



Trade Unions and Homeworking

Opportunities and possibilities

Homeworkers are arguably amongst the least protected members of the workforce and therefore, the issue of labour rights for homeworkers should be an issue for all trade unions committed to working for rights at work.

Homeworking is by its very nature hidden. It goes on behind closed doors, making it easy for the work to go unnoticed and seem unimportant. Trade unionists may not realise that there are workers at home, and that their labour is as vital to the production process as that of on-site workers. If unions are not addressing homeworking issues, they are effectively excluding a section of the workforce from union recognition

Organising homeworkers takes real work and dedication at the grass-roots. Organisers need to identify these workers, and to get to grips with the kinds of issues they face – some of which are similar to on-site workers, some of which are very different. Whilst organising homeworkers certainly presents challenges, it is also a great opportunity for unions to reach out to vulnerable members of the workforce who have so much to gain from union membership and recognition. It is also an opportunity for unions to increase their membership by

accessing the growing numbers of 'atypical workers' who have not traditionally been represented. So-called 'atypical' forms of work are increasingly becoming the norm across the UK and the world. Temporary workers, agency workers, migrant workers and homeworkers all need representation by unions, and unions need to find new ways to reach and organise these vulnerable and often dispersed workers.

Trade Union Activity in the UK

Despite the challenges, some trade unions have been taking positive steps towards organising homeworkers.

T&G-Unite in Scotland, for example, have recently been working to organize homeworkers in the knitted cashmere industry. USDAW has begun to recruit home-based couriers for the first time.

The National Group on Homeworking (NGH) has been working together with individual trade unions and the TUC, campaigning on shared policy aims such as the extension of employment status (see Briefing Paper 6 Employment Status)

The TUC has been coordinating work to highlight the issues affecting atypical workers such as agency and casual workers through their 'Working on the Edge' campaign, which has also incorporated work with NGH on homeworkers. More recently the TUC established a Commission on Vulnerable Employment, which highlighted homeworkers as one of the vulnerable groups. The Commission, which reported in May 2008 recommended,

'Unions must act to ensure they represent the interests of vulnerable workers. Unions should organize all workers in workplaces where there is a union presence, whoever employs them and whether their employment is direct or temporary. Unions should also focus on areas of the economy where exploitation is rife and where trade union membership is low. Trade unions should commit to a TUC co-ordinated drive to boost membership among vulnerable workers.'

NGH supports this recommendation and hopes it will be the basis of positive action for homeworkers.

Trade unions in the UK can also learn from the experiences of unions throughout the world who are beginning to take on the challenge of organising homeworkers, and recognising them as an integral part of the workforce. Important and significant steps have been taken by unions internationally, despite the difficulties of organising workers within the informal sector. UK trade unions can learn from these

experiences, and build on this work to ensure homeworkers are included under the trade union umbrella in the UK.

Trade Union Organising Activity Around the World

Italy

Homeworkers' rights are laid down in legislation and trade unions in the clothing industry issue common affirmations to abide by the homeworking law. Collective agreements exist which cover homeworkers, including calculation of piece rates, bonuses for weekend work and compensation payments for lack of seniority. The union also produces a newsletter for homeworkers called 'The Bundle'.

Madeira, Portugal

Over three decades the Union of Embroiders has actively sought to organise women embroiderers working in their own homes. The Union of Embroiders has secured special legislation for home embroidery workers, negotiating increased payments, improved enforcement of regulations and social security. All this has been achieved with the close involvement of the embroiderers themselves, mobilizing them through meetings and demonstrations. In recent years the Union of Embroiders has even succeeded in securing a lower retirement age of 60 for embroidery workers (65 is the usual retirement age). This is because many older women have problems with their eyesight as a result of long years of intricate embroidery work.

India

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has successfully organised homeworkers, and other women working in the informal sector. The Association was set-up and registered as a trade union in the 1970s. Workers are divided into two main categories; genuinely self-employed craft workers and home-based piece workers comparable to homeworkers in the UK. Members include street vendors, agricultural labourers, construction workers, rag-pickers and home-based workers such as embroiderers and embellishment workers.

SEWA has taken a flexible approach to organising homeworkers, investigating the specific problems of each group rather than imposing fixed structures on them, and built support by visiting homeworkers, organising activities and empowering the home based workers in the union to become SEWA organisers. SEWA provides healthcare and training for members, helps groups form co-operatives and has won recognition from the state that homeworkers should be covered by minimum wage legislation. SEWA is also working closely with the Indian Ministry of Labour to discuss how home-based workers can receive the same benefits as other workers.

Australia

The Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA formerly the Clothing and Allied Trade Union) adopted new methods to organise homeworkers in the clothing industry. This was done by a four

year campaign to bring homeworkers into the union. They started to circulate the union's paper, 'Ragmag' in 12 different languages, passed information through the ethnic media, and set up a hotline for homeworkers.

This campaign made contact with thousands of homeworkers for the first time. The union supported test cases that established new legal rights for homeworkers. This encouraged other homeworkers to take their employers to court including Nike and Adidas where the union fought cases on behalf of homeworkers. More recently they have, in partnership with Fair Wear, introduced a 'No Sweat Shop' label which can be displayed on clothing lines by garment manufacturers who can provide evidence to show they abide by the Homeworkers' Code of Practice.

North America

UNITE (formerly the International Ladies Garment Workers Union) operates in both the USA and Canada and has experimented with new ways of organising clothing workers in the informal sector. In the USA the union launched a campaign for justice in an attempt to organise from the top to the bottom of the subcontracting chain.

In Canada the union launched a campaign to organise homeworkers by setting up a Homeworkers Association. Its membership is mainly made up of Chinese and Vietnamese homeworkers in the garment industry. The union is working with the Clean Clothes Campaign to raise consumer

awareness, and is trying to build links with unions in other industries where homeworkers are likely to be on the increase.

International Organising

At a global level, homeworker organizations and trade unions were heavily involved in lobbying for the the ILO Convention on Homework (No. 177) which was adopted in 1996 and aims to bring equality between home-based workers and other wage earners (*see Briefing Paper No. 3 - ILO Convention on Homework*).

In 2007, the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF) signed an international framework agreement with the Spanish-based retailer Inditex (owners of retail fashion chains including Zara). The ground-breaking agreement is the first covering the supply chain of a global retailer, and explicitly includes homeworkers in its provisions.

Homeworker organisations from across the world have formed the International Federation of HomeWorkers Worldwide. The Federation brings together homeworker organisations and support organisations (such as NGOs and trade unions) to campaign on common issues and build solidarity between homeworkers across continents. As corporations and supply chains go global, workers' organisations need

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to do the same to stand together and secure basic labour rights for all.

Homeworking is a trade union issue

There are an estimated 1.2 million homeworkers in the UK, a substantial section of the workforce. By building on the experiences of other unions internationally, UK unions can find and recruit homeworkers, and ensure the best working practices for all workers in their industry. NGH is keen to work together with trade unions to develop strategies to organize homeworkers.

For further information:

Unlocking the Door to Homeworkers: An outreach strategy for working with homeworkers (National Group on Homeworking)

We Work At Home: Training Manual - for mapping homebased workers (HomeWorkers Worldwide)
Email: info@homeworkersww.org.uk

Hard Work, Hidden Lives: The Short Report of the Commission on Vulnerable Employment (TUC)
www.vulnerableworkers.org.uk

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