

## Case Study: Algemene Onderwijsbond - AOb (Netherlands)

### Context:

AOb, the General Education Union, represents education workers across all education sectors in the Netherlands, from Early Years through to Higher Education and Research Institutes. The union has over 87,000 members and is a member of the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV). Within the union there are a number of specialist groups and committees representing particular sectors, for example primary and secondary education, and also distinctive branches of the NL system, such as members working in schools based on faith-based groups. AOb has a specific group formed of younger members, known as the *Green Wave*. The different education sectors are represented within the union by Sector Boards, with each Board is linked to its relevant Assembly.

The industrial relations framework is well established with collective agreements enforceable through law. The system is often characterised as one that values collaboration between stakeholders and the union is well positioned within this framework and involved in co-partnership working. However, in practice there can be considerable tensions, and the union and its members face many challenges. Some of these issues are exacerbated by a school system that has several centralising elements (including collective bargaining over pay and working hours), but which also depends on very high levels of decentralisation. For example, schools are given a 'lump sum' budget and have complete autonomy on how to allocate resources. This can lead to considerable variation at the school level, including in relation to issues that are nationally negotiated. For example, working hours are the outcome of national negotiations, but local decision-making can have a considerable impact on actual workloads experienced by teachers in different schools.

The political context has been framed by various coalition governments, but a constant that has been consistent across all governments has been a commitment to austerity-based economics and attacks on public spending. Against this background the union has secured some significant successes – including a 10% pay rise in the period after Covid-19 and the closing of the deeply divisive pay gap that existed between primary and secondary

teachers. However, the central issue for teachers is less about pay, and more about workload. One union official made the following observation:

*For the first time in years, for our members, pay is not the main issue. Inflation is rising but we have a 5% pay rise this year, and won 10% after Covid. The biggest problem is workload – workload, workload, workload and workload! The contact hours in secondary schools are very high – and even higher in primary schools.*

These problems inevitably impact the labour market and contribute directly to the shortages of teachers being experienced in the Netherlands. This state of affairs should arguably favour the union by increasing union members' labour market power, but ironically it also causes problems. Rather than contributing to union action, teacher shortages make it easier for a teacher who faces a problem in their school to simply move schools – thereby individualising the solution rather than collectivising it. When this happens the workload problem moves around schools, rather than being tackled systematically.

### **What does 'local leadership' look like?**

Schools are encouraged to have a school representative, but this role is quite limited. The principal role of the school representative is to convey information that comes from the union to members, although there is a generally limited expectation that school representatives will communicate information from the members to the union. Their role may become more conspicuous at times of union action, for example during recent strike actions. The union has an aspiration for a representative in every school, but one union official indicated that the union does not know where schools have, or do not have, a representative, and where representatives exist 'we do not know how active they are'. For example, there is a hope that school representatives will 'pass on' to members the information they receive, but there is limited evidence about the extent to which this happens.

For the union, the most significant in-person relationship with members is that of the 'sectorconsulent'. This person is appointed by the union, through a standard selection

process, into a fractional contract. For most of the time, they continue with their substantive job working in an educational institution and as such they retain their intimate knowledge of real world work experiences. However, as a *sectorconsulent* they typically have one day per week to support union members in their sector and region.

*Sectorconsulents* work with members through in-person and online interactions. They provide two-way communication, ensuring that key union messages are communicated directly to members, but also acting to convey member concerns back to the union. AOb's website describes this aspect of the role in the following terms:

*You listen well and you see how things are going. That broadens your view. You discover what our colleagues are concerned with so that the Algemene Onderwijsbond can get started with that.*

*Sectorconsulents* are able to visit schools and try to resolve problems where they are able to do so. Where this is not possible, the issues are escalated within the union to a more senior level.

Alongside the school representatives, and *sectorconsulents*, the union offers a telephone based service that members can use to raise any problems they may be experiencing. This is clearly not an in-person service but it is acknowledged that for many members this is their most immediate contact with the union. As one union official indicated:

*It depends where you are. I would hope in most cases it is the sectorconsulent. In my school it will be me – because my colleagues know my union role – but if you ask in other schools, it's the phone number. You've got a problem – so you call the union.*

There are obvious advantages of such a system as members know they can receive a fast, efficient and reliable service. However, it is recognised that this can create a transactional relationship between the member and the union in which the member is dependent, and expects, others to fix the problem. The union is seeking to change this understanding of the union among many members – so that members see they are capable of fixing their own problems. However, this is currently work in progress.

One approach is to build up the role of the school representative so that they see themselves as more than a conduit of messages from the union to members, but rather they seek to develop a union identity among union members in the school. In such cases school representatives become a spokesperson for AOb members in the school – communicating back to the union, but also potentially to the school management. In these cases the *sectorconsulent* can offer a co-ordinating role as they develop networks of school representatives. This ‘group building’ at school level is very successful in some regions, but it also tends to be easier where there is a culture in the school of collaborative working. Where the school has serious problems, and the culture is ‘broken’, then there is often an element of managerial intimidation that creates fear. In these cases building a union identity among staff is more complex.

In an interview one union official indicated that this work is emergent and embryonic. It involves some significant re-thinking of traditional ways of managing union activity, and as such solutions and strategies are still being developed. For example, it was indicated that the union has not yet settled on how it wants *sectorconsulents* and school representatives to divide their activities. The union is looking to develop more activist cultures, and there is a button on the union’s website inviting members to become more involved – ‘but we haven’t quite worked out what we can offer to people who press that button, beyond getting involved in the usual activities and meetings’. There is an additional concern that if school representatives take on additional responsibilities they may over-reach their brief. For example, what might happen if a school representative provided poor, indeed incorrect, advice to a member? These are still issues that need some thinking through in the union.

The union is also organising more directly around professional issues, and not only industrial issues. This involves a series of very successful webinars on issues such as educational science and artificial intelligence, while the union has also developed its own professional development for members around teacher leadership. The union is currently developing a range of networks focused on key educational issues.

### **How are local leaders identified and developed?**

School representatives have very informal roles in their institutions. As this role is relatively 'low stakes', school representatives typically emerge by volunteering to take the role on. In some cases *sectorconsulents* may have actively recruited the representative. Training is available to school representatives, but there is also a form of peer-learning through collective problem-solving where some school representatives are networked together using electronic communications such as *WhatsApp*. Where this works well it tends to happen because *sectorconsulents* are proactive in organising school representatives to network together. It depends on *sectorconsulents* being confident and comfortable to work in this way.

*Sectorconsulents* are appointed posts, following advertisement and open competition. There may be informal encouragement to apply for such posts, but this is limited by the need to ensure equality of opportunity in the selection process. AOb has a comprehensive training programme for members in multiple contexts, and this includes training for *sectorconsulents*.

### **How do local leaders link to the formal democracy of the union?**

The very informal role of school representatives means that they cannot be considered to provide a link to the formal democracy of the union, and they are not intended to do so. However, this means they perform a necessarily limited role in terms of 'linking' members in workplaces to formal union structures.

Similarly, *schoolconsulents*, are union employees rather than elected members of the workforce and so their role is more focused on problem-solving for individual members and supporting school representatives. Members who become more active in the union, and who participate actively in its democratic structures, are likely to do so by engaging with the union's traditional structures.

### **Are there dedicated programmes to support particular groups in the union?**

The Netherlands is a diverse country, in particular in its urban areas. The union has developed guidelines and criteria to ensure its collective bargaining agreements address diversity and equalities issues. However, there is a recognition that those engaged in union activity, and holding union roles, do not always reflect the diversity of the workforce and the community. The union is exploring a number of ways to address these issues, but it does not, as yet, develop specific programmes for members of particular demographic groups.