

# Experience from Germany in Developing Trade Union Staff for Vietnam

Hang Nguyen Thi Thu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Trade Union University, Vietnam;

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**ABSTRACT:** The role of trade unions is further demonstrated through participation in new generation free trade agreements such as CPTPP and EVFTA, along with many other trade agreements. To ensure the rights of workers through labor commitments such as the right to form unions, collective bargaining and prevention of forced labor. Trade unions around the world are also very interested in developing their union cadres, because this is the team that has the main impact on the quality of union activities. The article assesses the current status of trade union cadre development in Germany and draws lessons for Vietnam in the coming time.

**KEYWORDS:** union officials, Vietnamese unions, German unions, union official development.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Trade unions are one of the organizations that affirm their important role in each country. Although they are implemented with different system structures, specific to each country, the nature of the role of the world trade union models is to represent and protect the legitimate rights and interests of workers, including wages, working hours, working environment and other benefits, through collective bargaining, dispute resolution and participation in socio-economic management.

In Germany, the development of trade union cadres is of interest and implemented effectively. With creative training and selection mechanisms. This helps trade union activities in Germany to be effective and become a typical model.

## II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRADE UNION SYSTEM IN GERMANY

The German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) was founded in Munich on October 12, 1949 and is currently the largest trade union center in Germany with nearly 6 million members and 8

national trade unions. DGB is a member of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

DGB does not have a local trade union structure, but the central trade unions have their own local steering committee system. Specifically, in addition to the headquarters, there are also trade union offices in 9 regions and 66 areas nationwide. DGB also has a similar structure to coordinate activities with the trade unions, but the offices are very small in size.

The DGB National Congress is held every four years. The Congress sets the guidelines for the Central Trade Unions and elects a five-member executive board. These people, together with the chairmen of the industry unions, form the DGB Executive Committee (equivalent to the Standing Committee). The Executive Committee members, together with the regional leaders and 70 industry union delegates, form the Federal Trade Union Council (equivalent to the Executive Committee). The Council meets once a year. The DGB also has its own youth organization called the DGB-Jugend. In Germany, there are no grassroots trade unions at the enterprise level. Instead, all workers (both union members and other workers) elect their representatives to the Enterprise Council. The Enterprise Council has the right to access information and business activities of the enterprise, and has the right to consult on all activities of the enterprise (expansion, change of scale, production and business structure, restructuring of the workforce, etc.) but does not have the right to negotiate. Sectoral unions negotiate and sign collective labor agreements with corporations and enterprises, which apply to all employees in those corporations and enterprises, not just to union members.

DGB represents its 8 member unions in policy consultation, advocacy, and policy criticism at the national (federal) and state levels, in relations with the federal government, state governments, political parties, and employers' associations.

Sectoral unions play an extremely important and key role in determining working conditions and wages in the industry. Workers join and are directly managed by sectoral unions. Sectoral unions focus resources on building a team of cadres and experts in related fields to directly support union members: cadres working on union member development; a team of legal experts and lawyers to advise and protect union members; a team of experts on collective bargaining; Establish training centers for part-time union officials on operational skills at the grassroots level as well as for full-time officials at industry unions in the states.

### **III. CURRENT STATUS OF DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIALIZED TRADE UNION CADERS IN GERMANY**

The system of developing full-time trade union cadres in Germany is inseparable from the country's unique dual structure of industrial relations and vocational education (VET):

- Dual Industrial Relations: German industrial relations are defined by the parallel existence of two separate, clearly defined bodies:

**Trade Unions (Gewerkschaften):** Responsible for negotiating collective agreements (Tarifverträge) at the industry or national level, regulating wages, working hours, and career development opportunities.

**Works Councils (Betriebsräte):** Employee representatives are elected at the enterprise level (mandatory for companies with 5 or more employees) and exercise the co-determination rights stipulated in the Works Constitution Act (BetrVG).

Although different, Works Councils and Trade Unions have a close reciprocal relationship. Works councils operate on a volunteer basis and often lack specialized legal expertise. Therefore, the CBCD CT provides essential support, legal advice and counsel to the Works Council, ensuring the implementation of laws and collective agreements at the enterprise level.<sup>21</sup> The function of the CBCD CT is not only administrative, but also institutional. This officer acts as a highly specialized professional, legally tasked with connecting strong collective bargaining structures at the industry level with the operational realities of enterprise-level co-determination mechanisms.

### **IMPACT OF THE DUAL RELATIONS SYSTEM ON TRAINING OF GERMAN LABOR UNION MEMBERS**

Characteristic	Works Council	Trade Union	Significance for staff training
Scope of operations	Enterprise/Factory Level	Industry/ National Level	Officers must train the Labor Council on company-specific laws and negotiations
Legal basis	Labor Constitution Act (BetrVG)	Collective Bargaining Law, Fundamental Organizing Rights	Officers must be experts in both collective bargaining and corporate law
Main function	Co-decide on social, personnel and economic issues; ensure compliance with the law	Collective bargaining (wages, hours, conditions); political representation.	Advises on complex legal compliance and collective bargaining strategy
Staff support	Members are unpaid volunteers (during working hours)	Full-time staff have jobs	The staff provides legal, economic and strategic continuity for voluntary agencies

(Source: Author's synthesis)

- Dual vocational education and training (VET):

The German dual vocational education and training (VET) system also lays the foundations for the professionalisation of the role of trade union officials. The system is called “dual” because training takes place at two locations: in the company and at a vocational school, and is

characterised by strong cooperation between the state, the private sector and the social partners.

The VET system ensures high professional quality for state-recognised professions. This context creates a social expectation that professional roles, including that of trade union officials, must be supported by

structured, high-quality and consensus-driven training frameworks. The educational path of CT union officials must reflect this rigour.

Furthermore, German decision-making powers give unions significant influence over company decisions regarding training and further education, allowing unions to integrate macro-level power into micro-level skills development. Unions use this influence to secure and promote lifelong learning opportunities for workers, often stipulated in collective agreements.

- Recruitment mechanism of full-time trade union officials in Germany:

Previously (in the 1960s - 1970s), most trade union officials came from the working class and did not receive formal training; this made the quality of system operation uneven. The process of social change requires Germany's trade union system to gradually build a team of professional officials with legal - economic knowledge and social skills, in order to operate more effectively between members and businesses.

According to a report from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EUROFOUND), the German trade union system currently faces a shortage of young officials in official trade union positions, posing risks to the inheritance and innovation in the organization.

In Germany, the right to represent workers is clearly stipulated in the law. According to Acts such as the Works Constitution Act (BetrVG - 1952, amended 1972, 2001), any workplace with five or more workers can form a works council (Betriebsrat). Although legally separate, in practice, a large proportion of works council members are also union members, especially in trade union federations such as the DGB. A study by Hans Böckler Stiftung found that over 75% of works council members were DGB union members. Although this figure has decreased in 2022, about 41% of works council members are union members, with manufacturing being higher (50%) and services being lower (12%). Unions often support works council members with training, legal advice, and election support, but unions do not directly run works councils. In many cases, unions also have indirect influence through works council members.

Therefore, in Germany there is no mandatory requirement for full-time union officials in the workplace, and unions have no formal right to intervene in the operations of the enterprise except through the works council. As a result, much of the work of the union is carried out by

volunteers or elected members of the works council, rather than full-time union officials in the form of formal employees.

However, some unions such as IG BAU have taken significant steps to deploy full-time staff:

- IG BAU have to work in specific industries such as construction, cleaning services, facility management... where most businesses are very small and the workforce is unstable. Therefore, they use many full-time organizers to organize and support workers right at the workplace.
- IG BAU union has a strict recruitment and training process: the training program lasts 23 months, including 11 months of academic training and 1 year of practice at local units, ending with a national exam organized by the union. They also apply an early retirement regime to replace the old generation of staff with a new generation with higher qualifications.

Similarly, unions such as IG Metall and IG BCE have also begun to focus on professionalisation and improving the performance of union representatives, through systematic recruitment, training and professional human resource management

The candidate profile is usually those who have extensive experience in the Works Council or have been actively involved in the trade union, and then pursue formal academic training. The academic necessity of recruitment often favors individuals with a university background, facilitating entry into higher levels of civil service in the union apparatus.

German unions are working to build a pool of qualified, dedicated staff through intensive training programmes and the application of modern human resource management. However, they face challenges such as declining membership, a lack of young staff, and limited resources.

By regulation, there is no formal traditional training pathway; Instead, candidates need to have a qualification from the Vocational Training Act of Germany (BBiG) or a university degree, or graduate from a trade union academy such as the European Academy of Labour. Experience in political or social volunteering is an important factor for selection.

Large unions often organize training programs lasting from several months to two years, which focus on learning labor law, understanding union organization structures, local practice, negotiation skills and communication languages.

- Training of full-time union officials:

Many unions, especially IGBAU, IGBCE, and IGMetall, have applied QTNL measures to professionalize their activities: they have increased recruitment and training standards for officials. Specifically, IGBAU requires candidates to complete a 23-month training course consisting of 11 months of academic training and 1 year of practice, followed by an exam to ensure a high level of professional qualifications.

German trade unions, especially those of the DGB system, play a key role in the political education of workers and officials, through a network of trade union training institutions and specialized training programs to ensure the competence of full-time officials.

Large trade unions such as IG Metall organize thousands of courses on weekends or throughout the week at specialized training centers. They have over 20 educational institutions with around 100 full-time teachers. In addition, many courses are organized on a regional model – taught by volunteer instructors.

Some organizations participating in training:

- ADGB Trade Union School

This is a prominent training center built in 1928–1930, which trains union leaders in labor law, economics and management. The center has full accommodation, catering, sports facilities... to serve the comprehensive training of trade union officials.

- Training in specific trade unions

For example, ver.di operates education centers in Berlin, Bielefeld, Brannenburg, Gladenbach, Mosbach, Naumburg, Saalfeld, Undeloh, Walsrode... and owns the agency “ver.diBildung + Beratung” (ver.dib+b), which specializes in training representatives of Betriebsrat, JAV (Association of Youth Trainers), representatives of disabled workers... with quality recognized by an independent accreditation organization for adult education.

- Training content and form:

Diverse training according to target groups: Staff are trained to become lecturers, work at the Betriebsrats level (workers' representative board in Germany), participate in occupational safety protection committees, or represent in bargaining councils... There are also training programs for business representatives, union leaders and regular members.

Training duration: Despite the wide training network, the issue of time for trainees

remains a challenge: long courses on weekends or all week are easily interrupted due to work pressure and lack of vacation space.

Content updated according to social transformation: In the face of digitalization and green transformation trends, unions such as IGMetall have introduced “Future Agreements” to orient future skills, and ensure participation in long-term training by industry group.

Trade Union strategies for competence and lifelong learning: German unions use their collective bargaining power to secure and enforce training provisions. Collective agreements often provide for professional development opportunities, ensuring that workers are retrained and upskilled for future-oriented roles. This transforms training from a discretionary benefit of employers into a guaranteed contractual right. Through their role as social partners (e.g. in the development of new training occupations), trade unions influence the upgrading of training and learning courses to the requirements of Industry 4.0, shaping the future labor market.

- Allocation and placement of staff by union and region:

According to data from Gehalt.de, the average salaries are as follows (full-time income, average by state):

- Baden-Württemberg: 8,157€/month
- Berlin: 7,512€/month
- Sachsen-Anhalt: 6,795€/month

Thus, union staff are appropriately arranged according to the living standards and scale of activities of each region. Large unions such as IG Metall, ver.di, IG BCE, IG BAU all have a network of offices in many states, allowing staff to be allocated to where the demand is highest and according to the capacity of each individual.

There is no common and mandatory legal mechanism. Therefore, the level of staffing varies greatly between unions: In large unions (IG Metall, Ver.di), most union staff are administrative staff or recruited specifically for the union department but do not regularly play a role at the workplace level such as works councils. In contrast, in IG BAU, full-time staff are essential for organizing the workforce in small enterprises.

The arrangement and use of full-time union officials in Germany currently has many limitations, depending largely on each union and industry. Although union activities are still significantly effective through works councils, the lack of a clear specialized structure makes the effectiveness and form of operation different and

inconsistent nationwide.

Advanced models such as IG BAU and the changes in IG Metall, IG BCE hope to open up a model development direction in the future: a professional, flexible but still effective union system at the grassroots level, meeting the needs of organizing and protecting labor rights in the modern socio-economic context.

#### **IV. LESSONS FOR VIETNAM ON DEVELOPING SPECIALIZED TRADE UNION OFFICIALS**

- Institutional integration and the power of the dual system:

The German dual system ensures that professional union staff are trained to operate simultaneously at the macro level (industry collective bargaining) and the micro level (enterprise co-determination). This comprehensive access is achieved by Sekretär providing the necessary expertise to sustain the functioning and effectiveness of voluntary works councils. Any system that seeks to professionalize its staff must clearly identify the high-level technical and legal support needed to make grassroots representation effective.

Prioritizing critical thinking and political consciousness:

German union training emphasizes the integration of critical socio-political awareness and historical context alongside technical knowledge. Cadres are trained as political actors first, and as technicians second. This prevents cadres from becoming mere state administrators. Specialized training programs need to foster a sense of mission and a systems understanding (sociological imagination) to address structural challenges such as economic change or liberalization.

- Force professionalization through academic pathways:

Union staff development is seen as a high-level academic undertaking, often requiring university degrees and using specialized institutions affiliated with universities. This ensures professional parity with management counterparts. Labor unions should establish or heavily fund specialized academic institutions separate from standard administrative training schools to provide rigorous, externally validated educational qualifications for professional staff. This validates the role as a prestigious, high-status profession.

- Leveraging collective power to demand future skills training:

German unions use strong co-

determination and collective bargaining autonomy to integrate strategic skills development (e.g. Industry 4.0 competencies, green skills) directly into employment agreements. Training is a matter of negotiated interests, not discretionary. Therefore, staff training must include strategic content on industrial trends (e.g. digitalization, supply chain management). Staff must be trained not only on labor law, but also on the economic and technological drivers of change, allowing them to negotiate qualification plans rather than just salary increases.

#### **V. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

In the context of deep international integration and rapid changes in labor relations, full-time trade union officials face many significant challenges. These include exercising their representative role in a complex legal environment, maintaining the practicality of the Trade Union in addressing employment and wage issues, dealing with the emergence of new workers' representative organizations, ensuring financial resources, and improving the professional capacity and skills of the staff.

To overcome these challenges, Vietnam Trade Unions need to have strong and comprehensive investment. This includes continuing to improve the legal framework, improving professional capacity and skills (especially dialogue and negotiation) for full-time officials, improving remuneration to attract and retain talent, as well as substantially innovating the organizational and operational model. The development of a team of specialized trade union cadres will be the decisive factor in the strength, effectiveness and adaptability of the Trade Union organization in the future, ensuring that the Vietnam Trade Union continues to be a solid support for the working class and laborers.

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