

# The Wider Benefits of Negotiations: Austrian Perspective on Educational Leadership as a ‘Power Game’ for Trade Unions

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**Abstract**—This paper explores the relationships between the basic learning processes of leading trade union workers and their methods for coping with the changes in the life-courses of societies today. It will discuss the fragile discourse on lifelong learning in trade unions and the “production of self-techniques” to get in touch with the new economic forms. On the basis of an empirical project, different processes of the socialization of leading trade union workers will be analysed to discover the consequences of the lifelong learning discourse. The results show what competences they need to develop for the “wider benefits of negotiations”. The main challenge remains to make visible how deeply intertwined trade union learning and education are with development in an ongoing dynamic economic process, rather than a quick-fix injection of skills and information. There is a complex relationship existing between the three ‘partners’, work, learning and society forming. The author suggests that contemporary trade unions could be trendsetters who make their own learning agendas by drawing less on formal education and more on informal and non-formal learning contexts. This is in parallel with growing political and scientific consciousness of the need to arrive at new educational/vocational policies and practices.

**Keywords**—Lifelong learning, Trade unions, Non-formal learning, Educational/vocational policies.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE task for unions is made more challenging by a rapidly changing globalised world [1]. A number of reasons for this can be named:

- The ongoing outcome from the great recession and the western debt crisis has led to structural economic change and also has reduced certainties about employment. The deregulation of the labour market and the resultant fluidity of the workplace has led to new dynamics of inequality which are based on high unemployment rates and labour market changes.
- The meaning of solidarity in an age of mass migration has changed rapidly. Thousands of migrants, mostly young, healthy men who are looking for work, come with an apparently boundless belief in capitalism and Western societies do not know how to integrate them into the labour market.
- The slow but sure reduction of institutions of the welfare state (Sozialstaat, état providence) will shape a new form

of the communal nature of human coexistence based on the ideal and the experience of solidarity.

- Age is also a big concern for unions. There is a polarisation on the labour market in terms of people under and over 50 years of age.
- The growth of consumer culture also increases people’s choices surrounding how to be connected with others. The processes of buying are increasingly important sources of identity in terms of distinguishing oneself from others through preferences for particular products [2].

These effects lead to societies that can be characterized by decreasing stability and a weak intention to form tighter bonds with colleagues [3]. The way enterprises deal with these subjects is to transfer the responsibility for all of these results into the sphere of individuals. This puts every employee in a situation of competing with everyone else. In such a competitive situation it is hard to speak about solidarity. Jobs quickly disappear in a globalized world, leaving loyal employees without work and means. Long-term perspectives are nearly useless and joint solidarity does stand much of a chance [4]. All union members in this sample agree that the labour market is in a dynamic transformation, mainly in these regard to three aspects:

- There is a transformation in the meaning of the word “work”. In industrial society this word initially meant realisation of a stable occupational career starting with the completion of education and ending in retirement. At present, work is flexible and decentralised and new forms of changing, pluralistic, part-time employment are emerging, which means multiple roles, the rise of part-time work and decreased social support.
- There is also a transformation in the labour market in the structure of labour supply and demand. As the shift from employment in the sphere of production to employment in the sphere of services occurred inequality.
- The acceleration in the change of civilisation is marked by the appearance of many new and previously unknown occupations. The social and occupational structure of societies is undergoing change and these transformations are accompanied (or should be accompanied) by reforms in the education system. One of the most important phenomenon is the formation of the European labour market, as a result of integration processes and the growing mobility of EU citizens. There is not only the choice of occupation and a place of work, but also skills to aid in adaptation to changes relating to migration to a

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different country that are essential to functioning well in this market [5]. The analysis of institutions should therefore help not only with the choice of an occupation and a workplace; they should also prepare their participants for important life changes and enhance skills that are necessary for functioning in a foreign culture.

All of these dynamic changes have brought a world of more unstable social relationships where individuals and social connections are no longer confined to a local and coherent context. The individualized ("late modern") society of consumers produces mutual suspicion and competition and devaluation of solidarity. Life will be seen as a puzzle of individual resources and individual solutions for socially produced problems. Due to these processes, the demands on unions have also changed and these changes also affect the performance of union workers. What role can they play in this complex, money-orientated world? Looking at the so-called processes of modernisation which are linked to the concept of a reflexive modernity, one can realise that individuals and also institutions have to face a number of changes in their traditional tasks, form and content. Contemporary urban life and the tendency of spatial separation and isolation are not at all helpful to the work of trade unions. It is in a way fascinating to see how these social transformation processes took place in trade unions [6] and how all these structures that have been in place for centuries have now changed in shape and perspective. Many unsolved problems in terms of negotiations and self-determination are currently dominating the discussion about the role and the function of unions.

In the analysis of narrative interviews, we found different modes of coping with this.

- Union members want to link discussion about their institutional frameworks with practices in the wider social, cultural and economic contexts of the way society works today. From the most general point of view, the frameworks of activity of professional union workers must be discussed in the processes of globalisation, a more risk-laden society, with more uncertainty and discontinuity. They want to reflect the range, dynamics and psychological meaning of these changes and deal with the consequences of transformation for the paths of individuals. These issues have great meaning for the practice of union counselling, as one of the fundamental problems becomes the question of professional role of the unions in conditions of a rapidly changing reality. The aims of union work are in itself in a state of change.
- These changes are also fundamentally linked with the transformation of "trade union narratives" in our society. The old strategy of unions keeping people for one job in the hope that they might find employment will not generate a secure and sustainable livelihood. A livelihood approach to education policy would bring disparate perspectives together. How can they establish a story surrounding how the trade union presents itself today? Is it the classical protective function of the trade unions? A common difficulty here is growing experience with an increase in the complexity of social and operational

processes and excessive demands on the system. The working sphere also became very complicated in the sense that the varying specific interests and their positions often overlap in terms of many tasks, e.g. the pension system, the stock exchange, quality of life, exploitation of female workers, etc. Parallel to this, they have to be experts in so many things that they sometimes lapse into fantasies of omnipotence. The everyday life in which they must exist and act is a daily guerrilla war against intolerable situations, which can hardly to be solved through political discussions. On the one hand they see the specific interests of the employees and the wishes for fast solutions, and on the other, the decline of the democratic system. All these steps produced pressure and forces, and moreover a rethink of this "trade union narration".

In such a situation they try to put together a collage using life and work fragments to form a larger narrative of the unions which can bring socially extended discourses in connection with the basic tasks of trade unions (as cooperation and solidarity). It is very clear for the interviewees that the independent development of these resources is linked with processes of lifelong learning. At the heart of the questions, problems are found in the meaning of confidence, in participation and networks in terms of values and standards, in power and the "market" for social cooperation. In a first step, such a perspective requires the addition of reflexive learning levels. "Lifelong learning" is for them not a concept in the strictly theoretical sense. It remains fairly vague, and moreover the history of the label does not make things much clearer. The participatory design of any union work programme or project should explicitly include consideration of learning. Alternatives to neoliberal global capitalism are being developed; they must be brought into negotiations and lead to new learning concepts.

## II. OLD AIMS FOR A NEW WORLD?

The demand for union work in postmodern societies will be systematically growing while paying attention to the duality in labour market expectations in the range of bringing in new services, ready to give new answers to existential questions and providing help in overcoming fears [7]. For the interviewees it becomes even more difficult to communicate with the stakeholders and to open this door to work for the unemployed. The above mentioned macro-social factors influence the work of union people in terms of the definition and function of personal and labour-orientated tasks and the role of the union. The issue of the functioning of assistance institutions in conditions of fast and radical changes in civilisation becomes essential. The question of the adaptive abilities of these institutions is crucial. Beginning with the matters of infrastructure and technology and finishing with the capacity to adapt the quantity and "quality" of staff (increasing employment, training) to the demands of reality. The principles under which the situation of the state and the individuals will be discussed, the meaning, especially the focus regarding what stability and development tendencies

mean to the realisation of occupational union tasks, are vital for the focal points from which societies try to discuss their future.

The frameworks of occupational union work activities are also greatly affected by the political system of the country. Solutions proposed by particular governments differ depending on the political views regarding the range of social services in the labour market, for example the task of social transfers, pension funds and tax systems. At this point union people found out that their role in the negotiations between the social state and the pure market mechanisms in the economic system is one their main tasks. Accepting the general concept of the role of the union in helping the individuals in the labour market, it is important for them to narrow down the issue and define the specifics of what a "good life" is while bringing an alternative structure of priorities of social policy, placing responsibility for solving the problem of today's various sectors of civil society [8].

Generally, the aim is helping the working people in solving their problems through direct interventions in politics or business, but also in encouraging the proactivity of people to realise their own working goals in the larger processes of changes (that means solving work problems, choosing a path of professional career, supporting workers in the sphere of their work and educational aspects, etc.). It is important to analyse these aims from the perspective of an individual and from a wider perspective that hold people in their jobs and positions, as well as supporting their active participation in work and social life [9]. Therefore, union work is a form of institutionalised activity strengthening the social order by placing individuals in controlled conditions, subjecting them to planned and organised requirements which lead to greater predictability in their life circumstances.

In several group interviews, participants pointed out that the mix of negotiations and bringing up new concepts for looking at society is very important. Union work is positioned to promote the basic needs and contributes to the development and growth of social life, workers' proactivity, the strengthening skill to tackle one's own problems and a growth in tolerance for rising individual choices and social demands.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: THE WIDER BENEFITS OF EDUCATION

Trade Unions with the leading attitude of a warden to protect the common responsibility for work and society have changed their role in a society of consumers treating the world as a warehouse of potential objects of consumption. The dismantling of these traditional "factories of solidarity" is an ongoing process in Austria. But how can they build up new strategies to suggest new approaches in dealing with human troubles and misery? Generally, the aim of trade union workers is (like in the past) helping workers in solving their problems through encouraging their reflexivity over their own life, teaching perception of changes occurring in their work-surroundings, as well as making people sensitive to the consequences of changes in society [10]. This contact can have an individual and a collective character. The factors

described in this paper, how trade union workers nowadays can build up new competences, are of diverse nature and meaning. A lot factors determine the frameworks of the institutions' activity and influence union workers everyday work. It should be presumed that the results of existing conditions are concrete adaptive reactions of professionals.

- Union workers provide job-related information, as well as giving help to individual projects for performing a given job. One of the interviewees evaluated this range in a following way: "(...) *there is a huge variety of individual situations from a simple question – even the 'bill of rights' in the particular job, but even more like philosophical questions about the meaning of work, etc.*"
- In the case of work with an individual, the boundaries between counselling and political work may disappear.
- Trade union workers also use different methods of teamwork, like Work Clubs, as a specific form of an informative and educational action.
- They also use the Internet to spread a full set of information as a form of preliminary contact.
- Knowledge and professional skills have a great significance too. Trade union workers want to have a better education which can prepare them better for different practical performing situations. The offer nowadays of practical training is (according to interviewees) too little, and the information conveyed by their teachers is often evaluated as non-essential and "repeated" from training to training. Most of the interviewees are highly motivated and want to improve their professional qualifications.
- Professional competences are thus acquired partly through one's own professional practice and/or through imitating more experienced colleagues. The realization of professional roles is a highly stressed area, because they have hardly enough time to work on it systematically. For most of the interviewees it is not easy to understand and to develop a specific role in being a staff member, a counsellor or a manager or something in between.
- Institutional limitations and barriers can also be the result of unclear conditions of work, as well as possessed financial means.
- Negative to the work conditions are: an excessive number of tasks to do at the same time, insufficient preparation of activities, administrative constraints, dissonance between ambitions and results of counselling work. Trade union workers apply different kinds of strategies to try to solve technically and emotionally difficult situations. Most of the interviewees are not convinced about the existence of good will for their mission in the companies.

Generally, three types of trade union counselling could be distinguished:

- Directive counselling based on the possibilities of the law and written rules, which correspond to the role of an expert. They follow a pragmatist model to focus on detailed processes of solving problems.
- Dialogue counselling referring to the concept of being a staff member in the role of a consultant. Such a person is

oriented at dialogue, takes care of subjective relations, and tries to arrange helpful meetings. Negotiators are aware of social problems, whose aim is agreement with internal and external reality. Oriented towards dialogue, they focus on problems and on people.

- Political counselling refers to a specific party where the colleagues are stimulated by a particular way of ideological thinking.

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