ATU Co-leaders' Report: 2019 AGM

The ATU has hit a milestone - our first AGM. The ATU has not only survived birth, it has grown into a vehicle that tech workers can use to move the needle and improve the whole tech sector.

We are not even one year old yet and we have over 100 members, and several campaigns under our belt. We have built a core committee, sustainable finance, and allies across the union movement.

The year ahead will be an important one for us, as we move and grow in the direction our members support.

Why a union?

The ATU was founded to provide a vehicle for tech workers in Aotearoa New Zealand to provide a voice of, and a voice for, tech workers.

There was a conspicuous lack of a dedicated union that understood the needs, fears, and desires of tech workers - so we built one. The ATU will always be directed by the membership, and everything it does must be in the interests and desires of our members.

This does put the ATU in a different mould to some of the international tech unions, each of which lives in a different context with different goals:
- Many are formed within existing large unions' structures where we were founded independently
- Some focus on specific workplaces
- Some focus on specific subsectors in tech such as game workers or contractors
- Some are founded to specifically target the needs of service workers supporting tech companies such as cleaners, security, or caterers, whereas we include everyone
- Some focus on using the power of workers in tech to manage the dangers of tech companies or provide tech-based solutions to world problems. We support this, but it has not been our primary driver

The ATU was founded to be as broadly focussed as possible, covering everyone under the umbrella of the tech sector, no matter where they work. We are a vehicle to empower the workers to make their own lives better, and a better world beyond.

Founding

The ATU, as we came to call ourselves, was incorporated on 26 October 2018, and our union registration was made official on 16 November 2018. While this is when we legally sprang into existence, this was actually the culmination of work over many months by a small but dedicated crew.

The first inklings of what would come occurred at a small conference when one of the founders found out that only 15 signatories were needed to form a union. She decided to start a tech union then and there. She had a poster and clipboard and, by the end of the day, a list of names and contact information.
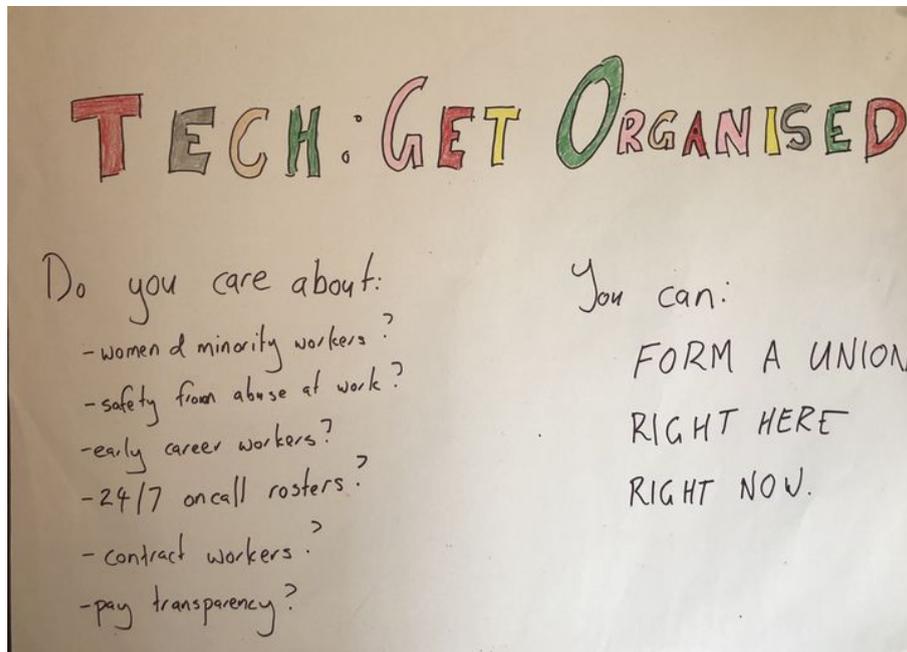
Over the next few months our Twitter account was made (firstly @techunion_nz, later renamed to @yourtechunion), we communicated on Keybase for a few months before moving to Slack in late August. Our charter took a few months to get right, as we merged together those from several other unions and brought our own ethos to include a code of conduct and online organising.

We finished the charter and had our first official meeting attended by our entire membership of about six people, and selected our first Co-leaders, Secretary, and Treasurer.

On 29th September 2018 we locked in the paperwork, gathered our signatures, and filed as a society. Getting the "first fifteen" physical signatures locked in was one of the harder parts. Our union registration was approved on 26 November 2018 and The Aotearoa Tech Union was officially ready to roll.

The year in review

How we do things

We are not a traditional union, which means we have no physical head office or even a main workspace where we can do business. If we need to host an event or conference call, we run meetings out of members' own homes or talk to our partner unions and borrow offices from them. We run social meetings in the main centres, which helps us connect with members around the country.

The primary avenue used for organising is the ATU Slack. Invitation to join the Slack is on the basis of interest and regular contribution to organising and campaigning - this means it's limited to committee members and volunteers. We check in with Slack members who become inactive and review access every few months for the safety of our members and organisers.

We discuss committee business in a private Slack channel - usually this only relates to issues that could identify a member, or logistics around committee meetings. The remaining Slack channels are available to any volunteers who are working on a campaign or activity for us.

Rather than focusing on who is in the committee or not, we look to our actively engaged members to drive our decision making - passionate people who have something to say or a campaign they are running. Some other organisations have called our structure 'grassroots' or 'decentralised' - we just do what works for our size.

Our committee meetings are open-invite and we dial in active members as guests. We do our best to remain transparent in most of our day-to-day business, whether that is collaborating on media responses, setting up social events, or working on campaign ideas. Personal member queries are handled via an email triage and response process, to ensure member privacy is protected.

We take a lot of email queries from our members, media, other unions, and the community at large. This is sorted through shared inboxes and triaged by appropriate committee members.

We are volunteer run and our capacity to keep up with quick-fire social media questions and the pace of the modern news media is a constant challenge. We will always prioritise the welfare and needs of our members, and the health of our volunteers, over the news cycle or the chance to grab onto a trend.

As we grow and our processes mature, we hope to have the capacity to hire union workers who will help us meet the needs of a tech sector that is used to rapid turnaround on requests and responses to the news cycle. This is a long term goal of ours that we are working towards.

Membership

We're growing at a gentle and steady pace - after an initial surge of members, we are gaining around 10 members a month on average. This suits our pace of growth very well - our current volunteer-driven "do-ocracy" needs to slowly mature. We expect to bring in more volunteers and committee members over time, and to equip them with delegate skills and confidence to advocate for and protect you, our members. We hope to grow strong enough that these positions will move from volunteer based to paid positions.

That doesn't mean we intend to adopt a traditional hierarchy; our members will continue to decide the direction we take, how we grow, and where we direct our focus.

Our membership is more diverse in terms of physical location, gender identity, and sexual expression than many traditional New Zealand unions. We have recognised that it's vital for us to include more tangata whenua voices, as their voices are vital to building a better tech industry. This means we are actively seeking out members who want to embody tikanga Māori and we will seek member-support to bring them into our leadership.

Helping members

In the last year, our leadership has:
- Visited worksites to talk about the role of the ATU, and hear tech workers' views about issues that affect them
- Published a guide to navigating employment agreements, including the common clauses and myths about what can and cannot be enforced by a contract
- Given advice to our student and graduate members about developing their careers

- Helped individual members with questions about their employment agreements, working conditions, and overtime payments
- Connected with the Migrant Workers Association of Aotearoa to help improve our understanding of what we need to do for migrant tech workers

Cooperation

At this time, our union is not affiliated with NZCTU. We do have a lively working relationship, and CTU has been useful in helping us to set up and grow as a fledgling union.

The ATU has been actively maintaining connections with other trade unions and organisations by meeting and collaborating directly. We have helped other unions and organisations to craft press responses, offered tech advice and provided a tech worker perspective when needed.

We are delighted to have strong friendships and regular contact with FIRST, Equity NZ, New Zealand Screen Writers Guild, PSA, Aotearoa Legal Workers' Union (ALWU), Action Station, and E Tū. Cordy has also met a number of independent mediators and community representatives who offered us advice on delegate skills and training.

Campaigns

We are a volunteer-run organisation; this includes all our campaign activities. ATU could organise and campaign around a wealth of potential campaigns and causes but this would stretch us thin. We soon realised that our time and energy needed to be conserved, and each campaign idea be evaluated before diving in head first. Thanks to Duck Lawn, Jason Danner, and Jess Ducey for giving us the wake-up call we needed and making sure we took care of our volunteers and ourselves.

We sought feedback from our members and from the sector about issues that people considered a priority. From this, we have focused on a few achievable campaigns that are relevant to our members.

Where possible, we have partnered up with other organisations to make the best use of our shared time and expertise. Examples where we have contributed to campaigns include working with ALWU to raise awareness about minimum wage legislation and unpaid overtime, and assisting the School Strike for Climate Change movement with web development and comms advice.

Two key resources we have released this year:
- [Minimum wage in tech](#)
- [Contracts and what's ok](#)

Other highlights from this year included waving the flag for ATU at WellyTech, the VUWWiT conference, NetHui, MBIE's Future of Tech forum, and a couple of CTU's organising conferences. Many of our members joined the School Strike for Climate Change this year - this action has inspired us to consider how we can grow in a more ecologically sustainable way.

Media coverage

ATU primarily responds to popular issues via Twitter, which reflects a rapid news cycle and the fact that tech stories often play out away from mainstream media.

Our founding press release resulted in various media coverage, including an article in the National Business Review, a feature episode with Access Granted podcast, and interviews/questions from mainstream media.

We responded to reports of an online 'security leak' at Treasury with an official correction, and replied to media inquiries about precarious work, climate change, and sustainability in the tech sector. You can read all of these on [our website](#).

Questions and considerations for you, our members

In the year ahead the ATU will continue to move and grow in whatever direction the membership and committee decide, and this first AGM is a key moment for your views to be heard.

What matters to **you** - what do you want out of your union?

Below we have briefly outlined some of the questions we are facing heading into our second year as a union. We'd love to hear your thoughts on these topics, either at the AGM or via email later on.

Direction of the ATU

Key decisions we are thinking about:
- Fee structure
- Volunteer workers and compensation strategies
- Affiliation with other organisations
- Which Tech worker's causes to support
- Sectors we should target for support
- External causes and alliances

Services we offer to our members

We currently handle personal enquiries and requests for advice on contracts and workplace interactions from our members. We have provided some generic advice on contracts and clauses that are difficult to enforce in NZ, but still common in contracts.

Bearing in mind that this is contingent on income, volunteer, or worker availability and union density. What other services would you like to see us offer to members?

Some examples might be:
- Draft contracts our tech start up members can use
- Legal advice during virtual office hours
- More local meet ups
- A monthly advice column where we take anonymised tech workers stories and publish our advice
- Developing collective agreements

Voice to Government

We're starting to get more vocal as an advocate and voice to government for our sector. The government is changing certain pieces of key legislation that affect us, and we will seek to put your views forward.

Some examples of changes we would ask for your input on:

- The controversial "hobbit law" for short term contracts that impacts game industry and other screen industry workers (in conjunction with other Unions)
- Immigration policy that impacts workers joining the tech sector
- Education policy that impact tech workers and the tech sector
- R&D funding grant evaluation criteria that looks for specific tech buzzwords
- Taxation policy around company equity

Advocacy for Tech Workers

Some things in our environment will also influence what we do. In some cases, these demand an answer. While we cannot anticipate what all of these will be, the general election in 2020 is a likely point of discussion.

- What causes, if any, would you like us to be involved with during that cycle?

We've already heard from some members that you'd like us to take a stand on certain issues, and we will be polling out membership to find out where we stand as a whole on the following:
- Sustainability and environmental issues
- Ethical and moral issues around tech and the things we build
- Diversity and inclusion in tech
- Tech issues that affect the rainbow community
- Living Wage

Communication with members

We're keen to hear how you would like us to canvass and put forth your views on any and all of the issues we've talked about above.

Would you prefer:
- Twitter surveys
- Google Form surveys in our regular emails
- Virtual union meetings where we take a live poll via Zoom
- Something else awesome that we haven't yet thought of?

Thanks

Signatories and founding members (some of who have moved on)

Individuals:
Lucy Stewart - Contributions to the initial charter

External Support and Allies
Andrew Chick, CTU
Louisa Jones, FIRST Union
Melissa Ansell-Bridges (Equity New Zealand)
Aotearoa Legal Workers Union (ALWU)

Most importantly, thank you to you, our members. We couldn't have come this far without you, and we look forward to how far we will go towards making Aotearoa the best place to work in tech in the coming year.

As the union movement continues to grow in tech internationally we expect it will garner more media interest here as well. Workers in Silicon Valley are organising more and more (Kickstarter, Google, Palantir, and many more), and we don't expect it to slow down any time soon.

This last year has been focussed on building a sustainable union that will last. We've built our processes and standards, while managing to get a few campaigns completed along the way.

The future we see is a bright one, where we spend more time engaging directly with our members, building campaigns for you and growing our membership base to include all those tech workers who need a voice.

Cordy Black   Kate Pearce
Co-leader   Co-leader