

Case Study: Pedagógusok Szakszervezete - PSZ (Hungary)

We try to show that power is in community – and we are trying to build community in the workplace.

(PSZ Vice-President)

Context:

The Hungarian teachers' union (PSZ) represents all types of education workers (teachers and education support personnel) in the Hungarian education system from Early Years through to personnel in Technical and Vocational Education and Training. The union is not the only union organising in these sectors, and the union does not represent members in the higher education and research sectors. The union is a member of the Szakszervezetek Együtműködési Fóruma (SZEF) trade union confederation in Hungary.

The union faces substantial challenges, many of which are linked to the increasing authoritarianism in the country associated with the government of Viktor Orbán. These trends within the Orbán administration are well known in terms of their impact on education (see for example the forced closure of the Central European University), but also include attacks on wider trade union rights. Many national policies and government communications are intentionally divisive and are intended to consolidate government support by creating a culture of fear. This is evident in relation to groups including migrants and members of the LGBTQ communities. Those associated with independent and free thinking, such as journalists, judges and educators were recently characterised by the Prime Minister as 'bugs' or insects that needed to be eradicated³.

The Orbán government attack on independent and critical thinking has a clear focus on the education sector. The government has created a highly centralised system in which power is concentrated in Districts and the organisation that represents the 60 different Districts. School principals are appointed by the Ministry on the advice of school district principals. Political patronage ensures that those in key roles are compliant in relation to implementing government policies. This includes the adoption of the national curriculum that provides teachers with very little space to exercise their professional judgement. Text books are all government authorised. At the present time there is no Ministry of Education, but rather education policy is the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior.

Despite these difficulties teachers have been successful in securing important pay rises. This was partly driven by labour market necessity (teachers' salaries were 50% of average graduate

salaries) but also resulted from combined pressure from the European Commission (who helped with funding) and Hungary's trade unions. PSZ was able to combine effective lobbying of the EC, together with militant action by its own members, to force the government to raise pay. By January 2024 this was 72% of average graduate salaries and in January 2025 the figure had risen 80%. Since then the government has point blank refused to negotiate further on pay, and this situation will not change until after elections in 2026. Pay for education support personnel continues to be very poor, and is the focus of a sustained campaign by PSZ.

The environment can clearly be considered hostile when looking at the spaces for trade unions to function and exercise their, albeit limited, democratic rights. However, PSZ has developed a strategic response to ensure it continues to grow in difficult times. In such circumstances the union's focus on renewal becomes even more important. Strategically it recognises that, in the current moment, progress on pay at the national level is not possible – so the union pivots to where it can make progress and win – at the level of individual employers, and in some cases in individual schools.

What does 'local leadership' look like?

The union has a traditional hierarchical structure based on developing organisational capacity at the national, regional, City and school level. Within the union power has historically been focused on strong regional structures, and these continue to be key. Membership records and contact details for members are held at the regional level. However, the union's renewal strategy has been sharply focused on building union organisation at the base – in workplaces. This has involved the development of the role of the workplace leader. In many cases the workplace leader is the union's formal school representative, but in other cases the emergent workplace leader is an ordinary union member without any formal status as a school union representative. In some cases, the emergent workplace leader is not a member of the union at all, but has been identified as an individual capable of winning the trust of union members and work colleagues.

Historically, union workplace representatives have had a strong service-oriented perspective, rooted in the legacy of soviet era trade unionism when 'the union' was seen as a source of services such as pensions and social insurance. Trying to change this thinking is the 'mindset shift' the union's renewal strategy is intended transform. As one union official stated 'they [the members] are the ones who can solve their own problems'. She continued 'We want a mindset change – "you are the ones who can make changes - real changes. At your own workplace".' This is a substantial shift in thinking, and it must be nurtured. It is an educative process in which members learn to think differently – and then translate new thinking into changed actions. From dependence and passivity to independence and action. The change represents a mindset shift within the union, as well as among members. In some regions the change is well understood and

the local leadership is enthusiastic. In other areas, there is still a need to persuade union officers of the need for change. The rate of progress is uneven, as might be expected.

How are local leaders identified and developed?

Local leaders are identified and developed through a process of careful leader identification, education and by engaging in structured and purposeful action. People develop as local leaders through, and in, action – supported by education, training and a form of coaching.

The union adopts a six step educational programme that focuses on organising that has been developed and disseminated by PSZ's national confederation. The intention is to identify the issues that are key to members' concerns, and then develop strategies, involving negotiating and campaigns, to bring about improvements.

The process begins by mapping union organisation (and hence union power) in designated geographical areas. As one union official noted – 'we need to know where our resources are'. National and regional representatives develop their analysis of where the union is strong and not so strong, then a strategic decision is taken to focus on a specific employer, in a specific area, where the union already has a level of organisation. A key principle is to organise where there is strength, and use the example of winning to inspire and organise in those areas that are less strong.

Once an employer has been identified the regional representative convenes a meeting of workplace leaders, encouraging attendance by the maximum number of workplace representatives. Workplace representatives are trained in basic organising skills and return to their school to conduct a questionnaire with as many staff as possible. The survey is short and simple – it asks respondents to identify their workplace grievances and to highlight the one issue at their school they would most like to change. They are also invited to provide their name and contact details. This is optional, but it is important as it helps to build the database of those sympathetic to the union's agenda. Crucially, the questionnaire is distributed in person, and not electronically. The PSZ official noted – 'when you hand out a survey directly, it becomes the start of a conversation'.

Survey results are analysed by national and regional officers, and a second questionnaire is designed. This is more sharply focused, drawing on the results of the first survey. A second workshop is called with the workplace representatives and they are invited to finesse the final copy of the second questionnaire. There is also support provided to representatives so that they

feel confident having conversations about these issues in their schools. The representatives undertake the second survey – and with each iteration they build a relationship with their colleagues, and they develop a deeper understanding of how individual members think about the issues.

Analysis of the second survey allows the union to focus on key issues that are a source of grievance for workers, and where feelings about the issues are strongly held. It also provides the union with critical data about its own power. For example, if the second survey has a lower response than the first survey then self-critical questions about trajectory and momentum need to be confronted. As the official stated – ‘we always follow the numbers’. Assuming positive data the aim is to develop an employer level campaign to address the issue, or issues, highlighted in the survey. However, in some cases the survey results point to a particular issue in an individual school, in which case the union can take action accordingly.

The whole process is conducted in a way that gives the workplaces representatives maximum agency. There is no guarantee the union’s campaign will be successful, but its chances of success are increased as the issue reflects members’ concerns, and is rooted in a democratic process that involved members at all key stages. The process itself is driven by the workplace leaders – who develop their relationship with their colleagues as the process progresses from step to step. Workplace representatives develop as leaders as they build confidence that flows from having an enhanced credibility and legitimacy with their colleagues. They are supported by regional staff, with contact that is always ‘live’ (in person or by phone). There is a recognition that relationships matter and email and other forms of electronic communication are avoided. Training, and coaching, are also key to the support provided to workplace leaders.

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

The fact that not all workplace leaders are necessarily union members indicates that there is a strong dependence on developing informal links, and building strong networks within and across workplaces. These will often be closely connected to union structures, but the key aim is a lively workplace culture that engages and involves employees – both union and non-union members. This does not conflict with the union’s formal democracy, but the hope is that union democracy can be made deeper and richer by mixing the need for structure with the experience of vibrant, participatory workplace cultures that become union focused.

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

At the present time, the principal focus is on building strong workplace organisation, often in an environment that at national and workplace level can be profoundly antagonistic to union organising. The feelings of fear experienced by many members can be palpable, and there can be real consequences if members experience victimisation of any sort. In such circumstances building the maximum possible unity of workers, around basic issues that are capable of unifying people is the priority. However, the organising methods used have been developed by those with connections to PSZ's young members' section and it is to be hoped that building stronger workplace organisation will draw in newer and younger members. Whether this is the actual outcome will depend in large part on whether Hungarian teachers can build an education system that young teachers want to work in, and stay working in.