

ITF ORGANISING MANUAL

WORKPLACE

PROBLEMS

Workplace problems are the fuel that drives organising. Many workers get involved because they want to help solve problems and improve conditions. Some examples of workplace problems are: low salaries, HIV/AIDS stigma, no collectively negotiated agreement, or a lack of respect, and poor morale. If you are organising to gain a collective agreement or take industrial action, this discussion of workplace problems may help you

prioritise one to three issues for bargaining.

** What do you know about the working conditions and problems that workers are facing?*

** What have the workers done in the past to try to address problems?*

Workplace problems motivate workers to get involved. Resolving problems or even sharing

PRIORITISING WORKPLACE PROBLEMS

Look for workplace problems that are most:

widely felt

The number of workers who are concerned about this problem.

deeply felt

How deeply and emotionally important the problem is felt to be by the workers.

winnable in part

We need to have at least a chance of winning some positive result for workers.

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information about problems can show that by working collectively, we can make a difference. **There are many problems in any workplace, so we need to decide which problems to focus on.**

We can make a workplace problem more widely felt if we communicate, educate and find a common cause around it. If we want a problem to be more deeply felt, we will need to appeal to the workers' sense of justice and

fairness. And any problem can be made more "winnable" by breaking it down into smaller steps, things that we can win along the way.

You will need to describe workplace problems clearly so that both the workers and the general public will be able to understand and relate to them. To make a problem clearer to the workers, ask some of them to discuss the problem whilst you take notes. To make a problem clearer to the

MAKE SURE THAT THE PROBLEM IS UNDERSTOOD BY THE WORKERS

Cabin crew have health and safety problems

Cabin crew have problems with back injuries from lifting luggage into the overhead racks.

MAKE SURE THAT THE PROBLEM IS UNDERSTOOD BY THE PUBLIC

Cabin crew want single rooms.

No one, including cabin crew, should have to sleep in the same room next to someone they do not know, who may smoke, act irresponsibly or violate your safety.

general public, get feedback from people who are not involved in the workplace or industry.

Deeply felt problems are real. They may be more difficult to talk about. Examples of deeply felt problems might be discrimination or harassment based on race, ethnicity or gender; the stigma of HIV/AIDS; workload and stress; or access to education for our children. Concrete solutions can sometimes be difficult, but giving a voice to the voiceless can be a powerful beginning.

If workers cannot openly talk about their problems, you might want to publish anonymous stories describing what workers are facing. These can be distributed in the workplace or wider community.

If there is a likelihood of a strong anti-union campaign by the employer, we might not want to talk about workplace problems openly right away. If we begin to organise around workplace problems too early, we may risk retaliation. Even increased discussion among workers about their problems may alert the employer. We risk

Learning from each other

We surveyed women locomotive drivers to find out more about their problems. The drivers raised toilet facilities, the need for separate restrooms, ergonomic design of cabs, and opportunities for flexible working related to childcare. The survey committee then made recommendations to the union about how to address these problems.

Grethe Thorsen

ITF affiliate, Norway

It is difficult for seafarers to take action. They are isolated and have few rights aboard ships. But an international online ITF petition to end piracy allowed seafarers to show support for an issue they care about. Having a petition which was also supported by shipowners made it easier to involve the seafarers. Over half a million seafarers signed the petition.

ITF seafarers section

WORKPLACE PROBLEMS

Learning from each other

In the past, the union would wait for the workers' anger to build and then call a strike, without planning ahead. There weren't many ways for the workers to participate in the union until they reached the stage of striking.

We are always looking for shared problems that are easy for the workers to get involved with. We did a survey to find out how many are affected by unsafe practices during the typhoon season. We had almost 600 questionnaires returned. We received feedback from the respondents that some workers were asked to keep lashing even when it is clearly dangerous, and there are not enough shuttle buses provided to get the workers out of the terminal to safe ground.

We held a seminar at the Mariners' Club in Hong Kong and invited workers and government

officials. The government said it would be too difficult to have legislation for a specific industry, which increased the anger of the workers. At the meeting, the group decided to leaflet the workers about their right to stop work in unsafe conditions and to continue to lobby the politicians. We also committed to gather more documentation about the unsafe practices. We are putting our demands to the employer association. And if we do not get results, we are prepared to then go to the public and the media.

Now the terminal operators have been holding longer briefings for workers about the coming typhoon season and have purchased safety equipment and hired more shuttle buses during typhoons. It is a start. We are making progress, and more workers are getting involved.

Doris Hiu Yan Sin

ITF affiliate, Hong Kong

losing, rather than gaining, momentum. Instead, spend time carefully and fully listening and learning about the problems that workers are facing so that we will be ready to act when the time is right.

If we are facing a strong anti-union campaign or violence from the employer, we might not use even anonymous worker action. There may be too much risk.

Organising to improve working conditions never ends. Once we resolve some problems, we look for other problems that the union can work on.



The accompanying PowerPoint module on “Workplace Problems”

includes an activity that will help you prioritise one to three workplace problems that are widely felt, deeply felt and potentially “winnable”.

Learning from each other

Sometimes organising can happen quickly. We had a small success at Cathay Pacific Airways in Hong Kong. The company unilaterally announced a change in the rules on swapping flight duties, giving only one day’s notice. The 4,000 affected cabin crew were very angry and wanted to go on strike. In ten days, we were able to get 600 more workers to join the union. We directed the anger against the CEO. Some 850 members rallied against the company and stopped traffic as we circled Cathay’s headquarters. The company withdrew the policy. We were able to use the anger from this issue to organise more participation in the union.

Becky Kwan

ITF affiliate, Hong Kong

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Learning from each other

We are organising the bicycle couriers in Toronto in the same-day courier-service industry. They were not union. We knew that we would have to build the union from the ground up, and it would not be a quick process.

We talked to the couriers and asked them what they wanted, what we can help them with. We have spent the year getting to know them.

They needed a clothes dryer and a courier worker centre in downtown Toronto. One problem they have is that they sweat when they are delivering, the sweat freezes and then they have to go to a public laundromat to dry their clothes. They can't carry extra clothes with them on their bikes when they are working. So we helped them set up a centre with a clothes dryer. The centre holds workshops and information sessions for couriers on a regular basis, and couriers can come there to learn more and get involved in the union.

Valère Tremblay

ITF affiliate, Canada

Learning from each other

A few years ago we were not talking about HIV/AIDS in our unions in the Arab World. This is a very sensitive issue for us. There is a myth that HIV/AIDS happens to other people, that it is a problem of Western and African countries.

We held two national education seminars, one in Jordan and one in Egypt. There were men and women in both seminars.

In Egypt, there were three women and 20 male participants. At the beginning, the men stopped the women from asking questions. However, by the third day, the women were educating people in the passenger van on the way to the seminar.

HIV/AIDS is an occupational health issue. It affects our members deeply, and we must educate each other and learn how to talk to each other about this and other difficult topics.

Bilal Malkawi

ITF Secretariat