

6 Summary

Roughly 100,000 immigrants from non-Western countries are currently employed in the Norwegian labour market – and not one of them participated in the LO¹ national congress in 2005. Yet if the composition of the 315 participants were to represent the ethnic make-up of the Norwegian workforce, the number of non-Western participants should have been 14. The picture is less dim if one looks at the different trade unions' national conventions, but it is nevertheless doubtless that ethnic minorities are strongly underrepresented in the different bodies of the trade union movement. At the same time, ethnic minorities as a group has a vulnerable position in the Norwegian labour market: Non-Western immigrants have a higher rate of unemployment than ethnic Norwegians; tend to have jobs characterized by low pay, low status, and low opportunities for upward mobility; and generally have a weaker connection to working life (Djuve & Friberg 2004). Thus, the Norwegian trade unions are posed with the challenge of both including immigrants and their interests in the organizational life of the movement, and strengthening immigrants' position in the labour market. The focus of this report is the Norwegian trade union movement's reaction to this challenge. A central question for the trade unions is whether equal treatment is sufficient to achieve equal opportunities, or whether special policies should be applied to overcome structural barriers that ethnic minorities might encounter in the labour market, and meet special needs that certain groups might have.

In this study, we have taken a closer look at how five different national trade unions within LO have responded to this question. What measures are being taken to include minorities? Which measures are considered reasonable, which are controversial, and which are considered unfair or unrealistic? We have also examined why it has been so difficult to implement locally LO's central goals in this field. The report applies a comparative perspective, using as a starting point a similar study conducted by John Wrench (Wrench 2004). His study focuses on policies, strategies, and attitudes towards ethnic minorities within Danish and British trade unions. We therefore have a unique opportunity to compare the Norwegian trade union movement with the situation in Denmark and Britain, and analyze our findings in a broader political and institutional context. The report discusses different factors that may help explain the differences between the three countries. Specifically, in what way are strategies and policies influenced by factors outside the domain of the trade unions, such as the political climate, socioeconomic conditions, or characteristics of the immigrants themselves?

¹ National trade union federation

How do Norwegian trade unions work to include ethnic minorities?

Trade unions can potentially play a significant role in fighting racism and discrimination, and in bettering the position of ethnic minorities in the labour market. However, our study shows that the Norwegian trade union movement is not fully realizing this potential. In its plan of action for 2001-2005, the Norwegian LO states that the trade union movement's effort to include ethnic minorities must be intensified in terms of combating ethnic discrimination, strengthening minorities' position on the labour market, and increasing minority organizational participation. A number of more or less concrete measures to be initiated during the period are also mentioned.

However, there has thus far been little in the way of implementation at the local and associational levels. For example, only two of the five national trade unions have published information translated to major immigrant languages. At the same time, at the associational level, little has been done in terms of Norwegian language training. However, we did visit two workplaces in which language training was offered to immigrant employees, a scheme initiated by the employers after pressure from the trade unions. In terms of recruitment, with the exception of a small number of company-level trade union branches, there has been no initiation of particular strategies to recruit immigrant members. Trade union representatives claim that this is either because immigrants are as easily recruited as ethnic Norwegians, or because there is low turnover and therefore little recruitment in general. Finally, none of the five national trade unions had any policies concerning representation of the ethnic breakdown of the workforce among members and representatives. One way of monitoring the situation and assessing the need for targeted measures is to register the ethnic background of members and representatives. This is, however, very controversial, and most of our informants were against the idea. Their principle argument against ethnic monitoring is that it would not be very useful in practise, and that it might violate privacy laws.

The low representation of ethnic minorities in trade union bodies was seen by many as a *challenge*, but few regarded this as a serious *problem*. Most informants on all levels were also against the idea of using reserved seats and positive discrimination as a means of increasing minority representation in executive bodies. However, many of them drew a parallel to the struggle for equal rights for women, and how positive discrimination had been an effective means of strengthening women's position in organizations and in the labour market.

The tactic of recruiting immigrants that sound and appear to be the "most Norwegian" as union representatives seems to be a trend among all the associations. There may be several reasons for this: members may feel that their interests are best looked after by those that seem "most Norwegian"; conversely, or complementarily, many non-Western immigrants may see the trade unions as something strange and unappealing, and therefore hesitate to take up representative tasks. An alternate interpretation is that the trade union movement has failed to adjust to the new diversity of a multicultural workforce. At the same time, many informants underscored the importance of recruiting ethnic minority representatives as role models for the immigrant communities, so that more would take a more active role in trade union activities.

In terms of implementation of the goals regarding inclusion of minorities from the LO's central action plans for 2001-2005, the main impression from this study is that the implementation efforts have been both few and unsystematic between the different levels of the trade union movement. In his study of the British and Danish trade union movement, John Wrench (2004) categorizes measures to include minorities on a four-point scale, with a "colourblind" approach at the one end and radical positive discrimination on the other. We argue that, in its central action plans, LO have moved to point two on Wrench's scale, by allowing for special policies in order to "level the playing field" for minorities, and stating that they intend to implement measures to neutralize differences that exist between minority and majority in the labour market, the labour organizations, and society as a whole. However, at the local and associational level, most informants contend that equal treatment, independent of ethnic background, is the best strategy for achieving equal opportunities. We therefore argue that this level employs what Wrench (2004) calls a "colourblind" approach.

Why is it so difficult to implement central LO policy?

It seems clear that LO's central action plans are not easily translated into concrete measures at local and associational level. The implementation of the central policy on inclusion of ethnic minorities in the trade unions is hampered by a number of barriers in the lower level organizations.

First is the question of whether the targets articulated in LO's central documents are precise enough. We argue that LO's central action plans are so vague and devoid of clear statements on concrete measures, responsibilities, and timeframes that it is difficult to implement them at the local level. This means that the formulation and implementation of concrete initiatives is dependent on the goodwill of local organizations. A central question is therefore whether individual associations and local unions choose to focus on this issue. Other factors, such as the situation of the labour market and organizational capacity, may also influence the priority this area is given. Despite the fact that many union representatives are concerned with this question, the awareness on minority issues seems to be weakly rooted and unevenly distributed in the organizations. Several informants complain that issues related to ethnic minorities are left to individual representatives that have a special interest in the field, while being ignored by the rest of the organization. Lack of competence among union representatives is also a major barrier to effective implementation, particularly regarding anti-discrimination policies. The paradox of the situation is that, while LO has passed resolutions to fight all forms of ethnic discrimination in the labour market, most union representatives seem to be of the opinion that this problem does not exist: most informants said that ethnic discrimination was not a problem in their area of responsibility, and union representatives hesitate to use the term "discrimination", even when they refer to situations in which discrimination is clearly relevant. Problems that arise with an element of discrimination are instead often ascribed to misunderstandings, language barriers, etc. This reluctance to recognise or 'call out' discrimination may be an obstacle to a more offensive strategy from the trade union movement against discriminatory practices in the labour market. Defining

what constitutes discrimination in modern working life, and how to handle such cases on the local level, is therefore an important challenge for LO. More competence and central guidelines regarding discrimination against ethnic minorities are both necessary.

In particular, the trade unions generally lack sufficient capacity to register the kinds of needs different groups of employees may have – especially when, as is often the case with ethnic minorities, those groups lack strong spokespersons to promote their interests. The fact that a number of unionized minority workers contact SMED (Center Against Ethnic Discrimination) instead of their own trade unions when feeling unjustly treated in the workplace is symptomatic: although the number of workers so acting is not high, such action indicates that the unions are deficient in this area. Many trade union representatives feel that, because minority workers themselves have not cried out for special anti-discrimination or minority inclusion policies, there is no need for them. Yet the fact that the trade unions have not registered a heavy demand for these policies does not necessarily mean that such policies are not needed: minority workers, because of social and linguistic barriers, often are less able to articulate their own needs, and may further be unaware that their needs are of any concern to the trade unions.

Many union representatives are eager to display “good values” in the form of immigrant-friendly attitudes. However, it is questionable whether this eagerness to show good values always enhances the ability to tackle the real problems that may arise in a multiethnic workforce. There is a danger that political correctness makes trade union representatives fail to acknowledge concrete problems, in fear of stepping on toes or being labelled racist. Moreover, despite widespread positive attitudes towards minorities in the trade unions, structural barriers to the implementation of effective inclusion policies do exist within the organizations. We argue that the solutions to this problem lie not so much in the display of good values, but in articulating clear central policies, raising the level of competence among local representatives, and creating the institutional capacity to register the kinds of needs that exist among less vocal parts of the workforce.

However, the picture is not uniform. Four of the local trade union branches stand out as having active policies aimed at including minority employees in the organizations and at the workplace. Each of these trade union branches are led by people that have a political commitment to, and personal interest in, minority issues, and much of what is being done at the local level can be ascribed to these individual enthusiasts. Yet these unions also share some features that make the need for inclusive policies more visible: they have had a large share of minority workers over a long period; the enterprises have a majority of low-skilled employees and immigrant workers with poor Norwegian language skills; turnover is low; and the level of unionization is high. Cumulatively, these factors have made the need to include marginalized groups of workers with special needs more visible. At workplaces with higher turnover and more skilled workers, this seems less acute.

Our informants at the local level told us that they received very little guidance from the central organizations regarding minority issues, and many of them said they wanted both LO and the national trade unions to take on a more active role in this issue. The national trade unions’ low level of engagement in minority issues was, to a considerable

extent, confirmed by the informants at the associational level. Many of them told us that they were cautious of putting pressure on the local unions in these matters: inclusion and minority issues were regarded as delicate, and there was a widespread fear of “stuffing solutions down the throats of the locals”. Furthermore, the informants in the associations argued that their lack of involvement was due to the fact that there was no local demand for any such policies. At the same time, many local trade union branches justified their lack of action by the absence of central guidelines from the associations, and those unions that did have an active policy requested more central follow-up and coordination. The result is disintegration of responsibility and failure to act. This is not only true for the relationship between local branch unions and national trade unions, but also for the relationship between the national trade unions and LO.

The Norwegian trade union movement in a European context

On the basis of Wrench’s (2004) account of British and Danish trade union policies and responses to immigration and ethnic minorities in the labour market, the Norwegian trade union movement has much more in common with its Danish than its British counterpart. The British trade union movement has adopted far more radical policies than its Nordic colleagues in its efforts to include minorities and combat discrimination. The willingness to treat different groups differently in order to achieve more equal outcomes is far greater in Great Britain than in the Nordic countries, and special policies for minorities are seen as much less controversial among the British informants. Conversely, both the Norwegian and the Danish trade union movements are more committed to the ideology of equal treatment, and many of the Norwegian and Danish informants have deep-rooted scepticism towards special policies of any kind. This scepticism, however, does not reflect any negative attitudes towards immigrants and minorities; on the contrary, many informants fear that creating special policies for certain groups will have a negative effect for immigrants by generating more stigma, envy, and distance between indigenous and immigrant workers. Specific anti-discrimination work also has a lower priority in the Nordic countries than in Britain. For example, although all the Norwegian local and national trade unions in our study gave financial support to different anti-racist organizations and projects, none of them had working procedures in place to handle concrete cases of ethnic discrimination, and almost all of them denied ever having heard of or taken on such cases. Wrench (2004) found similar results in Denmark, whereas the British trade unions more frequently applied the term “discrimination” in their daily work.

Explaining these differences is a central objective of this report. As a starting point for the analysis, we have chosen four hypotheses from Penninx and Rooseblad (2000):

1. Getting support for initiatives to include immigrants and minorities in organizational and working life is easier in times of prosperity, when the need for labour is great and there is little competition for jobs between minority and majority populations.

2. The more liberal and culturally pluralistic the national integration regime and political climate, the more likely it is for trade unions to adopt policies and measures aimed at including minorities.
3. A strong national trade union movement will have more active inclusion and anti-discrimination policies than a weak one.
4. The level of trade union engagement in inclusion and anti-discrimination work is dependent on the size and characteristics of the immigrant population in the country.

We find that the labour market situation – at least on the associational level – seems to have an effect on the kind of inclusive measures adopted. In times of prosperity, more people are hired and the need for training, information, and recruitment increases. However, we do not find support for more permanent changes in policies and attitudes as a result of economic fluctuations. Neither do our data support the hypothesis that the national integration regime and political climate have substantial effects on trade union policies. Policies and attitudes in Norway and Denmark are surprisingly similar, despite the fact that the Danish trade unions operate within a political climate and an integration regime that are much less “immigrant-friendly” than the Norwegian. Neither do the assumptions that the strongest and most influential trade union movements are the most active in combating discrimination and creating equal opportunities find support in our data. However, our findings suggest that the structure and functions of the trade union movement have a different effect. The British trade unions are far more conflict-oriented than their Nordic counterparts, which are more oriented towards consensus and cooperation. This affects the kind of measures adopted. Within the tradition of consensus, negotiations are considered the best way to promote the interests of the employees, leading to less radical policies. The high level of unionization in the Nordic countries will in itself lead to more moderate policies, as the average worker may object to the more radical measures. In Britain, unionization is much lower, but the trade unions are much more radical in their strategies. Union members tend to belong to the political left, and the trade unions are therefore comprised of the most radical part of the workforce, independent of ethnic background.

The minority population in Great Britain is not only larger than in Norway and Denmark, but British immigrants also have different backgrounds and histories. Immigrants came to Great Britain much earlier than to the Nordic countries, and most of them came from former British colonies. Most of them are therefore familiar with the English language, as well as British-influenced trade unions, political systems, and working life. Union members with minority backgrounds have also organized themselves in “black” networks within the main organizations, and constitute a political factor in the unions to a much greater extent than they do in the Norwegian and Danish trade unions. In Denmark and Norway, by contrast, the minority population is primarily comprised of refugees and other immigrants who are less familiar with the manners, culture, and language of their countries of residence, and therefore have a greater need for measures that could *help* them become integrated in their new countries. These factors may help explain why the Nordic trade unions have focused more on information and

training, while the British have mainly focused on anti-discrimination and representation policies.