

## Case Study: Lithuanian Education and Science Trade Union - LESTU

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(Senior LESTU official)

### Context:

LESTU is the largest education trade union in Lithuania and has over 12,000 members and represents education workers in all fields of education, ranging from pre-primary teachers to lecturers and researchers in universities and vocational education and training (VET) schools. Higher education workers are typically represented by another union - Association of Lithuanian Higher Education Trade Unions (LAMPSS), but LESTU also has members from higher education institutions. LESTU is a member of the Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation (LPSK) and is the largest trade union member of that organisation. The union has a significant role in both the education sector and in civil society more widely. Its strength helps to explain why LESTU was able to secure a ground-breaking collective agreement in 2017 which represented a major step forward not only for the trade union, but also enshrined in law a constant annual increase in the wages of education sector employees. The education sector collective agreement was the first such agreement in Lithuania and provides for annual negotiations over key terms of conditions - wages and additional social guarantees for trade union members. As every year, negotiations on the renewal of the collective agreement took place in 2025, and the result of these negotiations was an agreement that on January 1, 2026, the wages of employees in the education sector will increase by 7.65 percent.

LESTU is politically independent and in dialogue with employers is deeply committed to influence the education policy formatted by the Government and the Parliament. The trade union has developed constructive relations with government, which is currently a centre-left coalition with the Prime Minister, Inga Ruginienė, being a previous Chair of LPSK (from 2018-24). However the country faces numerous challenges, and these inevitably impact the education sector. The war in Ukraine has generated considerable insecurity and a commitment to increase military spending is putting public spending in other areas under pressure. LESTU faced serious challenges in negotiating the renewal of the collective agreement and the state budget for the next 3 years, including its education component. However, an agreement was reached, although doubts remain about how the government will be able to meet its obligations under the collective agreement in the future. At the same time teachers report that commitments to inclusive education are not being properly resourced and are creating considerable pressure, while research of the education sector on psychological violence conducted in 2023, commissioned by LESTU, revealed that

teachers are experiencing high and different levels of systemic pressure from multiple sources, including students, managers and often parents. The study data shows that 33 percent of the teachers surveyed have experienced physical violence from students. Psychological violence is increasingly becoming a reason why teachers leave the education system, and many new entrants into teaching are not willing to work in such conditions.

LESTU has achieved some considerable successes, not least the 2017 Collective Agreement and its annual updates, and the union's prominent role in civil and political society. However, it must constantly consider its own renewal. The average age of a Lithuanian teacher is 51 years and only 4% are thirty years old or younger. Maintaining the union's strength and influence will require a commitment to constantly rebuild. One element of this process of renewal is a commitment to create a 'community culture' around the union, in which members are encouraged to feel that they belong to the union with a group identity, rather than being individualised payers of their subscription. One official commented that the union should be a place where members can have a great time together as well as experience its more serious elements - training, participation in formal events and conferences.

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

The trade union is organised at three levels, national, municipal and workplace, with union officers elected at all levels. The trade union can make collective agreements at all of these levels, including at workplace/school level. One feature of these agreements is that some of the benefits that have been negotiated by LESTU are only available to LESTU members. These include provisions for additional three rest days, three days for self-study or volunteering, 10 days of study leave, 5 days to improve one's health, 3 days a year off for work related to trade union activities and 72 hours per year for trade union representatives to perform their duties and they offer an obvious and tangible benefit of union membership, that understandably supports recruitment. The overarching framework for these agreements is the 2017 Collective Agreement, but there continues to be real and meaningful flexibility relating to the negotiation of agreements at the school level. This type of school-based bargaining can present complications for trade unions, but it also provides an obvious organising focus for the union which can press for improved terms and conditions in a number of areas, including pay supplements or working practices (such as remote working).

These school-based agreements are negotiated by LESTU's workplace representative, supported if required by regional, and sometimes national, officers. Any workplace with three LESTU members is able to elect a LESTU representative, and the representative is able to negotiate a school-based agreement. The national education sector collective agreement ensures the workplace representative has 72 hours per year time off to undertake trade union

duties, and the representative is also protected from dismissal, thus limiting the potential for victimisation.

Where trade unions are well organised at the workplace, they are able to achieve tangible improvements for members. They can also provide a bulwark against managers who are reluctant to adopt collaborative practices, but instead prefer to act unilaterally.

As well as being able to secure practical advances for union members in their schools, the union representatives become the 'face' of the union to other union members. One official put it in the following terms:

*I always say to the workplace representatives that I can't do what they do - I can't. I could create a social media campaign using Facebook and Instagram to show what a fantastic organisation we are. But they are the people who really show to our members what this organisation is. They are like a face of the organisation - how they react, how they help.*

*How we manage things at school between members and the management of the school, they are the people who do that. That's why I think they are the most important people in our organisation.*

The union intentionally encourages school-based representatives to resolve their own workplace problems by drawing on their own resources. Support is available, and workplace representatives are encouraged to escalate issues if they need to – but the union is keen for members to not see help from elsewhere in the union as the default solution to every problem.

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

LESTU recognises that because local leaders, at the municipal and school level, carry considerable responsibility (due to their involvement in collective bargaining) then it is important to provide them with appropriate support. The trade union has recently developed an expanded leadership programme in association with one of the Lithuanian universities. The programme comprises a 'theoretical' and a practical element and it involves simulations to help participants develop the skills to navigate complex negotiating environments.

Training programmes are aimed at different levels of leadership, as well as being directed to the membership more widely. For example, municipal leaders can access training focused on a range of negotiating issues, while member focused training is more likely to address wider issues of knowledge and awareness raising, for example, in relation to Artificial Intelligence.

The trade union places a high priority on training and leadership development, although there is a view that the programme currently on offer is not as good as it might be in terms of reaching those it needs to support. The trade union is therefore reviewing its current provision in order to enhance its effectiveness. The focus will be on ensuring training programmes are accessible to those who already have limited time due to their significant roles.

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

Because of the bargaining structures discussed above LESTU's workplace leaders are already deeply embedded in the formal democracy of the union. The union-negotiated collective agreement sets out clear roles, rights and expectations relating to the roles of workplace representatives with formal elections, access to the school management, and direct links to structures at the municipal level.

Individual members get to elect their workplace representative and through this role members are plugged into the democratic structures of the union. Where there exists municipality organisation workplace representatives are contacted by the trade union's municipality leadership and engaged in knowledge sharing in a two way process with information flowing upwards and downwards. In this context knowledge flows also work horizontally as workplace representative are brought together to share experiences and engage in collective problem-solving.

The union's formal democracy is understandably important, but emphasis is also placed on encouraging informality, and creating spaces for workplace leaders to network outside of the formal structures and their committees. Social occasions are built into the calendar to facilitate relationship building, and the construction of a union community.

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

At this time the union is focused on general programmes to develop leaders. There are no formal programmes directed specifically at, for example, younger members, but there is a very extensive programme for new members about trade union activities, which LESTU calls the 'trade union

alphabet'. It is recognised that by developing leadership closer to the members then it is likely that those taking on union roles will look more like the union's wider membership in all its diversity.