



SOLIDARITY ECONOMY CENTER

CARE WORK



Analysis of the problem

Accumulation of capital in capitalism is founded on the appropriation of certain categories of 'cheap resources'. The main manifestation of this is 'cheap nature' that provides cheap food, energy, and material resources. Equally important as a cheap resource is, however, reproductive work typically done by women. This broad concept encompasses among others housework and care work, such as childrearing, care for the elderly and people with disabilities, and care in general for vulnerable and sick people both in material and emotional terms. Reproductive work, therefore, is what sustains and reproduces the whole of society – all the while being seriously undervalued.

Undervaluation affects both informal and formal care work. The former is being done by women without pay at home as a sort of invisible work, usually while having a day job too. Care work done professionally either as a commercial or state-funded activity pays wages but these are relatively low and the workforce is composed mainly of women. A crisis of care is built into this system from the outset as care duties pose an immense burden on solitary individuals and households, while resources are hardly sufficient. This leads to the reproduction of global and national inequalities in the area of care: paid services are only available to the well-to-do, while states higher on the global hierarchy drain professional care workers from (semi)peripheral regions by offering them higher wages.

Crises of capitalism exacerbate the care crisis even further. State participation in care has diminished significantly in Hungary since the transition to neoliberalism from state socialism. State-run nurseries provide only 16 percent of the required capacity – though, in fairness, there have been recent attempts by the government to increase this. Waiting lists continue to grow in care homes for the elderly and basic social services barely cover needs, if at all. The state's system of care does not provide for the specific needs of people with disabilities and its availability is limited. The dedicated nursing fee intended for families, in theory, is, in reality, accessible for few and it does not cover the costs of living. School and kindergarten lockdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic made the crisis of care visible by increasing its severity even further. All the while the sectors providing care: the health and social sectors have been pushed to the verge of collapse by lack of workforce and increasing burdens.

Aim and pilot project

What the introduction shows is that the root of the exploitation of waged workers and the root of the care crisis is one and the same – a common thematization of this by the labor and the feminist movements could bring about systemic change by reinforcing each other. Should trade unions and other communities of workers take a role in solving the care crisis by alleviating the care burden of their members they would also strengthen and deepen the fight of workers for a decent standard of living while finding new allies by engaging in wider social struggle.

The issue of working women's care burdens at home and the conflict with being at a day job are taken up by women's committees in unions, highlighting unequal, gender-based division of work at home and the personal sacrifice it takes to deliver in multiple roles. This work aiming at shaping attitudes, building community, and the reconciliation of wage and care work can be complemented in a solidarity economy approach by creating communal solutions that evoke the common origins of the trade union and the cooperativist movements.

The importance of the trade unions' role also stems from their ability to secure the required resources through collective bargaining and by putting pressure on employers. A guide has even been prepared by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on this matter for trade unions laying out an approach similar that our research adopts in three stages: first, information gathering and assessment of needs, second, preparing of demands, and finally, submittal of demands. The focus of this guidebook is on formal childcare services (nurseries, kindergartens and babysitting) and besides in-house solutions at work it recommends as possible demands cooperation with already existing institutions (e.g. at the municipal level, in the form of reserved capacity or aid), financial support of workers, and provision of counselling and agency services. State and municipal funding or the support of international donor organizations and grants can provide further financial resources.

In our pilot project we have been working together with the Budapest branch of the Social Sector Workers' union (SZÁD) that brings together workers from the Budapest Methodological Center of Social Policy and its Institutions (BMSZKI), a municipal system of Budapest providing care for homeless people. The work being professional care work most of the employees, and as a consequence, most of the union members are women doing informal care work at home besides their day job. In our project, we have helped the union to bargain for a collective agreement for 2021 that gives specific emphasis to the needs and considerations of workers doing care work at home too. The project consists of two parts: in the first period, we have done in-depth interviews with workers of BMSZKI who raise children or care for elderly relatives or relatives with disabilities at home. Based on what we've learned we aimed the second part at the mobilization of workers by co-creating a list of demands in collaboration with union activists that was reviewed by each worker first through a survey, then in a forum open to all employees. The final list of demands arrived to was put forward by the union's bargaining delegation during negotiations with management. Since the current report was written at the end of the second phase of the project, it was not possible to give a definitive account of the results. In the next section, we will outline the general conclusions of the campaign in the hope that other unions will find them useful in their work.

Conclusion and suggestions

Our research is done with BMSZKI employees through surveying and in-depth interviews have shown what many other similar endeavors had: that various aspects of the care crisis manifest themselves as acute difficulties of the everyday lives of workers. Trade

unions can play a vital role in turning these individual hardships into collective demands and fighting for effective solutions for their members. An important first milestone of this struggle could be if during bargaining, especially for collective agreements, trade unions put reconciliation of wage and care work at the forefront. It is for this work that we will attempt to contribute inspiration and practical tips in the closing section.

Assessment of needs, getting in touch with workers

Once a trade union decides to start tackling issues around care work, the process should start with an assessment of needs. In accordance with union organizing methodology this phase serves a dual purpose: first, to give union leaders an accurate picture of the number of people in their constituency involved in care work, the main point of conflict in the reconciliation of wage and care work, what solutions and demands do workers propose, etc. Secondly, it should be an explicit goal for union activists to reach as many workers and ask for as many opinions as possible to increase union visibility and trust in it. The most suitable method for this dual-purpose is in-person surveying at the workplace. Moreover, this provides a good opportunity to increase commitment through involvement in organizing: filling out a small number of surveys (5-10 per person) is just the right low threshold task for workers who find the issue important and are ready to do something for a change.

These questions provide a good starting point for preparing a campaign. The actual content of the survey is of course adaptable to the specific context.

Childcare

Do you have children?

yes
no

What age are they? (If you have more than one child you can mark multiple answers)

kindergarten
primary school
high school
older

Are you a single parent?

yes
no

Do you have children with special needs?

yes
no

What is your greatest difficulty in reconciling raising children and going to work?

summer activities for children
daily logistics
finding affordable and good quality extracurricular and free-time activities
financial difficulties in child-rearing
sickness of child
other:

Which of the following solutions would work best for you in reconciling childcare and your job?

extra leave days for all parents
multi-day summer camp organized by the employer for employee's children
parents receive financial aid in paying for a summer camp of their choosing
establishment of daycare at work
flexible working time/shifts for parents
financial aid at the start of the school year
summer daycare at work organized by the employer
extra leave days for fathers
maternity bonus (an employee on maternity leave receives x months worth of salary as bonus)
other:

Care for elderly and other care work

Do you have an elderly or sick relative whom you are taking care of?

yes
no

Which category does the person you are taking care of fall into?

self-sufficient elderly
not a self-sufficient elderly
person with a disability

Do you live in the same household as this person?

yes
no

What is your greatest difficulty in reconciling caring for your relative and going to your day job?

daily logistics
The financial burden of care work
organizing care and surveillance when at work
transport
other:

Which of the following solutions would help you the most in reconciling caring for your relative and your job?

extra leave days for those who do have to care for someone

flexible working time/shifts

annual financial aid for medicine, medical supplies

other:

This survey is of course openly adaptable and modifiable. After in-person surveying is finished, a clear picture will emerge about the number of workers affected by certain issues and which solutions would help most of them – a clear set of demands the union can put forward during bargaining for a collective agreement. A successful campaign around these issues can substantially improve the standing of a union with workers.

It is important to add that workplace organizing alone is insufficient in solving the care crisis as a whole. Putting not only employees, but municipalities and even the government under pressure seems justified and the trade unions themselves could set up their own measures (such as union daycare centers) to help their members. What is lacking for this, however, is substantially larger membership and power for unions than currently is the case in Hungary.

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