



# Education Trade Unions mobilising for environmental sustainability

Online Seminar, 31 March 2022

**REPORT**

# Introduction

The online seminar '[Education trade unions mobilising for environmental sustainability](#)' took place online on the 31st of March 2022.

In the light of the [Draft Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability](#) proposed by the European Commission in January 2022 together with a new [European competence framework on sustainability](#) prepared by the Joint Research Centre which maps out the competences needed for the green transition, education on environmental sustainability is becoming a very prominent topic in national and European education policies. Teachers, academics, and other education personnel play a key role in designing, implementing, and assessing the education on environmental sustainability and by setting up progressive and informed role models. Consequently, there has been an increased interest among education trade unions in addressing this topic and building the capacity and knowledge of their affiliates on the topic of environmental sustainability and sustainable development.

In the framework of the ETUCE Resolution '[For a sustainable future of Europe: the role of education trade unions in Europe in addressing education and environment for social change](#)', the European Trade Union Committee Education (ETUCE) organised this event to provide the space for education trade unions to discuss various approaches to promoting the topic of environmental sustainability onto the unions' agenda, discussing and debating it with their affiliates, preparing and supporting their affiliates to teach about sustainable development and lead by example. A one-day seminar gave participants the opportunity to share the experience of their unions on engaging on the topic of environmental sustainability with their members, to discuss the various challenges they face in that regard, and to exchange good practices and possible tools.



**Larry Flanagan**

ETUCE President

Opening the meeting, the ETUCE President, Larry Flanagan welcomed the participants of this seminar, and underlined the importance of the topic of environmental sustainability for society, especially in a world affected by the pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine. In particular, he outlined the relevance of addressing this topic by education trade unions as teachers, academics, and other education personnel should play a key role in designing, implementing, and assessing the education on environmental sustainability and by setting up progressive and informed role models. He underlined that ETUCE is committed to its work in relation to environmental sustainability, and supports its member organisations in addressing this crucial topic in their agenda.



**Ekaterina Efimenko**

Coordinator, ETUCE

Ekaterina Efimenko, Coordinator for Working Conditions, Human Rights, Equality and Environment, (ETUCE) , presented the introduction to the topic of Education Trade Unions and Environmental Sustainability. Climate emergency and environmental issues require a drastic social change, including individual and collective changes in our mentality, behavior, lifestyle, making the topic of environmental sustainability more complex for education trade unions to address. Addressing the environmental sustainability for education trade unions not only means preparing their affiliates to teach about environment or supporting them regarding the impact climate changes and mitigation measures have on their working conditions, but also represents rather a personal topic that involves members as individuals and requires them to lead by example.

There is a wide variety among European education trade unions regarding their involvement with the topic of environmental sustainability<sup>1</sup>. Some unions are already addressing the topic in collective bargaining including relevant clauses in collective arguments and introducing environment-preserving measures in the union's policies, while others have noted some interest in the topic from their individual affiliates but different priorities on the trade union's agenda. Some unions focus on providing materials and guidelines to support their affiliates in teaching about environmental sustainability, while other unions focus on addressing only the impact of climate emergency and mitigation measures on their affiliates' working conditions (e.g. the level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the classrooms, heatwaves, etc.). Overall, education trade unions cite limited human and financial resources, the lack of cross-sectoral communication on environmental sustainability and climate change priorities, and the controversy regarding the use of trade union action for addressing the climate emergency (e.g. joining the student demonstrations), as the main challenges in mobilising for environmental sustainability. Furthermore, many education trade unions do not have sufficient data regarding the views and needs of their affiliates on addressing environmental sustainability.

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<sup>1</sup> For more examples, check the [report](#) on the Kick-Off Conference of ETUCE project 'Education for Social Change: The role of Education Trade Unions in addressing sustainable environmental development'.

# 1. Identifying needs: Getting to know ETUCE member organisations' views and needs on the topic of environmental sustainability



**Betty Jean Dit Teyssier**  
SNUipp, France

Betty Jean Dit Teyssier, SNUipp, France, presented the work of her union on the implementing the mandate of social responsibility that it shares with the FSU union federation. She explained that in every district, they organise local conferences where the needs and interests of members regarding the environmental sustainability are discussed. In particular, SNUipp sees the urgency to prepare teachers to address this topic in their work but also in their everyday activities and consumption habits. Ms. Teyssier highlighted that teacher training does not reflect the link between socio-economic and environmental conditions. Another crucial topic for SNUipp members is the infrastructure of the educational institutions as classes are often not ventilated properly and the infrastructure is not environmentally friendly. Finally, the SNUipp focuses its work on the commitment of their own trade union staff and members being conscious of their footprint, use of paper and alternative types of transportation.

In the plenary discussion, seminar participants discussed various approaches to investigating the views and needs of their unions' members related to the topic of environmental sustainability, and the challenges that education trade unions are facing in introducing this theme on their union agenda. They highlighted in particular that:

- In the area of higher education, it is useful to cooperate with student clubs for collecting the information about the needs regarding environmental sustainability and use the research for designing the training for teachers, academics and other education personnel on this topic;
- One of the challenges of addressing the environmental sustainability in education is the existing inequality between private and public schools;
- Some unions are using the opportunity of cross-sectoral or confederational conferences and congresses to discuss the needs and views of their member on the environmental sustainability (e.g. FENPROF, Portugal) while others conduct surveys among their members on the topic (E.g. DLF, Denmark) and organise targeted working groups addressing the topic on a regular basis (e.g. STES, Spain);
- Among the most cited needs and challenges of the education trade union members linked to environmental sustainability are initial and continuous professional development on this topic, methodological approaches including on how to involve all students, working conditions, and infrastructure of educational institutions;
- There are several risks when addressing the topic of environmental sustainability including the lack of concrete actions ('getting lost in speeches'), education personnel left on their own to implement the education on environmental sustainability, and education being left alone to ensure a more sustainable future;



- One of the challenges for trade unions is the lack of communication on the topic between education trade unions and education authorities, who often do not recognise environmental sustainability in education as a crucial topic to be discussed;
- It might be difficult to introduce the topic of environmental sustainability to the classic education trade unions' agenda in some countries where it is rather rigid and focuses only on the workers' rights and working conditions. In such cases, the top-down approach needs to be employed and the links between classical trade union agenda and the topic need to be found;
- Increased public funding is crucial for introducing education on environmental sustainability in the national curricula; however in many countries there is not enough funding coupled with the persisting teacher shortage;
- Often, students are more engaged in the topic than education personnel; it can help to build common knowledge on this topic together with students.

## 2. Addressing different views: Discussing environmental sustainability with education trade union members



**Jean-Luc Barbéry**  
ACOD- Onderwijs, Belgium

Jean-Luc Barbéry, ACOD-Onderwijs, Belgium, opened the second plenary discussion on addressing the various views on environmental sustainability within the union and presented the experience of his union. ACOD has a working group where affiliates meet regularly to discuss the union's approaches to addressing the topic of environmental sustainability. In particular, he raised the issue of whether unions should be joining the student strikes on climate change and if so, how they could join without risking taking over the climate strike action away from students. Mr Barbéry explained that in Belgium, some teachers take the whole class to climate change demonstrations as part of education for environmental sustainability but sometimes they are challenged by families or even students themselves who have a different opinion.

He further highlighted the issue of inequality as students have to pay for transportation to Brussels if they want to participate in the climate change demonstrations. Regarding the discussions within the union, he underlined that trade unions should considerate every point of view that their affiliates have on the topic of environmental sustainability and the issues related to climate change, always maintaining an open-minded attitude when focusing on these sensible matters, and rather providing the information and knowledge on the topic then imposing one central approach. Mr Barbéry also underlined that for ACOD the issues of health and safety linked to the climate change (including for example, public transport reimbursement or bicycle allowance) are important matters to deal with.

The following discussion on addressing different views of trade unions on environmental sustainability in education focused on:

- The issue of believers and non-believers not only regarding the climate change and environmental issues, but also on whether this topic should be addressed by education trade unions. It was noted that often the suggestion to address the environmental sustainability comes suggested by the leadership of the unions while affiliates see them as less important, rather complex and distant;
- Some unions bringing the topic of environmental sustainability in the context of bearing the costs of the environmental transition: who is paying for it and whether the interests of the workers are affected;
- The participants highlighting the importance of local partnerships and campaigns to raise awareness on the environmental sustainability issues among trade union affiliates, as well as linking it to the digital transition and democratic processes;
- Education trade unions acting as facilitators that provide space for discussion among education stakeholders;
- Various ways to connect the topic of environmental sustainability to the traditional issues addressed by education trade unions: e.g. school infrastructures and problems with asbestos, transportation of the education personnel and how far they have to travel to work, etc. The participants concluded that it is important to encourage a movement for environmental sustainability within the unions by providing the concrete and down-to-earth information about the impact of climate change on their work and their lives, and to train them to address the topic in teaching.



### 3. Building capacity: Equipping education trade union members with relevant information and effective arguments on environmental sustainability



**Aoife Mullen**  
INTO, Ireland

Aoife Mullen, INTO, Ireland, presented the work of her union on building the capacity of their affiliates on environmental sustainability and preparing them for their involvement in the design, implementation and monitoring of the education for environmental sustainability strategy in Ireland. In particular, she highlighted the role of trade unions in supporting affiliates on how to act on environmental sustainability both in their professional and personal life, acting as role models and creating a positive movement in the education sector.

Ms Mullen informed participants that the primary school national curriculum in Ireland has integrated the strategy to ensure that students develop a broad and balanced view of the environment and appreciate the ways in which science and technology can help people to use the Earth's resources for the social, cultural and economic benefits of humanity. INTO has taken an active role in addressing the topic of environmental sustainability supporting their affiliates by providing professional development courses (e.g. Global Citizenship School), informing them through various communication channels (e.g. Intouch monthly magazine), communicating with their affiliates on the topic (e.g. discussion groups at the national education conferences and National Committee of education personnel), and collecting the information on their needs via surveys.

Furthermore, INTO lobbies the Ministry of Education to ensure environmentally friendly school infrastructures and transportation, and provision of the continuous professional development for the education personnel in the context of a new curriculum. At school level, INTO supported Self Help Africa initiative with the [One Million Trees](#) project. All schools across the island, north and south, were encouraged to get involved to help tackle climate change by planting one million trees.

During the discussion on building capacity of education trade union members, the participants identified some actions towards this objective. In particular they highlighted:

- The campaigns of unions on avoiding long-distance travelling of education personnel and students to their education institutions every day; The importance of renewable energy in the education institutions, and what actions the educational institutions can take to move towards more sustainable way of operation. In particular, the relevance of wind and solar energy were highlighted as alternative sources.

- Building of capacity and knowledge of education personnel including school leaders on the topic of environmental sustainability, through effective training, incentives and professional support. Examples given on how to raise awareness within the educational sector included the promotion of the role of the environmental coordinators in schools.
- The importance to develop a trade union strategy to engage effectively with the topic, promoting professional development, actions at the level of education institutions and partnerships with other stakeholders.





# Conclusions



**Susan Flocken**  
ETUCE European Director

Concluding the seminar, the European Director Susan Flocken thanked all speakers and participants for the active contribution and noted that the discussion showed the complexity of addressing environmental issues in the context of education, and the need for a drastic social change, including individual and collective changes. She confirmed that identifying the challenges and the needs of teachers and other education personnel across Europe, and by building their and their trade unions' competences in addressing this theme, was the first step in leading towards concrete outcomes for a more sustainable environment in the education field. She pointed out that education trade unions are at the core in supporting social change that provides life chances and equal access to quality education to young people and teaching professionals through their career without leaving anybody behind.

# List of abbreviations

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| ACOD Onderwijs | Algemene Centrale der Openbare Diensten (Education)                 |
| ETUCE          | European Trade Union Committee for Education                        |
| SD             | Sustainable Development   |
| SDGs           | Sustainable Development Goals                                       |
| SNUipp         | Syndicat national unitaire des instituteurs, professeurs des écoles |
| FENPROF        | Federação Nacional dos Professores                                  |
| DLF            | Danske Lærerorganisationer International                            |
| INTO           | Irish National Teachers' Organisation                               |