

LO Norways student service

Background

Eight out of 10 higher education students now work and study at the same time and many have their first contact with the world of work in this period. The Norwegian ideal of full-time students with sufficient financial security to devote themselves fully to their learning is an ideal LO shares with the students and with many political parties. There has been little political will, however, to translate this vision into reality and students increasingly have to work and study simultaneously.

Vulnerable students

Our long-standing work with young workers has clearly established the deep need for information on the rights and duties in the world of work. Ignorance of their fundamental trade union rights makes students an easy prey for unscrupulous or ignorant employers. Organising students, however, goes beyond simply protecting their rights, as affiliating with a union affords them a solid basis when bargaining with their employers and, more indirectly, their affiliation is a contribution to industrial democracy and an organised and orderly relationship between the social partners.

LO is aware that as a group, student-workers in Norway tend to find employment in the least transparent sectors of the economy, change employers more frequently than other groups, and more often resort to temporary employment agencies. The difficulties local union representatives have in contacting student-workers because of these particular circumstances exacerbate their vulnerability.

These considerations have informed our decision to establish a low-threshold student service, in which union representatives from different LO affiliates will visit educational establishments to offer relevant and necessary advice to young workers and provide them with an opportunity to unionise.

Changing demographics – change in organising strategies

LO-Norway has been an important social actor in shaping Norway's universal educational system but has not traditionally unionised higher education groups. In line with the changes that follow from the massive spread of higher education, LO-Norway needs to affiliate these

groups and the Confederation has for many years now focused on servicing highly educated workers, whereas the student membership was not instituted until 2000. LO-Norway has no jurisdictional agreements with any of the other confederations and thus competes with them all. LO's student membership has two categories, both of which are for part-time workers who will enjoy full support in case of labour disputes through a mechanism for cooperation between LO's 22 affiliates. Ideally, most students would thus be able to affiliate with the union of their choice independently of their course of studies and professional profile. Student memberships have an indicative price of NOK 250, as all LO affiliates have agreed to subsidize the union membership fee. This is a clear sign of worker solidarity with students, whose budgets are considerably more strained. Affiliates have also agreed not to compete for student and that affiliation procedures will be channelled through LO. Student members are under the same obligations as regular members of their LO union in case of strike.

- Student may organise according to their education and training. The idea is that unions can build loyalty through different kinds of benefits, educational opportunities and professional relevance and thus ease transition from student membership to regular membership as full-time workers. Experience shows that nearly half of the students stay on as regular members. If the student is organised according to his or hers studies, and becomes involved in a labour dispute, the union that he or she is affiliated with is responsible for starting a dialogue with the union that has jurisdiction over the workplace or with LO's district office to find a solution.
- Students may organise according to their part-time job. Students who wish to be close to their local union rep or who work in particularly exposed sectors are recommended to affiliate through the local branch. This is a traditional trade union membership that ensures greater proximity and more readily available assistance should a conflict arise.

LO Student Service

LO Student Service is a low-threshold service adopted by the LO 2009 Congress. LO's youth organizations were given the responsibility for desinging the practical implementation. LO's central administration will coordinate and facilitate the Service's visual and communicational design and materials, whereas LO's youth secretaries (there is one in every county) will coordinate implementation with the national unions and the individual

educational institutions. The simplest version has a stand and a poster wall, staffed by activists wearing distinctive clothing that clearly identifies LO as the organiser. The stands will have a variety of giveaways , including pens, marking pens, book marks and free coffee (purchased at the student cafeterias on campus) in order to generate more traffic to the stands. Activists are encouraged to attract attention by other means as well, including addressing relevant issues such talk on what unionising is all about, current political matters of particular interest to students, and seminars on personal finance and trade union and student rights. The personal finance and rights classes have proved to be in high demand.