



Slovakia: labour on the brink of another crisis

Thursday 16 February 2023, by [Karmina \(SK\)](#) (Date first published: 25 January 2023).

Twenty years ago, there was a big strike in Slovakia. In response to austerity measures that would have seen dozens of train services and many jobs axed, the rail unions decided to stop work. At the end of January 2003, they went on strike, bringing passenger and freight services to a halt on virtually the entire network. The economic damage, caused mainly by disruptions in the supply chains of the large factories, was enormous and grew rapidly.

In the end, however, it was a heavy defeat. The management of the railway companies applied to the court for an interim injunction declaring the strike illegal. The then [Minister of Justice](#) was also involved in the case. The court granted the companies' request and the unions immediately put the strike on the back burner, mainly because of the fear that the companies might seek damages from them. The strike, which was supposed to be indefinite, ended after 77 hours. The planned changes on the railways were allowed to go ahead.

After several months, the Bratislava Regional Court [lifted](#) the interim measure, but it was too late to resume the strike. In less than three days at the beginning of 2003, the energy that had been building up among railway sector workers for several years was discharged. We shouldn't forget that the passenger rail service alone [employed](#) over 18 thousand people at the time, three times as many as in 2021. Similar mass mobilisations do not arise on the spur of the moment. Moreover, as one of the unions admitted, it was not certain that the situation with a court-imposed interim measure would not be repeated, which would bring the strike to an early end again.

That same year 2003, Minister of Labour Ľudovít Kaník introduced an amendment to the Labour Code, which, among other things, extended the scope of overtime work to four hundred hours per year and allowed workers and employers to sign a series of short-term employment contracts. The Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ) initially responded with street protests and the blockade of several border crossings. Finally, KOZ decided to call a general strike. An hour-long work stoppage took place on 26 September. It did not have a significant impact due to the low turnout. Many workers joined this "warning" strike only symbolically. Even where work actually stopped (as at the Bratislava Volkswagen plant, for fifteen minutes), its economic effects were negligible.

Since then, there has been no further general strike in Slovakia, and no serious attempt to organize one. Nor has there been any further strike on the railways.

The events of 2003 do not represent some kind of turning point, at which the further development of workers' struggles in Slovakia was decided. Rather, events that year only illustrate the long-term trends that still dominate Slovak trade unionism today. These are, on the one hand, legalism combined with trust in the bearers of legal expertise, and on the other hand, an orientation towards

what we call mobilisation instead of organising. We will return to these aspects later in this text.

According to the most recent figures (for 2018), only 11.3% of the employed workforce belongs to a trade union. [1] However, the events of 2003 show that the difficulties in which trade unions find themselves today are not primarily the result of a lack of members. Back in 2003, more than a quarter of all employees [belonged to](#) unions, a higher proportion than in Germany at the same time. But the size of the membership base was not enough to make a general strike successful, nor to achieve support and solidarity actions in other sectors to support the railwayworkers in their unequal struggle.

In this article we take stock of the situation in which trade unions and workers in Slovakia find themselves today, twenty years on. [2] There are two immediate reasons for taking stock. First, 2019 marked the end of several years of boom. Then we had two years of pandemic upheaval. This was followed by a sharp rise in prices, amplified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which led to a fall in real wages. Today, European economies, including in Slovakia, are on the brink of another recession. However, every crisis creates the preconditions for a new period of recovery and boom. And although a crisis is a disaster for many individual enterprises, from a society-wide perspective it is also always an opportunity for capital to dictate conditions in its favour, thanks to rising unemployment or falling wage purchasing power. It is therefore appropriate to ask with what battle experience from the previous boom and in what condition Slovak workers are entering this period - and what is likely to await them.

Secondly, 2022 has brought changes in the leadership of Slovak unions. Emil Machyna left the chair of the metalworkers union OZ KOVO after more than two decades. The Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ) has also seen a new wind blowing: long-time vice-president Monika Uhlerová became president after the last elections, and other officials of the younger generation are coming to the fore with her. However, the two major actions of the renewed metalworkers' union KOVO and the KOZ confederation, the vote on the general strike (spring 2022) and the "Demonstration against Poverty" (8 October 2022), both ended in fiasco due to very low turnout. What does this say about the state of the unions in Slovakia, and what does the new leadership want to do about it?

In this article we proceed more or less chronologically. First, we recapitulate the last conjuncture, give three examples of the struggles it brought, assess their strengths or weaknesses, and note what changes have taken place in the labour-capital relationship at the societal level. We then look at how unions have fared after 2020 in defending the gains made under the Smer-SD (social democracy) governments, and how the situation in the tripartite has changed with under the recent and current right-wing governments, for example with the arrival of a new actor, the Joint Trade Unions of Slovakia.

The two above-mentioned campaigns of OZ KOVO and KOZ, aimed against the rise in the cost of living, in our opinion illustrate well the "mobilisation" model of trade union functioning. Below, we contrast this with the "organisational" model. In the final section we discuss the prospects for the near future. In 2022, we saw protests by teachers as well as mass resignations in hospitals. These have resulted in promises of significant wage increases, but they look considerably less impressive when we take into account current inflation forecasts. This, of course, will also affect workers in the private sector.

The 2014-2019 conjuncture

In 2009, the Slovak economy was hit by a deep recession as a result of the global financial crisis. Global effects reverberated for several years, for example in the form of the European government budget crisis, which also led to cuts in public spending in Slovakia. Things started to change in 2013

when the Slovak economy narrowly avoided a further contraction, with [real GDP](#) expanding by a modest 0.6 per cent year-on-year. A boom took off immediately afterwards, lasting until 2019.

The Slovak economy grew by more than three per cent a year on average during this period, faster than the EU or eurozone average. Unemployment gradually fell to a historic low - from almost thirteen per cent to just five per cent. The increasing demand for labour has also been reflected in real wages, which have risen by an average of 3.85% annually, and even faster in manufacturing and some other sectors including health and education. This period has brought some significant workplace struggles: the [collective resignations of nurses](#) (2015-2016), [the fierce teachers' strike in the regional education sector](#) (2016), and [the several-day strike at Volkswagen](#) (2017). Each of these pieces completes the mosaic of the overall condition of the working class in Slovakia.

In 2015, after long delays, a law was passed according to which salaries of generalist (non-specialist) nurses were to start at 0.81 times the average wage. However, this did not mean any increase for many of them, as their current salaries already exceeded this level. Nor did the law introduce recognition of seniority in determining the level of pay, something that nurses' organisations had long called for. [3] The Nurses and Midwives' Trade Union Association (SaPA) therefore decided to organise collective redundancies. The action followed a [similar move](#) in 2011 by hospital doctors and medical doctors from the Doctors' Trade Union Association (LOZ). Compared to the unified action of the doctors, who engaged workers in key positions, managed to cripple the normal operations of hospitals and had a well-thought-out strategy for a collective return to work, the nurses' campaign was less coordinated. Those who persevered to the end were left alone and were easily replaced by management. [4]

For years, dissatisfaction has been gathering in the education sector, particularly outside the national capital. At the core of frustration is the significantly lower level of teacher salaries compared to those of college-graduates employed in other sectors. In 2015, a small group of disgruntled teachers founded the Initiative of Slovak Teachers (ISU), which, after several protests, decided to declare a strike alert and set about preparing for a strike. In January and February 2016, about fifteen thousand teachers and other teaching staff joined the strike in varying degrees. The ISU functioned as a network of larger or smaller groups of activists, rather than as an organisation with established structures. As it was not a participant in collective bargaining, it was legally in a grey area as regards the constitutional right to strike, which is not fully defined in the legislation. Meanwhile, the strike was announced "from above", from the activist centre, and participants joined it ad hoc - one by one, two by two, or even in whole collectives, without prior coordination. The degree of participation was closely related to involvement in earlier activities of regional teachers' initiatives or the New School Unions, which had already emerged as an alternative to the established Education and Science Workers' Union (OZ PŠaV). The ISU action was the largest strike in modern Slovak history in terms of the number of participants. It caused a media uproar and managed to close individual schools (especially in the larger cities). But it failed to generate sufficient pressure due to the uneven participation, including the weak involvement of kindergartens, which are critical in terms of strike impact. After three weeks, the movement exhausted itself without making immediate concessions - although in the following period teachers' wages did rise slightly faster than before.

The third strike we want to discuss is rather different. It took place in the private sector, one of the key sectors of the productive economy - and was the first ever strike in a car factory in Slovakia. It came almost at the height of the boom, at a time when employers' were increasingly complaining about labour shortages. Because of the labour market situation, collective bargaining in Slovak industry was quite hot in 2017. For example, employees of Podpolianske strojárny in Detva forced management to award a wage increase of 4.5% with a three-day strike, while in Žilina, the union at the Kia automobile plant negotiated an increase of €75/month (for workers in the lowest tariff class

this meant a 9% increase). At Volkswagen in Bratislava, the unions initially demanded a 16% wage increase. After several months of unsuccessful negotiations, they called a strike which lasted six days and completely paralysed production. However, it ended in a [compromise](#) that was closer to the company's last offer than to the original demands. At the same time, it established at that factory a series of collective agreements with two or more years of validity, which allow the company to better plan long-term costs, and acts as an insurance against further strikes.

The boom of 2014-2019 was clearly not a calm one. On the other hand, the conflicts that accompanied it did not lead to exceptional gains in wages or working conditions. Rather, they followed spontaneous developments throughout the economy, triggered by the gradual depletion of the "reserve army" whose ranks had been swelled by the previous crisis.

Of course, in addition to material improvements in wages or working conditions, workplace struggles can produce other, even more valuable results: encouragement to collective action, experience of self-organisation, or the unification of a class across occupational and other boundaries that divide it. Even in this respect, however, the record of the previous period is dismal. Among the nurses, the defeat in 2016 has provoked a deep demoralisation and discouraged them from considering further actions of this kind. They remained on the sidelines during the collective resignations of doctors in 2022. In education, the energy of the protests and strike organised by the ISU gradually dissipated, in public events more oriented towards media presence and gaining a seat at the bargaining table with the ministry than workplace organizing. During the next wave of teachers' protests in 2022, the ISU was not heard from.

The strike at Volkswagen also generated rather [uneasy feelings](#) among the workers, after the initial euphoria. In the following years, the company skilfully [used](#) the negotiations on the allocation of new models to the Bratislava plant to increase efficiency and slow down the growing demands of the workers. Further negotiations took place without mobilising the rank and file. In 2017 we hoped that the interruption of production at the Bratislava plant would become the [impetus](#) for conflicts in other car plants, five years on we have to conclude that these hopes have not been fulfilled. The promising strike vote at PSA in Trnava (now Stellantis), which took place only a year later, ended in [failure](#). Here the division between the domestic workforce and that from abroad, especially Serbia and Ukraine, also played an important role. [5] The internal division of the workers and the inability of the struggles to deal with it is in fact the common denominator of all the struggles mentioned above: whether it is the division between doctors, nurses and other medical staff, the division between teachers and non-teaching staff, or the division between domestic and foreign, or directly employed and agency workers in many factories.

The achievements and pitfalls of social dialogue

The last boom was going on at a time when the then nominal partner of KOZ, the Smer-SD party, was in power. After the 2012 elections, the party managed to form a single-colour government. From the point of view of the 'big' unions, this situation was particularly favourable, as it was in line with their long-term strategy. The membership base of the trade unions has been steadily shrinking since the 1990s. Along with it, their ability to use mass mobilisation of people - whether in the workplace or on the streets - as a tool of coercion is disappearing. In the face of this trend, trade unions have found themselves on the 'path of least resistance', which consists mainly in defending and extending the legally guaranteed minimum in terms of pay, working conditions and the social wage, especially the old-age pension. Trade unions are primarily promoting these standards through negotiation and lobbying from above, not through activity from below. The main instrument of this strategy is the tripartite in which the ETUC acts as one of the social partners. However, the success of the trade unions in this field is only possible if another of the participants, the state, has an interest in the functioning of the tripartite and accepts the role of the trade unions as representatives of the

employees. The Smer governments have met this basic prerequisite. This has manifested itself in a series of accommodating steps.

One of the first was the approval of a [law](#) (2013) that allowed higher-level collective agreements to be extended to enterprises in the relevant sector without the consent of the employer concerned, based on a decision of the tripartite commission. Although this law was later declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, it was replaced in 2017 by another [mechanism](#), based on so-called representative higher-level collective agreements.

Even more significant were the annual negotiations on minimum wage increases. In 2014 (at the beginning of the boom), the minimum wage stood at €352, or about 41% of the average wage in the economy. By 2019 it had risen to €520 (48% of the average). Employers' representatives have generally advocated that the wage floor should not be increased and only in a weak moment have they admitted an increase that would follow the evolution of the average wage. Trade unions, on the other hand, called for an average increase of 14% per year. If these partners could not reach an agreement, the state had to intervene. Its decisions have always been closer to union demands than to the uncompromising position of business: the average annual increase in the minimum wage has been over 8%. [\[6\]](#)

The minimum wage is also related to another achievement from the period of the Smer government: the additional payments for work on Saturdays, Sundays, nights and public holidays, which were introduced by the [law](#) of 2018, or tied them to the minimum wage and thus ensured their regular valorisation. Until then, the increase in the minimum wage had little impact on the earnings of the majority of workers, as less than 5% of employees receive the minimum wage. In turn, [minimum wage requirements](#) according to the degree of difficulty of the job are often lower than the actual wage for these positions. It is only through supplements that the effects of raising the minimum wage have been extended to virtually the whole of industry, not least because of how widespread [night work](#) is in this country.

In the calculation of concessions to the unions under the Smer governments, we can also include the introduction of a ceiling on the retirement age, which was also [promoted by](#) OZ KOVO by means of a petition. These and other victories have meant an objective improvement in the material situation of the working class, or a significant part of it. The workers did not have to make any contribution to these achievements, apart from a few actions of rather symbolic importance. Social dialogue at the tripartite level and the associated lobbying thus act as a multiplier of the power of the trade union membership base, which, moreover, makes it possible to exert this power in areas where it would not otherwise penetrate. For example, representative collective agreements at a higher level could also cover enterprises where unions are quite passive. Raising the minimum wage, in turn, has an immediate impact on people's incomes in areas where trade unions are virtually non-existent, such as catering and accommodation services.

On the other hand, concessions won in this way are quite fragile. Winning and keeping them depends on the bargaining skills or connections of the union leadership, but above all on the affection and goodwill of the other side, i.e. the government and the strongest parties in parliament. They are therefore always 'on the hook', so to speak, with the maturity date coming with a change of government. At that point it will become clear whether there is anyone left to defend the positions that have been won. After the end of the last boom, the trade unions became, figuratively speaking, insolvent. One by one, the gains fell. As for the capping of the retirement age, the new government had already made a pledge in its [programme statement](#) that it would abolish it. After coming to power, it put the [tripartite party to sleep](#) for a few months. Supplements linked to the minimum wage were [frozen](#) after 2020. Representative collective agreements disappeared from the Collective Bargaining Act. The minimum wage rose by [just under four per cent](#) year-on-year in 2022. However,

none of this has provoked a significant reaction in the workplaces or protests in the streets. In fact, the real power behind the backs of social dialogue negotiators has proved to be tiny. And if some of the aforementioned concessions have been maintained or reversed in the meantime - the pay rises have been unfrozen, the tripartite is working again, and there is unlikely to be anything to gain from the abolition of the pension cap as early elections loom - this is largely the result of factors such as the coalition crisis, which has nothing to do with workers' activism.

New And Renewed Departments

The government that took office in March 2020 immediately changed course in relation to unions. The new Minister of Labour refused to convene a tripartite meeting, despite calls from the KOZ, and several laws (e.g. the one on *kursarbeit*) were passed by Parliament without prior discussion with the "social partners". The tripartite finally met to negotiate the minimum wage for the following year. However, when Minister Krajniak described the unions' demands as blackmail, the trade unionists walked out of the negotiations. The government's new approach was soon reflected in a change in the composition of the tripartite.

Until then, according to the law, only organisations with at least a hundred thousand members could represent employees in the tripartite. Only KOZ met this condition. However, an [amendment](#) in 2021 introduced a rule according to which the tripartite can be supplemented by smaller units in certain circumstances. [7] Thus, the [Joint Trade Unions of Slovakia](#) (SOS) also became a participant in the tripartite. It is an association of trade union organisations that was established in 2018 as a diverse mix of unions. It includes the Modern Volkswagen Union (MOV), the Modern Trade Union AIOS, [8] the New Police Trade Union, as well as the Trade Union of Nurses and Midwives (OZ SaPA) and the New School Trade Unions. The then chairman of the trade union at Volkswagen, Zoroslav Smolinsky, [described](#) the formation of the SOS as the arrival of "a new wave of active trade union organisations" in response to the "long-standing stagnation and inactivity of traditional trade unions". It seems that it is the trade union that Smolinsky led that plays first fiddle in the association: it is also the one from which the representative who speaks on behalf of the SOS in the tripartite comes. [9]

SOS stress that they are independent of political parties, thus defining themselves against KOZ and its long-standing agreement on cooperation with Smer-SD. However, the practice of the SOS member organisations, as far as can be ascertained at all, does not deviate from the traditional framework of 'social dialogue'. The various details of the activities of some of them raise further doubts: Smolinsky, the former chairman of the ILO, evaporated shortly after the Volkswagen strike and is now speculated to be living somewhere in Costa Rica; the union at the Jaguar plant in Nitra recently [concluded](#) a collective agreement for up to six years, and its [communications](#) resemble more *teleshopping* than trade unionism; the president of the sister unions is an [MP](#) for a coalition party, although SOS prides itself on its independence from "state authorities"; the unions at Amazon are [promoting](#) a working time account... Whatever its original intentions, the Joint Trade Unions of Slovakia today operates as a secretive association whose basic documents - starting with its statutes - [are not](#) accessible on its own website, [10] and whose practice does not present any more militant alternative to the KOZ.

The reasons why the government has decided to include an additional employee representative (or potentially several additional representatives) in the tripartite are not entirely clear. It may be an attempt to fragment and weaken a position that has until then remained united, notwithstanding the fact that there have always been tensions and disputes even within the ETUC itself. However, so far there has been no information that the SOS has been pushing demands at the tripartite that are at odds with those of the larger confederation. The long-term plans of the SOS are not known, but it can be assumed that membership of the tripartite is mainly a reputational issue for them: it gives

them a stamp of representativeness. Given certain personal connections, it is possible to believe that SOS is trying to gain a similar position in relation to the Sme rodinina party as KOZ once had in relation to Smer-SD. However, this cannot yet be documented with concrete steps.

However, the past year has also brought significant changes in the “traditional” unions. Emil Machyna was replaced by Stanislav Lupták, a long-time chairman of the basic organisation in PPS Detva, as the chairman of OZ KOVO. Monika Uhlerová, formerly vice-president of the confederation and the first woman to hold this post, also became head of the KOZ. Both organisations also embarked on campaigns against the general decline in real wages and the lack of adequate measures by the state.

General Strike?

In the case of OZ KOVO, it was a call for a general strike. This possibility was first [discussed](#) when E. Machyna. In April, a series of protest rallies were held in three regional cities and in May, preparations for a “sectoral general strike”, i.e. work stoppages in those sectors (enterprises) where KOVO operates, were officially [launched](#). The conduct of the strike and its concrete form was to be decided “from below”: through a public petition, as well as through a vote in the union’s constituent organisations or in the enterprises. The petition was supported by just over two thousand people, but the [poll](#) of the membership was similarly disastrous. Only 23% of the workers expressed (abstract) support for the strike and only 14% expressed a determination to participate. [11] Out of just under five hundred enterprises, only in twenty-six did more than half of the workforce vote for active participation.

These union strongholds remained alone in the voting, and in only one - PPS Detva - did support for active participation in the strike hover around the 80% level that the outgoing chairman Machyn had [identified](#) as the goal of the union’s efforts. The idea of a general strike, which was supposed to be directed primarily against an incompetent government, did not gain support even at a time of very [low trust](#) in the executive and growing social discontent caused by [price hikes](#). From the point of view of the new president of the union, this was such a dismal result that he [resigned](#) after less than a month in office. In the new elections held in October, Monika Benedeková, a lawyer and long-time employee of the union’s apparatus, won. [12]

A look at the somewhat more detailed voting results, which are not publicly available, allows a closer characterisation of those companies where support was strongest. In the sample of sixteen firms where an overwhelming majority of workers voted for active participation in the strike, we find several where unions have long been active and visible, or where there have been disputes during collective bargaining in recent years. The most strongly represented enterprises are from the Banská Bystrica region (4), but otherwise the sample ranges from Malacky to Košice. Factories with up to five hundred employees, operating in the mechanical engineering sector or in the supply chain of the car industry, predominate.

We do not know the details of the progress of the campaign at site level. In retrospect, there were complaints from the enterprises that there was not enough time for canvassing. However, a slightly different interpretation of the results seems to us to be acceptable. Where unions mean something, and where workers are loyal and loyal to them because they see tangible results from their activities (perhaps irrespective of membership), there was no need for a massive campaign. Here, support for strike action may have been essentially instinctive. It is at most questionable whether more time to prepare would have helped in other companies. The whole concept of a “sectoral” but at the same time “general” strike, first for an hour, but if necessary for *up to a day* (!), which was to be directed against the government and [with no intention](#) of “harming the employers” (?), was far-fetched. The calls of the KOVO did not contain specific demands. They focused on the need to point to the

deteriorating situation and to extort some more adequate but unspecified measures to help. For this, were people to make trouble with employers (and, for example, lose their attendance bonus) who would undoubtedly be damaged by a real hourly strike? Only a handful of the most militant workers have expressed a willingness to take such a risk. Their determination may not even have been conditioned by rising prices or the prodding of the presidents of the base organisations, but rather by the fact that 'their' union in 'their' company was going into action, which should be supported simply out of principle. Of course, we don't know how practical participation would have turned out in the end.

Similar reservations about this form of general strike were later [voiced](#) by the new chairwoman of OZ KOVO or her counter-candidate, Ján Šlauka. At the time the campaign was announced, both were in top positions in the union. Either they had only come to their senses afterwards and the criticism was a way of distancing themselves from the previous leadership and starting with a clean slate, or the idea had been promoted from the beginning by another part of the presidency, perhaps headed by E. Machyn. The idea could hardly have come from the membership, which later vehemently rejected it. It is also unlikely that this was a mass initiative by the presidents of the constituent organisations, who, after all, know the mood in their workplaces and could have guessed how the campaign would turn out. The failure of the whole operation is now also reflected in informal discussions among blacksmiths and smiths as a failure of the membership: 'We offered you the opportunity to do something, but you turned it down!' For some, this attitude may also serve as an easy alibi - we tried, it didn't work. Sellers who feel threatened might perhaps reconsider what was actually offered and what it was intended to achieve in the first place. Either way, the experience of the survey seems to have only demoralised the union.

The 'Demonstration against Poverty' organised by KOZ last October did not leave a better impression. The protest took place simultaneously on SNP Square in Bratislava and Wenceslas Square in Prague (directed by ČMKOS). In Slovakia, its main [demand](#) was the adoption of anti-inflationary measures. The action was preceded by several weeks of mobilisation through social networks, videos and a separate website. But although the unions later spoke of thousands of demonstrators, the actual turnout was meagre. The Confederation was far from [able](#) to fill the square in the way that the only member union that unites the education sector had managed to do just a few months [earlier](#). A few days before the event, legends circulated about an extraordinary express train from the East that would bring thousands of angry people, but according to passengers, it eventually arrived half-empty. The overall message of the protest itself was, on balance, essentially disarming: "Thank you for giving us a strong mandate to advance your interests by your participation, now disperse peacefully." There was not a (memorable) word about the need to organise in everyday life, in workplaces.

Organising Versus Mobilising

This style, like the organisation of a general strike at the instigation of the leadership, corresponds to the long-term orientation of the Slovak trade unions, which we have already outlined. It consists in defending the interests of workers through tripartite bargaining, which, in necessary cases, can be backed up by symbolic actions in the streets of the cities. At the workplace level, this is a model in which there is a 'client-service provider' relationship between the membership and the unions. Members pay membership fees, in return for which they receive a range of services and benefits, from discounts on holiday stays to free legal aid to small Christmas gifts. When necessary, they mobilise or, more precisely, are mobilised in support of trade union demands - whether those relating to bargaining in the enterprise or those put forward at a higher level by the union or confederation. The impulse that sets people in motion comes from the union. Other participation is not required of the membership, nor is it sought by the membership because it expects the union to "handle it for us". We are not claiming that all grassroots organizations operate this way, but it is a

common phenomenon.

From the perspective of this strategy, the simple expansion of the membership base appears as a growth in organisation: increasing numbers of members means greater 'representativeness' of the union, hence its weight as a partner in social dialogue, and at the same time greater mobilisation potential in announcing actions in support of demands. However, there is in fact no necessary link between the size of the membership base and the capacity for action of the workers themselves in advancing their interests. A large union is useless if its leadership accepts or accommodates the employer's every move. A large membership base that associates union membership mainly with a discount on admission to a water park will not be able to defend even elementary gains, no matter how radical its leadership may be.

In short, paying membership dues does not automatically make one organized, just as paying health insurance does not make patients an organized force. The mere fact that people show up at a union demonstration says nothing about whether they are organized, just as attending a political party's campaign rally does not make one politically organized. The difference between a model of how any organization (not just a union) operates that focuses on mobilization and a model that aims at organization can be illustrated simply as follows. In the former, it is easy to distinguish a circumscribed group of "functionaries" who initiate activities and engage in recruiting new members. Grassroots participation is limited to moments of mass mobilisation or participation in processes such as elections or membership meetings, but these are often more ritualistic in nature. In the second model, the boundaries - if they exist at all - are less sharp. Organising implies self-initiative and active participation in the day-to-day life of the organisation, including a sense of responsibility for its successes or failures. A genuinely organised membership is therefore not just material 'at the disposal' of the leadership, which it uses to put pressure on the employer or the state as necessary, on the occasion of individual 'campaigns'. On the contrary, from the base, organically and on the basis of practical experience of real activity in promoting workers' interests, grow new organisers who are themselves interested in building the organisation because they regard it as their organ.

Trade unions in Slovakia have found themselves - partly as a result of processes they could hardly control - trapped in the mobilisation model. There is no way to get out of it with another 'campaign', by hiring a handful of professional organisers paid by international projects, or by better marketing on social media. The difference between the two models is not cosmetic, but relates to the fundamentals of the organisation, its structure and long-term strategy.

One of the pillars of the current functioning of trade unions, in which everything revolves around tripartism and collective agreements, is legalism, i.e. the emphasis on respecting the letter of the law and enforcing claims through legal means. Trust in the institutions of law and the preference for bargaining over industrial action (which is usually only *to express support* for bargaining) reinforces the authority of the legal expertise on which unions depend. This deepens the divide between the membership on the one hand and officials, professional negotiators or lawyers on the other. If the sharp wording in lawyers' letters or the opinions of the Labour Inspectorate, rather than the collective power of the people in the workplace, are seen as the decisive force in a conflict with an employer, it is natural that rank-and-file members see themselves as a grateful audience rather than as actors in the struggle.

The strong aversion of unions to the risk of legal recourse, which was also evident in the railway strike twenty years ago, implies an acceptance of a certain framework within which the conflict with employers is to take place. This framework, dictated by the Labour Code and the Collective Bargaining Act, blunts the workers' most effective weapons: a strike can only take place under well-defined conditions, without a moment of surprise, after several attempts at conciliation. [\[13\]](#) To

accept these rules unquestioningly is to fight with one hand behind one's back from the outset. Any effort to contend with capital on the legal terrain will always be a struggle on a tilted playing field. Legislation is not neutral, but shaped by the interests of capital. [14] Even if it were not, employers will always find it easier to get away with breaking the law. [15] And even if they do not get away with it, judgments in this area, such as illegal terminations, are at best several years away, and the contest is also about who can afford to invest more in the quality of legal representation.

Moving from a mobilisation model to an organisational one would require a significant reduction in legalism, an increase in trust in the membership and its capabilities, but also an acceptance of the risks associated with a more combative approach to advocacy. This is not a magic bullet, and would undoubtedly not be without defeats and setbacks, after which the organisation would have to shake itself up and persevere. Given the general state of trade unions in Slovakia, we are not very confident that such a turnaround can be achieved in the next few years. Nor do the actions and rhetoric of the new leadership signal a fundamental change in direction. [They talk](#) about the need to "increase the attractiveness" of unions, especially in the eyes of young people, but this does not seem to be anything other than a quantitative expansion of the membership base as part of a mobilisation model. Discussions about where the focus of union activity should be and what their strategic priorities should be, which have been going on for a long time even in the large, not particularly radical, unions in the US, have not yet been much reflected in Slovakia.

However, we can also find practical examples that point in a different direction. In the factory of the German company Booster Precision Components in Belushi (in the Považie region), which produces components for turbochargers, a successful strike took place in 2021, lasting several days and resulting in a number of important concessions. They were won mainly thanks to the unity of the tribal production workers, as well as their awareness that they could only rely on their own ability to cripple production and cause problems for the whole chain of companies. We have analysed the strike in more detail in the booklet [We must stick together](#). In it, we also draw attention to those features of the struggle that correspond more to the mobilisation model. More recent developments, however, confirm that the Belushi workers - mostly women - have got it right. Earlier this year, they came out collectively in defence of several colleagues who have not been allocated work by their employer for several weeks. They have also stood up for agency workers who are not being given the opportunity to transfer to the tribe.

It remains to be hoped that if union headquarters try to take advantage of such experiences, it will not end up co-opting active trade unionists from the workplace into the apparatus, away from the places where they benefit most. It would seem that if a skilled organizer gets a position at headquarters, his or her organizing skills will magically be transferred to all lower levels. In fact, he or she turns into a functionary and one department loses an organizer. It would perhaps be more useful if militant union members from different workplaces and unions would learn from each other and exchange concrete experiences, with or without the help of headquarters.

Prospects

The first signs of an economic slowdown and the coming [end of the "good times"](#) appeared in 2019 at the latest. No boom lasts forever, but it was not clear in which sector the coming recession would start and how long it would last. These questions were quickly resolved by the COVID-19 pandemic, which locked down entire economies, ripped apart supply chains and sharply reduced consumer demand. After the pandemic measures were relaxed, a recovery did come, but the joy did not last long as it was continuously complicated by logistical problems and rising inflation. In February last year, the war in Ukraine was added to the mix, causing energy prices to soar. The US and European central banks reacted by raising interest rates in order to tame inflation by slowing down economic activity. While in the countries of the global South this is deepening the debt crisis and putting

countries at risk [of bankruptcy](#), in the US and Europe the risk of a recession in 2023, or the possibility that some EU Member States are already in [recession](#), has been discussed for several months.

As far as the Slovak economy is concerned, the NBS is currently [forecasting](#) that it will be able to avoid a recession and that it will expand by 1.6% this year. However, the actual development will depend to a large extent on what happens in the countries on which the local key industries depend - especially Germany. Notwithstanding the positive growth, however, the NBS is counting on a slight increase in unemployment and, in particular, persistent double-digit inflation of around 10%. This is bad news for workers, which can be most easily illustrated in the public sector. Let us first look at what has happened in it over the last year.

Between 2016 and 2020, teachers' salaries [increased](#) by six to ten per cent annually. After the new government took office, they will see a zero increase in 2021, and an increase of only three per cent was initially envisaged for 2022. The school unions responded swiftly with a multi-thousand-strong [demonstration](#) in June 2022, the largest union protest for several years. The government soon [presented](#) a salary indexation proposal that included a one-off €500 increase in 2022 and two increases - of ten and twelve per cent - in 2023. This is a record increase in education wages that is probably unparalleled in the period of independent Slovakia. [16]

The struggle of hospital doctors went much further. In May last year, the Medical Trade Union (LOZ) - as it did [more than a decade ago](#) - put forward eight [demands](#), which included an increase in medical salaries. For themselves, they demanded 1.7 times the average wage in the economy instead of the previous 1.25 times (doctor or physician without certification), or 2.8 times the average instead of the previous 2.3 times (with certification). More generally, however, nurses' and midwives' wages have also been included. They warned that if the demands were not met, they would hand in their resignations and leave the hospitals. The government responded in September by approving a [law](#) that would raise the salaries of non-certified doctors to 1.4 times the average wage from January 2023, while the salaries of certified female doctors were to remain unchanged. In addition, the amendment included an increase in the salaries of other health workers, including nurses (at the lowest category from 0.89 times to a level equivalent to the average wage).

As we know, this was not enough for the doctors and they persisted in their resignations until the end. In the end, the government did not decide to declare a state of emergency and enforce compulsory work through [stricter legislation](#). It backed down before the first of December. As a result, salaries were increased to 1.5 times (uncertified) or 2.5 times the average wage (certified). Other health professions did not receive further wage increases, but the Ministry came up with a proposal for a stabilisation allowance of five thousand euros. It will be granted to female health workers who commit to working in the establishment for the next three years, with the amount being reduced proportionally for shorter periods.

We have already briefly reviewed the results of the match in the hospitals in [a shorter text](#). Since then, it has become clear that there is [no](#) general interest in the stabilisation allowance, although the state eventually [exempted](#) it from social and health contributions (but not from income tax). For nurses who choose to use it, it is a top-up equivalent to roughly ten per cent on top of their monthly salary for the next three years.

To summarise: teachers' salaries will double in 2023, and will be about 23% higher than at present at the start of 2024. Further increases are not yet agreed. The evolution of health salaries is more difficult to estimate because they are linked to the average wage in the national economy two years ago. Based on NBS estimates of average wage growth, the basic salary of a non-qualified doctor can be expected to be less than 40% higher in 2024 than it is today. The salary of a certified doctor will

rise by about 26%. The basic salary of a nurse without specialisation will increase by about 30% over the same period (without taking into account the stabilisation allowance).

However, these figures need to be seen in the context of inflation. The NBS forecasts that inflation will reach almost 20 % in 2023 and 2024. And if we understand the increase in wages as a response to the sharp rise in the cost of living, which began in 2022 and which has already triggered protests or the handing in of resignations, we should take into account the full three years, i.e. a cumulative inflation of around 34%. The real value of a teacher's or nurse's basic salary is therefore likely to fall by the end of 2024, not to mention the value of [public administration](#) earnings, whose nominal growth will be even lower.

Of course, these predictions do not take into account additional increments or salary increases with each year of service. We are not working here with the earnings of specific workers, but with the tabulated variables on which the actual numbers on the paycheck are based. On the other hand, it was these that were the subject of last year's conflicts. We can therefore draw some simple conclusions from our comparison. Doctors and medical practitioners have made exemplary use of their ability to threaten the provision of health care and, through their determination, have been able to win the most, including one-off allowances for other professions. For other public sector workers, the balance is considerably less favourable. The school unions, after a fierce mobilisation and a first small victory, have sounded the retreat. Since then, there has been silence on teachers' salaries. Nurses have been left out of the loop: neither the larger health and social services union (SOZZaSS, a member of the KOZ) nor the nurses' union OZ SaPA have taken any action - either in the workplace or on the streets. [17] Here too, the results are in line with the efforts made.

In this summary, we only deal with the public sector, as the results of wage bargaining for the next one to two years are already known. Workers in industry and other sectors can take comfort for the time being that the forecasts do not apply to them. But inflation will catch up with them, not to mention the effects of a recession if one occurs. The good times remain somewhere before the pandemic, and the majority of workers in Slovakia are entering the hard times in poor shape. This situation plays into the hands of various saviours who will promise simple solutions linked at most to mobilisation, whether trade union or political. The alternative is to start relying on our own strength and to organise where we are strong and powerful.

Karmina

Translated from Slovak by AN using Deepl

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Karmina

<https://karmina.red/posts/odbory-a-pracujuci-na-prahu-dalsej-krizy/>

Footnotes

- [1] In addition to the OECD, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) also monitors the level of organisation. Its [data](#) are thinner and slightly different (according to them, the Slovak rate is still slightly lower), but they confirm the same trend.
- [2] We outlined our more general view of unions in a 2017 [interview](#) and discussed it in more detail in an [article](#) for *Kapitál* Monthly (May 2019) = an extended version was published at <https://karmina.red/posts/limity-odborarstva/>
- [3] If these demands sound familiar to current readers, it's because they were also at stake in 2022. In October, Parliament passed an amendment to the health [law](#) that for the first time, a nurse's basic salary is to start at the average wage. At the same time, the entitlement of nurses to a pay rise with each year of service was introduced.
- [4] The bitter end of the action is depicted in a [contemporary video](#) by the daily *Sme*.
- [5] The rapid growth in the employment of workers from so-called third countries during this period caused friction in various workplaces. Fortunately, in only one case - at the logistics company FM Slovenská (Sereď) - did the trade unions decide to organise a protest with banners in the style of "We are here at home!".
- [6] The ratio between trade union demands and the state's willingness to implement them is significantly distorted by 2019. KOZ demanded a minimum wage increase of up to 32%, but received much less. If we consider only the years 2014-2018, the average union demand was at about 10% per year, and the actual increase sanctified by the state fell short of it by only two percentage points.
- [7] Similar changes were [advocated](#) in 2004 by the then Minister of Labour Ľudovít Kaník.
- [8] This union brings together trade unions operating in the automotive industry and its supply chain (JLR in Nitra, Stellantis in Trnava, Schaeffler in Skalica, Syncreon in Nitra), logistics (Amazon's return centre in Sereď), as well as other sectors.
- [9] We described the disputes that lay behind the formation of the Volkswagen Modern Union by splitting off from the plant's basic KOVO organisation in an earlier [article](#). A number of other organizations affiliated with the SOS were also formed by splitting off from KOZ's member unions, particularly the KOVO.
- [10] True, they can be found elsewhere, along with the information that the chairman of this organization in 2019-2021 was a certain Marek Švec. He is a lawyer, university lecturer and author of several professional publications in the field of labour law. Previously, he worked in the apparatus of OZ KOVO. However, his services are also used by employers, whom he advises in collective bargaining with employee representatives. This is undoubtedly a valuable qualification for a trade union president.
- [11] These are shares of the total number of employees in the companies where voting took place.
- [12] As in the case of Monika Uhler and KOZ, this is the first woman in this position.
- [13] The Collective Bargaining Act also does not recognize anything like an "anti-government" or "political" strike. If last year's KOVO survey had turned out differently, an hour-long general strike would have had to take place outside the usual framework, based solely on the

constitutional right to strike, which was exercised - without a union - by teachers in 2016. It is highly questionable whether the union would actually take such an unprecedented step.

[14] It is enough to look at the development of norms regulating overtime or agency work in the longer term.

[15] Particularly in the field of OSH or in relation to dependent work of “tradesmen” in certain sectors, especially in the construction sector.

[16] Public employees and non-teaching school employees got by with the same one-time bonus, but lower indexation (by seven and ten percent in 2023). The difference between them and the teachers can be interpreted in different ways, for example, the latter took to the streets in June to demand a raise and the government did not want to spoil the start of the new school year with more protests.

[17] We would like to remind you that OZ SaPA is a member of the Common Trade Unions of Slovakia, the association is headed by an MP from OĽaNO and its former member [became](#) State Secretary of the Ministry of Health in 2022.