



Getting Stronger Together:
Trade Union Renewal in Education

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Introduction

Those who work in educational institutions, from early years education and care through to adult and higher education, face many challenges. The problems of underinvestment in public education, in particular since the global financial crisis, are well documented. However, in recent years the situation has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, followed swiftly by the invasion of Ukraine and a global cost of living crisis. It is unsurprising therefore that many parts of the education system across Europe also face a labour supply crisis. Insufficient funding, ever more demanding work and falling real terms pay feed directly into chronic problems of both recruitment and retention of staff (Stevenson and Milner, 2023).

In such circumstances education workers have looked to their trade unions for protection – to provide a safe and sustainable working environment, and to maintain the real value of salaries. In very many cases, education workers have taken industrial action to defend themselves. For some educators, the need for collective organisation and trade unions has assumed a relevance that may not have existed previously.

The challenge for education trade unions is to capitalise on these trends and developments, partly by organising effective collective action that makes a tangible difference to the lives of members, but also to build on current levels of interest in unions so that new members retain their membership and participation in the union. This is what is meant by ‘union renewal’ – the building of union organisation at the base in a way that grows union power and effectiveness. It is increasingly evident in some form across Europe (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017).

Examples of this type of work were already well underway in many education unions before the impact of Covid-19, and the European Trade Union Committee for Education’s (ETUCE) [Your Turn!](#) report provided multiple case studies of union’s engaging in diverse renewal processes in ways that reflected their specific challenges and their unique contexts (Stevenson et al. 2020). Based on this work the report presented a framework for education trade union renewal (see Appendix 1), and also a [Handbook for Critical Reflection](#) (ETUCE, 2020) to support unions looking to engage with the Your Turn! framework.

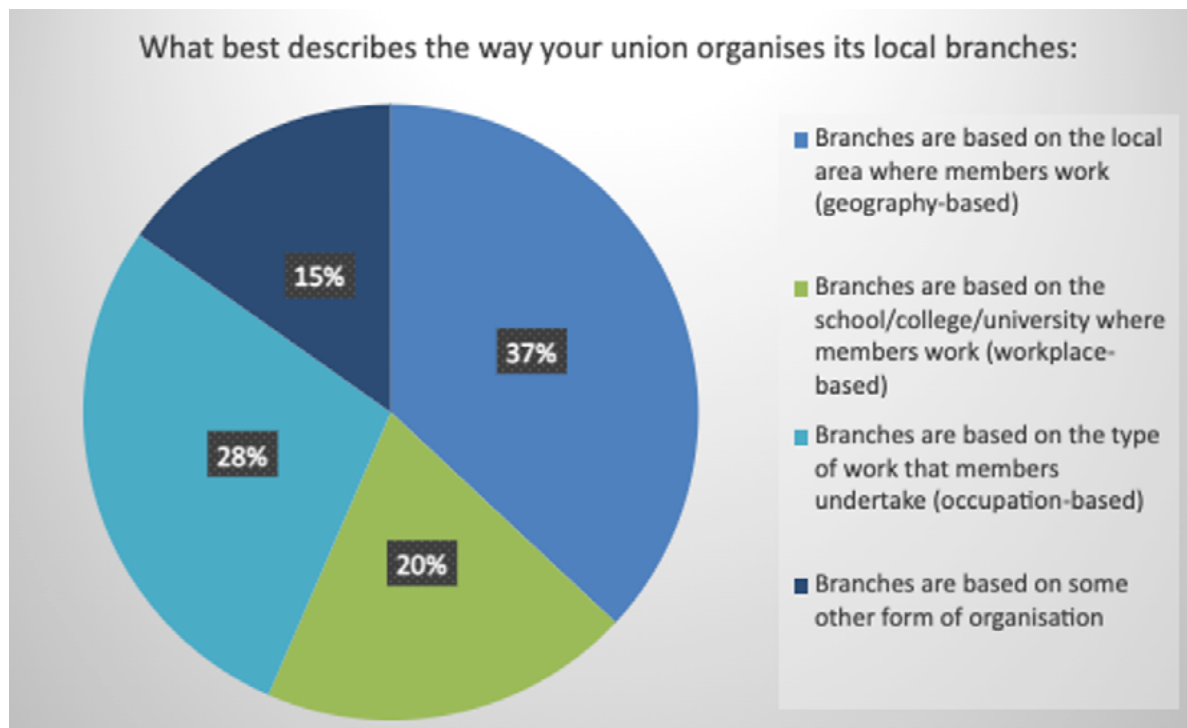
This report provides an insight into how ETUCE member organisations are engaging with ideas that were initially presented in the Your Turn! report and framework. It presents findings from a survey of ETUCE member organisations and focuses on three key themes drawn from the framework (survey details in Appendix 2). It is followed by three short case studies that each illustrate the key themes and offer interesting examples of how different education trade unions are engaging with contemporary developments in ways that both support education workers, and build trade union power to face future challenges. The three themes in this report focus on:

- Building workplace organisation and leadership
- Developing future leaders through education and training
- Strengthening democratic engagement through organisational change

Branch and Workplace Organisation

An important factor in how workers engage with their union is its local organisation, as this is where the union is 'closest' to members. Typically, the union branch is the basic democratic unit of the union, although in the education sector it is clear branches are organised in diverse ways. Most commonly branches are based on a geographical location (37%), with occupation and workplace-based branches also common (union branches based on workplaces are more common in the higher education sector, where workplaces are usually larger).

Figure 1. Union branch organisation



Workplace union organisation therefore assumes a range of forms. Although only 20% of unions organise workplace-based branches it is also evident that more informal workplace-based organisation is common. Respondents indicated that members were able to meet as union members in their own workplace (only 2 respondents indicated this was not the case), and 89% of respondents indicated the union had a staff member who acted as a general union representative in the workplace (the equivalent figure for dedicated health and safety representatives was 59%). A majority of unions (58%) indicated that formal, constitutional bodies existed at workplace level that had staff representation, and in 50% of these cases the union had guaranteed representation.

Where workplace representatives exist the overwhelming majority (92% of unions) are able to access specific training provided for them. There are also efforts to network workplace representatives with each other both locally (87%), and less commonly, nationally (62%). It would appear that many of these opportunities exist through local branch networks although clearly availability and participation are not equivalent (that is, the opportunity and the ‘take up’ are not the same).

The importance of workplace representatives was indicated clearly by the data, with representatives playing a significant role in several respects. Most obviously, workplace representatives provide a two-way link between individuals members in workplaces and the wider union organisation (typically the local branch). However, workplace representatives also play an important role in relationships with their workplace management, with most unions indicating workplace representatives were engaged in consultations, and in some cases negotiations, at workplace level.

Table 1: the role of the workplace representative

Are union workplace representatives involved in . . .	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %
Communicating between members and the union	2	43	55
Consultations with management in the workplace	7	45	48
Negotiations with management in the workplace (formal and informal)	10	42	48

The data indicates that even in centralised systems, where formal collective bargaining is concentrated at the national level, workplace representatives play a key role in shaping local decision-making, whether that is making local agreements or being engaged in decisions about the local implementation of the outcomes of higher level bargaining. Such negotiations may be more informal, given that the line between formal and informal can be a difficult one to draw, but in terms of the direct and tangible impact on the quality of members’ working lives, it appears clear that the role of workplace organisation, made visible by a workplace representative, can be significant.

In some cases unions had engaged in strategic talent-spotting within the organisation to develop workplace leaders to build campaigns on specific issues. As one respondent indicated:

We hand selected natural workplace leaders to join a group with responsibility for coordinating our campaign against precarious employment in the sector. This group was able to meet outside of the rigid rules of nominations / elections, without the need for formal quora, minutes etc and was able to encourage a new type of activist to engage with us and to assist our work.

The above example is interesting in the way that it intentionally developed more informal and less bureaucratic ways of working as a means to draw members further into the organisation. It highlights what can be seen as a disconnect, and even a tension, between formal and informal democratic structures (Stevenson, 2024a). In another example one union reported how it used its membership database to identify workplaces without a union representative in order to recruit someone into the role, avoiding the danger of ‘cold spots’ where the union has no presence or visibility.

The importance of the workplace leader and organisation is discussed in the case study from FSLI, Romania.

Building union capacity through education and training

Education and training programmes play a significant role in both engaging with members (supporting them in their work, and helping draw them into closer links with the union) and developing activists in the union (through building knowledge and expertise and also developing leadership skills).

Training programmes are typically delivered by union officials (that is, those who are paid as union workers) with programmes delivered at both the national (93%) and local (85%) level. However, a significant proportion of unions (58%) use local union activists to deliver training to other members and/or activists in some form. Involving local activists in training has obvious resource implications, but it also confers significant benefits in terms of connecting members with their local union and also developing the leadership capacities of those providing the training.

Example: One union provides a comprehensive training programme for its workplace representatives. The course is at two levels, Foundation and Advanced, and has traditionally been delivered by union officials. However, as the number of workplace representatives to be trained has increased the union is beginning to make more use of local union leaders to deliver the programme. The union reported there are risks (in terms of ensuring quality and consistency in a programme that is seen as critically important) but ‘the pay off in terms of leadership development and networking’ will be substantial.

A significant proportion of unions (nearly one-third) provide training programmes in conjunction with other education trade unions, although providing training programmes with other non-education sector unions was more common (37%). Nearly half of unions work with other organisations in civil society to provide training, while more than two-thirds offered training with partner organisations such as universities.

Table 2. Union training: collaborations with other organisations

Education and training events are organised with other partner organisations (e.g. universities)	68%
Education and training events are organised with civil society organisations	47%
Education and training events are organised with other non-education sector unions	37%
Education and training events are organised with other education sector unions	32%

The range of issues covered by union training programmes is reported below.

Table 3. Union training for general members: course focus

Your union provides education and training to members on the following topics . . .	
Union structures eg 'How to get involved in your union'	84%
Education policy issues	75%
Health and safety	75%
Curriculum and pedagogy	73%
Education and the law	68%
Equalities and anti-discrimination	61%
Social and environmental issues	59%
Mental health and well-being	59%
Career planning and development	52%
Political education	25%

The survey also invited respondents to identify the training programmes the union provides to those who are already active in the union and that are typically devoted to developing the skills of local officers to build the union and develop local campaigns.

Table 4. Union training for activist members and local union officers: course focus

Your union provides education and training programmes to activists on the following topics . . .	
Union organising and building	93%
Developing leadership skills in the union	63%
Organising and building local campaigns	55%
Using social media to promote union work	50%
Political education	33%

The importance of education and training programmes is discussed in the case study from SNES-FSU, France.

Building the union by providing ‘multiple ways in’ to union engagement and activism

Trade unions exist to draw together workers who possess shared interests (as workers in the same occupation, or those who work for the same employer) to amplify their power by acting collectively. By combining together individual employees can overcome divisions and challenge the power of the employer. However, such an approach often makes assumptions about the extent to which issues are experienced in the same way. Workforces are differentiated in multiple ways (job role, status, security of contract) and this can cause divisions. Moreover, employees do not exist purely as ‘workers’ but they also have other identities (including gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and (dis)ability) that are not only the basis of differences, but are often the source of additional discrimination and inequality. Put simply, the common experience of being a worker can be experienced very differently when intersecting identities are taken into consideration. Furthermore, inequalities in work can be replicated within the union as those who experience discrimination and marginalisation in the labour market may face similar experiences in their union. It is this latter issue that is the concern of this report. Unions will advocate on substantive equalities issues, and this will inevitably impact how members perceive their union. However, the focus on renewal is concerned with how unions organise in ways that addresses the interests and identities of those who feel under-represented in their union, articulated by one union activist we have interviewed who commented: ‘I went to my first union meeting, and realised the union did not look like me’.

Unions in the education sector and beyond adopt a range of positions in relation to these issues, and there is evidence of diverse practices in different contexts. In the Your Turn! study the report highlighted some of the ways education trade unions not only took up issues of equality, diversity and inclusion with their employers, but also developed their own practices to offer ‘multiple ways in’ to union members who have not always seen the union organisation as reflective of their experience and identity.

The data indicates that many unions prioritise a focus on engaging with young members, with a significant number of respondents indicating their union adopted practices aimed at this specific group.

Table 5: Union actions to support the engagement with new and young members

Does your union . . . ?	
Provide training specifically for new/young members	74%
Have a national official with designated responsibility for new/young members	63%
Have a national new/young members’ section	63%
Have a local officer (at branch level) for new/young members	40%
Hold a national new/young members’ conference	37%

One respondent commented: ‘Young employees and members is the only under-represented group

that is organised in a specific manner. The President of the Youth Committee is a valid member of the National Board and also sufficient budget is allocated for the activities of the Youth committee'. In another case a respondent highlighted the establishment of an 'Academy for Young Trade Unionists' that had been very effective in forming a leadership pipeline in which young members had taken on membership of Executive Boards at national and local levels.

On wider equalities issues the experiences were more variable, and lower survey responses for these questions suggest that practice is also less common. In the survey respondents were asked about a range of union practices related specifically to women, ethnic minority, LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning/intersex), disabled and migrant members. In an occupational sector where 75% of employees are women (and very much higher in some sectors such as Early Years Education and Care) it may be unsurprising that specific initiatives in relation to women members were most commonly cited. For example, of those who responded nearly half indicated they had a women's officer at local branch level and that they organised some sort of national conference for women members. Over two-thirds of those who responded have a national women's section, provide training specifically for women members and have a national official with designated responsibility for women members.

In the other areas highlighted by the survey, activity was more diverse and less common. The most frequently cited form of action was the appointment of a national official with responsibility for these issues, and in many cases this appears to be a broad 'equalities' role that covers some or all of the issues highlighted in the survey. One respondent indicated their union organised national conferences on equalities issues, but attendance was not restricted to members with specific characteristics, not least because the union did hold this data about its members. In another case one union reported that the union has some activity at a local level (in stronger branches), but 'nothing to the degree that allows me to tick any of the [survey] boxes'.

Provision of this type has clear resource implications and many smaller unions cannot contemplate offering a wide range of activities for particular groups within the union. Moreover, some of the open text survey responses indicated particular issues were not always seen as important, or relevant, to a union's context. Approaches will inevitably vary according to circumstance, but what some of the data clearly indicates is that investment in organising in these specific areas can grow union resources by drawing some people into union activism who may have felt discouraged previously, and who perhaps felt the union was 'not for them'. Creating spaces in which members can work with others who have shared identities and interests can offer an important way to advance social justice, and also build the union in a way that ensures the union 'looks like' its members.

The importance of building democratic engagement into union organisation is discussed in the case study from Sveriges Lärare, Sweden.

Conclusion

Several respondents indicated that their union typically grew membership when it was engaged in an action, and in particular when the outcome of the action was a tangible improvement in members' living standards and quality of working life. In the recent period, as the cost of living crisis has rapidly eroded real wages, many unions have been able to channel workers' sense of injustice, and have achieved significant advances for their members. In other instances, more localised campaigns (including at workplace level) have provided opportunities for unions to secure improvements for members, and in so doing demonstrated the value and importance of the union to all workers. This is the virtuous circle of union organising – strong, campaigning unions make a difference for workers, and securing improvements in working conditions helps recruit more members and build stronger unions.

However, material conditions change, and the favourable conditions that can help union organising can easily, and sometimes quickly, reverse. A focus on union renewal, drawing on the framework presented in the Your Turn! report, ensures that there is always a relentless focus on building union organisation and power. Sometimes conditions are favourable, and this work may appear more straightforward. Often the conditions cannot be considered favourable, and the task of building the union is more difficult. In this regard, the Your Turn! project's conclusions, which are reiterated in this short report, are important to remember – the strategic decisions and choices that unions make matter. Economic conditions may provide the terrain on which this work takes place, but what is most important is how individual unions negotiate and navigate the prevailing conditions. This report highlights some of the choices that individual unions are making, about building workplace organisation, training and developing activists and future leaders, and creating democratic spaces to make it easier for all union members to become involved. Issues, and responses, are always framed by local contexts, but many challenges have common elements and learning 'horizontally' across the education trade union movement can help share experiences and improve collective learning.

Project Case Studies

The importance of workplace organisation and leadership

Case study: Federația sindicatelor libere din învățământ (FSLI), Romania

Key theme: Organise at the workplace: build at the base

Subsidiary themes: Educate to transform; Democratise change; Organise around work: connect the industrial and professional.

Context

In 2023 education workers in Romania were engaged in a huge mobilisation to secure improved working conditions. Protests involved mass national action, but this case study highlights the importance of building such movements in workplaces, and the key role of workplace leaders. The Romanian education system is notorious for its low levels of investment in public education (3.7% of GDP in 2021). Education workers have poor working conditions (including salaries) and teaching is not seen as attractive to young graduates. The cost of living crisis compounded these problems and in December 2022 education workers began their action. After initial protest actions education unions called a general strike in May 2023. The strikes involved 90% of education workers, and street protests in Bucharest in May and June attracted 40,000 people each time. The dispute was 'suspended' in June when an agreement between the government and trade unions secured an average 25% increase in pay and a collective agreement with 17 new provisions. The strikes were the first general strikes in education for 18 years.

A national movement: built at the base

FSLI is a national union, with a strong regional structure, based in the municipalities. It recruits employees from Early Years to Upper Secondary and it organises teachers, principals and support staff. Union members in each workplace elect one of their members to be their 'workplace leader'. At a national level the union has taken initiatives to recruit and develop workplace leaders, based on a conviction that members must take collective responsibility for making change happen – 'members need to feel part of something – that they are the organisation' (national official). Workplace leaders play a key role in recruiting new members, representing the views of members to the school management and linking members in schools to the union organisation in the region. As such they are involved in connecting the informal democracy of the workplace with the more

formal democracy of the union organisation, helping to bind individual members in schools into the collective culture of the union. During the general strikes this enhanced sense of commitment was crucial to securing support for the strikes and the street protests. This is illustrated through the example of one workplace leader, Anna.

Anna is an experienced teacher who became the union's workplace leader in her school during the pandemic. She describes herself as an 'informal leader' who was encouraged to become the union representative by her colleagues because of the trust they place in her. They appreciated her strong sense of justice, good judgement and her ability to inspire confidence across the staff group. In many ways she exemplifies the type of 'organic leader' described by Jane McAlevey (2016). Anna has developed as a leader to take on a wide range of roles, including representing her members' views to the school management, and acting as a link to the local union structures. During the strikes she was interviewed on TV, and she now trains other union members through a leadership programme. What is perhaps most significant about Anna is the way she builds cultures of solidarity in the workplace by promoting a strong sense of collective identity. She places a strong priority on 'togetherness' and the need to tackle problems through collective action. In describing her work she refers to 'persuading' and 'convincing' her colleagues of the need to act collectively – 'being together and thinking together'. In fundamental respects Anna describes her work as a workplace union leader in similar ways to how she talks about her role as a teacher. She is concerned with building trust, developing confidence and reframing collective thinking. In essence she is describing a form of 'educative leadership' (Stevenson, 2024b) that works to forge a collective identity and a sense of collective agency that binds colleagues together as union members, recognising that the union is the essential vehicle for effective collective action. As Anna herself recognised, there could be no successful action on salaries without union organisation providing a vehicle for education workers' grievances. However, there can be no union organisation without the type of union building undertaken by workplace leaders like Anna.

Conclusion

Workplace leaders play a key role in building union cultures. Such people make the union visible and tangible in the workplace. The union is no longer removed and remote but is experienced by members as something real. It has the ability to develop collective agency and to forge the virtuous circle that secures positive change at work, which then builds the union that in turn secures further change. However, the role of workplace leaders can be complex and the skills required are sophisticated. Leadership development does not happen by accident but needs to be addressed strategically and resourced appropriately.

The importance of leadership training and development

Case study: Syndicat national des enseignements de second degré - Fédération syndicale unitaire (SNES-FSU), France

Key theme: Educate to transform

Subsidiary themes: Organise around ideas: reframe the narrative; organise at the workplace: build at the base; organise around work: connect the industrial and the professional; organise for inequalities: mobilise for the under-represented; organise with community: build alliances and coalitions

Context

SNES-FSU represents secondary school teachers in lower (collège) and upper-secondary (lycée) schools in the public education system across France. There are four levels of union organisation: national, regional, district (département), and school.

Union renewal has long been a national priority of SNES-FSU, with the need for more younger activists in leadership positions a key concern at headquarters. Union education was identified as an area through which members might be engaged at all levels of the organisation.

The union has revised its activist training programmes (stages “nouveaux militants”) for four reasons:

1. SNES-FSU identified a need to train activists to develop union activity in the school workplace.
2. In 2016/2017, the union realised that many activists had gaps in political education on (educational) trade unionism. The new programmes seek to contextualise union demands in a broader historical and political context and make a link between theory and practice.
3. The national secretariat noted a large gap in women’s participation at local, regional and national levels. The new programme content aims to make the representation of marginalised groups more explicit.
4. Facing membership recruitment challenges, SNES-FSU identified the need to retain union power at national, regional and school levels. The training programmes were part of a national strategy to build capacity and increase influence over national and regional policies.

More broadly, SNES-FSU wishes to promote collective action in the context of national educational reforms and local recruitment policies which create professional disunity through distinctions in teachers’ pay and working conditions.

Linking teachers' struggles with wider social struggle

Since many reforms relate to the contract between state employers and workers, the programmes now have a greater focus on the public sector (la fonction publique d'état). To promote activism, SNES-FSU wants activists to have better understanding of the role and function of all public services in society. SNES-FSU believes that it cannot fight neoliberalism without collective mobilisation; teachers' struggles are similar to those of other public sector workers (Seal, 2017) e.g. labour market deregulation and the local employment of unqualified staff on different terms and conditions.

Programme topics include: Local union law in local public education establishments – how do we avoid union repression?; Presentation of the education system and the work of SNES in FSU; Men's and women's equality, sexual and gender-based violence at work; What public sector for the 21st century?; Communicating on local action.

Democratising training delivery

The programmes are designed by the SNES-FSU national secretariat and training unit but are delivered mostly at the national and regional levels. Training for school representatives is organised at the regional level but with branch latitude over implementation. It is the general view that regional branches have an important role in the implementation of training policies for young and new activists.

National senior officials deliver programmes face-to-face over two days at SNES-FSU headquarters in Paris. Activists then disseminate content at the regional level. When activist attendance is impossible, national senior officials offer a one-day programme in regional branches.

Programme content is adapted to the different school sectors. Lower secondary schools are often smaller and in rural areas; here, the workplace representative might be the only SNES-FSU member. Upper secondary schools are bigger and almost all have representatives; here, two to three members often work as a team to share the workload and have greater influence with the employer.

Increasing member engagement

In the past year, SNES-FSU has prioritised the need to increase membership and to draw on the 'untapped resource' (Vandaele and Zwysen, 2023) of union members not currently involved in formal activity. Recently, membership has grown but this could be related to the national struggle against pension reforms rather than the training programmes. There have been no formal evaluations yet.

Training programmes do not target specific marginalised groups. However, the secretariat has made recommendations to regional branches on how to improve the balance between members' professional and private lives e.g. no branch meetings after 4pm, subsidised crèche facilities. It is uncertain whether this has been fully implemented and too early to assess its impact on women's engagement. However, renewal is apparent at headquarters; in certain departments, younger colleagues have national responsibilities.

Developing future leaders

Julien joined SNES-FSU during his teacher education because it aligned with his unionist values. Following early experience as a member of school boards, in 2016, he was invited to a district congress, where he was offered the opportunity to be a member of the district board of SNES-FSU. His activist work started here.

The training programmes helped Julien answer colleagues' questions and handle cases more effectively. Case studies and role play activities enabled him to develop strategies for complex meetings e.g. how to communicate with journalists. Additionally, activist participants gain a better understanding of educational reforms and, according to Julien, the 'political weapons' to deal with various situations. A senior official noted the importance of communication and public presentation skills to activism. She believed that working alongside more experienced activists gave members greater confidence to become representatives.

Julien believes that the training programmes are a good way to identify future talent. However, in his view, they do not guarantee members willingness to be 'on the frontline'; activism requires engagement but is ultimately a process which develops over time.

Conclusion

Union education and training situates trade union activity within a broader political context in which the defence of public education can be connected to a larger fight for quality public services. Through the development of professional and personal skills, activists can be inspired to take on leadership roles at all organisational levels. With an inclusive orientation, union education and training can increase the active participation of marginalised groups. However, various factors need to be considered in course design e.g. sector-specific content, time and location, training capacity. Moreover, evaluation is important to understanding the extent, diversity, and impact of member engagement.

The importance of strengthening democratic engagement through organisational change

Case study: Sveriges Lärare, Sweden

Key theme: Democratising change

Subsidiary themes: Organising around ideas; reframe the narrative; organise at the workplace: build at the base; organise with community: build alliances and coalitions

Context:

On 1 January 2023, Lärarförbundet and Lärarnas Riksförbund amalgamated into Sveriges Lärare, a new teacher union with over 300,000 members. Previous attempts at merger had failed to materialise in part linked to Lärarnas Riksförbund members' desire to maintain their professional identities within a separate union. In 2019, the two unions – along with Sveriges Skolledarförbund, the school leader union – began to discuss, and consult members on, the formation of two new unions (one for teachers and the other for school leaders, some of whom had been organised in Lärarförbundet). With resources coordinated and interests aligned at the national level, Sveriges Lärare now has an opportunity to build power through an organisational form and constitution which promotes democratic engagement at all levels (Milner et al. 2024).

Large divergences in municipal educational expenditure per student, alongside the growing independent school movement, have had a negative impact on municipal school resources and teachers' pay and working conditions. As Sveriges Lärare launched, municipalities announced a cap on education budgets. In response, local branch officials began to organise members through social media, demonstrations, and political education, and subsequently requested support from headquarters.

Organisational change for democracy

Sveriges Lärare is a new union therefore different procedures had to be developed. With many new questions and a strong desire to take care of, and gather the expertise to support, elected officials at different levels, the Democracy Operational Area (Verksamhetsområde Demokrati) was established. Its aim is to reduce the distance between national and local levels and thereby speed up the process from 'idea' in the board to 'action' in the wider union. The 16 staff, including a Director and Deputy Director (both of whom have additional responsibilities as union secretaries and history of a predecessor union), work across headquarters, regionally and locally, advising and supporting officials on democratic issues.

Digital platforms have supported union renewal. Quick, transparent and frequent digital communication was essential to member consultation on the amalgamation process. Sveriges Lärare holds regular online meetings with branches (e.g. on finance, monthly plans). Additionally, there

are sub-national meetings between Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmo branches, where officials discuss opportunities to organise collaboratively, and between neighbouring municipal branches. Sveriges Lärare also organises online events to engage members nationally. Meetings promote two-way communication and thus reinforce the idea that 'the union is us'.

There are annual general meetings at local level and annual member meetings in workplaces. Constituency (valkrets) meetings take place every four years to elect representatives to the national level (e.g. congress and collective agreement delegations). Workplace representatives are elected every year, which increases teachers' awareness of, and involvement in, union organisation in school. Workplace representatives can work across several small schools.

Democratising recruitment

Member recruitment in Sveriges Lärare is much easier; however, all new members must now have teacher certification.

The union is building strong relations with universities. The student teacher section, Sveriges Lärare Studenter, has its own rule book and local associations. In spring 2023, the union had a student teacher recruitment campaign and membership is now at an all-time high. In Gothenburg, a local official visits the university every Wednesday to answer students' questions. Sveriges Lärare has a long-term strategy to encourage former students to complete their teacher education and leavers to return to the profession. However, there are currently no strategies to attract other marginalised groups.

Cecilia is a chairman of the Sveriges Lärare Gothenburg branch (formerly chairman of Lärarnas Riksförbund Gothenburg branch). For her, the best way to attract new members is through informed workplace representatives. However, these have been increasingly difficult to recruit; younger teachers struggle to see the importance of, and their potential role within, the union. Therefore, new strategies were needed to encourage engagement and challenge the individualism of the service model.

Democratising engagement

Differentiation and integration are important to the success of union amalgamation (Bednarek et al. 2012). To ensure teachers in all sectors identified with, and felt their interests were represented in, one new union, Sveriges Lärare established various 'associations' (föreningar): national (for private and state/other sector employees e.g. universities, prisons), municipal/regional (branches), and school form (pre-school, elementary, upper-secondary and adult).

Sveriges Lärare aims to recruit representatives (ombud) in every workplace (currently in 50% of schools). Additionally, it is exploring how teachers can be active without a formal union role. Workplace representatives and associations are equally important to strong local engagement. One senior official felt that power was now greater at local level and therefore the union needed to evaluate how it supported activists and members locally.

Municipalities' decision to cap educational budgets shifted headquarters' focus from structural reorganisation to supporting local branch demonstrations across Sweden. One senior official noted how the demonstrations had increased member activism, particularly among younger teachers with no history of the predecessor unions. Cecilia considered them a visible display of union strength to members which raised wider public consciousness over problems in the Swedish school system. In Gothenburg, the #Vi mår inte bra (#We don't feel well) social media campaign culminated in a demonstration where Cecilia handed over the union report 'Döden för Svenska skolan' (Death to the Swedish School) (Sveriges Lärare 2023) to local politicians. Local branches have also engaged activists from a progressive think-tank, Tankesmedjan Balans, in their political education programme.

Conclusion

Organisational change provides unions with an opportunity to rethink established structures and procedures. Consultation and dialogue prior to, during, and following the process can increase members' commitment to, and involvement in, that change. Digital platforms and the establishment of organisational units devoted purely to the deepening of democracy offer unique possibilities for improved two-way communication between headquarters and regional, local and workplace activists and members. Addressing all members' needs and interests in a large organisation can be difficult but various forms of association – new teacher, professional, sectoral, regional, local – and action can increase members' understanding of and engagement in the union.

Getting Stronger Together: Trade Union Renewal in Education

Project Webinar report

The ETUCE-FES webinar was hosted on Wednesday 6 March 2024, and was attended by 37 participants from 26 ETUCE member organisations.

Ms Susan Flocken, ETUCE's European Director, chaired the meeting. In her opening remarks, she emphasised the importance of union renewal as an ETUCE priority following the ETUCE Conference in 2021. Ms Flocken highlighted the need for unions to be able shape an agenda that includes many challenges such as digitalisation (including artificial intelligence), economic globalisation, inequalities in education, the climate crisis, and growing, European-wide teacher shortages. These challenges impact education workers very directly, and education trade unions need to adapt to quickly changing circumstances.

The meeting was also addressed by Ms Johanna Lehmann, policy officer from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), co-partners in this project. Ms Lehmann described FES's global work to support social justice and tackle social inequality, and their particular commitment to working with trade unions. She argued that strong trade unions are essential to creating a fairer and more equitable society based on robust human and labour rights. She acknowledged many of the specific challenges faced in education systems across Europe.

Professor Howard Stevenson then presented the outcomes from the project survey. He located the project in the initial Your Turn! project on which the current analyses build. That research had begun in early 2018, 10 years after the global financial crisis, an event which had forced many trade unions on to the defensive. However, as the Your Turn! project concluded, the unfortunate circumstances of the pandemic, followed by an international cost of living crisis, had education workers often looking to their unions to create safe working environments and protect their living standards. Many new members joined trade unions, and many more took action to defend their pay. Professor Stevenson argued that in a relatively short space of time, trade unions had moved from being in retreat to being able to think again about advance. However, the social, political and economic contexts that brought about this reversal of fortunes can change quickly and are typically not open to being controlled. The challenge for union renewal is to focus on those factors that can be controlled - that is, the strategic choices facing trade unions. Whether the wider context is favourable, or unfavourable, for union organising, the objective is to ensure a relentless focus on building union power so that unions can shape the agenda, whatever the terrain.

Professor Stevenson presented the findings contained in the attached report, around the three project themes:

- Building workplace organisation and leadership
- Developing future leaders through education and training
- Strengthening democratic engagement through organisational change

He concluded with three reflections. Firstly, he emphasised the need to build links between the formal democracy of the union branch and the more informal democracy of the work group in the workplace. These two forms of social organisation are often quite disconnected. Secondly, he argued that ‘workplace representatives’ are well placed to provide the organic links between these two domains. Workplace representatives are elected by their peers and work alongside them. They provide a visibility for the union and make the union real in the daily lives of workers. They can connect union members to the formal union organisation in a reciprocal relationship. Finally, he highlighted the need to develop – actively and intentionally – this type of workplace leadership. The leadership skills required can be sophisticated and need to be both acquired and developed. In this context, the success of leadership development initiatives must be evaluated by the extent to which those engaged in leadership roles build leadership in others.

Professor Stevenson’s presentation was followed by questions and comments from webinar attendees. First, Mr Stuart Anderson of FECCOO asked whether the pandemic – and social distancing recommendations – had caused problems for union organisation. Second, Ms Elina Stock of GEW asked whether there were any good practices of opening spaces for democratic engagement. Finally, Mr Jean-Yves Thibaut of Syndicat CGSP Enseignement highlighted the decline in workplace representatives, related to young teachers’ difficulties in balancing personal, professional, and union organisation and education time, and the impact of individualism on collectivism in the Belgian context.

In response, Professor Stevenson noted that, while the pandemic had increased fragmentation, it had also made unions more relevant since most issues needed to be resolved in the workplace in order to create safe working environments. Furthermore, technology had enabled quick communication to a greater number of people, thereby bridging the gap between formal and informal democracies, and could be used more. However, while unions can be good at advocating for groups, many people still feel marginalised in or from unions. In this regard, renewal is an opportunity to think about how we create spaces for genuine self-organising to promote inclusivity and build capacity. Such a process can be complex as it raises difficult questions for unions. Equally, members’ engagement can have a negative impact on work-life balance and careers. However, in his view, organising will take place, and people will devote time to the union, if this makes a difference in their workplaces. Therefore, it is important to identify the issues on which progress can be made and consider more informal and different ways of organising.

Dr Alison Milner then chaired a roundtable on the three union case studies which started with individual presentations from the research participants.

Ms Alexandra Cornea, Director of the International Relations, Education and Training Program Department of FSLI, Romania, presented on workplace leadership and organisation. She noted that FSLI headquarters had principally focused internal activity at the national level on engagement with county leaders but over time contacts with school workplaces had weakened. In the context of low financial investment in schools and declining membership, the union sought to rebuild member trust

and develop member confidence, and collective thinking and action in the education sector. Inspired by the Your Turn! project and the ETUCE action plan, and supported by LO and SL in Norway, FSLI developed their own renewal project at the national level in 2021/2022. This included an interactive training programme for workplace leaders, thereby shifting the focus to the 'base of our structure'. FSLI started to recruit teacher members and elected leaders in every school. The union realised that, without a good workplace leader, they would lose members. In addition, the union adopted a better and more modern communication strategy, which includes direct communication with teachers and, inspired by GEW, a union podcast and YouTube channel. Ms Cornea noted that the investment in workplace leadership has been most beneficial and paid off during the strike in May and June 2023. Resistant to management pressure, workplace leaders were key to the daily mass mobilisation of 40,000 teachers, school employees, and students. With 90% of education workers involved, the public demonstrations in Bucharest put huge pressure on the Romanian government and were the decisive factor in national leaders' negotiations, enabling them to achieve more than initially proposed e.g. a sector-wide 25% increase in salaries and increased GDP (4.3%) for education. Ms Cornea felt that without ETUCE, renewal would not have been possible or would have taken much longer to achieve.

The second presenter was Mr Julien Farges, an activist responsible for the International Section of SNES-FSU, France, who spoke about leadership training and development. He argued that building power through union renewal requires the identification of new activists to lead the defence of workers. Trade unions cannot procrastinate; the pandemic revealed how trade unions can quickly lose their established ways of working, therefore renewal needs to be taken seriously. In this regard, SNES-FSU had worked intensively on developing networks and the collective dimension in local branches where young members could meet, develop links, and focus on local struggles. Once local membership has grown, the local branch can then identify potential local activists. SNES-FSU then trains those who wish to invest more time in the union. However, a willingness to engage in union work is not sufficient; to maintain union credibility, activists also need to be able to perform their union work in a consistent manner. Moreover, SNES-FSU leadership had noted that activists had limited knowledge of trade union history, and how the internal structures of the organisation operated. SNES-FSU had therefore redesigned its training programmes to combine theory (e.g. how to communicate with education management, the press or on social media) and practice (e.g. role plays on how to handle difficult questions from journalists or negotiations with administration). A key aim is to develop activists who will become future union leaders. Mr Farges noted the need to entrust new and young activists with new responsibilities in a gradual manner. In his view, renewal is not simply a reboot of the organisation but a process that needs to be operated with due respect. He has taken part in SNES-FSU programmes and, while learning much from the expertise of more experienced colleagues, he has also found his own way to address international issues in his new role.

Ms Cecilia Wahnholtz, one of two chairpersons of the Gothenburg branch of Sveriges Lärare, gave the final presentation. While her union is only one year old, the process by which Lärarförbundet and Lärarnas Riksförbund moved towards amalgamation started in 2018. In this regard, Ms Wahnholtz highlighted that organisational change is a long journey which takes time and energy. The Gothenburg branch represents just under 10,000 members. This branch has two chairpersons, one from each of the predecessor unions, and this has been important to the success of the amalgamation process. It has meant that the new union has taken ideas from both unions to make sure that all members and activists were represented and no voices were ignored. Local branches have some autonomy within the formal framework of the union constitution; local officials engage independently in union activities in the municipalities, and the national headquarters provides support. This represents a significant shift from the predecessor unions' practices; previously, the national level steered the work of the local branches. The Gothenburg branch is keen to have well-educated representatives in every workplace. Local officials meet representatives five or six times every year in the local

branch for education on local or national issues. Local sector-specific groups also meet regularly e.g. pre-school teachers. With strong university connections, the Gothenburg branch organises seminars specifically for student teachers and local officials try to meet all students before and during the practicum component of their education programme. In Ms Warnholtz's view, a focus on both the union as a 'whole' and members' interests as a 'part' of the union was important for democracy.

The three presentations were followed by questions and comments from the wider webinar audience. Ms Odile Cordelier of SNES-FSU remarked that the three presentations highlighted the importance of advanced reflection on the concrete strategies and actions that an education union can or should develop to build capacity and grow the union, which was also key to training activists to take on more important roles. Ms Gabriela Tlapová of ČMOS PŠ asked Ms Cornea how the county leaders had responded to the shift in communication, and how the union had dealt with this. Ms Cornea emphasised the need for time, diplomacy, and county leader involvement at all stages of the process, underlining their mediatory role between headquarters and schools. Ms Elina Stock of GEW commented on the importance of communication with, and participation of, those at the centre of change. In this regard, training, organisational structural analysis, and member feedback were useful instruments. She felt that there needed to be a responsible person at different levels who could develop the spaces for democratic engagement. Strategy was about who decides on the action, who manages the process and who gets involved, while the instruments support the involvement.

Professor Howard Stevenson then gave his final thoughts based on the presentations. First, he emphasised the need to take the union to the members, not expect members to come to the union. Second, he argued that there was no union renewal without democratic renewal. Finally, he noted that renewal is about cultural change which is challenging in large and complex organisations.

Ms Susan Flocken concluded the meeting by highlighting that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to union renewal; every union and every context is different. She congratulated all the presenters on their union renewal work and thanked Dr Milner and Professor Stevenson, ETUCE staff, the interpreters, and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung for support with the project. Finally, she emphasised that renewal would remain a high priority for ETUCE and announced that they will soon be launching the follow-up project to Your Turn! with financial support from the European Commission.

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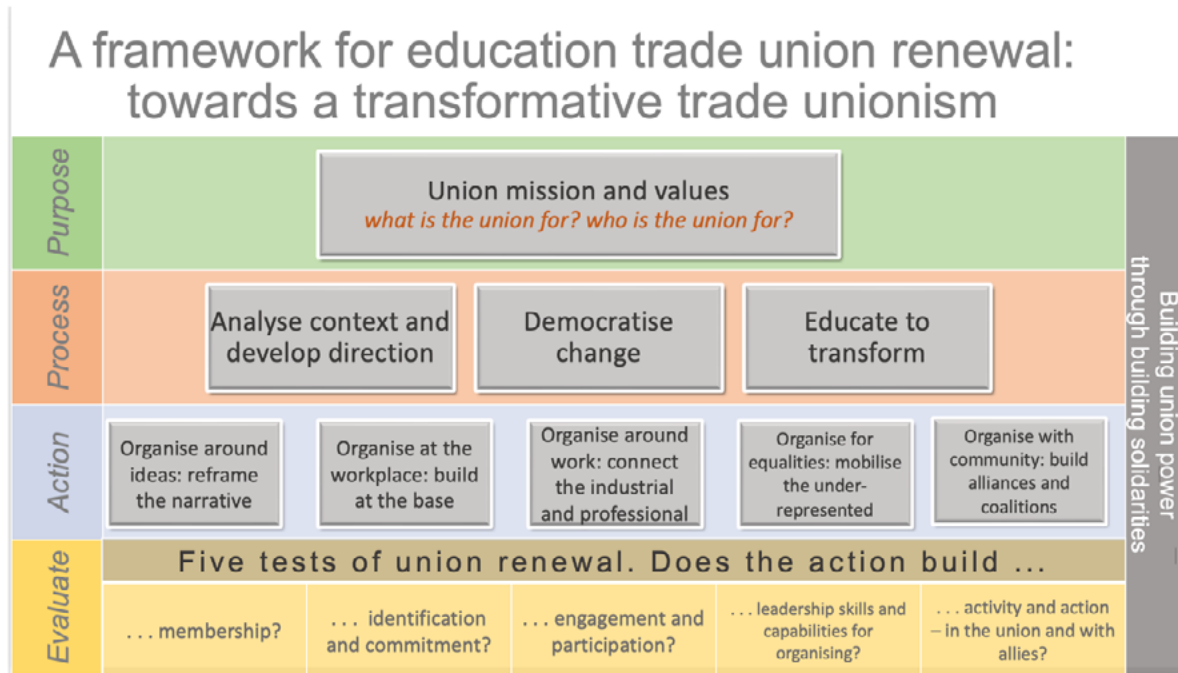
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Appendix 1: The Your Turn! framework



Appendix 2: Project methodology

The survey reported in this study is based on a questionnaire that was distributed to all ETUCE member organisations (in French, Russian and English versions). The results reflect responses from 46 individual trade unions. Surveys were completed either by a single person, or by a team of people. Hence responses reflect the perspectives of a person or persons who is well placed to provide an overview of the relevant issues, but there is no claim that individual union submissions represent the collective view of the organisation. Similarly, it is important to note that each union, regardless of its size, is presented as a single respondent. In this sense a trade union of 3,000 members is treated the same, and reported in the same way, as a union of 300,000 members. Weighting responses would introduce a number of different problems and so this approach was rejected. The intention here is not to try to present a detailed account of how widespread some trade union practices may be, but rather, at a broad level, to gain an understanding of policies, practices and issues in a range of contexts. It is important to recognise this qualification when engaging with the results.

Data for the three case studies was collected from interviews with national officials and activists in each of the relevant unions. We thank them for their time and support.

