

Peter Szilárd Karácsony: WORK-BOOK¹

Our Greatest Error

The world has changed a great deal. In the past, if you didn't have a *work-book*, or if it gaped empty, you were considered a public danger, a skiver, something that counted as an attack upon society. Today we are no longer bound by the compulsory administration of the work-book, but then many of us have no jobs either, just bills.

We have thrown away our thrall with the work-book, but did we get what we had expected in exchange – *an honest and secure living*? It is more than probable that our support of the change in regime expressed our desire for a better life. After all, who would not to secure a better standard of living for themselves and their loved ones?

I was not the first to state that those who live off wages and salaries and pensioners did not receive what they expected from the changes. But why not? It is difficult to provide a clear answer. We can blame a number of factors. Most frequently, if the topic comes up, those in power and the newly-rich are stridently harangued. Without doubt, they could have carried out their affairs differently, but I don't think we desired a real democracy in order to depend upon the benevolence of a different elite. That much has come about, for since the change in regime those wielding power have certainly not pampered us.

Why not? Here the answer is simpler: *because it's not their business to look after us. Not much – the majority think even today – for after all, in the West democracy, capitalism and welfare work alongside one another, because the leadership has a different attitude.*

I believe this is our greatest error.

Because the welfare in western democracies is not some kind of gift, but the result of extremely tough bargaining.

What is the subject of the bargaining?

The exchange value of completed work.

You have to bargain for that?

Yes.

The exchange of labour is only one of many exchanges that take place every day, for it is exchange that moves the world. If you just think you will see that practically everything you desire you obtain through exchange. Including your wages. And whoever is unable to put a value upon their labour power will disappear from the process.

In today's Hungary practically everything is priced according to the world market; everything, that is, except labour. I believe this is because we are bad at bargaining, in other words, we exchange badly. You ask how you can get into a position to bargain? Simply in that you, too, are an owner – *the owner of your labour.*

So think courageously, like an owner!

The possessors of labour

Before we go more deeply into the condition of the possessor of labour and exploring the opportunities, let us take a look at what I mean by exchange. Every exchange can also be understood as a contract.

In a contract we understand there to be two equal partners with mutual responsibilities who through their own free will create the contract to their mutual advantage.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every contract was like that! In my experience, contracts with regard to *labour power* are not like that in every case, indeed I dare state that the majority of them do not contain the most important element of the above definition, that is, *they are not entered into by parties of equal status.* It follows from this that the undertaking of responsibilities and the advantages gained from them are generally imbalanced.

¹ In Hungary, a compulsory document showing one's occupational history. (translator's note)

Despite this the situation is not hopeless, if for no reason but that there are examples of how it is possible to make contracts that satisfy all expectations. Most of these examples are to be found in economically developed countries. I am convinced that this is no coincidence, but if they operate successfully there, then why shouldn't we take advantage of them too?

Upon what do I base my contention that contracts made between employers and employees are not created by parties of equal rank? It is easy to see if we make a thorough investigation of the labour market and those with a role in it. The following diagram will make things easier to grasp:

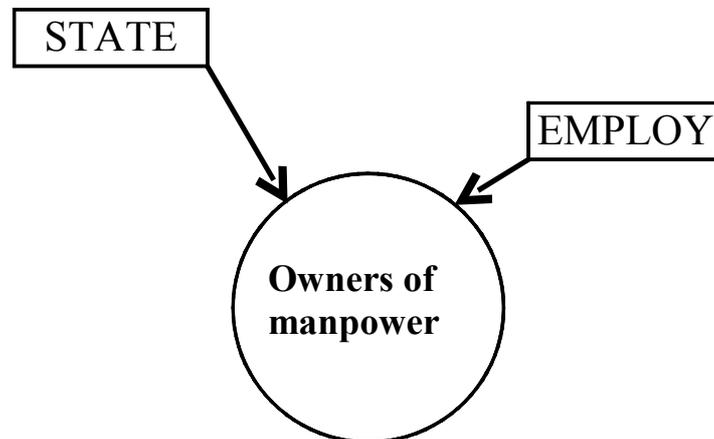


Diagram 1
This is what the labour market looks like
if you rely solely upon yourself

Our departure point is the owner of labour power; that is, the wage-earner. Perhaps at first the expression is somewhat strange, because if we hear the word *owner*, we usually think of the owners of companies, for we live in a world of enterprises: private firms, limited and shareholding companies. The owners of these have some kind of wealth and live from the profits emanating from it, generally well, or certainly better than you or I. If you do not belong among them, why should I recommend that you think as an owner thinks? Because you too are an owner. What do you own? Your labour. You are the sole and inalienable owner of your labour.

Like you, most people do not own a fortune. By fortune I mean –simplified – a degree of capital that guarantees constant income to its owner. It does not include the necessary accoutrements of life: a home, a summer home² saved up for with great difficulty, a car and so on. In the classic meaning of the word, you probably do not have capital. But you do have something: as I have already said, you have the power of your labour. Because every person has *talent, knowledge, experience, strength* and *time*. These are the most important components of labour power. This labour is in your ownership.

OK, so now I know what I have, but can I achieve with it?” you may ask with absolute justification.

Labour, like every possession, becomes valuable for its owner if with its assistance one can obtain everything necessary to maintain the owner and family: food, warm clothes, education, leisure and a thousand other things desired for. After all you, too, only live once. How can you obtain all this through your labour? By utilizing it in the labour market.

True, you knew this already. Moreover, it’s something easier to write down than to carry out. People who have been or are currently out of work could tell you a great deal about that. Unfortunately nobody has to go next door for personal experience, for in Hungary there is hardly a family without a member who has not been unemployed for a longer or shorter period.

And so You, as the owner of your labour, will manage to survive if you succeed in selling it, in other words if you exchange your possession... and make a good deal! In order to understand this and

² The original Hungarian text has been retained in translation, but in British culture perhaps the summer home should be simply replaced by “summer holiday”. Many Hungarians with these summer dwellings live in very small urban flats in high-rise buildings. (translator’s note)

why it is so difficult to do so we have to become familiar with the rest of the participants in the labour market.

Right at the start (Diagram 1) there is the **STATE**, which among other matters decides upon the regulations regarding the hiring out of labour. These regulations relate to everyone equally. In the interests of order and equal opportunities the state makes general regulations and laws from which in themselves we cannot expect much joy. This is right and proper, for it were not so everyone could demand that the Labour Statute Book and other laws determining the world of labour (laws related to those in state employment and civil servants) be tailored to their own personal needs. And we can hardly expect that from them.

The role of the state is not confined to making, keeping and ensuring that others keep laws, but also appears on the labour market, together with the local authorities, as the largest employer. This fact augments its weight.

The rectangle on the right side of Diagram 1 represents the second main participant in the labour market: the **EMPLOYERS**. In the market economy these are businesses and enterprises which usually – within the framework set out by the state – enter a contract for the hire of our labour.

At last we have arrived at the point of entering a contract. But before dissecting the conditions of labour hire let us take a more harmless example. A frequent and familiar situation, when someone decides to sell a used car. This is a typical exchange, and one which – just like a contract of hire – must be set down in writing.

Now most people do not understand automobiles to the extent that in the course of a transaction they are professional equals in the selling of a car. I suppose that sellers are familiar with the state of their own used cars, or if they aren't then they entrust someone who knows more about salesmanship. Whether buyer or seller, no-one enters the adventure alone, but asks someone within the family or circle of friends to help. Those more thorough entrust a professional with the task. I know that even then there exists the possibility of making the wrong decision, or of making a good bargain even without proper preparation, but surely no explanation is required when saying that the chances of a good exchange are enhanced with the inclusion of somebody who knows what they're talking about.

Both characters in our example are careful to reduce risk. The buyer attends to getting value for money, while the seller does his best not to undersell the vehicle. Yes indeed, most people are careful with what they have once acquired (money, a car), and do everything in their power to diminish the chance of diminishing it in the course of an exchange. But are we so careful when exchanging our own labour skills?

I am sure that even those who know comparatively little about cars can list ten important details that should be inspected when purchasing one (papers, owner, MOT, engine and bodywork code numbers, condition of tyres, condition of engine, gear stick and bodywork, consumption, etc.). Now try to list ten things that you investigate in the course of a hire contract! My experience is that the majority of people don't even know the three most basic and mandatory elements which must be precisely included in a hire contract. *To wit: where the work must be carried out and how much one will receive for it. More precisely, the nature of the work, where it will be carried out and the rate of hire.* Naturally there are many more elements involved in the completion of work, either in its favour or against it, just as it makes a difference whether you can wind down the window of the car. Such are, for instance, the company's social services, from its dining to its personal hygiene facilities.

In the sale of a car a real contract is created. The person selling the vehicle is in need of money and the purchaser of a car. The acquisition of these represents *mutual advantage* for both, for both get what they desire. At the same time *a mutual shouldering of responsibility* occurs, for both surrender what they have: the seller his car and the buyer his money. And most important of all, the contract is made between *equally ranking partners*, for with respect to them the bargaining is not accompanied by any disadvantages. If the exchange does not take place, there will be another occasion, another purchaser and another seller. Naturally the classic law of the market comes into play, where supply and demand determine the possible price, but nobody could deny the free will both of the buyer and seller.

Now is this how the labour market works? Sadly, not. Why not? Because the possessors of their labour are never equal partners, either with the state or with employers, they always remain

subservient, as can be observed from Diagram 1. Why? *Because* in practice the free will of those in possession of labour is limited in many ways, and so *the work contract will never be a true contract*. What are these limiting factors? Let us see.

1. Those in possession of labour (who accept work) are the “*sellers*” on the labour market. The employers, on the other hand, are the “*buyers*”. In a market situation the buyer is usually at an advantage. The buyer is only at a disadvantage in the market if the seller enjoys a monopoly. In a market where a variety of sellers have more of the same product is up for sale than the buyers are able to or even wish to purchase, sooner or later the price of the product has to be reduced. The greater the surplus the greater the temptation on the part of the buyer to pay the very least for the product. There are many employees on the labour market. Within this surplus they are their own greatest competition. High unemployment strongly diminishes the equal opportunities of the employees. I note here that it is not the person who is for sale, as many – and especially the “*buyers*” – would like to think, but his or her labour.

2. Furthermore, the employers can choose from among those offering their labour. Unfortunately you are not in such a comfortable position, if only because without a stockpile reserve at your disposal time is pressing, making it impossible for you to wait patiently for the best opportunity because full and regular employment is a matter of survival. Conversely, nothing is urgent for the state employer, local authority or business, or rather it is almost certain that they will obtain what they consider to be the necessary workforce within the planned period of time.

3. Thirdly: employers hire lawyers and economists precisely in order to get the best deal out of you, in other words, so that they can pay you the minimum for your labour. To stay with the car purchase example: it is likely that a seller in possession of knowledge of the car’s every screw will exploit this advantage in the face of a purchaser if that purchaser does not take with him a specialist. This is unnatural on the labour market: just imagine the reception if you were to take your labour rights lawyer with you to a work interview. Probably you would not get the job “*for other reasons*”.

As I have already mentioned, unfortunately most often a person looking for a job cannot even list the three most basic conditions that should appear without fail on a work contract. It’s hardly their fault, they have learnt how to knit, to plan a house, bake bread or weld, not labour law (although they could have learnt some of that in these schools as well³). However, when a contract is being made they – and you – are at an unbridgeable disadvantage. That is – give or take the odd example – those undertaking employment are not ranked equally with the representatives of companies.

4. Fourth: employees are strongly attached to locale. While companies wander the world – and before long, beyond – to wherever the capital brings the greatest profit for their owners, for a number of reasons the owners of their own manpower rarely and with difficulty change their place of residence.⁴ I think you are like this too. Your employment options are for the most part limited to an imagined radius of around 50 kilometres.

Despite the parties not being of equal rank, a contract may still be written up; at most, the mutual acceptance of sacrifice and advantage will also fail to be equal in proportion. That is, you give more than you take. And even so, you are happy, because at least you have work. And yet we have said nothing of how many ways and in how many places you will have to suffer humiliation in order to keep your employment, for at the tiniest confrontation you will be told, “*You don’t have to work here!*”

Let us return to the state for the space of a thought. As is public knowledge, it brings into existence general rules, and these seriously affect the situation of those accepting work. It determined the length of the working week, overtime regulations, the time and method at and with which wages are paid, and a number of other details that affect income. Just think: despite every triumph of democracy not one of us, and that includes You, is able to exert any influence over the State. Not to mention that for instance it is just as difficult to make a contract with any state institution as it is with a private company. The reasons, though they may differ a little, are essentially the same as those listed in the case of private employers; that is, oversupply, the urgency of time, a lack of any real

³ The author’s experience comes from his own country, where there exist vocational schools.

⁴ Manpower mobility in Central Europe, while growing, is considerably less frequent than (for instance) in the UK, where it almost expected of those with any ambition. (Translator’s note.)

preparedness for discussion and geographical attachment, all of which prevent you in the true sense of the word from being present on the labour market as a proper partner. Indeed, neither are the institution leaders who embody the employers (be they state or from the private sector) in a bargaining position, for the tables tightly defining wage structures are also decided upon by the state.

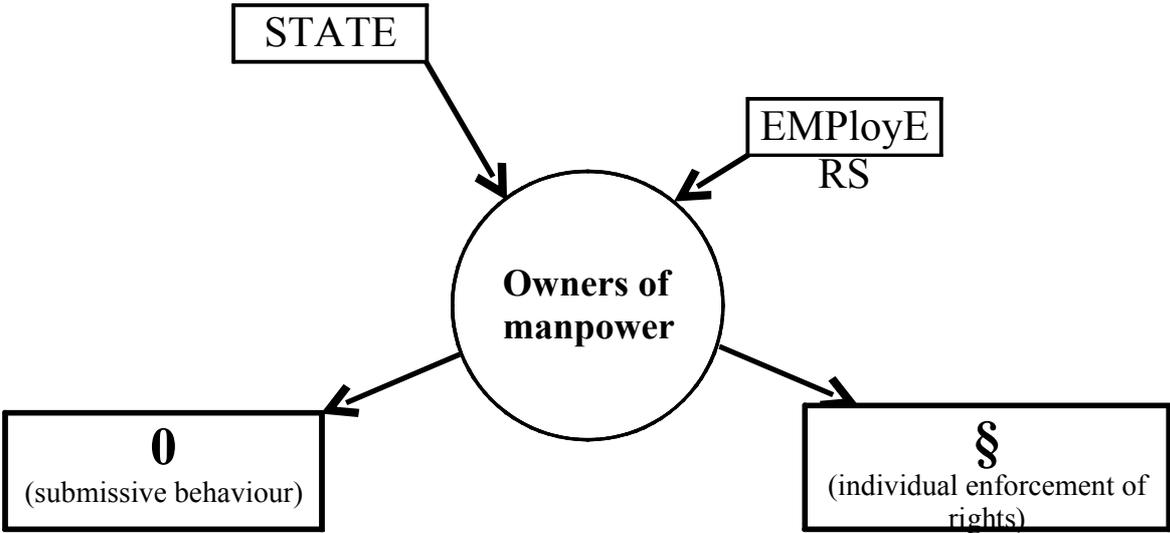
We therefore live from wages and payments, for the most part for reasons not dependant upon ourselves, and we are incapable of making a proper contract, or selling our labour under conditions that satisfy our own interests. Yet as the owners of our labour we have just as much right to make a contract as have the owners of companies, it is just that we are unable to do so for the reasons listed above.

Does the situation sketched out seem hopeless? To a certain degree it is. It's enough for you to take a glimpse at the defencelessness of the possessors of labour in your immediate environment. But before give up, it isn't difficult to see that the labour market does actually function and that you can choose from a number of options. Let's take these one by one.

Individual Solutions

In the preceding chapter we sketched out the labour market. We established that the *significant part* of employees are not equal and are obliged to undersell their labour on the labour market from a position of subjugation. A significant part, because there is a layer for which there is a great demand precisely because it has prepared itself. They are the people who are supported by employment advertisements, mostly by enterprises with foreign interests, which run something like *applicant should have at least two relevant degrees, be able to hold discussions in at least two foreign languages, should not be older than 35 years of age and have at least five years' managerial experience*. This story does not refer to them. They are in a luckier position, because they can enter a contract with the *head-hunters* in search of them as equal partners. Yet even for them the condition will not last forever (indeed, it may only be superficial), so it may be a little early for them to put down this book. Not to mention that as a rule they are standing on the other side, in other words they represent the interests of their employers. It is to be hoped that they are not indifferent to the condition of their employees, if only because their own salaries are to a great degree defined by the productivity of the people working for them.

But what can the others do? What can the people do who are at their own mercy, not because of their ability, but their condition and the reasons given in the previous chapter (oversupply, a lack of professional preparedness, restrictions in time and space)? As a general rule, they adapt themselves in two ways. Let us develop further our diagram.



**Diagram 2
Individual solutions**

The *first* group comprises those who, in the interests of survival, unconditionally accept every condition laid down by the employer. Their fate depends upon the goodwill of others; in other words, they are unable or unwilling to influence their own futures.

Let us draw their passive means of action starting from the circle and following the left-hand downward-pointing short arrow to the rounded zero (0). Unfortunately these people comprise the majority and often do not even know it. Their condition is special, for with their submissive behaviour they “voluntarily” subjugate themselves to the whims and wishes of their employers rather than “stir things up”. It’s just that our experience of such an attitude is rather bitter. People do not choose such a form of behaviour through their own fault. That notwithstanding, they create the wide ranks of the greyish-black employed. It is they who are officially paid the minimum wage with “extra” cash in hand, which of course sounds good but which generally bears no relation to the work required in its stead (for instance, length of working hours), even when it appears to be more than what one might be able to earn legally. What usually happens with those who accept their lot is that they unexpectedly find themselves out on the street without a penny to their name. Doubtless you could list a dozen examples in your own neighbourhood.

But there is another variant of this behaviour, an element no less important if less visible. And that is that people who choose to subjugate themselves also give up their human dignity. This can be expressed in many ways, but for me it is mostly that they think more as subjects and less as citizens. A citizen can be identified as differing from a subject in his ability to act through his own self-respect and will. Meanwhile, the way in which a subject thinks often encourages dominating characteristics designed to bring profit at the expense of others. For me, this is why resignation to one’s lot is so difficult to accept, although I know how difficult it is to break out of it. Sometimes I myself am unable to. Possibly because it cannot be done alone.

The *second* group is for the most part made up of those who have been *wronged* at the workplace, and believe that they will be able to obtain reparation for damage caused by their employer through the legal process. “*After all, we live in a state founded on the rule of law,*” they will say. This group we have marked in diagram 2 with the paragraph mark (§).

This is a rather tortuous road, for it is customary at present for Court of Labour trials to last one or two years. This not only places one at a disadvantage because as a general rule the employee has to survive without income over this lengthy period, but also because the outcome of such trials is uncertain. For instance, the person who has lost their job must rely upon testimonies by ex-workmates, which for understandable reasons is somewhat risky as the witnesses will remember long-past events according to their own personal interests. Natural it is difficult to blame them. Apart from that, going to court is an expensive “*sport*”. Even those with regular incomes find legal expenses hard to bear, let alone an unemployed person. Not to mention how difficult it is for someone to find a job who is known to have taken their previous employer to court. Meanwhile, employers can defend themselves with an, as it were “within doors” legal background. Their risk is minimal. But it is not here that the true disadvantage lies in the legal way, but in that **only those can turn to the courts who have already been wronged**. In other words, first the wrong has to be suffered (for instance being unjustly dismissed) and only after that can one take steps. One is under a disadvantage from the outset, a disadvantage which is made even more difficult to overcome for the reasons given above. Although in this last case a person’s self-respect comes to the fore, which is commendable, the result makes it questionable as to whether this method is the best road to self-fulfilment.

Yet here we can also list those employees who possess the required bargaining skills, and precisely because of this “provocative behaviour” are not taken on as such an attitude is looked upon by employers with disapproval. In other words, if someone demonstrates the qualities of an equal partner this will put them at a disadvantage. And so we cannot speak of a true exchange taking place in their case either.

It is easy to establish that neither solution is reassuring. Such individual tactics can reap success at most in the short run, and then a great deal of luck is also needed, for hidden in the economy there may be employers blessed with a little humanity, yet their goodwill can only go as far as their voluntary sacrifice of profit. As a rule, that is not as great a sacrifice as your own. For instance,

through their “*goodwill*” you can fight through your sicknesses on your own two legs. Despite the obvious disadvantages, the above solutions can operate well temporarily; indeed, in certain individual cases over a long period. Experience shows that anyone who has been wronged along one of the two above routes, after counting one’s losses would given the option seek another solution. After all, who wouldn’t want a secure workplace which genuinely offers a long-term decent living? Who doesn’t desire to exist under conditions which assure one, not only of their biological needs, but a life worth living? The societies of which we are so envious parade before us as a good example: yes, all of this can be achieved. In what way? It is possible that for many a great effort will have to be made in order to sweep aside prejudices before they can accept the answer to this question. Even so, this is what I advise, especially from those who are prepared to exercise a little patience and read on; who feel that they have belonged or belong to one of the groups described earlier. Because, as ever, between the two extremes there lies a golden middle way. This road also demands a toll, but in today’s world few employed live so well that they can afford to dismiss it out of hand.

Your Only Chance!

Maybe it is not commonly known that in Tokyo, the capital of Japan, one still has to queue for a new car, just as the citizens of the old “Eastern Bloc” had to years ago. And why? The answer is fairly simple. In Earth’s most densely populated metropolis, you can only purchase a car if you can prove you have a place to park it. And due to the lack of space that’s not so simple. The resourceful Japanese, in order to relieve the parking problem, have started building car parks next to the high-rise tenements that work on a kind of paternoster principle. The owners of these are very rich people. To all intents and purposes they are in a monopoly situation. In a nutshell, it is they who dictate who receives a parking place and therefore an automobile. At first sight they do not depend upon others, they stand on their own feet, and they’re not even threatened by oversupply. Despite this they have established their own association, in other words, they have joined forces. Why? The answer is simple: they have a common interest which they can protect better together than alone. Without doubt, one of the main aims of their association is to maintain the present situation for a long time to come. Their representatives keep a constant eye upon changes in regulations related to them advertised by local and state authorities, and do their best to influence these in the bud.

Isn’t this form of action simple? In their situation you’d probably do the same thing. And yet if is worth while for the car-park owners of Japan, with their stable incomes and probably decent standards of living, to join forces in their common condition, why should it not be worth the owners of their labour in Hungary to examine the advantages – and of course the responsibilities – secreted in the joining of forces? There’s nothing new in that, for both the institution and its name are familiar: they call it a *trade union*.

Of course merely to *combine* does not in itself mean a solution for *beginners, employees, the unemployed and pensioners* with fates similar to your own, but it does provide an *opportunity*. Perhaps this is the turning point where we have to separate prejudice and reality. And so I will write it down again: **the joining of forces is primarily an opportunity, and while its mere existence does not guarantee success, without it we cannot expect any.**

As we shall see later, the success of an association, especially that at a workplace designed to protect interests, is influenced by numerous factors, but it is only worth speaking of them *once those affected have joined forces*.

Three kinds of reaction can be expected from those who have followed thus far what has been written. First there will be those who are already trade union members, but not entirely satisfied with the results. Secondly there will be those who on the basis of personal disenchantment or information gleaned from others have formed an opinion whereby they balk at the very mention of the words “*trade union*”, or consider them to be a thing of the past. And there will be those might perhaps like to belong to a union, but – to put it finely – are unable to do so at their present workplace. We shall provide a few tips for those in a later chapter.

Put your prejudices aside!

Since 1994 and up to the present I have had the opportunity to make a survey of what people think of trade unions. Nearly a thousand people from different parts of Hungary and living in a variety of conditions filled out a questionnaire made up of five questions. The questions were the following: *What is a trade union? What is the opinion of employees about trade unions? Who is a trade union member, and why? What is the membership fee for? What methods of enforcing interests do you know?*

Those filling out the questionnaires did so entirely voluntarily and anonymously. A large number of answers appeared which were greatly to my liking, but the result was staggering. From the completed questionnaires it could clearly be established that the relationship of the majority of people with trade unions *was emotional*. Only an insignificant minority gave answers that consciously referred to their own interests embedded in the power implicit in the joining of forces. Naturally they are not to blame, but it remains a fact that in Hungary the labour force judges that power emotively, often dismissing it without consciously examining its advantages and – undeniable – disadvantages to their own benefit. This is why I ask you to put aside your prejudices and to concentrate exclusively upon your self. Because the joining of forces by the owners of labour is not primarily an emotive category, as many believe, but *everybody's own economic, social interest*. Yours too.

Advantages in joining forces

Do you remember the example about buying a car? Isn't it interesting that when we are concerned with the bargaining power of our money, and we feel out of our depth, that we turn to a specialist for help? At the same time we find it not nearly so natural when we are bargaining the power of our labour. Or maybe we cannot? After all, if we think about it it's not so simple. As I have already mentioned, the arrival of say a miner or a baker at a job interview together with his labour rights lawyer and economic adviser would be worthy of an entry in the Guinness Book of Records. Before signing the contract he would have it perused in detail by his legal adviser, who would doubtless demand a few modifications here and there. His economic adviser would study the employer's economic situation in detail to discover whether it was worth his client's while to contract himself. In today's general practice it is far more likely that the agents responsible for employing someone will find the applicant unsuitable for the job for some other reason than that they would begin to bargain about the form and content of the contract.

So do we have to give up the idea? No. Now of course the correct solution is not to parade in with the above-mentioned expert aid. Today, an option exists with far less risk and greater results – the joining of forces. I say today, because the right of combination was by no means always such a natural option for employees. After all, there still exist countries which persecute those attempting to create any kind of work association.

Let's see what advantages you will have if you join forces with others in conditions similar to your own, and extend our diagram.

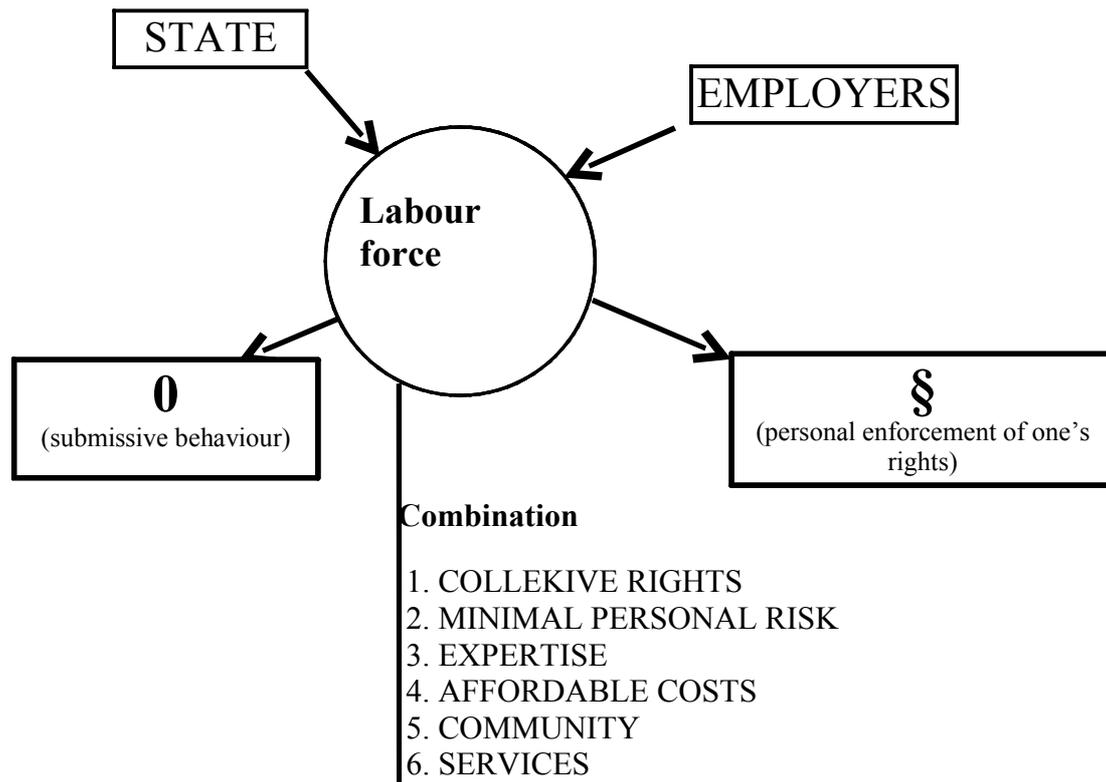


Diagram 3

What advantages are there to combination?

1. First it ensures you **collective rights**. Behind this expression lies the idea that in certain questions the law recognises a community at a higher level than an individual. Today's legal system guarantees this in Hungary, but it was not always so. It took a century and a half's struggle between employees and the authorities and capitalists for collective rights to be accepted and set in law.

What are the most important collective rights? Imagine your future being based upon the whim of an employer or institution. Would you receive an answer in advance from your boss as to what would happen to your workplace in the event of reorganisation? Or if there was going to be reorganisation at all? And yet the fates of many people depend upon such management level decision-making. As an individual, you do not even have this minimal *right to information*. Just think, the most elemental demand, so that you can prepare yourself for events that will affect you. And yet in this you too have similarities with an owner. What wouldn't the owners of companies give to know in advance the intentions of the participants in the market? As a rule, they create a special group to carry out research in this. All you have to do is to become a trade union member – wherever a union has survived. Where there isn't one, it will have to be created.

The most significant advantage of collective rights over the application of individual rights is that they can be used prior to and not merely after suffering a wrong.

That is, trade union can form an opinion about actions carried out by the employer (*right to form an opinion*) before the employer has executed them, and can even counteract itself. In certain cases it can raise objections (*right of veto*), thereby delaying or preventing unfair decisions on the part of the employer – it can come to an agreement and make decisions (*collective right to enter contract*) and as a final solution announce a *strike*. Because the workplace community, that is the trade unions have the *right to form an opinion, to raise objections, to make collective decisions and to enter a collective contract*. The *right to strike* is also a basic right of employees, but in my experience a successful stoppage of work only stands any chance where well-organised trade unions operate.

You can only really participate in this if you too are a member. Put better, an efficient trade union implements the above-listed rights in the interests and with the agreement of its members. For this to be the case, *it requires active members*, yourself included.

As I have mentioned, workers did not receive their collective rights as a gift, but their forebears, recognising the strength of unity, fought for them. *Collective rights are an advantage which alone make it worth becoming a trade union member.*

2. Union significantly reduces personal risk. In comparison, personal legal redress is only realised alongside the utter acceptance of risk by those affected. Law guarantees protection to those representing the employees' organisation. And so the risk taken by those representing the interests of their companions is also far less than if they were transmitting their own personal demands. (A separate chapter is devoted to the special position of those holding an office.)

3. Collective rights only achieve anything if the given community can enjoy them. This is why there is a need for **specialised knowledge**. Moreover, a specialised knowledge that is indispensable in bargaining with employers.

The union can reduce the greater risk and the burden of expertise, but not the responsibility of the individual.

4. The second significant advantage lying with union is that it provides you with the opportunity to obtain *expertise*, and at an **affordable burden**. What do I mean by affordable burden? Naturally, the trade union *membership*. We shall return to this in more detail in a later chapter, for the question of the relationship between members and membership fees is fundamental

5. *Man is a social being*, and so it is natural for us to want to share our joys and sorrows with those closest to us. This is also true of those with whom we work, for statistics show that we spend more time with them than with our families. Name-days⁵ and other celebrations stimulate us to spend time together outside the workplace. You could say that you don't need a trade union for this, for there are good **communities** where no conscious or organised collaboration (union) is present. That's true, but then why shouldn't a community which works well not enjoy its collective rights? Not to mention that traditionally unions have accepted tasks which it would be unimaginable to envisage being undertaken in any other way. The quality of the community life of the workplace depends entirely upon us – the work force – and those we have elected to represent us.

6. The sixth advantage emanating from union comprises those **services** which can only be created through an organised mass. If we look back in time it becomes evident that the various services have a considerable history. In the early days societies were and could only be formed by workers to safeguard one another's interests. Out of this grew the trade union movement, naturally maintaining the idea of self-help and proffering to its members other services and methods. The trade union can assist those of its members who have fallen upon hard time through no fault of their own in ways other than safeguarding their interests. Organised solidarity can mean a solution here, too.

As I have already noted, the six most important aspects listed above only refer to the remarkably great opportunities opened through union, yet in themselves they are no more than *opportunities*. Let us put them in our diagram. Between the rectangles containing the inscriptions STATE and EMPLOYERS we will insert a third, and write in it TRADE UNIONS, and draw in both the trade and the employers' unions.

Oh, and I almost forgot! This is not the end, for here we stand at the gateway to Europe.⁶ The European Union member states have created their own associations so as to keep pace with the other participants in the global economy. In order for EU employers and employees to be capable of discussion, they have created their own international organisations. After all, not one level can be omitted at which decisions are born that affect our fate.

⁵ The celebration of one's given name on a particular day of the year, often associated with Christian saints, predominant in Catholic countries – including that of the author. (Translator's note.)

⁶ Since this was written Hungary has become an EU member. (Translator's note.)

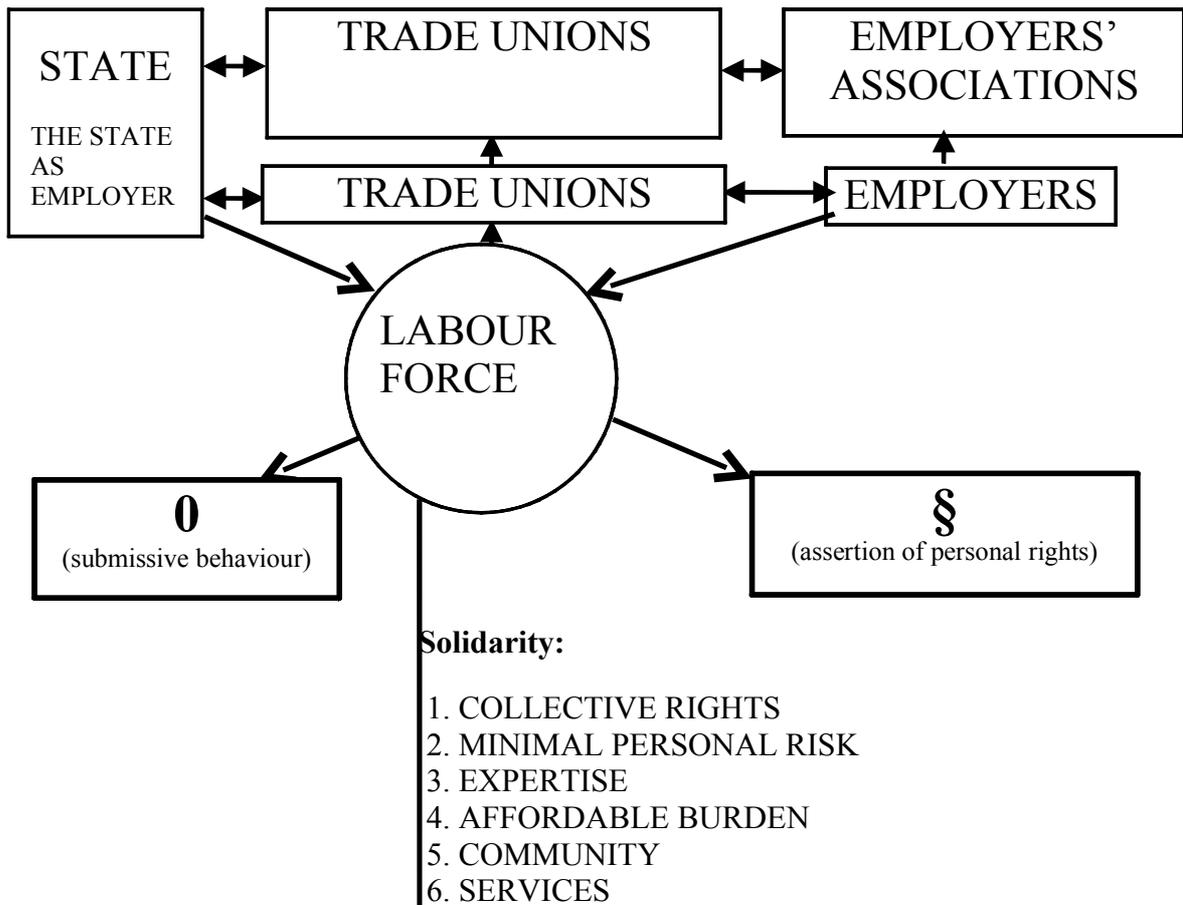


Diagram 4

Here are all the participants in the labour market

If we observe the diagram closely it transpires that union by the work force can create the conditions of partnership necessary for the making of a true contract. **Manifest solidarity in a trade union is the sole option for you to become, together with your colleagues and the assistance of your representatives, a partner of equal rank with employers and the state.** This is depicted by the horizontal arrows.

I think that together we have discovered the answer to the oft-raised question: *why is it worth being a trade union member?*

It is in the personal economic and social interest of every employee to be a trade union member.

Misconceptions about volunteering

Not so very long ago...

...in the days before what has become known as the regime change... many of us — who are still members — were placed in trade unions. The procedure used had little to do with volunteering. Fresh applicants to jobs were immediately recruited by signing a declaration of membership. The result of this method — which contained a modicum of *aftertaste* — was virtual one hundred percent union membership. Services were attached to membership payment that were at the time indispensable. Remembering back, there was not only the trade union resort or maternity benefit, but also a company apartment or a loan to build a home that without membership would have been impossible to obtain. At that time it was therefore a kind of *direct economic and existential constraint* that maintained membership.

As the main responsibilities of the trade unions were those of service providers, the relationship between the members and their union was *rather similar to that between an office and a client*. If someone had business with the union, they sought out its office and after filling out the appropriate forms awaited the decision of the relevant committee. This is how things operated right up until 1989.

Naturally this system had advantages to it which are looked back at with a degree of nostalgia, the lack of which have been observed in the form of a restriction of social benefits, not to mention a relationship with the workplace which, if *guaranteed by peremptory order*, was still clearer than the present one.

The law regarding the *right to combine* was born at the same time as the basic requirements of constitutionality, in 1989. Why did the new law radically alter the position of trade unions? Because the *trade unions* from this moment no longer operated as an organic part of a “*single party state*”, but from that time on *were constructed, and continue to be constructed upon voluntary membership*. It was at this time that the various trade unions that until then had been part of the National Council of Trade Unions (Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsát = SZOT) became independent, accepting their own rules of association, and that it became possible to form new unions.

What does this new construction mean to employees? The situation has changed qualitatively. Whereas in the past — to outward appearances — trade union rights were automatically maintained, today employers frequently do not even invite trade unions to the conference table. If the employees wish to discuss matters with employers as equal partners, they have to create a trade union *on a voluntary principle* that cannot be ignored. The situation is made more difficult in that unfortunately a percentage of employers do everything in their power to prevent unions from operating at their workplace. This, even though a growing number recognise that in the long run their own interests are served by dialogue with the union of their workforce.

Today, then, the trade union is not an *office*. It can only exist and go about its business if it has sufficient members. Unfortunately, employees, probably including Yourself, were *neglected being told* about this change that has fundamentally affected the existence of trade unions. Such enlightenment was in the interests neither of the State Administration, nor the employers nor the institutions., while it was precisely at this time that the operations of trade unions became perforce considerably diminished as they entered financial difficulty through the loss of their assets, of which they would have had the greatest need at the time of the change in regime. I primarily place the blame for this phenomenon at the door of prejudices directed against the trade unions.

After the change in the regime, nobody informed the majority of employees about how to make use of the new environment. With no collective protection of interests, the material and moral defencelessness of wage- and salary-earners can be explained by an encouragement of anti-trade union propaganda and the widespread use of individual solutions.

Not to mention that many misunderstood the notion of a voluntary principle. Freedom of union does not primarily mean the right to leave a union, but that citizens have the right to create associations that safeguard the workers' interests and enjoy their collective rights. As I have noted, this freedom was not always such a natural matter; indeed, in many places obstacles are still encountered when practicing these rights.

The Partner Relationship

It can be said, therefore, that the existence and weight of every trade union depends entirely upon the membership. Meanwhile its strength depends upon the size of its *membership*, the *expertise* of its representatives, its *ability to exert pressure* and its degree of *economic independence*. To get a visual picture it is worth creating another diagram.

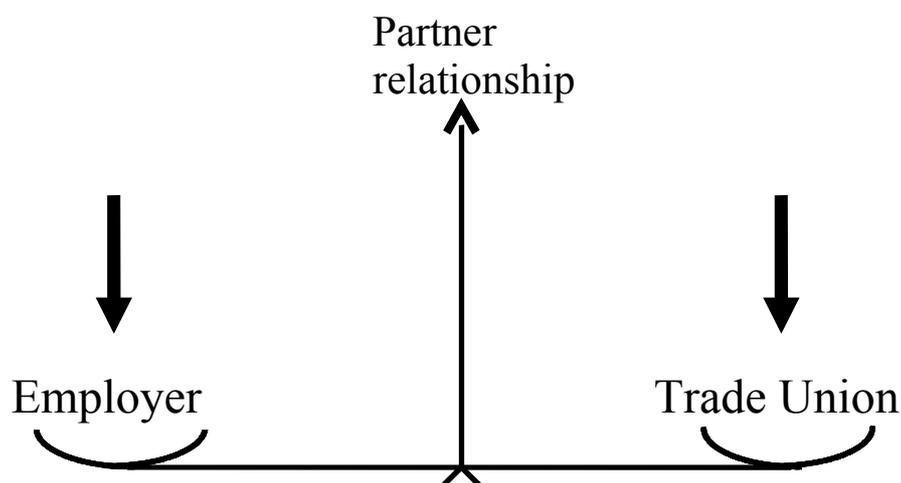


Diagram 5
Partner relationship

Imagine the employer (used in the widest sense: see “State as Employer”) in one of the “baskets”. In other words, with which we have made a contract and where we work, represents a “weight” that is independent of the employee. *Size of capital, quality of tools, managerial experience and a system of contacts* (and so on) all represent pressure on the employer’s side. In order for the scales to level out, “weights” of the same value must be placed in the other basket. This is the basis of a partnership. In other words, having sized up the employer, the solution is not to “lighten” the other side, but to demonstrate a degree of **organisation, expertise, ability to exert pressure and economic independence** that will provide a force sufficient to *balance the scales*. But we must also take care that the pointer in the centre points in favour of the trade union, because in that case the other partner is forced into the defensive against unpredictable eventualities. For instance, the employer wishes to use every tool at his disposal to abolish the union (threats, the creation of a “blackleg” union etc.), or escapes to a “union-free zone” or, of which there have also been examples, closes the plant and moves to “*more peaceful climes*”, in which the members lose their jobs (score an own goal).

The trade union is a form of voluntary employees’ society which represents the workers’ interests through ongoing meetings with employers, carrying out bargaining and coming to decisions authorized by the membership.

However, it can only thoroughly *protect your interests* if it can have itself accepted as an *equal partner*. This depends solely upon the members – including yourself – and their chosen representatives, and none other. The trade union, as we have seen, is not an office. It is not the kind of service where it is sufficient to pay one’s membership dues, in exchange for which it will offer protection. The operation of a *voluntary* trade union demands *responsibilities* from its members. While the earlier *official* trade union fussed over its members, simultaneously accepting responsibilities, **in the activities of a today’s trade union the fully responsible will of the members must be seen to assert itself**. If you do not experience this, then the trade union has not entirely transformed itself according to the dictation of circumstances. But it is the members alone

who can bring about the change. Otherwise the trade union in question will remain weak and eventually wind up. From this it follows that a trade union is least able to change to its advantage if a member leaves it, because in that event it is weakened further.

The peculiarity of the democratic state and market economy is that the **responsibility** to oneself of the individual significantly increases in degree. Mind you, I'm sure you've already experienced this for yourself. For who cares in the least about your fate if you do not take your fate in your own hands? Your own responsibilities also become apparent when you form or join a voluntary society, that is, a trade union, at your workplace, which is the sole organisation capable of protecting your interests as an employee. Sooner or later you have to make a decision!

The trade union is a voluntary employees' organisation that represents its members' interests through regular meetings with the employers, carrying out bargaining and making decisions on the authority of its members. For it to work effectively it must create the conditions of a partner relationship. That is, if it has enough members and expertise it is capable of exercising pressure and of being financially independent.

About organisation

The weight and strength of trade unions basically depends upon how organised they are. This index means far more than mere statistics. The management must perforce take seriously the representatives of a trade union the members of which comprise the *greater part of the workforce*, and a union which is incapable of attracting a membership has practically no weight, despite the fact that all trade unions have identical rights irrespective of size. However, experience shows that *only those trade unions are capable of attaining their objectives which, in addition to applying collective rights, can count upon the support of the majority. The reverse is also true: they will only be able to assert their collective rights if supported by the majority.*

Organisation has particular significance in this day and age, when the *basis of membership is its voluntary nature.*

Whoever accepts voluntary trade union membership not only contributes to the operations of the union through membership dues, but openly expresses his allegiance to a *community of interests*, and emphatically serves in the attainment of collectively formed objectives.

About union

The highest point of organisation is the unity of its membership, which according to some is open to suspicion as it brings forth old and unpleasant memories and prevents otherness, that is, difference of opinion from reaching the surface. As a rule, people of this opinion call for the existence of several trade unions, or the "*beneficial*" effect of *plurality*.

Let us look at the significance of unity from your angle of vision. It is probably that you have a different opinion about the matters of the world – politics, religion – than the other members of your neighbourhood. This is natural, for everyone inherits different characteristics from their parents and has a different upbringing. And that's the way it should be!

And yet the entire essence of a trade union lies in its having **common interests** despite a variety of opinions and habits. If anything upsets those common interests and other, personal or group goals rise above them, then the situation arises which in today's Hungary divides the trade unions, and which was partly responsible for subjecting the workforce in the 1990s. Luckily the process appears to be turning as I write these lines.

The significance of unity lies in the reduction of risk to the minimum in situations of conflict. I saw an excellent example of this in one of the episodes of the TV series, "*Northern Exposure*"

All of them

The Indian assistant of the doctor "exiled" to Alaska has begun to breed ostriches. The tame creatures reward loving care with gigantic ostrich eggs until Morris, the entrepreneur who sees massive profits in the birds, begins to make regular visits to the colony. One fine day a remarkable change takes place.

"Are you keeping chickens as well?" asks Morris, picking up a minute egg from the specially designed ostrich-size egg cartons.

"No, but the ostriches are not laying properly," came the cool reply.

"Why not?"

“Because they’re nervous.”

“Nervous. Of what?”

“Of you.”

“Of me? Which one?” interrogates the puffed-up entrepreneur, his pride hurt to the roots.

“All of them.”

The infinitely simple yet effective reply closed the discussion. It is not difficult to guess what would have happened to the offender if the woman had revealed its identity, or if there had been more than pen and she had pointed to one of them.

About “free riders”

A high degree of organisation really does depend upon the decisions of the *individual employees*. According to the information at our disposal, it is not the mandatory membership fee which holds people back from membership, but on the one hand a *dissatisfaction* with the trade union, which may be valid or may be fed from prejudices rather than authentic information, and on the other the fact that *the achievements of the trade union are equally applicable to non-members*.

Both points of view can be argued and are contradictory, for the effectiveness of a trade union depends on the greater part of the workforce becoming members. On the one hand those leaving the union through *dissatisfaction* further weaken the only organisation representing their interests. On the other, the *outsiders* – even if offensive, there is no better description of the phenomenon – *enjoy benefits from the sacrifices of their co-workers*. Earlier, when membership in Hungary was virtually universal, we could hear of how free-riding non-members in Western Europe were referred to as “blacklegs” or “scabs”. Now there is more than one type of free rider: there is the one who simply *does not have the money for the fare*, and there is the *profiteer*. It is not my belief that the majority of non-members would like to accept the rewards of the strivings of their work companions as “*profit*” or charity. Of course there are those who believe they are able to protect their interests without the help of a trade union. Let me draw your attention to the earlier chapters to show the hopelessness of such a belief. But there is not much one can do with anyone who even so manages to delude himself into believing that his increase in pay is the result of his own labour, or that the next increase will fall into his lap.

A contradiction to be resolved

The worker who is not a trade union member because the results fought for by the trade union equally apply to him also expects others – his co-workers – to take care of the protection of his interests. But on what basis can someone who has no wish to act on his own behalf expect others to act for him?

About expertise

We have already spoken of how employers engage specialist experts to ensure that they sign contracts with us that are to their best advantage. We have seen in an earlier example how individuals are unable to counterbalance this, or at least only very few of them. One of the great advantages of a trade union is that it can guarantee this expertise. Moreover, specialist knowledge is not only indispensable in the making of the *contract itself*, but also in the later *observation* of it.

At most workplaces and institutes the new employee is taken around their new workplace on the day they are employed and introduced to the most important places. They are given various papers to sign and (at least in better workplaces) the necessary training and equipment for their job. In the past this is when the “*signed up*” for their union. Today, unfortunately, ever fewer workplaces contain an office of this kind, and as it is not “*compulsory*” to join the union, the step is generally overlooked. And yet this is the only door at which it would be in the worker’s interest to knock, for it is there that they would find the expertise required to make the best bargain.

The question arises: how should we interpret expertise? Trade union expertise begins not only with a degree in law and economics, but *is built upon a readiness to carry out the work of the union, the party steward, its secretary and all its voluntary officers*. The advantage of such a person can be measured immediately, for it they who must first judge any given situation to see whether it is against the law and/or the interests of the workers. At the same time any lack of preparation on the part of the

officers can lead to immediate failure. Naturally the treatment of problems – mostly the more serious of them – requires a greater degree of preparation (at least as much as that of the employer), which is why it is absolutely necessary for the person representing the employees to have “*specialist knowledge*”. Without the appropriate parading of expertise even the most organised of trade unions is no more than a toothless lion. At the same time, in many cases, in the process of successful bargaining even the most thorough expertise is insufficient, which is why it may be necessary to exert pressure.

About the ability to exert pressure

Why do I claim that a trade union must be able to exert pressure? Because the other side, if able – as history shows – certainly does exert pressure, threatening the workforce with dismissal, wage reductions and sometimes even worse.

According to the logic we have followed thus far, if we can find vehicles for the exertion of pressure on the employers’ side of our imaginary scales, then the balance can only be maintained if they can also be found on the side of the workforce. Workers can exert pressure in a number of ways. We can list here all kinds of *workers’ meetings*, *collection of signatures* and demonstrations, and of course the final method, considered the most effective: the *strike*.

All vehicles for exerting pressure go hand in hand with a degree of risk, for in the course of them the members are personally expressing their will in a situation where discussion has been to no avail. But the *strike* is the most effective way of balancing the scales against the ways in which pressure is exerted by the management, listed above, and so we’ll go into this in a little more detail, although an entire chapter would not do it justice.

“The critical mass”

The strike is a *legal* means of protest regulated by the law. That notwithstanding, I can state that nobody likes going on strike. This is understandable: whoever would like to come into open opposition with their employer? This is why the strike is a tool in the hands of the trade union used only in the cases of the sharpest conflict.

So why bring up the subject at all? Because it is one thing to go on strike, and quite another for the employer to know that when a trade union announces a strike it is able to organise it. This, for instance, is the situation in Austria. For decades there has not been a strike worth mention over at the “*in-laws*”. Why not? Because everybody knows that if there was a need for one that they would be more than capable of organising one. So by ability to strike I mean *organisation*, *legal preparation* and an *independent financial background* which together make it possible for a trade union in the final phase of negotiation, whether they announce it or not, to have in their possession and ready to use the most powerful tool for exerting pressure.

Trade unions that are truly capable of going on strike, apart from the period of proving it so, need actually strike far more rarely. But the ability to strike must be maintained. For this, a well-organised membership – *that is, a critical mass* – is necessary, as well as a disciplined and prepared team of officers and experts, and a full strike-hat – that is, a great deal of money.

About financial independence

I think this factor needs the least explanation, for any kind of financial dependence leads to subjugation, which may make the establishment and maintenance of a partner relationship a more difficult, if not impossible factor. This is precisely why every trade union must ensure that its membership dues and other means of income are able to cover its own expenses (expertise, strike fund, communal aims, services etc.). Otherwise bargaining will begin under an unsalvageable disadvantage. But bluntly, we can say that a trade union that operates through the good will of the employer is unable to be effective.

Considering the importance of the topic, we shall turn to the matter of trade union housekeeping in the chapter on *Membership fees*.

Bargaining

Now that we have discussed the conditions for a partner relationship, let's take a look at to what end and how trade unions can make use of their *being organised*, their *expertise* and their *ability to exert pressure*.

Wage development in the "competitive sphere"

We have already made mention of the fact that there are some employees who confess that they are not members of a trade union through disenchantment. For the majority of cases this is dissatisfaction with results. To be sure you know individuals who are, or you yourself may be disappointed because your income did not rise as much as expected, or that your work-related benefits are insufficient, or you feel that the trade union did not do enough to protect your workplace. In concrete situations the claim may be valid. At the same time, in judging the trade union's *performance* potentials might be mistakenly being attached to it which it does not possess.

The situation is that the trade union occupies a bargaining position with the employer the strength of which is recognised in law and which emanates from the unity of its membership. *This bargaining can only refer to how a particular company uses its profits – if such it has.* Again, let us make a diagram to make things clearer.

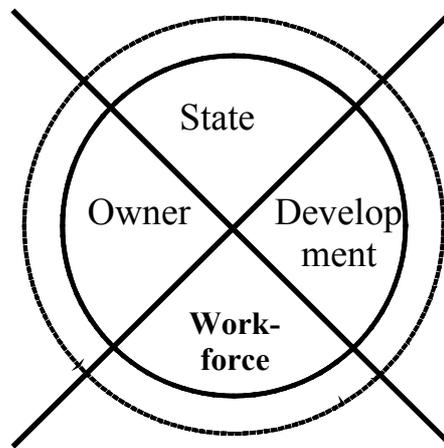


Diagram 6

You can only divide a cake that has been baked

Let negotiations be about the reduction of the workforce, an increase in wages or a collective contract, the *subject of the bargain* can be about one thing alone, and that is the *profit* created by the instruments of the given company, its workforce. Seen as a drawn circle, profit takes the form of a "cake" shared out by many people. (The diagram does not show how it is divided. We have divided the circles into equal proportions for the sake of simplicity in drawing.)

First of all the State takes its portion in the form of taxation. For the moment let us ignore the fact that in better places the degree of taxation is discussed annually, *and that the trade unions are present at these discussions*. From the aspect of our example, it is an objective fact that one part of the profit goes to the State.

Secondly, *the owners of the company whose invested capital has been used* expect their part. They too must receive their portion, which at the very minimum must equal what they would have received if they had placed their money in a bank account. Indeed, as they have accepted a greater risk through their investment, they expect a greater return. It is logical that if over a longer period they do not see a return on their investment they will withdraw their capital from the company, which could go hand in hand with the loss of jobs. In the process of negotiation this is something which a responsible trade union cannot ignore.

The third share goes to *development*. Despite the fact that development primarily enriches the owners, it must be recognised that they must satisfy the pace of development dictated by the market, because to a great extent the *long-term existence of the company and its workforce* depend upon it.

We, the workforce, are the fourth in line to receive *recognition of the results of our*

achievement; indeed, we are due it, for without us not one crumb of the cake could have been prepared.

The task of the trade union is to use expertise in mapping out the division of profit and to define with the greatest precision possible the extent of their demands. However, wage rises or other demands are not as a rule met voluntarily by the owners and management merely through the existence of expertise or strident announcements. For the bargaining to be successful the trade unions must also exercise pressure, which can only be guaranteed through the *solidarity and ability to exert pressure* of their members.

Naturally the owners would like as much profit as possible, the management has its own plans for development and the trade union also makes its own just demands. Nevertheless, alongside the conflicting interests in this debate, *common interests* can also be expressed. For instance, it is in the interest of all four parties for the *divisible profit (the "cake") to be as great as possible*, as the circle with the dotted line shows.

Put simply, *the trade union only participates in the process of division*. In other words, nothing can be expected of a trade union if there is nothing to divide up, for it only through work that new, divisible wealth can be created.

One of the most important tasks of a trade union is to establish to the greatest precision possible the *ratio of the produced profit that can be demanded by the workforce* and to obtain it through agreement (collective contract). If it is small, because the company's profits are small, then even the strongest trade union is unable to "*break off*" a bigger slice. It is against the *long-term interests* of the workforce for the owners not to receive their expected profit, or for them to be deprived of their resources for development.

It must be noted that dissatisfaction with the trade union lies not only with the degree of improvement in work conditions through bargaining – for instance, a wage increase – but also with *internal division*. Internal division – for instance, the degree to which various groups (according to qualification, age or skill) participate in a wage rise, is not solely the "*merit*" of the trade union. It is in the *interest of the employer* to create conditions in the workplace whereby the workforce feels *inspired* to work harder in order to produce greater profits. The trade union places the interests of its members in this process, in other words it complements the ideas of the employer and attempts to influence them.

Hopefully what has been written here has made things clearer for you in your judgement of *trade union achievements*. Sadly, some employers use trade unions as scapegoats to cover up their own faulty or anti-workforce decision-making. The only means of protection against this is to make known the true situation and through sane judgement.

A particular bargaining position.

History has already provided numerous instances of how a trade union has agreed to a reduction in pay. Part of Lee Iacocca's plan for handling the crisis at Chrysler was a bargain whereby the leaders of one of the strongest trade unions in the world were offered a significant drop in wages in return for keeping tens of thousands of jobs. As time has borne out, the leaders of the United Auto Workers made the right choice when they accepted the deal. With their help, or better to say with the sacrifice of the employees, Chrysler got through the crisis and the workplaces remained.

Pay rises in the state and local government sectors

The above are true *if there is something to divide*. But what, for instance, is the state of affairs with those employed by the State, which as everyone knows does not make a profit (or at least the main objective of which is not to make a profit)? What should or can the trade union demand in such a case? How much increase in pay can be demanded by unions for teachers, policemen or health workers? What is too much, and how much is satisfactory? How and on what basis can they expect their demands to be satisfied?

Those employed by the State (state employees, civil servants) operate the largest "*company*" of

all: the State. Unless the State machinery is well-oiled, companies in private hands are unable to make a profit, because if there are no roads, no customs regulations or law and order in the country (and we could carry on with this list) the ability to make an income will remain low.

All state employees and civil servants and other people employed by the State are paid from the country's income. Among the many ways of approaching the concept of taxation, that with which we most closely associate is that of the *State as a special provider of services in exchange for which it collects various duties, taxes and levies*. The degree and division of these directly affects those employed by the State.

In a case such as this, which does not involve the division of some kind of profit but abstraction from the great State "pool" of resources, it is difficult to provide an answer to the question of what a union may demand. Even so, we'll give it a try.

It is logical that the only aim can be to obtain a change in national *real wages* (a change in real wages expresses a change in their purchasing power – an improvement or deterioration). (Attention! A drop in real wages can even occur alongside a pay rise!) One part of State revenue derives from a proportionate taxation on profits made in the community. In other words, it would be dishonest to the community to demand an increase in real wages exceeding the national average, but neither is there any rational explanation for accepting anything lower. Naturally this is only so when the incomes of the various types of work are otherwise in proportion with one another, in other words they express preparedness, stress, responsibility, danger etc.. In the case of people employed in a sphere of activity that has been unfairly handled over an extended period of time they have the right to demand a pay rise that closes the wages gap.

What about the unemployed and those employed by small enterprises?

What can the unemployed do, or those one, two or handful of employees engaged by a small firm? Is it worth their joining or remaining members of a trade union?

If you ask me, the answer will of course be Yes.

Trade unions do not only carry out their interest-protecting activities at the workplace, but also in the preparation and monitoring of the execution of laws related to the unemployed and those employed by small enterprises (for instance at the local authority and chamber level) in which – when they merit it – they can play a significant role. By this once again I refer to their being *organised, prepared, able to exert pressure and financially independent*. And for this they require members.

For instance, those working in trade are exceptionally vulnerable. As a rule no more than a handful are employed by any retailer. Often there is a considerable discrepancy between the hours they work and their wages. A good solution would be for the trade unions and the chambers of commerce or other professional bodies to jointly supervise employers. This would be in their interests too, for due to the "grey areas of employment" certain parties gain a dishonest disadvantage (for instance, prices become cheaper through "saved" pay and contributions). Strong trade unions can help the supervision of the unemployed in the same way, or, which is more important, create new workplaces for them.

Maybe you think that today nobody is interested in your problems, but that's not true. Every bargain also has you in mind.

Pay increases or more jobs?

The labour force is defined not only by wage levels, but also in numbers. Seemingly, this *causes a contradiction in trade union demands*, because for instance the fewer people necessary to create a given output, the more income goes to the employees. But this only seems to be a contradiction. For a trade union can never proceed from the expenses set aside for pay in establishing the size of the workforce. It must however keep in mind the numbers required to satisfy the requirements of expertise, physical and intellectual work in a safe and humanly viable manner. When this is being established attention must be paid to the level of technological development, the degree of the load of responsibility per capita, psychological and other environmental influences and numerous other, yet measurable factors.

That is, expenditure on wages is only indirectly connected to the establishing of the size of the

workforce. It is the *employer's task* to provide the conditions for even more effective work within the bounds of human expectation, but if nothing compels this provision, then the lack of conditions is *a burden on the employee*. Naturally today this in itself is contradictory. This is why we often find employees who are burdened with more than one sphere of activity, who are forced into long-term overtime in order to save costs and upon whom are transferred the risks ensuing from overburden.

Alone, individual workers are incapable of taking up the competition against such odds. For this, a trade union is required that is professionally prepared and has the clout to enforce interests. As long as an annual wages duel is the order of the day, the struggle against unjustified dismissals is a continuous task.

Naturally there is another side to the coin. One cannot ignore real situations where a reduction in the labour force is justified (for instance, as a result of significant technical development). In such cases, and by obtaining information of the timing of dismissals, the trade union can assist by making an effort to soften the effect of the arrangements. That is, it not only attempts to extend the process in time – although that in itself can aid in the avoidance of a deal of conflict – but (for instance) encourages *retraining and the creation of new workplaces, acceptance of early retirement* and many other measures.

We can see that the trade union not only plays a part in bargaining for a better standard of living, but also has recourse to a variety of effective tools for preventing and avoiding unemployment.

Monitoring at the community level

The State continually tightens the tax laws in order to gain access to your income. Despite central efforts, in Hungary the proportion of the proportion black and grey areas of employment is high by international standards. That is, a great deal of income is hidden not only from the State, but also other participants in the economy, among them the employed workforce.

In my opinion this is one of the main reasons why in today's Hungary there is such a disproportionate discrepancy in incomes.

At the same time, were somebody to prepare a survey of the proportion of withheld information regarding income in companies with an operative trade union and those without, they would be surprised at the result. Experience has shown that the presence of trade unions makes it much more difficult for companies to deprive the State of one of its largest means of revenue – income tax. After all, you yourself could give a number of examples of workplaces where the workforce is stated as receiving and tax is paid only after the minimum wage or somewhere just above it. Maybe you have worked or are working at present for such an employer? It's a typical personal solution. And what will happen when you fall ill, or you're given the sack?

Social monitoring is not only important from the economic aspect. After all, trade unions are also NGOs for human rights. They fight for values that cannot be expressed in money, such as health, education and the right of free expression. Acting in this capacity they can place the decisions of those in power under social scrutiny. This is how trade unions have become an indispensable part of the democratic social order. In the Scandinavian country much admired by the author this "*social scrutiny*" has been operating well for many decades. Indeed, I dare risk stating that *this is one of the foundation stones of social welfare*. In contrast, at the time of the political changes attempts were made in Hungary to place the trade unions in disorder. Yet before I put the blame upon anyone else, this was done because it could be done. It is up to us to alter this situation through mutual strength.

Should trade unions disappear, many more would feel the loss than the present membership. This is because many more enjoy the advantages fought for them than the number of those who are prepared to take the moral and financial step of becoming members.

The trade union capable of entering a contract

As we have seen, the objectives of a trade union are quite clear: to assert the members' financial and social interests by signing collective agreements. *For this, an organisation is necessary that can guarantee that the members' interests and contingent injuries come to the surface, that democratic decisions are made as to how they are handled, and that can succeed in satisfy demands through a framework of collective agreement and according to the opportunities afforded at the given workplace. This kind of trade union is called a trade union capable of entering a contract, one that is able to satisfy the conditions listed above.*

In the interests of being able of entering a contract the trade union must create its own "game rules". For those who think I am not taking the necessity for regulations related to trade unions sufficiently seriously when I compare them with a game, I would like to draw attention to the rules of one of the most common game forms, the pack of cards.

I believe I am not too much mistaken when I state that most people like playing; at least, when we were children we all liked playing, and that desire for most of us has not disappeared in later years. The majority of card games are played by more than one participant. One of their characteristics is that they are only entertaining if everyone keeps to the rules.

Cheating is not permitted and the mildest form of punishment is to be ostracized (not to mention vengeance exacted with the help of various objects hidden in the leg of one's boot, a familiar feature of outlaw tales). So if at least two people would thus like to while away their free time together, for the most part they do so by observing defined rules. This is even truer if there is a necessity for a greater number of people to cooperate.

It's that simple. Trade unions are also institutions with a number of players, and so if they wish to work well they have no choice but to abide by clear rules. The articles and organisational and operative regulations of a trade union must contain *rules related to democratic operation, organisational structure* (adjusted to the system of decision-making of the partner company, the state institute and the bodies governing them) and *management regulations*, as well as the *manner of monitoring the organisation*. It is through the creation of and keeping to these rules that the trade union will become, shall we say, **capable of entering a contract**, that is, it is expected that it will be capable of keeping to its part of any contract that it makes. The ability to enter a contract is at once a legal and moral category. Curiously, it is easier in this case to fulfil the legal conditions. After all, the legal registration of a trade union is not a very difficult formal task. However, the standing of one's moral ground is far more than that. To give an extreme example: a trade union that enters a collective contract with which its members disagree with so violently that they protest through strike action is likely to lose its credibility. Put better, its leaders will lose credibility, for *it is impossible to be disappointed in a trade union, only its leaders*.

In order to avoid such "accidents" it is not sufficient to create good rules: they must also be kept to.

About democratic operation

In order that its members feel that a trade union is their own, and that it is a suitable vehicle not only for achieving the main aim, but also for protecting a whole variety of secondary interests, *it must operate democratically*. As is our habit, we will try to show this through a diagram.

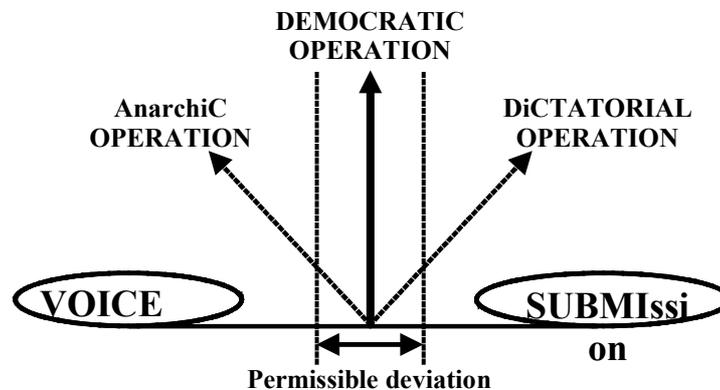


Diagram 7

Tolerance, trust and active participation

The diagram depicts the possible relationships between individual members and the union. One feels an equal within a community if one has sufficient *voice* in the formation of objectives. At the same time the community must satisfy the similar expectations of the others, which means a voluntary *submission* on your part. That is, the commonly represented position – for instance, the measure of a wage increase – is formed through an agreement of differences of opinion, in the course of debate within the community. When the two categories (voice and submission) are not balanced, for example if each person concentrates upon *his own stance* without taking those of others into consideration, the result is *anarchy*. If on the other hand only a few have any voice in decision-making, and the rest remain *submissive*, then we stand face to face with a *dictatorship*. However, the democratic process cannot be depicted on any point of the scale. Due to a number of factors, *voice and submission* can only remain *in balance* in the long term within a particular line, but they must remain in balance over the long term. WE can give a number of names to the line of **permissible deviation**.

The first is individual *tolerance* or a *talent for compromise*. This differs in each of us. Some of us are better able to tolerate decisions being made on our behalf so long as we are left in peace, while others demand the right always to be able to voice their opinion and so influence their environment. Your own degree of tolerance is defined by whether or not you can accept the deviation between your own ideas and the *stance* (and not results!) of the union. Here we can only speak of the stance, for *attainable results* will depend upon numerous factors.

Permissible deviation can also be referred to as *trust*. Tolerance and trust are strongly interdependent, for we *trust* our environment as far as *the limits of our tolerance*. To remain with our example, if your opinion about a given matter, for instance the level of a wage rise, differs significantly from the stance represented by the union, then your trust may be shaken. Let us set out from the point where both parties wish to maintain trust (if it were not so, then the only way out would be for them to dissolve the variance, but that is not the object). The sole means of maintaining trust is continuous interchange of information. In other words, your actions are satisfactory when on the one hand you express your point of view and support it with arguments, while on the other you listen to why and what the union is representing. It is probable that in the course of such interchange one or both of you will alter your opinion, thereby replacing your trust. The greatest mistakes are made by trade union leaders and committees when they do not inform their members of their opinion on any given matter, or provide insufficient reason for it. On such occasions the members inevitably search for ulterior motives. In this the party with opposing interests (the employer) is happy to “*assist*”. This is why the members (including the representatives) of a good trade union must also form a good community. On the one hand, within a community healthy and continuous dialogue is guaranteed, while on the other external effects are more easily filtered out. In short: *trust exists*.

The third concept connected to permissible deviation is *active participation*, which at the same time *serves as a control*. This is important because democratic operation can only be guaranteed through the active participation of the members. Without this the “*scales*” will never balance. If the operations of a union or the stance it represents fall outside the sphere of tolerance of the majority of its members, shaking their trust, then the reason must be uncovered and the members themselves – or their representatives – must take the appropriate measures. This is how the role of control is played in the democratic operation of a trade union. Without it, the scales may tilt toward the two extreme values, which can lead to a serious disruption in operation. If the members do not through active participation maintain regular control of their trade union then either anarchy or a dictatorship makes it inoperable, and it loses precisely the advantage which makes membership within it worthwhile.

When someone forfeits their membership they not only forfeit their right to control, but as an outsider the trade union no longer guarantees their democratic rights. Workers outside of the organisation fashion their own “*dictatorship of the majority*”. In other words, for the union to operate democratically it is necessary for the *membership to be active*, but first it is necessary to be a member.

The democratic operation of trade unions is basically defined by the quality of the preparation of decisions and the manner in which they are brought. If the members are for any reason left out of these processes they will sooner or later feel that others are deciding instead of themselves. However, as we have seen this depends upon them. For this reason a member with a sense of responsibility for himself or herself can never remain far from a single opportunity to voice their opinion. For this reason alone you must participate at every vote affecting your fate. Indeed, you must demand that your opinion is taken into account.

At the final count, everyone *must decide for themselves* whether to take part in the activities of the union or not. I reiterate: *it is desirable to have as great an organisation as possible, indeed, ideally total organisation, something which depends upon the individual decision-making of the workforce.*

On Representativeness

This expression, daunting at first sight, can also be brought into play with the ability to enter a contract. Representativeness is a much debated institution; in ordinary parlance it delimits the minimums of the ability to enter a contract, reduced to numbers. That is, only that trade union or those trade unions can make – together – a collective contract whose members comprise the majority of the workers in a particular company or skill. I refrain from writing specific numbers in order to make these lines more lasting. The threshold values of representativeness are determined by laws regulating employment. (It is true that present regulation is strongly debatable as the basis is formed through sympathetic voting and is not founded upon the real membership.)

The setting down in law of the concept of representativeness was taken by the most part of the unions as a new attack upon their existence. If there is some truth in the matter, it cannot be denied that a rationally thinking employer will want to make a collective agreement with a union that has the real support of its members.

We know of a particular case when in the course of the privatisation of a large plant the new owner announced that he was only prepared to enter an agreement if the union could count more than 90% of the workforce among its members. While the demand was illegal and excessive, those affected joined the union to the last man in order to avoid the lengthy court procedure.

From this it can be seen that it is not so very difficult to meet the strict conditions of representativeness; all we have to do is recognise our own interests.

Combination acts

It is not my aim within the framework of this section to provide a complete legal guide to the preparation of fundamental regulations, for I am not entitled to do so, but I would like to clarify some details that appear important in practice.

As I have already mentioned, the operation of voluntarily organised societies and social associations was regulated in Act II of 1989, with a rare degree of permanence. To my knowledge, Parliament has not since made any amendments. According to the Constitution and the law in

question, citizens have the right to form free and voluntary societies. Trade unions are included. However, for a union to be created and operated in the legal sense, it must satisfy certain formal elements.

Among these is the court certificate of registration. I should like to emphasize that the creation of a trade union is *decided by the desire of its members*, not by legal procedure. Naturally without registration a trade union cannot be considered of full value, and so it is best to obtain one. And there is no great risk in the matter, for while the court examines the aims, constitutionalism and other formal conditions of the trade union, it may not qualify the necessity for forming the union.

I might comment that it is significantly more difficult to form a new trade union than to choose the best from out of the existing supply. And of course here regulation cannot be entirely dispensed with.

In a nutshell, a society can count upon being registered if *it is founded of their own free will by at least adult Hungarian citizens, if its aims do not conflict with the country's constitution, if it elects its representatives and executives (authority), forms rules of association and has a public list of its members*.

The combination act does not stipulate the existence of fiscal conditions for operation, but it is decisively required elsewhere, for instance in the Accountancy Act and taxation law. The matter is logical, for where a membership fee is paid, or the union comes upon other sources, these must be accounted for. On the other hand, if a trade union does not husband its resources how is it going to cover expenses needed to attain its aims?

A nice little list, but what does it all hide in truth? Naturally the essence. You have to find your rights and responsibilities in the rules of association. Here are a few of them: who can you vote for and how? when will you yourself obtain the right to be elected? which bodies can decide upon the collective agreement, and how? who decides upon the rate of the membership fee and the uses it is put to, upon services provided by the union, upon communal programmes? In what capacity can you participate in the preparation of decisions (for instance the organisation of actions) and what responsibilities will you bear in executing them? how can you take part in training courses, what information can you demand... the list could be much longer. I think they are all questions that affect your pocket and your existence. This is why I cannot agree with those who believe that members are only interested in the final result, and shouldn't be bothered with the basic documents.

Who should enter a contract and with whom?

We have arrived at another important question. We have already suggested in passing that it is expedient to align the structure of the unions with the employers' decision-making points. That's a rather strange statement to make, especially in the light of our having consistently endeavoured to emphasize the independence of the trade union. It appears contradictory, yet is not. For we are obliged on practical grounds to construct the structure of the trade unions in line with the employers. This practical reason is none other than our main aim: that is, *to create a collective agreement*.

After all, employers construct a decision-making structure in their own interests. The larger the company, the more levels they are obliged to create, from executive director to group leader. This by the way is also true of state and local governmental organs. (Indeed, more so!) From this it follows that if a trade union wishes to satisfactorily address tasks, then it too must create decision-making levels at every point of partnership where a decision affecting the fate of the employees may be born. This is not always easy to do.

A characteristic contingent of economic reform is reorganisation. In the early 1990s (and occasionally to this day) it proved difficult for the trade unions to meet the demands of decision points. It is most likely that the majority of officials could quote numerous cases when in the course of solving a problem the leaders sent them running hither and thither. As they say, in some cases it is best to be on your toes.

In the case of a balanced partnership the trade unions will not be caught unawares, for it is also in the interest of the other half that collective agreements can be made and kept – that is, that it is created between parties capable of entering a contract. The task in hand, then, once again: **the trade union must represent itself at every level where a decision might be made that affects its members.**

Among these levels the lowest point of control requires the least explanation, for in most cases the leader of a team in a workplace is in contact with the group in a position of trust, or their leader. Unfortunately, experience has shown – with due respect for the exception – that the higher we go up the ladder, the less those affected are able to follow the operation of certain levels. But this phenomenon is natural. For the higher the level of decision-making, the more interests have to be harmonised. And this is not easy. The mass of information to be processed becomes ever greater, and spheres of interest clash more violently. We only have to think of the conflicting interests, generally based upon objective facts, within a profession or between generations or genders.

Naturally, as I have already mentioned, the larger the concern, the greater the number of levels, but even in the case of trade unions in small or medium-sized companies one has to look beyond the walls of the firm. For depending upon one's branch of work it is worth operating regional and national bodies, for the intentions of the various ministries or employers' bodies, chambers, local authorities and so on must also be kept under observation. From this it can be seen that two levels are certain: *that of the immediate workplace and the national level*. Between the two there are considerable differences according to skill and region. According to these there is clearly a need for regional and national associations according to skill. Naturally it is rightly expected that they too will keep to regulations relating to their democratic operation.

It must be stressed that the decision-making systems of the competitive and public sectors differ considerably from each other. For in the public sector fundamental questions affecting the workforce (for instance, the degree of a wage increase) are decided at the topmost levels.

On the basis of what has been described we must resign ourselves to the fact that it is not the construction of a trade union that will define the decision-making order of any company. This is perfectly natural, for companies can and do exist without a trade union. If therefore we create a trade union with the aim of making the best agreements possible on behalf of the workforce, then we must seek out the points within the company where decisions are made, and create a decision-making organisation of our own. Among other matters, the rules of association are good for this, too.

The “Murphy’s Law” of decision-making levels:

Questions affecting the fate of the workforce are always solved at the level where there is either no trade union presence, or where it is at its weakest.

About inspection:

Trade union members and officials are human. This will conceal opportunities for subjectivity and error. Not to mention that none of us are the same. Our inheritances are different and we were brought up in different surroundings, which results in our judging various things in different ways. Mention has already been made of tolerance and various levels of trust. To an extent, union takes these differences and makes them uniform. Not to arouse suspicion of a militaristic operation where decisions are taken from above, it is imperative that active membership participation take place. But, as we know, the members elect representatives so as not to have to deal with the day-in day-out processes, and that's how things should be. Then the officials create body after body, for which the regulations created by the association determine tasks, obligations and powers.

Of course with a local organ of ten people it is not too complicated to follow processes, but as we shall see, it is rare that a group as small as this is able to serve all the needs of its members.

The larger the organisation, the more important it is that representatives keep to its regulations. Control of this cannot be compared with some kind of official procedure, although this kind of examination may be equated with the concept of self-government, so that for instance it is not sufficient to evaluate the annual accounts from the political aspect, but does no harm to follow them from the mathematical point of view. Even so, I would not place the emphasis here but that an organisation without supervisory controls may unwittingly make mistakes which in the long run may be detrimental to its members, whether they be made in the course of preparatory decision-making, the making of the decision itself or its execution. If for example we discover such an error in the analysis of an agreement, then the reasons for the error must be uncovered, indeed satisfactory conclusions must be drawn.

Why do I preach at such length over this? Because today it is characteristic that we make excuses for one another, for after all “*we are playing on the same side*”. The essence of the matter lies here. Mistakes made within a trade union can only be rectified within the union itself. If this does not occur over a longer period, the entire operation may disintegrate to such a degree that internal discord creates barriers to effective operation. Naturally inspection must also take place under proper regulation because personal remarks and offence can form obstacles to the operation of the entire organisation. Not to mention that differing parties can be exploited to create divisiveness – for instance during a period of discussion fraught with pressurisation. More than one example can be brought forward where conflict flares up between the members and their leaders when their respective incomes are made public.

The union makes contracts which looking upon the members have an economic effect. We might say that this too is a kind of deal, and as we know in deals there is room for trust but there is no friendship. Everyone has to keep to the rules of the game in the interest of long-term cooperation.

And so control must take place, but the age of the witch hunt is over.

No miracles

As we could see, it is not so easy to exploit the opportunities concealed in the unity of the workforce. In the interests of one’s aims cooperation must be regulated, and the rules of the game must be kept to. The ability to enforce interests is sometimes much closer to reality than what we would like on the basis of what are or what we consider to be our rightful desserts. Yet even if not all of what we imagine can come about, still thanks to unity many partial aims can be reached. With this I merely wish to point out that **no trade union is capable of miracles, but without them no member of the workforce can expect a long-term improvement in his fate.** The more we accept this truth we less disappointed we shall become.

The enforcement of interests is a tiring, time- and energy-consuming process that we could also describe as a “work battle”. And for war you need three things: money, money and money.

The Membership fee

It is more than 100 years since Hungarian workers created their first self-help associations. From the pennies saved from their extremely low wages they supported the families of those who had died in industrial accidents – unfortunately in those days an all-too-rare occurrence. As a rule the aid ran out with the burial of the head of the family, often its only breadwinner. But it was more than nothing. Later, the voluntary benefit societies of the workers became stronger, their services expanded, and over many decades they amassed considerable fortunes.

The organisations formed to safeguard the workers' interests at the end of the 1800s and in the early 1900s primarily spent the paid-in membership fees on educating and informing their members. It was with membership fees that the first trade publications were issued, and the costs of lawsuits related to work conditions were also financed from them. Where necessary, strike aid was paid. This system, constructed on the principle of solidarity, worked very well for a long time.

Then came forty years. In the countries of the Eastern bloc the role of the unions diminished to no more than that of an administrative body, and the tangible manifestation of the voluntary principle and solidarity was reduced – with some exaggeration – almost to a tax. The services extended to the members in return for the membership fee came to the fore – some of them ones which earlier had been the responsibility of the self-aid societies and the State – and unfortunately some people still regard this to be the case. Yet today the membership fee has its old purpose, or at least should have.

The purpose of the membership fee

The purpose of the membership fee is to serve in the most effective manner possible those who have paid it in. That is, the members. Again you say, *“That sounds all very fine, but can it be realised, and what is it that best serves the interests of the members?”* If we are agreed that the workforce has a need for a body that protects their interests, because this is the only way they can protect their collective rights, then the main aim is to ensure that a trade union can operate and that it is independent, so that it will be able to enter the best contracts possible on your behalf, so that you get the best deal in exchange for your labour. *So regard your membership fee as an investment.*

I know that this too general, so let's look at what you should be spending your money on and how; that is, what you expect in exchange for your membership fee.

What must your membership be turned to?

As far as the members are concerned the membership fee is clearly a burden, for it has to be paid in every month just like the electricity bill. Indeed, at the end of the year when our income tax is calculated our employers inform us how much we have spent on the trade union (where there is a deduction).

There are some who at this point do some quick calculating: *a flower for Women's Day, frankfurters and beer for May Day, schooling aid and a present from Father Christmas for our children, a refused application for aid etc. etc.* – for most, the end amount is a negative figure, because in the course of the year they have not received as much as they paid in.

Although it is possible to count in this way, if you have read the book this far you will suspect that this is not the point I want to reach. Let's depart once again from the essence of the trade union, that we maintain it so that we get the best deal possible in exchange for our labour (among other reasons, so that no-one will ever have to apply for support). For this a *democratically-run, independent* trade union is needed that is able to apply pressure, satisfy *communal* demands and *provide services*. Let's take these one by one.

Democratic operation, as we have seen, is extremely important, precisely so that the will of the members can be brought to bear within the trade union. According to the sometime Prime Minister of Great Britain Winston Churchill, “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the other forms that have been tried.” It is very expensive.. Good decisions have to be prepared, brought and executed, and for this time is necessary. Which brings another English adage to mind: “Time is money”. Unfortunately we can lose the essence in a bid to save money. That is not to

say that we have the right to waste money in the name of democracy. I think that a badly-prepared meeting that as a result has to be reconvened is the same as throwing money out of the window.

Only people can represent expertise. This is precisely why a large proportion of the money spent by every trade union is spent on personal expenses. Maybe you know that at the time of every conflict it has become customary for the other side to expose the high salaries of trade union leaders. Sadly the demagogy is still effective. Yet you only have to think a little: “How much would you do the job for? Ah, that’s different! I know.”

But let’s approach the matter from a different direction. How would you do better? To be represented by tenth-grade, badly-prepared errand-boys, or by the best brains the country has to offer? You see, there’s no contest. People with expertise, as we know, are in great demand on the labour market, and that’s why they come expensive to everyone. To us as well, but that’s why we have combined, so we can afford to pay them. Naturally we want something for the money we pay them, which is why we mustn’t forget to evaluate their work on the results they achieve.

The only trade union that can refer to itself as having expertise is the one which regularly spends on **education**. This because we need qualified representatives so that they can remove from our shoulders the burden of know-how. And education is very expensive. Unfortunately at the beginning of the 1990s, when there was the greatest need for both representatives and members to be appraised of the new situation, trade union education in Hungary came to a virtual standstill. We are all paying a great price for the lack of knowledge.

I don’t think there is any great need to explain **independence**. A financially defenceless trade union is incapable of negotiating as an equal partner. It’s as simple as that! But let’s at least provide an example. *In neighbouring Austria, where for decades membership fees have been collected in an immense pot, the ÖGB (Austrian Trade Union Congress) is so independent that when they were asked how much their strike fund was the reply was that this information was secret, but that if the State of Austria were in financial trouble they would be able to help out.*

There, not only are the trade unions independent, but the incontestable high standard of living of the labour force could not have come about without effective protection of their interests.

And if we’ve arrive at the **strike fund**, the work struggle can cost a lot. At the time of an extended strike it not only behoves those standing up for their interests to be compensated, but compensation must occur. This, in better places – see Austria – is collected in one big pot. Here it is not only significant that more of you there are the greater the amount that can be collected, but that the money can only be used with the common agreement of the other trades. In other words the railwaymen can only enjoy financial support with the acquiescence of the health workers, the miners, the teachers, the traders, the foundrymen etc., and vice versa. This makes it possible to avoid bickering among groups from the various occupations and wage brackets. Isn’t that splendid? Two flies in one swipe. Simultaneous *democracy* and *solidarity*.

Orientation could be placed in a variety of slots at the same time, but because of its importance it is worth devoting a little time to it separately.

Partly, it has become an organic part of democratic operation since the appearance of the first Hungarian specialist publication, the printers’ *Typographia*. People, and that means you too, have a right to know what acts of parliament are in preparation and how they will affect your life.

Secondly, the power of the press. It is no accident that in the early days trade union publications were censored and distributors persecuted. The publicisation of the opinion of the workers is a most important tool in the protection of rights, for the sense of justice of society is inescapable. If the trade unions cannot spread their messages so that they reach the public, then how can it be expected that the public will form an opinion about them?

One of the important tasks of trade unions is to **construct a community**. I believe this is also a part of the protection of one’s interests, for members who know each other well and who trust each other are able to stand up for their interests at the local level. And the best way to construct a community is to spend the most time together, maybe even with one’s families, in a way both enjoyable and useful. This also costs. However, this needs less explanation, as it has strong traditions, which once again are worth spending upon.

Naturally we cannot forget the **services** of the trade unions. Even though – in my experience –

for most people this means aid and holiday vouchers.

I'll start with the **holiday voucher**, because it's an easier question. In the early nineties the majority of the old "SZOT" trade union resorts were collected together in a state-owned foundation. With this, the former and general explicit trade union holiday-making disappeared for a time. Basically, the Hungarian Trade Union Confederation maintained the resorts, that is, it ran them and carried out the allocation of vouchers. You might ask, "*If the trade unions used to be able to maintain resorts, why can't they do so now?*" The simile is inappropriate. For with the loss of their properties, the trade unions also lost the profit brought from running them, besides which the greater part of expenses used to be supported by the state, through the trade unions. That no longer exists.

Today holidays are supported by the state in the form of tax relief. Among the resorts in trade union ownership, many fell victim to the reallocation of wealth. Of the surviving company resorts, most holiday vouchers are allocated by the social committee of the factory council. Put plainly: the earlier system of cheap holidaying formerly run by the trade unions has been utterly transformed. And so, with a few exceptions, which may be looked upon as considerable achievements, most trade unions do not directly run holidaying facilities.

So what role has remained in retaining holiday support? Quite a large one. Most companies wished to abolish the resorts, because they were a burden. They were kept on solely through the persistent demands of the trade unions. But their voice can also be heard when the state is determining the level of state support.

Now, if after all the indispensable expenses listed above in the defence of the members' interests there is something left in the pot, I believe that it is no longer permissible to divide it up in the old traditional way. *Support*, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is as old as the membership fee. But here too a new way of thinking is required.

Let us remain with the original principle. You would like your membership fee to be a good investment. If it is, then probably you will never need any aid. Experience shows that the majority of members never do ask for aid.

But let us examine what aid means: the for those who receive it, but find it less than they hoped for, or requested it but did not receive it, the proportion of the membership fee turned to aid is exactly that much less than the amount demanded and the amount received. On the other hand, for those who have never requested it, it is that much more than the amount from the membership fee turned to aid. If we look at it, both groups may have reason to question the sense of it. The associated bad feeling aroused is perhaps thanks to this duality.

Together with this the giving of aid is one-sided and its total abolition would be against the principle of solidarity. Everyone agrees that aid should only be available to those who have entered a critical condition due to circumstances beyond their control. But helped they must be. As, for instance, there was no question of whether the railwayman should be helped out who went to work in the morning only to find the smoking ruins of his home when he returned from work.

**The proceeds from aid for those who do not request it = 0.
For those without any other resources: everything!**

Instead of abolishing the amount allotted to aid, it should be handled separately from the expenses incurred in the protection of interests. *Because we cannot allow money required to protect our interests to be shared out as aid, for then sooner or later everyone will be requiring aid.*

Of course we have to exploit the fact that there are many of us. A new form should be found to replace the subjective forms of division of aid. Luckily experiments are being made. For instance, a number of trade unions have taken out group accident insurance on behalf of their members.

Specific situations must be treated alongside normative solutions, but we should jointly reach the point where these occur as rarely as possible. **We must fight for labour to be paid for, not to wait for aid. I think everyone would agree with that.**

How can we manage our membership fees?

Now that we have listed the many purposes to which the membership fee can be turned, let us also take a look at what we are permitted to use it for. I devote a separate section to this, because I think today's practice, which put delicately is hardly optimal, can be traced back to a lack of trust. And this is costing a great deal to all involved.

You may have paid in your subscription, but it's still your money! That is, not only do you have a voice as to how it is spent, but, but you must use it. Of course not as in "Give me my bit!". In that case put it in the bank, where at least it will accrue interest. Although your membership fee can bring you far more than any other investment. I have a good illustration.

One year in the early nineties the management of the Hungarian Railways (MÁV) did not want to review wages. At that time the average wage was 25,000 Hungarian forints, so a member paid in 250 forints subscription a month, or 3,000 a year. At this time the headquarters where the experts were negotiating a rise in wages with the employers turned 20% or 600 forints to the protection of the workers' interests. Thanks to collective bargaining, the annual rise in wages came to 20%, or an annual monthly increase of 5,000 forints. This came to an annual increase of 60,000 forints. So the 600 forints from each member's subscription turned toward the protection of their interests was reimbursed exactly one-hundredfold. I raise my hat to anyone who knows of a better – of course, legal – investment!

So it is worth paying attention to how the union spends the members' money. Luckily, today every member has a voice. How? The utilisation of the membership fee is fundamentally defined by two decisions. The first is what is known as **subscription division**, that is, how the membership fees are divided proportionately within the different levels of the trade union. At this point it is decided how much goes to the union, how much to the branches, how much to regional or specialist intermediate bodies (where such exist) and how much remains for the primary organisation. These decisions are for the most part made by the congresses, otherwise called councils. I think that in today's Hungary this is the source of the most trouble. The foundation of the division of the subscriptions lies upon trust. It would appear that there is insufficient of this among the various organisational levels.

Because what happens with the money that pours into the headquarters? From the aspect of the local organisations, as soon as it is paid in it disappears over the horizon. Yet this is not the case, or should not be. *The trade unions were created and run through the principle of union. If we do not trust the bodies and representatives that we have elected, then it is not money that should be removed from the task in hand, but trust that must be replaced.* For this, democracy is needed as well as consistent, functioning inspection. Because if we leave any level of the union to vegetate without sufficient funds, the results will be questioned and it will continue to be deprived of funds at a later date.

The trade union movement is a unique opportunity. Success has its price. If we don't want to pay for expertise, independence and the ability to exert pressure, then we will never step out from beyond the nonsensical barriers raised around us!

In the western democracies, well-organised, effective trade unions, such as the Norwegian Trade Union Congress (LO) collects the subscription in one pot. This is also what the ÖGB does.

The running of trade unions has over the past decade or so been completely reupholstered, but it has not been possible to change the earlier principles related to the division of the subscriptions.

Due to the "*cataract*" that independence has grown in the unions' eye, in recent years *we have renounced our best experts, our independent press, training for our representatives and, most important of all, wages that guarantee a decent standard of living.* I am convinced that the only ones who can change this sorry condition are the people affected, and that means us.

For evidence as to exactly what degree the necessity for this is, I bring forward the Norwegian and Austrian example. It is striking that in both countries, unions that are financially powerful and unified are capable of protecting the interests of their workers, equally at the national and at the local level and of guaranteeing for them an enviable standard of living. New ideas don't have to be worked out!

The budget and the report

Whether locally or centrally, the utilisation of the membership fee must and can be inspected through an annual budget. The aim of preparing an annual budget is not only to assist in decisions on how much to spend upon what. The preparation of a budget is a most important task demanding foresightedness. **Don't forget: it is not the union that orbits the money, but the other way round; the money is one of the tools used for achieving one's aims.** This is the point from which we should depart at the planning stage. The aims, meanwhile, are determined year by year by the relationship between the members and their environment.

As the secretary of a branch organisation I myself committed the error of settling the budget in a single meeting of the fiscal committee. Then, as a beginner, I too was among those who attached little importance to it. As it transpired no serious harm was done, because traditional usage was allowed to take sway. But on the first occasion that I felt that keeping the membership informed was more important than educational aid – the allotting of which always caused dissatisfaction – and after speaking separately to practically every member we changed our budget, and first a photocopier and then a fax machine. Later the investment brought dividends. The members themselves said so. At that time, when the first wave of dismissals and serious wage battles were under way at the railways, information was at a premium.

As far as I am concerned, this case is proof that good decisions may not and cannot be reached without consulting the membership.

The budget is paired with the annual **report**. Most people think this to be the statement expected by the authorities. That, too, is indispensable, but the information it contains is useful only to a very few. Be warned! Where a mere end-of-year statement is released, there is something suspicious in the air. Fortunately, the “*Here you are! Read out of it what you will!*” approach, which made a mockery out of democracy, is becoming less and less typical. *A budget plan and report that are transparent and comprehensible for all make up the cornerstone of trust.*

Other income

Trade unions have sources of income other than membership fees. The Labour Code provides that the working hours needed to operate a union organisation, i.e. a part of the entitlement to reduced working hours, can be redeemed in cash. Many mistakenly look upon this as a way of appeasing the unions, but it's not. What we're talking about here is the membership subsidy that the union receives, and when it's not required it would be absurd not to claim it. The fact that it is redeemed must be set down in the collective agreement, that is, its size must be made known to all those affected.

The other way in which income can be made is through **economic activities** not directly connected with (though still serving) the union's aims, such as participation in enterprises or other investment forms. Where a union husband its resources well, reserves are formed. One has only to think of the strike funds. Though union money also receives interest in one or another bank, the degree of interest certainly makes a difference. Carefully and with due caution, but it is the responsibility of every union to bring the greatest possible profit with the minimum risk in the interest of its own aims. Note, this too requires expertise.

I recently came across a brochure from 1991. It contained plans which considered the creation of a union-owned bank and insurance company. Unfortunately the plan came to nothing. Instead of fattening some commercial bank, the profits from the then several tens of millions of forints from membership fees would have gone to the unions and their members. At that time politics intervened. If today's much smaller divided union wealth does not make such a grandiose plan possible, let us at least consider what the multinational companies know only too well: *money goes further if its clubbed together*. One large joint investment fund would generate a far more significant profit than all those little branch accounts. After all, only will and trust are necessary in order to come to good decisions.

According to some the trouble is that there are some who depend for their existence upon subscriptions and other trade-union income. But if we pause to think we should be grateful that our officials do not expect their financial security to come from other sources – say, from the partner

employer.

Otherwise, everywhere in the market economy the fate of the executives depends upon company results. Furthermore, where there is necessity, there the best solutions should be found.

The point is that the membership fee and all other revenues find their origin with the members, and these must be handled with the greatest care.

As a rule, the problem with the membership is not that it must be paid. The breaking point rather comes when people do not know what it is being spent upon. Yet it's no secret, or at least it shouldn't be.

The most important embassy of the budget is to guarantee the trade union a long-term and effective operation on the behalf of its members.

The Officer

In the April of nineteen-eighty-seven I was elected trade union secretary. Before that I had had as much to do with the trade union as most other people. Five years earlier, on my first day at work, when I had to do the rounds of the offices in the engine-house, the wages clerk asked me if I wanted to be a member. But I might remember incorrectly and possibly I wasn't asked anything, just had me fill out the statement of entry to the union along with all the other papers I had to sign. After that the party steward asked me for my sub every month, in exchange for which I received a small stamp, which – on the basis that one day it would be good for something – I duly stuck in my little membership booklet. A few years later even that came to an end as membership fees were automatically deducted from my pay packet.

When later on, due to an organisational change, the local branch was looking for a new secretary, the honour went to me as “*young blood*”. I was probably ambitious, because I accepted the offer without knowing the slightest about anything. Despite this, I was unanimously voted in by the committee as the only candidate. What could demonstrate my lack of preparedness better than that there and then I did not even have the gumption to express my thanks to the steward. To this day I am embarrassed that I failed to do so.

A few weeks later I thought that once I had been elected I might as well find out what my duties were. I sought out a few experienced colleagues who reassured me, telling me that I'd soon settle in. And that's what happened. One after the other, members approached me with their problems, which I attempted to solve. Enthusiasm was a great help in the early days, as was the fact that at the time of the political changes the officials were “*officially*” taken seriously by the financial leaders. At that time there was still time to learn the job; furthermore – and most significantly – there were still training courses held for trade union officials. During the year following my election I received an education. To confess the truth, I cannot remember the weekly timetable, but I do recollect that one was able to glean information from the more experienced in one's free time.

Then suddenly everything changed. At once matters became serious. Along came the dismissals, there was no money for pay rises, and social benefits disappeared by the dozen. Moreover, trade unions were increasingly becoming a greater burden on owners and managers. Add to that the fact that the “old” unions were at that time coming under fire. They were accused of being communist spawn. Naturally they knew perfectly well that they were nothing of the kind, but nevertheless they were sacrificed on the altar of the economy, to the benefit of the new elite. If the workers wished to find solutions to their daily growing problems they would have to discover a new tone of voice. Where this succeeded, they still exist, but where it did they found themselves for the most part shut out. Change – and lack of it – depended to a considerable degree upon the officials. But before I lay the blame upon them – and myself – for the way in which the workers have become defenceless over the past years, let me hasten to point out that many of us were taken completely unawares by the sudden changes, not to mention the brutality of the attacks.

Whereas earlier trade union officials were held in respect, from 1990 they were displayed by the new political and economic order as the enemy, because they were incessantly demanding a say in the reformation. Attempts were made to make people believe “*they have nothing to do with company business*”, and for a minimum pay rise or even just the promise of one people believed them, because they wanted to believe them. Then, at the beginning of the changes, the majority trusted in the general beneficial effect of private enterprise on everybody. *Since then, we have learnt that there are no miracles, only humdrum deals, in which employees are the only defenceless parties.*

In the years of regime change previously elected officials gave up their office for one reason or another. Those stepping into their positions did what they could to hold their ground, but the changeover in personnel met with as many disappointments as successes. At that time, among the tougher conditions, we had the greatest need for knowledge and experience. Of course, not only that at the disposal of the veterans, even though most of their experience they gleaned is still relevant, but that which for lack of a better solution those in office had to pick up as they went along.

In today's Hungary expertise is necessary wherever responsibilities are taken. With a little

exaggeration, expertise is required merely to hammer in a nail. At the same time, sometimes when an agreement has to be made at the discussion table that will affect the fate of others the people at the table – should it reach that stage – are there solely on the strength of their enthusiasm. Naturally it is not my aim to disillusion those who today accept this difficult if noble work. Quite the opposite: I believe that the tools of the trade of trade union officialdom can be acquired. For me, over the past ten years the greatest lesson has been that one should only accept the post of trade union official, and most importantly carry out the job, if one is truly prepared. I would like to make my own contribution by sharing my own experience. Let's start by explaining the expression.

Who is an official?

An official is a member who has been elected by the other members. This is an incredibly important definition. Because even after being elected the person is still a member. Why is it so important to emphasise this? Because unfortunately after the vote and the announcement of the result the relationship between the voters and the elected person changes. Some of this alteration is natural and necessary, even as it should be, but another part is wholly unwarranted.

It is right that a certain aura of respect surround officials, for with their election they have deserved the trust of others. It is right that greater attention be paid to each announcement they make, for to a certain extent the work they carry out, just like their behaviour, will become a role model. Indeed, as their opinions will affect the fate of their companions they are to a degree raised up above them, though it makes a difference as to how much.

However, it is not at all right if for this reason the distance between the members and the elected official increases. In fact I think it should be the other way round, for the official has remained a member. A member who is entrusted by them with extra tasks, tasks which they do not wish to and cannot carry out one by one. And so in order that they can carry them out satisfactorily they must be given certain rights and tools must be placed in their hands. *That is, the official is a member whom we empower and whom we burden with the execution of the community's matters. In order for the official to be able to support this common burden, we must strengthen the official. That is why officials must be carefully chosen, trained and protected.*

They say that trade union officials are the “*air between the cymbals*”. And many times over. Not just because they are the point of impact between the bosses and the members, but because they are at once subordinates and leaders.

Subordinates, because they act according to the will of those who have elected them and represent their interests. In other words, they can never decide upon important questions of moment alone. At the same time leaders, because their direction, based upon their special knowledge, should never be ignored. If for no other reason this cannot be done because in the long term no-one can successfully represent an opinion that is opposed to theirs. By the way, if anything, this is what occasion the most conflict between the members and their officials.

If for instance in a given situation the members make demands far greater than what the official considers to be feasible, or vice versa, then they must start by coming to an agreement with each other. Although it only occurs rarely that an official remains isolated with their opinion. If it happens on a number of occasions in questions of importance, then deeper introspection is required.

“Murphy's Law” for officials

Our eager official, the encouragement of those who elected him ringing in his ears, sets out full of the desire to prove himself in his first battle. The members really have put their trust in him, for he has always spoken from the heart, he is dynamic in debate and thanks to his sharp mind puts forward good arguments, and is not the slightest bit afraid of his own shadow. With such heightened confidence it is not unusual that he sets himself an unrealistically high aim. But our man trusts in his disciples and accepts the challenge. Now if the impact is so powerful that the official requires assistance, and “looking behind him” discovers there is no-one there to back him up, then defeat is inevitable and will inflict severe wounds. It even occurs sometimes that the very people that have entrusted him will transfer the entire responsibility to his shoulder, even when he has done everything within his power. What happens next time? He will only accept as much conflict as he is personally

able to withstand and risk. The result will certainly be that he will not satisfy those who have voted for him, so once again everyone is disappointed. With the second defeat both trust and our man's – or woman's - self-confidence will evaporate.

How can this be prevented? In one way only, and that is if the official and his supporters really combine to try to achieve their aims together. Although the members have chosen the best from among themselves, they cannot transfer all responsibilities to that person. The official represents them but the decision-making remains mutual.

If in identifying their aims the members not only decide what their interests are but also what they are prepared to do in order to achieve them and what they can expect from their officials, then the first crossfire can be prevented as well as wounds from later conflicts.

The criteria for election

At the time of electing one's officials a great many aspects must be taken into consideration, for the task in hand is remarkably complex. Forgetting perfection, here are a few important characteristics the existence of which are crucial in order to carry out one's commission:

Activity: Here I mean that the individual in question can be no shrinking violet, for the representative of a community must display initiative and a dynamic personality. At the same time someone with a short temper is no good either, for if they cannot keep their emotions in check then they may do much harm to the community they represent.

The faculties of criticism and self-criticism are indispensable in handling conflicts. For this a person with an equable temperament and self-knowledge is required. The presence of these two qualities largely helps in the formation of *an ability to tolerate conflict*. Unfortunately most reconciliations of interests are burdened by conflicts. Strong nerves and self-discipline are demanded in order to withstand the psychological pressure of the party with opposing interests. Naturally newly-elected officials cannot produce preparedness from up their sleeves, *but they must have the motivation to acquire new knowledge*. The ideal thing would be if our officials were selected from out of a number of candidates with similar qualifications. Sadly, today the trade union training system does not always make this possible, although we should not disregard demands for minimal school requirements. However, these too must be handled flexibly, for provision for office can vary according to the degree of skill and organisational level required.

This is closely linked with the demand according to which for the most part it is *trustworthy individuals, well-known in their own field of work*, who are able to summon up communal support. This is important so that office-holding individuals can withstand work-related attacks, for it has happened more than once that attempts have been made to make the activities of a union official impossible through attacking his work abilities. People like to look up to their officials just as they do to their good leaders. For this, one must have *exemplary behaviour*.

Officials also take on the role of mediator, and therefore must possess satisfactory speaking abilities. This ability can be developed with much practice, or rather it continually develops; at the same time the lack of this ability may be the greatest stumbling-block in the official's work. It really is worth investing energy in one's performance abilities. It's worth the effort!

One must also possess a degree of self-respect, because sadly this character trait is all too frequently put to the test. For instance one must not suffer any refusal to engage in dialogue. After all, you are not taking steps on your own behalf, but as entrusted representative of the community. If an official suffers being ignored, then in practice the people he is representing, the workforce, are being held in contempt through his person. And that cannot be allowed to happen.

These are the most important character traits. As they say where I come from, that's quite something! It's no wonder that it's difficult to find the right person. But let's not be maximalists: after all, most people can satisfy the list of requirements, they just haven't had to be put to the test. My experience shows that it's not the requirements that makes nominees hesitate in taking up their commission, but the fact that they do not know what is expected of them because nobody has ever told them what is expected and required of them. And people don't usually accept what they are ignorant of. This is why a lot more time should be spent upon educating members, so that the task doesn't tower above them like some insurmountable peak when we nominate them for office. With this we could avoid a lot of disappointment both for them and for ourselves.

Replacement

One of the most vital questions in the trade union movement is that of who will represent the members at each level. We have seen the number of criteria the person we have entrusted will have to satisfy. It's hardly surprising that it becoming ever more difficult to find the right person for the task. So we cannot expect too much from the elections which for the most part take place every four years over a period of two or three months. Replacements and satisfactory voting arrangements can only be achieved through continuous work.

Now this sounds pretty formal, but all it is about is that where the official does not take on tasks himself, or conditions do not compel this, and matters can be solved together, it can always be discovered which person out of a group can not only be entrusted with a task, but enthusiastically takes it on. The first and most important step to becoming an official is to discover who it is that is willing to cooperate with the community.

Once that has been discovered, in ideal circumstances a preparation process is required. Many trade unions have recognised the significance of raising a replacement generation, and so they run youth branches or something similar so that in satisfying the demands of the young (which most often appears no more than entertainment) they can be persuaded to see the advantages of a community existence.

Preparatory courses, if put together with appropriate thematic material, are able to discover which of the participants is most suited for work as an official. Incidentally we could save both ourselves and those whom we "*throw in at the deep end*" without sufficient caution a deal of disappointment by using this method.

Why do so few accept the post?

Probably it has never been easy to find candidates for trade union officialdom, but today few and fewer accept the invitation. As to the reason why, that has more or less been covered in the previous chapters. Let's make a summary! Firstly, today negotiation with the employer is far more like to end in conflict, and often means inconvenience rather than acknowledgment. Undertaking the job of an official is a serious matter and presupposes *wide-reaching knowledge*. To gain this is no small achievement alongside work and family. Not to mention that for the most part the knowledge and skills acquired in a trade union – however useful – have only limited application in other walks of life and are practically impossible to have recognised.

It is a *great responsibility* to represent a collective and prepare contracts in their name. In addition, in the course of keeping to them the person accepting office comes into conflict with his own employer. Neither does *election* make the job attractive. Unless unavoidable, people do not seek out situations which may end in failure. Yet where there are several candidates for the job one person will win the majority's trust while others will fall behind.

Meanwhile, the electors expect results. Often results which depend the least upon the union officials, and even when there is absolutely no chance of attaining them.

Among such circumstances it is a wonder that anyone consents and accepts the invitation. Why do they? It is very difficult to provide an answer. I myself was most curious, and so I put the question to students attending the above-mentioned courses.

According to their written answers, the majority of the respondents were urged on by some internal compulsion, that is the main reason why trade union office is accepted is that they cannot stand by and watch the exploitation of the workforce. This was generally expressed in the following manner: "*I would like to help my fellow workers*". In all events a viewpoint to be respected!

In my opinion these are the volunteers without whom the trade union could not operate. For this reason protection is the very least that we should be able to guarantee them.

About the protection of officials

The question of the protection deserved by those holding office has been present since the very beginnings of the trade union movement. The logic of the matter is infinitely simple. We elect somebody who then represents our standpoints in discussion with the employer. What that person says is not done for personal interest, and so he or she should not suffer greater risk than those who

are being represented. That is only fair.

Trade unions have demanded protection of their officials since the moment they were formed. One result, for instance, is the inclusion in the Labour Code of a passage according to which they may not be transferred, dismissed or be otherwise disciplined without the consent of a higher body.

But unfortunately law is not everything. Daily practice proves that employers occasionally pick quarrels with the for them burdensome officials that are based not upon matters relating to their office, but upon the work relationship. In this case it is very difficult to assert one's protective rights via a legal route. At times like this what, or rather who can protect the official? I am convinced that it is the obligation of the voters to come out in support of their fellow member. Perhaps it won't be necessary to go the whole way, as happened at a provincial boiler-room at the beginning of the twentieth century when skilled workers who were difficult to replace protested at the dismissal of their workmate by collectively handing in their cards. Mind you, on that occasion they got what they wanted. There are many other ways in which the electors can achieve results by standing up for those they have elected. And they must make the most of them, for an unjust affront upon the official endangers every member of the community.

We must break away from the attitude whereby the elected official will bear every burden in our stead. If even so this is what we expect of them, let us at least stand by them if they have found themselves in a difficult situation because of us. I think this is the minimum that can be expected of us.

Bringing a motion of confidence

That that we have clarified how we should understand the defence of officials it will do no harm to dwell a little upon what should happen when an official encounters conflict within their own organisation. In this situation the most important thing is that officials are also entitled to what after all is the mission of the entire trade union: *the protection of their interests*.

The worst possible solution comes when we do not take care of the way in which we handle internal conflicts. One of the most commonly applied institutional ways to solve problems of conflict is call for a vote of confidence.

Why is it important for the motion of confidence to be regulated institutionally? Because if a trade union takes its democratic operation seriously, nobody can be allowed to be condemned out of hand without having recourse to the opportunity for defence. This is none other than if someone finds the activities of one of the officials not to their liking, they should not make accusations without any basis, or if their accusations do have some basis then the trade union should not have to waste energy dragging along their own problem that should be directed and the true tasks.

The most common solution is either a permanent or an ad hoc committee which is obliged to examine every written complaint that reaches it and have the right to advise the decision-making body. Now of course they can't play the home-grown authority because here everything is voluntary, but it's certain that whoever refuses to cooperate will find themselves in a pretty difficult position. If however they are prejudiced concerning the composition of the committee, then that too must be handled.

The essence is that we are behaving correctly when we provide fair procedural conditions both for the organisation and the individual. Everyone is entitled to this. Just think: if you were unjustly accused of something and for this you were recalled from an initial impulse. Such a wound on one's pride often does not heal even after years.

There are not so many of us that we can afford to scratch at each other at each petty matter, and our status is not so high that we can pass by the more serious misdemeanours and omissions detrimentally affecting the community. But let us at least attempt to maintain our humanity amongst ourselves.

About the independent

As is the case with the summits of all organisations organised from the bottom up, so too at the head of the trade unions there are the professional, independent individuals. We have a great need for them, because in this work there are many parts which require an entire person's time. The majority

of independent officials whom I know consider the protection of interests to be their profession, indeed their vocation. At the time of writing these lines the number of independent officials is unhappily hovering around the bottom limit. This has taken shape for a number of reasons.

Let us openly confess that nowadays to work in a trade union does not really mean a serious existence. I do not think that today there are too many young people who would like to build their career within a trade union. Yet the *tasks are varied, require creativity and stamina and are real challenges*. Despite this, trade union work has a low social standing. A number of factors have come into play in causing this to be the case. We have already spoken a great deal about these reasons in this book. Just as a reminder, we list here *propaganda degrading the unions, distorted judgement of its achievements and the limited economic opportunities*.

It is evident that we need independent officials. But let us not forget that they are the employees of the trade union. We can and must expect concrete results from them. But neither let us forget to appreciate them. If we would like the best to stand up for our interests, we must replace this exciting work to the rank it deserves,

About expertise again

I hold this question to be so important that I find it absolutely necessary to return to it. For it is not merely the obligation of the officials to acquaint themselves with the knowledge necessary in order to carry out the tasks to which they are entrusted; they are also entitled to preparation.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, about two-thirds of the membership fees flowing into the trade union were spent upon the education of its officials and on providing information for its members. (In those days the assistance was provided by the self-help societies.) I am convinced that that this is the alpha and omega of the protection of interests. If we do not guarantee for our officers the conditions necessary to acquire knowledge then we are ruining our own chances.

If we regard the membership fee as an investment, this is the quickest way in which it will reap a profit. Our officials are our brokers. It is their business to follow the economy and changes in the company's fortunes and to align the workforce's demands to them. That is, they draft what the workforce deserves from the profits made out of the cooperation between capital and work. This presupposes a thorough knowledge of economics and law.

Fortunately, not every official has to have a Ph.D. from these two basic sciences. Trade unions must also exploit the advantages of specialisation. That is, each level requires a different depth of knowledge, but the potential to acquire it must be guaranteed to each membership fee-paying member. Because they are entitled to that. Here we arrive at another important question: *"Who should make provision for the individual and collective protection of interests?"* Here too the quality of the preparedness supplies the answer. For instance, in Holland – according to one survey carried out at the end of the nineteen-eighties – out of all Labour Code problems arising, 70% were solved by the voluntary officials, 20% by the independents and 10% by professional lawyers working in the judicial assistance service. This is also evidence that that knowledge does not begin with a degree.

Without training, officials can chalk up their defeats in advance.

About gratitude

I have heard from many officials how thankless a task theirs is. For the most part they work without respect for their own free time, and as for the most part the matter by its nature rarely provides spectacular results, honour is also rare. It is a Sisyphean task. The stone rolled up the hill by day invariably lies in the valley the next morning.

We anyway live in a world where only an opening up of heaven and earth would attract the attention of most people. Recognition of success only occurs in campaign terms. You may ask, somewhat cynically, *Why should this be any different with trade unions?*

It really is difficult to pick out a single feature from the everyday course of things; nevertheless, one should occasionally try to. It's a fact that positive thinking brings home more success than fear of eternal judgement. Not to mention that honour and failure are mutual. Neither should be monopolised or underestimated.

Some say that they can measure their own work by whether or not they receive complaints. If

not, or if less than the average, they are doing all right. That's one way of looking at things. However my own experience supports the fact that the membership rarely jump for joy at the officials' necks.

Even so, I did manage to find a standard over the ten years. This is none other than re-election. In other words, for the most part the members display their gratitude to their representatives by re-electing them. Unfortunately I have witnessed grown men, tried and tested in the labour struggle, in tears "*just because*" they have not been able to continue carrying out this "*infinitely thankless*" task.

And so I recommend that you do not seek out or expect gratitude, and then perhaps you will not miss it quite so much. But if those who are entitled to do so place their vote with you, then know that this is a mark of their estimation, even if they do not always tell you to your face.

How can you be a good trade union official?

Here are 13 + 1 tips which I once made out for myself. I know it's very hard to stick to them, and admit that I didn't, always, but one has need of a norm. So:

1. Create a relationship with those who elected you so that they can always be frank with you about their problems.

2. If you protect them or are representing them, never refer to them by name unless the law demands it, in which ask their permission in advance.

3. Don't give up on your members' problems. Seek out a solution and demand an answer with the same consistency as if it was being demanded of you! Don't forget: for them their own problems are the most important!

4. Explore, inspect and immediately forward to the members information that affects them. They have a right to know what to expect. Without information they cannot express an opinion, and consequently they are unable to enforce it.

5. Systemise information coming from members and immediately send it on to where you hope the solution to come from.

6. Train yourself! You don't have to know everything, but you will discover pure good intentions are not enough. Things will go best for you if you can use the specialisation in the organisation, which is why you must have a thorough knowledge of the organisation of which you are an official.

7. Build a team! You will discover that alone you cannot solve every task entrusted to you, and that you are not irreplaceable!

8. Build a community! The people require it, so create as many opportunities as possible for carefree togetherness. It's difficult, but it's worth it. It's much easier to have the problems of others accepted within a good community and easier to include its members in solutions.

9. Handle the membership fee so that the members who have paid it in are convinced that it is serving them down to the last penny.

10. Be consistent! You will inevitably be entering a situation where you must make decisions connected with people. It is especially difficult to create fair division. If you can, form as detailed regulations as possible (for instance in connection with the distribution of aid); this will make things easier, though your hands will be more tied. Be careful! You're not in authority but a representative!

11. You must be a role model! Whether you like it or not, you are serving as a model in your environment because you have accepted and been granted the office. If your behavioural practice becomes too distant from what is expected you will attract the anger of your voters and partners.

12. Respect your partners! It was not you who selected the company's leadership, so you must accept them as they are. And anyway, are you so certain that you would not regard matters as they do if you were in their shoes? Concentrate on what you have been entrusted with and don't concern yourself with qualifying your partners.

13. Once you have succeeded in winning the trust of your companions and partners, don't forget how you gained it and in whose interest you may use it, because difficult as it is to gain, it is just as easy to lose.

+1. Don't go seeking gratitude in your work! If you expect it and don't get it, it will gnaw at you; if you don't expect it but get it you'll enjoy it all the more. Mostly you will only receive it through being re-elected. I wish you every success!

The responsibility of decision-making

It's a fact that today in Hungary manpower is undervalued. You can choose! You can slave all day and do everything your "*almighty*" employer demands of you. And then in the evening, exhausted, you can complain away to your spouse and your friends or anyone who is prepared to listen, for it is likely that their case is no better. And so you "cry" on one another's shoulders, vilifying your condition, or else you can make up your mind to do what you can about it.

I know it's a difficult decision, but at least weigh it up; after all, you only live once. When it comes to the final judgement, you owe it yourself to be able to say, *At least I tried*".

Closed: June 4, 2001