

RESEARCH

REPORTS

RECOMMENDATIONS

VALENTINA FRANCA

THE CARE SECTOR IN SLOVENIA

CHALLENGES OF ORGANISING AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

INSTITUTE OF
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

VALENTINA FRANCA

**THE CARE SECTOR
IN SLOVENIA**
CHALLENGES OF
ORGANISING AND
COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
Social Policy Programme

This report is one in a series presenting the findings of research carried out in Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia as part of the project CEE CAW ‘Challenges for Organising and Collective Bargaining in Care, Administration and Waste collection sectors in Central and Eastern European Countries’, which was led by the Institute of Public Affairs (Warsaw). The other partners were the: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Sofia), Central European Labour Studies Institute (Bratislava), Lithuanian Centre of Social Sciences (Vilnius), and Centre for Democracy Foundation (Belgrade).



Management at the Institute of Public Affairs:
Dominik Owczarek, Małgorzata Koziarek

Proofreading: Marcus Bashford

Please refer to this publication as follows:
Franca, V. (2024). *The Care Sector in Slovenia: Challenges of Organising and Collective Bargaining*. Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs.

Copyright © by Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warsaw 2024

ISBN: 978-83-7689-470-6

Publisher:
Fundacja Instytut Spraw Publicznych
00-031 Warszawa, ul. Szpitalna 5 lok. 22
tel.: +48 22 55 64 260, fax: +48 22 55 64 262
e-mail: isp@isp.org.pl, www.isp.org.pl



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

The report was co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

1. Methodological preface

The care sector in Slovenia is subject to rigorous regulation and operates within the public sector. In this report, we have distinguished between long-term care workers (NACE 87.1, 87.2, 87.3), social assistance centre workers (NACE 88.99), and early childhood education and care workers (NACE 88.91, 85.1).

This report was compiled through desk research, primarily sourcing information from reports and data published on reputable professional websites, as well as interviews. Additionally, it includes a brief overview of the legislative framework, which encompasses collective agreements.

In March 2024, three interviews were conducted via Zoom, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Two interviews involved representatives from trade unions, while the third interview was with the President of the Kindergarten Community. Unfortunately, despite multiple requests, the Ministry of Solidarity Future, responsible for long-term care workers and social assistance centre workers, did not respond. Subsequently, transcripts of the interviews were meticulously prepared and analysed, in accordance with the project guidelines' key objectives.

2. General characteristics of the sector

The care sector in Slovenia is highly regulated as it provides a public service. The hospitals are mainly owned by the state, while local municipalities own the health centres and nursing homes. The share of privately owned care institutions is very limited in Slovenia; thus the state and local governments are the main providers. Unfortunately, the number of employees is decreasing, although the needs are rising, as explained further in the report.

According to the Statistical Office of Slovenia (2024) in the school year 2023/2024, 12,440 educators and their assistants were employed in kindergartens, which is 1.2 % less than in the previous year. Female educators make up 97.3%, while males account for just 2.7%. Of the 12,440 educators, 6.1% work in the private sector. On average, one educator is responsible for 6.8 children.

The profession within kindergartens is subject to stringent regulations, ensuring a consistently high standard of service delivery. These regulations serve to cultivate an environment where children not only gain substantial knowledge but also develop essential social skills.

3. Major problems and challenges in the sector

Activities in the sector of long-term care workers and social assistance centre workers have been significantly **undervalued** in Slovenia for quite some time and have not been a priority, not only for this government but also for previous ones. Trade union representatives have been pointing out to the government for a long time how important these services are for society, yet they have not been prioritised. Consequently, a situation has occurred where retirement homes have been built and appropriate equipment is available, but due to a lack of workers, the homes and individual units are empty, leaving people struggling with how to care for their family members in need of assistance. This was also evident when the Long-Term Care Act was being adopted. Although the act is valid, it is not feasible in practice, and it will result in worse or fewer services in some places.

The workers in the sector are **ageing** and the projection for the next five years is very bad, as around a third of workers will retire. Regarding foreign workers, individuals from former Yugoslavian countries are indeed present. However, as emphasised by one of the trade union representatives, they face considerable xenophobia. Despite the clear demand for additional labour, these workers are confronted with unjustified hostility from locals, despite openly showcasing the demanding nature of their work. In the background of this hostility, there may also be the fact that these foreign workers are more diligent and hardworking. While workers from more exotic countries, like the Philippines, may not be arriving imminently, it is crucial to emphasise that a basic understanding of Slovene is required.

The second problem is the **education** of workers, which is generally very **low** (vocational and secondary technical education) and as the wages in the public sector are linked to the educational level, the wages are consequently low. In elderly homes, nearly half of the workers receive the minimum wage, like the nursing assistants, as well as workers in the kitchen, laundry and even in the accounting department. Moreover, last year, the price for the services

was determined in dialogue with a consensus, but before this, it was decided unilaterally by the government.

Worker **fluctuation** is also prevalent, many change employers within the same sector but to different institutions. The main reason, as cited by an interviewed union representative, is not wages, but primarily working time: employees tend to move to workplaces where work can be scheduled from Monday to Friday, without weekends and night shifts. Another reason is **workplace relationships** (negative relations between employees and management, as well as among employees themselves; some cases of bullying were also reported), which unfortunately are relatively poor in many places. Only after that does the issue of pay arise.

One of the directions of the relevant ministry is also **deinstitutionalisation**, which, according to one of the union representatives, has proven to be a poor decision. For instance, when they fragmented a care centre, it consequently meant that medical staff had to travel to multiple locations, spending more time travelling than on their professional work.

Kindergartens face challenges stemming from **frequent sick leave days** and difficulties in finding substitutes, leading to the merging of staff groups. This issue may be attributed to an **ageing** workforce or a tendency towards illness. Although dedication to the profession is high and preschool teachers strive to create good conditions despite these shortcomings, the biggest problem appears to be **disrupted interpersonal relationships**. *“There is no longer that positive energy towards colleagues as there was in the past,”* explains one union representative, adding that perhaps the epidemic has deepened this. Most workers are women, the age limit is rising, and fewer young people are choosing this profession. The union participates in encouraging young people to work in this profession by conducting presentations in primary schools; however, appropriate motivation would be a **decent salary**. Indeed, low wages, especially for preschool teacher assistants, are one of the main problems. Despite some measures, the wage gap between preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants remains too significant (i.e. up to 10 salary grades); in many cases, preschool teacher assistants receive only minimum wage. Furthermore, they are increasingly burdened with additional tasks, most of which they accept to prove themselves and increase their chances of being hired as preschool teachers by principals after completing their education.

Another challenge for the sector is the increasingly **diverse multicultural environment**, particularly with children who do not speak Slovenian, as well as their parents. This makes communication very difficult, but while children quickly learn, parents often do not, leaving communication issues unresolved. Digitalisation has influenced the staff's work to some extent, yet they primarily utilise it for administrative tasks. When it comes to activities for the children, they opt for non-digital alternatives.

4. Characteristics of social dialogue organisations in the sector

In the sector of long-term care workers, there are three trade unions, the biggest being the Health and Social Care Union (Sindikat zdravstva in socialnega varstva). There are also two smaller unions of which workers of the long-term care sector are members, namely the Union of Social Care Centres (Sindikat centrov za socialno nego) and the Union of Healthcare Workers in Slovenia (Sindikat delavcev v zdravstveni negi Slovenije). The counterparts of these unions are the Ministry of Solidarity for the Future and the Ministry for Health.

In the realm of kindergartens, a sole representative stands in the form of the **Union of Education, Training, Science, and Culture of Slovenia** (Sindikat vzgoje, izobraževanja, znanosti in kulture Slovenije), aligned with Slovenia's largest trade union confederation. **The Ministry of Education** acts as their counterpart.

4.1. Challenges of organising employees

Difficulties in social dialogue in the long-term care sector are particularly evident in the fact that adopted resolutions are not implemented. Unions are truly dissatisfied with the considerable time spent on discussions and meetings, as their opinions ultimately **do not influence** either the laws or the practical decisions of the employer. They feel that there is simply a lack of political power to give social care the importance it deserves.

To overcome this, both unions and other organisations, such as social care communities, the Social Chamber, and even the Institute of Social Care, are attempting to form a connection. The aim is to find common interests between workers and employers, without the involvement of the ministry, to coordinate positions and thus exert a kind of **professional-political pressure**

on the ministry. Their common goal is to improve working conditions in the sector.

The trade union in the kindergarten sector collaborates extensively with the Ministry of Education. According to the union representative, the dialogue is actively ongoing, but everything comes down to money. *“We reach agreements with the relevant ministry on conditions, standards, and payment, but when it comes before the Ministry of Public Administration and the Ministry of Finance, everything comes to a halt.”* When negotiations regarding salaries and other expenses occur, the Ministry of Public Administration is always involved, but otherwise, it is the Ministry of Education with whom the unions negotiate. In essence, the relationship and collaboration with the Ministry of Education are positive, but there’s a lack of responsiveness from the other ministries.

According to trade union experiences, among younger employees, there is initially less interest, but it tends to increase after a few years of employment as they become familiar with the work.

4.2. Good practices for organising employees

Regarding the care sector, one of the union representatives highlights the good practice of trade unions coordinating among themselves before each meeting to ensure a unified stance. According to union data, between 80% and 90% of workers in kindergartens are members of the union because they see the benefits of membership, such as having more opportunities and better working conditions.

The union covering kindergarten workers takes great care of its membership and is active at various levels: nationally, at the level of individual kindergartens, and within regional areas. They also take care of their membership through various activities, such as hikes, performances, and similar events. The challenge is to include young people.

Long-term care workers and social assistance centre workers fall under the **Collective Agreement for the Healthcare and Social Protection Sector**. This agreement is negotiated between the relevant ministries and the representative trade union, which, for these workers, includes the Ministry of Health and the Health and Social Care Trade Union of Slovenia, a member of the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Public Sector of Slovenia.

Early childhood education and care workers in Slovenia are governed by the **Collective Agreement for the Education Sector**. This agreement is negotiated between the Ministry of Education and the representative trade union, the Education, Science and Culture Trade Union of Slovenia, which is an independent trade union. It is worth noting that both collective agreements have nationwide validity for both sectors, resulting in **100%** coverage of collective agreements.

4.3. Characteristics of employer representation

Employer representation within each sector is overseen by the respective ministries highlighted earlier. In the public sector, including both long-term care and kindergartens, there is no distinct employer representation. Typically, a bargaining committee is assembled for negotiations, with wage bargaining involving the Ministry of Public Administration and the Ministry of Finance.

5. Collective bargaining and other forms of social dialogue in the sector – characteristics

5.1. Content analysis of collective agreements

The **Collective Agreement for the Healthcare and Social Protection Sector** concluded between the unions and the ministries regulates the operations of the union and other workers' representatives working conditions (probationary work, internship, working hours, annual leave, education, protection of workers' rights, occupational safety), classifies job positions into salary grades, and regulates job performance and salary supplements. It covers all workers in the sector. According to the interviewees, the employment conditions are not modified significantly from the standard set by generally applicable labour law. Thus, the added value resulting from the conclusion of collective agreements should be described as not very high.

As for kindergartens, the union and the Ministry of Education concluded the **Collective Agreement for the Education Sector**, extending its coverage to all workers within kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and universities. Its content mirrors that of the Collective Agreement for the Healthcare and Social Protection Sector, tailored to accommodate the distinct needs of

the education domain. Nevertheless, a union representative of kindergartens believes that all relevant issues are included in the collective agreement.

5.2. Other forms of social dialogue

In both care and education, works councils are absent. One of the main reasons for this lack of worker representation is the absence of effective legislation allowing works councils to organise in the public sector; the law is tailored for companies.

However, workers do have the right to **their representatives in the institute council**,¹ albeit with limited influence due to their smaller numbers. For example, in kindergartens, the institute council consists of 6 employee representatives, 3 parent representatives, and 3 representatives of the founder, in this case, the municipality. The board plays a key role in making important decisions, such as appointing the principal. Although employees make up half of the members, it is not always the case that their opinion prevails, as the voice of the founder often takes precedence. However, it is crucial for employees to be active, as this makes their voice more heard. In the health sector, the representation of workers is more limited. According to ministerial regulations, each seven-member institute council includes only one representative for workers.

In general, the majority of the social dialogue occurs between the trade union and the employer.

5.3. Impact of European sectoral social dialogue

Social dialogue takes place at the sectoral national level, with no interactions detected with the European social dialogue. No cases of affiliation of Slovenian social partners to European federations of social dialogue organisations were identified.

¹ The board adopts rules, work programs, and financial plans, monitors their execution, suggests changes to activities, and provides input on various matters to the founder and director, as stipulated by law or the institution's regulations.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Social dialogue should be **clearly structured**, if not necessarily formalised, at least with some assurances that the decisions made are respected and implemented in practice. Similar to the setup of the Economic and Social Council, dialogue should occur within a structured framework and result in concrete outcomes, thereby increasing motivation for further collaboration.

According to the union representative in kindergartens, it is vital for the union to focus on empowering workers so that they can express their opinions and thus have more influence on decisions, as well as in the preparation of all documents, curricula, and similar matters. In addition, more emphasis should be placed on the profession, as attention is increasingly given to those who finance kindergartens and to the mayor. In terms of content, one interviewee believes that the focus should be on two main aspects. Firstly, there should be the simultaneous presence of more educators in kindergartens, which undoubtedly entails a certain financial investment. Secondly, building quality interpersonal relationships should also become a topic of social dialogue, as this is a very pressing and wide-ranging area. This should include both formal and informal relationships between employees and management in both directions.

References

Long-Term Care Act (Zakon o dolgotrajni oskrbi), Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 84/23.

Institutes Act (Zakon o zavodih), Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 12/91 — 127/06.

Collective Agreement for the Healthcare and Social Protection Sector, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 15/94 — 21/23.

Collective Agreement for the Education Sector in the Republic of Slovenia, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 52/94 — 13/24.

Statistical office of Slovenia. 2024. Zaposleni v formalnem izobraževanju, šolsko leto 2023/2024; 19. 6. 2024.

About the Author

Valentina Franca, PhD, works as an associate professor and researcher of labour law and social security law in the Faculty of Public Administration at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her research includes numerous studies, books, and articles in the field of collective labour relations, digitalisation in labour relations and new forms of work. She is a member of editorial boards of scientific journals and participates as a national expert in international associations, such as the Worker Participation Network at the ETUI Institute in Brussels and CEELEX at the International Labour Organization. She is also an active researcher in national and international projects for various organisations, such as Eurofound, EIGE, OECD, and EC among others, and a lecturer at various professional and scientific conferences.