

Authors: Valentina Franca, PhD, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Management University of Primorska
Barbara Filipov, B.Sc. Iur., Legal Counsel with the Council of Trade Unions of Gorenjska

Title: ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN THE PROCESS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Changes in society and economic development greatly influence labor market and consequently also the position of trade unions. In the current situation only fight for higher salaries and better working conditions cannot present the whole spectrum of trade unions' activities. It is expected from trade unions to modernize and to include also new aspects in their activities, one of which could be the participation of trade union members' in the process of lifelong learning. This is the basic idea of the European project TULIP, in which also Slovenia has participated and in the framework of which we have begun to discuss and implement activities of participation of trade unions in the process of lifelong learning.

Challenges of Trade Unions in the 21st Century

Trade unions as workers' representatives face many challenges in the 21st century. One of the main ones, which is also the subject of many panel discussions, is the issue of **what exactly determines the power of a trade union**. Until recently a firm belief was settled in our society that the power of trade unions depends foremost on the number of its members. The greater the number of members the greater is the power of a trade union. Due to global decrease of trade union membership, the trade union managements are forced to think of ways to re-define their position in order to keep or to increase their power regardless of the lower in-flow of new members. One of the model examples of the trade unions' new positioning is **British trade union UNISON**, members of which are foremost the lower qualified workers of the public sector, among which many are immigrants and women. Its management took the stand that the power of a trade union is not defined only and just by the number of its members, but and foremost by **the knowledge, its members posses**. Thus, it actively harnessed all its powers in search of different possibilities and ways to increase knowledge of its members. Since most of knowledge is concentrated at the universities, they linked themselves up with the university in Liverpool; this represented the start of the European project TULIP (Trade union and University Lifelong Learning In Partnership), focused on building cooperation between trade unions and universities in the process of lifelong learning. At the final conference of the Project, which took place the end of June 2009 in Romanian town of Iasa, also Slovenia presented its experience and activities in this field. The main starting point of the discussion and reflections are presented hereinafter.

Lifelong Learning in Slovenia

Lifelong learning is becoming one of the more important views of development of society. Following the examples of other countries, it has been gaining importance also in Slovenia since politics as well as economy are aware that gaining and permanent upgrading of knowledge and skills are fundamental requirements for personal growth and consequently, development of society. More and more Slovenians participate in the processes of lifelong learning (especially in non-formal forms of such learning) every year, because they are aware of the importance of knowledge, education and different skills. According to the statistical data of Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, the resident of Slovenia, involved in additional education, is on average **between the age of 25 and 34, highly educated and employed** and is participating in the additional education due to **work-related needs mostly after work time**. The data also show positive trend of general interest for different forms of education. At the moment 41 percent of Slovenians, between the age of 25 and 64, participate

in one of the offered forms of education. On the other hand it is alarming that the persons, who require additional education the most - unemployed persons, among whom individuals with a very low degree of education prevail, are disinterested in gaining knowledge and education. **Only a tenth of unemployed persons** participate in educational programs and **only a fifth of unemployed persons** in the programs of informal education (SURS. 2007. Anketna raziskava o izobraževanju odraslih v Sloveniji).

Necessary Broadening of Educational Activities of Trade Unions

Unfortunately, in Slovenia, it is **difficult to discuss any visible role of trade unions in the process of lifelong learning** or learning in general, because in our social surroundings trade unions are still present “only” as workers’ representatives and representatives of their interests, which in general do not educate their members. Education in trade unions is in place mostly **at the level of trade union presidents and trade union trustees**. Even though an “**educational undernourishment**” can be noticed, a membership in a trade union does not provide members with any additional education. In the times of increasing unemployment this is even more obvious, since individuals having lower degree of education and without any additional skills are more difficult to be employed.

Even though data on the structure of trade union membership in Slovenia is not available, we can estimate based on the observations that **older workers having lower education being long-time members** prevail in trade unions. Younger workers, having as a rule higher degree of education, do not decide to become trade union members or decide to do so more rarely. The core of today’s trade union membership are workers, who see participation in the additional education and trainings as a »work« duty and cannot afford gaining knowledge at their own expense or are less interested to do so. In addition, it can be hardly said that these individuals have high motivation for learning and gaining knowledge either because they recon it unnecessary or because they are completely content with the current situation. Also countries abroad face similar trends. Thus, more and more trade unions question themselves how and in what way to activate themselves in these areas in order to increase the motivation and willingness for education among their members.

Possible Reasons for (Non-) Participation of Trade Unions

Key purpose of trade unions, which is a result of historical development, is protection and enforcement of rights and interests of workers. However, modern society and economic circumstances demand from trade unions new activities in the spirit of their added value increase or enrichment of their activities. One of potential options is surely **possibility/right/obligation of education and training of their members**. Before deciding to do so it is reasonable to analyze possible reasons why Slovenian trade unions (still) do not participate in the process of lifelong learning.

One of the most important reasons is **(un)interest of politics and economy**. In the current situation trade unions have considerable role in adoption of employment and social regulation, since the bills are adopted only after prior debate by the social partners in Economic and Social Council (*Ekonomsko-socialni svet*) has been carried out. Due to our political and social system and possibilities, which it offers, trade unions are for the moment manageable even though, from time to time they are forced to use extreme measures such as a strike in order to achieve their goals or wishes. Should they had greater power or stronger role in society, which they would surely gain by receiving the right to educate their members, they would strengthen their position in relation to other partners, gaining greater reputation and could

even rid themselves of negative connotations, e.g. »undesired« and similar. The question, however, is whether this is in the interest of politics and economy.

The reason for non-participation of trade unions lays also within the trade unions themselves or in the fact that trade unions **do not recognize the opportunities arising from the lifelong learning**. It may be that they simply do not recognize their role of a provider or the holder of education or trainings of their members. In connection to this a question of **(un-)interest of trade unions** for such activity arises. Taking into account the fact that among 600 different providers at this year's 14th Week of Lifelong Learning only 1 trade union conference participated, we can conclude that **most of the trade unions at the moment (still) do not show any visible interest for participation** in the processes of lifelong learning. Reasons can maybe be found in not adequate readiness for more intensive cooperation in the educational processes (too big of a responsibility, inadequacy and/or inappropriate professional competency, the lack of regulatory framework with regard to such activities and similar) or also in the weak recognition of the need of broadening their activities. The question of financial means, needed for execution of different educational programs for their members, is also related to this, since most of trade unions finance themselves exclusively from the membership fees, which mostly suffices only for coverage of basic activities.

An additional reason for the low activity of members in lifelong learning might also be **the lack of regulatory framework**. Slovenian legal regulation (still) does not recognize the right or the obligation of education and training of trade union members. This is not required by any law or any valid act or program, which would (financially) provide trade unions with means to implement and encourage such learning.

Considering their position, trade unions have a series of advantages, which they can wisely take advantage of when introducing activities in lifelong learning. The trade unions are namely those, which **are constantly present among workers** and are at the same time **in daily contact with employers**. This enables them immediate awareness of the needs of work process as well as lack of certain training of workers. In addition, they notice the changes of employment-social politics and emerging regulation, about which they can inform their members on time. By doing this they take care of informing their members with regard to their rights and obligations, which also influences the quality of relationship between employees and employers. As an answer to constant decrease of membership in trade unions, this could present the key fact when deciding whether to become a member in trade union or not.

How to Proceed in the Future

Taking into consideration the aforementioned it is more than obvious that trade unions could or even should participate in different forms of lifelong learning. The main part of such activity should be focused on the time **during the employment** of a trade union member, since this would increase employability of this member. First step in achieving this could be done by the state by publishing tenders for different programs, which would enable start-up of these activities. Considering that educated citizens are in the interest of as well as to the benefit of the state, the state could contribute its share from the budget and at the same time enable tax reliefs for the part of membership fee, which the trade union would spend for members' education. Nevertheless, trade unions themselves would certainly have to add their contribution (probably the majority part) for the execution of educational activities. Some means could be collected from the membership fees, the majority from successful application to different tenders, also those co-financed by the European Union, the remaining part in

different ways, e.g. invitation of donators and similar. When they would succeed in building the cornerstones of such system, it would make sense to think about setting up legal framework of this field or on specific definition and determination of rights or obligations to educate the members, then ways and participation of the trade union with different educational institutions and also financing of such educational activity should be considered, since trade unions in fact cannot finance such activity from membership fees.

Trade unions could perform certain forms of trainings by themselves; most of them, however, in cooperation with different educational institutions (foremost universities), different interest associations, societies, NGOs and similar. Much work is left to trade unions in the area of increasing motivation among (lower educated) members and presenting the importance of additional education, of gaining new skills and benefits of learning process applying to their entire life.

Trade unions, not participating in the process of lifelong learning to an adequate extent, should look for the most suitable way to participate. In order to achieve this goal a »system within the system« and modern programs of trade union activities should be set up, because only in this way trade unions can contribute to the spread of knowledge and the raise of general knowledge of its members.

THE FRAMEWORK: *ECONOMIC CRISIS, TRADE UNIONS AND LIFELONG LEARNING?*

In Slovenia, the economic crisis so far hurt mostly work-intensive branches. The degree of registered unemployment has risen in one year from 6.6 percent to 8.8 percent or the number of unemployed persons has increased for 38.2 percent compared to May 2008. More than explanatory is the fact that among unemployed persons more than two thirds are the ones not having more than fourth degree of education, out of which 39.7 percent have first or second degree of education. **Participation of these persons in the process of lifelong learning is essential**, if they wish to improve their employability and by doing so increase possibilities to survive in the ever more competitive and knowledge-full social surroundings. In addition to the Employment Agency, the trade unions could play a key role in doing so, even though participation is easier during the employment.

The economic recession demanded activity from the state. One of the anti-crisis measures, which is at the same time opportunity for the trade unions, is recently adopted **Partial Reimbursement of Payment Compensation Act** (*Zakon o delnem povračilu nadomestila plače*). This Act foresees partial reimbursement of payment salary reimbursement for the employees, for which the employers temporarily cannot ensure work and are at home waiting for work, as well as reimbursement of the costs of their training or education or qualification or re-qualification in the period of temporary waiting for work. One of the requirements for obtaining subventions is also the obligation of the employer to **train employees** for other work or to improve their knowledge and skills. Since keeping working positions is definitely in the interest of trade unions, this Act might be an **opportunity for trade unions** to actively participate in the process of trainings (and thus in the process of lifelong learning) by participation in the forming of an educational program and maybe even by its execution. To what extent the trade unions will be involved in this activity depends foremost from the will and willingness of each individual employer, since the Act does not recognize this right to the trade unions explicitly.