



United and Stronger Together: Building TRANSNATIONAL Trade Union Power

The Transnational Partnership Initiative (TPI) of VASAS and IG Metall

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In the Transnational Partnership Initiative (TPI) of VASAS and IG Metall, traditional international trade union solidarity meets tangible self-interest - in both unions.

The members of IG Metall want to know how work is actually done at the sites in Hungary. They no longer want to rely only on information from the employers. They want to know how working hours are regulated, in which tariff classification workers are grouped in, what the labour market is like, and which technology and methods are used for production, development or administration in Hungary.

The members of VASAS have been fed up for a long time with wage levels that are among the lowest in the EU. For them, the Single Market means that the cost of living has long reached the German level in almost all areas. At the same time, incomes remain at about 30% of the wages in German locations. In Hungary they work 40 hours a week, in the German metal industry 35 hours - in practice, of course, this is usually more, in both countries. The workers in Hungary also want to overcome these gaps. It is clear to them that they have to unionise themselves well and they are looking to their colleagues in Germany for solidarity.

VASAS and IG Metall know that cooperation needs strong partners on both sides. Since 2016, TPI Nonprofit Kft. - the joint training and consulting institute in Győr, Kecskemét and Debrecen - has been preparing VASAS members for trade union work in the workplace and networking with their colleagues from IG Metall. The topics range from trade union building with organising methods, the work of shop stewards on working time and grouping systems, labour law in both countries, and other topics related to the transformation of industry.

History:

The two metal unions from Germany and Hungary have been shaping their cooperation more intensively, concretely and on a daily basis for almost 10 years. The hitherto well-established trade union diplomacy of resolutions and top-level talks lacked sufficient practical elements to be able to counteract the increasing location competition in multinational companies.

Since then, VASAS and IG Metall have been bringing together more and more company trade unionists from companies that are trying to play off their sites in Germany and Hungary against each other. After the political and economic transition, subsequent to the historical events of 1989, more labour-intensive production was relocated to countries with lower labour costs, this is increasingly true of state-of-the-art production and many classic ‘white-collar’ jobs. Companies are not only interested in low costs, but they also benefit from tax advantages and subsidies, from weak labour law, the pronounced diversity in the trade union landscape and - especially in Hungary - from a government that fulfils almost all wishes that go beyond this.

In practice:

Education and consultation are carried out by the three TPI teams. Each team consists of three project workers and an experienced VASAS regional secretary. They are supported by the TPI managing director and other colleagues from VASAS and IG Metall with different competences and skills. On the one hand, the latter bring experience from Germany into the joint education work. On the other hand, they bring their knowledge from the work in and with Hungary into the educational work of IG Metall. In this way, both organisations learn from the project.

Results:

- In the TPI project, **12 colleagues are receiving long-term training and further training for full-time trade union work in Hungary**. If they continue to work for VASAS in the long term, at the end of the project a good third of the VASAS staff will be qualified in organising methods adapted to Hungarian conditions, in trade union education and in new forms of teamwork.
- **The number of members at VASAS could be increased by almost 10%**, although the fluctuation on the labour market in Hungary is extremely high due to emigration. The TPI project is thus also making an important contribution to stabilising trade union sector structures in Hungary.
- In some companies, **wage negotiations have resulted in wage increases of between 10 and 30%**. This has a knock-on effect on other companies and at the same time reduces the high fluctuation rate.
- So far, **more than 80 joint training events** have taken place.
- VASAS has unionised **6 new companies** so far.
- Numerous **full-time and voluntary colleagues of IG Metall are involved in the work in Hungary** and carry their commitment to transnational cooperation at company level into the organisation as multipliers. They come from several local

branches, training centres, regional district managements, as well as from the head office.

- **The work of the European Works Councils is enriched** and supplemented by important aspects through the bilateral intensification of cooperation on issues that are important for the employees at the sites.

The German-Hungarian project, which is scheduled to run for eight years, has a pilot character because there is hardly any experience of such intensive cooperation. At the same time, there is an exchange with other transnational organising approaches at industriAll Europe and UNI Global Union. In addition, IG Metall is currently investigating how the experience gained and conclusions drawn so far can be used for cooperation with foreign trade unions and in strategic projects, for example in Morocco.

Lessons learned:

- **Necessary skills and competencies:** For an organising campaign, a good knowledge of organising methods is needed, of course. However, there is a team working on each process and people need to be qualified. Participating actors must have at least a specific knowledge of the country, the people and the languages. Leadership skills, educational skills and intercultural skills are also necessary. Proper administrative skills are required to manage the budget or to clarify legal issues.

- **Think about transnational cooperation from the workplace perspective:** This is necessary to build successful concrete organising cooperation between workplace trade unionists in both countries. In joint workshops we ask: What are your interests? What connects and what separates your sites? Only then can we achieve that transnational mutual support is perceived as part of our own trade union work.

- **Make room for differences:** In the mother country of a company and in the country of a site, the legal framework and the trade union situation can be very different in terms of membership, financial strength and working conditions. If the partners nevertheless meet with respect and on an equal footing, the learning in the process goes both ways.

- **Allow for time:** Such projects trigger change processes and a cultural shift in the respective organisations - on both sides. Along the way, misunderstandings and conflicts arise, which - if dealt with well - further develop the project. New thoughts, behaviours and perspectives need time to take root. It is necessary to have a plan, but it must always be jointly reviewed and adapted.

- **Dovetailing organising and transnational work:** European Works Councils, international trade union organisations, global framework agreements are important

foundations for strengthening trade union countervailing power. They need to be closely interlinked with organising and development work at the sites of a company or along the supply chain. Only then can they also contribute to strengthening the trade unions.

- **Ownership** can be secured again and again on both sides or worked out anew so that it is not lost.

Our conclusion:

If trade unions want to prevent workers' and trade union rights from being undermined and violated along the supply chains of multinational companies, they need joint and, above all, transnational strategies, tools and methodological approaches to build up trade union counter-power.

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