers who have been spoken to or who have participated in an activity. Record

this and what the workers are saying. Use this information to build your lists. Do frequent spot checks to make sure that the correct message has been communicated.

After major actions or events, have communicators ask workers for feedback. For workers who did not participate, include questions about why they did not attend or get involved. For those who did participate, make sure that the communicators reinforce the

We will need **communicators**, the people who will keep in touch with the 5-7 workers.

If our arbolito is large enough, we will also need **co-ordinators**, the people who will keep in touch with the communicators

importance of their contributions.

If a communicator does not speak to their people, reassign the work or leave it undone until someone else comes forward.

If a communicator does speak to their people, give support, recognition and educational opportunities.

Here are two sample forms, one to be filled out by the communicators and one for the co-ordinators (*below and on the following page*).

If you need to keep the arbolitos underground, each communicator can keep in contact with only those workers they trust and one organiser. You might want to keep the arbolitos even smaller and quieter, with two to three workers instead of five to seven. The organiser should be a trusted person, preferably someone who does not work directly for the company and, therefore, is not subject to pressure. Only the

To be filled out by COMMUNICATORS for each of the 5-7 workers they are talking to:	
Contact Details	Tasks
Name:	Survey complete: Y <input type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Date:</i>
Date of first contact:	Met me to talk: Y <input type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Date:</i>
Work location and type:	Will talk to others: Y <input type="checkbox"/> N <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Date:</i>
Hours of work:	Who did they speak to?
Concerns and comments:	Reason given for inability to complete a task:

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organiser knows which workers are supporting the union.

When workers will be facing pressure from the employer, communicators do not need to talk openly about the union. The arbolitos can be used to strengthen social relationships and discuss working conditions or any other topic of interest.

We need to find people who can be communicators and co-ordinators, workers who will lead

the organising. Leaders are not necessarily the most outspoken or even the ones most in favour of the union.

There are two easy steps to finding leaders:

- 1) *Ask workers who they rely on when there are workplace problems and also who organises social events.*
- 2) *Ask workers to do small tasks, and then you can spend time with those who complete the tasks.*

To be filled out by CO-ORDINATORS for each of the communicators:	
Communicator Contact Details	Communicator's Tasks
Name of communicator:	Total surveys given <i>Date:</i>
Best time to call:	Total surveys completed: <i>Date:</i>
Concerns and comments:	Total workers the communicator met with one-to-one: Reason given for inability to complete a task:

Arbolitos can be used to target specific groups of under-represented workers to get them more involved. Identify the types of workers who are under-represented in the union (by age, work location or area, shift, type of work, language, culture, gender, etc). Plan to recruit communicators who can talk to workers in their own languages and are familiar with their cultures and subcultures.

Arbolitos support union structures and workplace leaders; they do not replace them.

Workplace delegates and union leaders help recruit, train and support the arbolitos.

Communicating with co-workers is usually one part of the workplace delegate's job. Arbolitos can assist workplace delegates.

To create arbolitos:

- * Think about the workplace leadership structure of your union. How will we involve these union leaders in the creation of the arbolitos?*
- * How many communicators will we need? How many do we have*

now? Do we need people to coordinate the work of the communicators?

** How will we recruit, train and support these people?*

** What information will we need to collect, and how will we keep and maintain records?*

** What problems might arise from setting up this network? How will we overcome these problems?*

The most important thing to remember when talking to apathetic or fearful workers is to not talk but to listen. An organiser should be listening about 80 per cent of the time and talking not more than 20 per cent of the time. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell the person that you will find out and get back to them.

When workers are afraid of firings, retaliation and violence, remember to listen deeply. Simply providing an open ear, support and solidarity is most important. Workers will make their own decisions about how much risk to take and when, and their risk levels are likely to change with time and circumstance.

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Learning from each other

One-to-one contact is key to getting young workers on board.

Marco Steinborn

ITF affiliate, Germany

Ask workers open-ended questions that will get them talking about their working conditions, themselves and the possibilities for change. Ask them to commit to small things that will get them more involved, whether they can remain open to more discussions with you or if they know someone else you can talk to. When the worker says no, do not get into an argument or try to convince the worker. You want the worker focused on what they are concerned about, not all the reasons why it is so difficult to get involved.

Workers get involved in unions for many different reasons. Be able to share your own story of why you are involved. Find out if people have been involved in social activities or unions in the past and what that experience was like for them. Have they ever wanted to change things? Do they have a vision of what is needed to improve things for workers? Sharing with each other deepens our relationship.

Workers have to trust the information they receive from the union more than they trust what the employer is saying, what the media is saying and perhaps what their friends and family are saying.

Worker networks help us deepen our relationships with each other and place these deeper relationships within a union structure. The more workers trust each other, the easier it is to organise.

The employer is likely to take actions against workers or pass around misleading information. We need to be able to counter the employer's anti-union campaign quickly and effectively. One-to-one contact with workers, systematically organised so that we can contact them within a short period, is critical.