

Work-family reconciliation: What trade unions are doing

Trade unions have become increasingly involved in promoting the needs of workers with family responsibilities, in particular, through collective bargaining. This Information Sheet looks at some concrete examples of what trade unions are doing to help workers with family responsibilities.¹

Facilitating participation in union activities

With the increasing employment of women in most countries, new needs are arising, not only for women workers but also for men, as dual-earner couples with dependents struggle to manage their family responsibilities while coping with the demands of work.

Recognizing this new reality can be a way of strengthening the trade union movement by showing that trade unions are responding to the evolving needs of workers, as can be seen in the example of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU).

Policies to increase union membership

In considering how to increase its membership base, the ICTU notes that "Trade unions do their business, for the most part, in a way that was appropriate to the age of the male breadwinner. The structure of work has changed radically in recent years. Two-thirds of the 450,000 new jobs created in the Republic of Ireland since 1994 were filled by women. The twin pressures of commuting and caring are making participation difficult for people. This is a reality that has to be recognized and accommodated in some way".

Source: ICTU: *Strengthening the trade union movement*, at http://www.ictu.ie/html/programme/trade_unions.htm#Introduction, 16 February 2004.

To respond to these evolving needs, trade unions have been concerned to ensure the representation of workers with family responsibilities, in particular women, in their committees and activities. This is not always easy since family responsibilities can be a barrier to participation. The "Unions for women" campaign kit prepared by ICFTU/GUF² provides suggestions on ways affiliates can address women's family responsibilities in order to facilitate their participation in trade union activities.

- Arrange meetings and activities at

times that do not conflict with family responsibilities.

- Provide childcare facilities to assist women to participate in union activities.

In budgets for seminars or training activities, it is ICFTU policy that there should be a provision for paying a carer.³ A number of unions are now encouraging greater participation of women and men with family responsibilities by having childcare available at meetings, if needed.

Negotiating work-family measures

In many countries, trade unions have negotiated various types of measures to help reconcile work with family responsibilities.

In Brazil, an analysis of clauses in collective agreements established in 2000 found that the most frequent clause, found in 85 per cent of agreements, concerned job security for pregnant workers, a right already established by law, but probably one of the most difficult to put in practice.⁴ The unions feel that this will help ensure that these provisions are applied and that, in case of infringement, they will be stronger to defend the worker.

Although legislation in virtually all countries provides for maternity leave, improving on legislation by increasing the length or improving the payments has been one of the more frequent gains through collective bargaining. The case of an agreement at a Honduras garment factory signed in 2001 illustrates the importance of family benefits.

In collective bargaining, there may sometimes be more scope for non-wage benefits than for wage increases and thus for visible gains by the union. Such gains — for example, flexible time

arrangements or short leave for a family emergency — can make a big difference to employees and may be more important to them than a small wage increase. The certified agreement at a company in Australia (see below) provides some interesting flexibilities for employees, particularly for those with children.

Honduran Maquila Union signs collective agreement including family-related benefits

After two-and-a-half years of struggle, workers at the Yoo Yang garment factory in La Lima signed their first collective bargaining agreement in 2001.

The contract provides a number of improvements, including a grievance procedure, the expansion of medical benefits provided by the on-site clinic, increased maternity leave, higher transportation benefits, transportation and meals during overtime, education scholarships, assistance with education costs for workers' children, and additional benefits associated with holidays and May Day. A small raise was also secured.

Source: International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF): Press release of 11 December 2001, at <http://www.global-unions.org/>.

Certified agreement at Barnardos Australia

Acknowledging the caring responsibilities of many employees, the Directors will, as far as practical in meeting the needs of clients:

- Allow a reasonable number of short personal calls;*
- Allow work that can be undertaken at home to be done there when family illness or other pressing reason exists and clients are not disadvantaged;*
- Permit a child to be temporarily at work in emergency situations where there is no direct contact with the client and where clients are not disadvantaged;*
- Allow young babies being breastfed to be brought to the office, if not too disruptive;*
- Allow flexibility in hours to meet family obligations if they do not interfere with services to clients;*
- Allow unpaid leave in school holidays where this does not interfere with client service.*

Source: Department of Employment and Work Relations: "Barnardos Australia Certified agreement 2001-2004", in *Work and Family*, No. 30, February 2003, p. 13.

To negotiate effectively, those involved need to know the problems and preferences of workers and also the options that have been used elsewhere. Thus, to support collective bargaining for the development of family-friendly policies, a number of trade unions have produced information materials or toolkits to assist negotiators.

To prepare its guide, the ITUC held a series of regional seminars for trade union officials and representatives, as well as focus groups, to find out what the trade unions needed to assist them to move the agenda forward. The main stumbling blocks found were a lack of information on the options available and no clear method for beginning a process of developing family-friendly/work-life

balance policies and arrangements.⁵

On its website, the AFL-CIO of the United States provides bargaining fact sheets on issues such as control over working hours, comprehensive advice for family leaves, as well as possible questions for a questionnaire which affiliates could use to identify the work and family needs of workers.⁶ Similarly, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) on its website has resources for bargaining for improved family rights at work which can be downloaded.⁷ The TUC in the United Kingdom is starting an online course on work-life balance for union representatives, and publishes a free fortnightly bulletin on work-life balance issues.⁸

Support for exercising existing rights

Ensuring that pro-family legislation and collective bargaining agreements are actually implemented is a key role of trade union organizations, the more so in contexts of weak government control mechanisms. Workers cannot exercise rights that they do not know about, and trade unions play an essential role in disseminating this information. Various means can be used to reach workers with this information, such as newsletters, information kits, study circles, training of shop stewards, etc. In some countries, websites are providing new possibilities for reaching workers

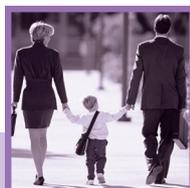
and their representatives.

Vigorous action is often necessary to ensure that workers not only know their rights, but also are able to exercise them. Even when they know their rights, without support, workers may hesitate to claim them. For example, in order to combat discrimination for pregnancy-related reasons, the ITUC has launched a campaign to inform women of the maternity protection under existing legislation, encouraging them to join the union to help them protect their rights.⁹

Direct interventions

There are some cases where trade unions have played a significant role themselves in providing facilities (such as childcare) to help workers with family responsibilities. The NTUC of Singapore, for example, is renowned for its facilities

(see below). The projects of trade unions in Benin (see below) provide some innovative examples of how trade unions can provide education and services, which have the added advantage of creating employment.



Family care programmes by Singapore trade union

In 1969, the Government of Singapore encouraged the labour movement to redefine its role from one narrowly focused on collective bargaining and grievance handling to helping workers in all aspects of their life. It was thus that the NTUC, composed of 63 unions, set up a series of cooperatives related to family care, including childcare and elderly care. NTUC has become the largest single provider of quality and affordable childcare in Singapore.

Source: National Trades Union Congress, at www.ntuc-childcare.com.

Union services to alleviate household burdens in Benin

In Benin, unions have projects for:

- *staff cooperatives which buy household goods (rice, soap) in bulk so women members can obtain them at lower prices;*
- *laundry services for working women to alleviate the heavy workload in the home and also to create employment for other women in the neighbourhood;*
- *childcare facilities near the main market for children of women vendors to facilitate breastfeeding;*
- *a women's theatre group to help educate women on issues relating to unionization and family, such as family planning, health, education of girls, the disadvantages of polygamy.*

Source: Gender Promotion Programme: *The role of trade unions in promoting gender equality: Report of the ILO-ICFTU Survey* (Geneva, ILO, 1999), p.19.

Advocacy: Placing the issue on the agenda

A major role of trade unions is to advocate improvements in national legislation and policies that affect workers' well-being. Trade unions can lobby governments for improvements in legislation concerning working time provisions and family benefits. In Australia, for example, where the national provision for maternity leave is unpaid, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has been actively lobbying for federal government-backed paid maternity leave of at least 14 weeks

for all women workers.¹⁰

At national level, trade unions are often involved in various committees dealing not only with labour issues, but also socio-economic policy. In these committees, unions can play an important role in getting work-family issues on the agenda and taken into account. For example, in Ireland, the ICTU has been promoting the interests of working parents within discussions about a national childcare programme.

¹ Examples are limited by the space available. Any trade unions that do not have websites and would like to share an experience are encouraged to write to the Conditions of Work and Employment Programme.

² ICFTU: *Unions for women campaign kit* (Brussels, ICFTU, 2001), at <http://www.icftu.org/www/pdf/u4w-campaignkit-en.pdf>.

³ Information provided by Ms. Elsa Ramos, ICFTU.

⁴ B. Sorj: *Reconciling work and family: Issues and policies in Brazil*, Conditions of Work and Employment Series No. 8 (Geneva, ILO, 2004).

⁵ ICTU, at http://www.ictu.ie/html/services/projects/family_friendly.htm, 14 February 2004.

⁶ AFL-CIO, at <http://www.aflcio.org/issuespolitics/workfamily/>, 26 April 2004.

⁷ ACTU, at <http://actu.asn.au/public/campaigns/workandfamily.html>.

⁸ TUC, at <http://www.tuc.org.uk/changingtimes/>, 26 April 2004.

⁹ ITUC, at <http://www.ictu.ie/html/campaign/pregnancy/pregnancy.htm>, 20 February 2004.

¹⁰ ACTU, at <http://www.actu.asn.au/public/campaigns/>, 27 April 2004.