

Case Study: Syndicat National des Enseignements de Second degré - SNES-FSU (France)

Context:

SNES-FSU is France's largest trade union for secondary education staff, including teachers, school counsellors (*Conseiller-e principal-e d'éducation*, CPE), guidance counsellors (Psy-En) and education support personnel for pupils with disabilities (*Accompagnant-e des élèves en situation de handicap*, AESH) or in charge to supervise the students (*Assistant-es d'éducation*, AED). It is affiliated with the FSU (Fédération Syndicale Unitaire), the main public servants federation in France. SNES-FSU defends a high-quality, free, secular, and egalitarian public education system. It promotes educational justice, professional recognition, and democratic values within schools. The scope of its representation is Middle and high school teachers, Educational and 'Psy-EN' (guidance counsellors and national education psychologists) in secondary education. The union has nearly 56,000 members.

France has had a context of political instability since the general election in 2022, and it has worsened since the general election in 2024. There is no majority in parliament. Parties from the Left won the election, but with not enough seats to form a majority. The result is an alliance of Centrist and Conservative parties without a majority. The consequence is the government is very weak and could fall at any moment. This creates not only instability but uncertainty.

SNES-FSU is engaged in campaigning about the public budget for education, since France is in a new phase of austerity with new job cuts, a salary freeze and further cuts in health. While contrasting these policies with the employer, SNES-FSU is bargaining for better salaries and against job cuts. The union is also facing a very new debate about workload. The debate centres on how many hours a student must have in class during the day, and overall during the week. This has become a big debate about holidays, about working time, the workload for the day, and for the week. Bargaining on these issues is mostly at the national level since all the main rules about workload are decided at national level. France remains a very centralised system in political terms. Bargaining at the level of the single institution exists but is on a local and specific topic. For example, about the organisation of the day such as in a lycée where the union was negotiating with the Director to provide more flexibility during the day.

As has been indicated, many of the key challenges derive from the political situation, which is complex and confused. Among the most significant challenges encountered, the main one has been pension reform for all workers in France, not only educational workers or public servants. In 2023 there was a major mobilisation against this pension reform. The union participated in and organised many demonstrations with millions of people on the street, and a very tense debate in

the parliament. In the end, the government passed this reform with a constitutional tool that allows the passing of a law without the vote of parliament (article 49.3). However, the struggle was very important because although the government won the first battle, in the long term, it ended up weakening itself. For this reason, in the negotiation during the election in 2024, and in the negotiation about the budget during the last weeks, one of the conditions of the Socialist Party to keep the government alive was the suspension of the pension reform. So, in the medium term and in the long term, this was not a victory for the government but a victory in the capacity of mobilisation of the unions.

A second challenge is focused on education and relates to a reform in the first year of secondary school, (*collège*), known as “*Choc des savoirs*”. The reform aimed at changing the group class by dividing the group into smaller groups in mathematics and French according to the level of proficiency (merit) of students. SNES-FSU was against this kind of organisation because it is deemed very segregational, and it is not a solution to improve the inequalities between the students. The main message at that moment was ‘*nous ne trierons pas nos élèves*’ (‘we will not select our students’). This has been a long-term struggle, and was only implemented in a minority of schools (the union estimates 20%). However, in December 2025 the Minister announced that the separate groups for mathematics and French classes would no longer be compulsory in the next academic year. A union official indicated ‘*this is an important collective victory for our union*’.

Many of these inappropriate reforms reflect a lack of social dialogue. SNES-FSU is asking for more, and better, social dialogue, since the union is convinced that improved social dialogue, could avoid reforms that do not address the real problems.

What does ‘local leadership’ look like?

At SNES-FSU, there are four organisational levels. S4 is the national level, S3 is the regional level, S2 is the district level and S1 is the local level. Local leaders are at the S1 level. S1 is the section of the union based in the school. All the colleagues who are affiliates of SNES are members of this S1. As a local section, S1 represents both the section and its leader, the local leader.

The S1 is a local section, and its precise form depends on the school. There are schools with more affiliates, and schools with fewer affiliates. The union aims to have S1 in as many schools as possible. This is a high priority for the union for two reasons. First, local leaders pass information and analysis to members from the national and regional levels to the local section. But, in reverse, they also gather the information from the base to make the analysis as precise as possible at the national level. S3 and S2 sometimes will negotiate or relate with the representative

of the state in the region or the district. In France, the core of the educational policies is made at the national level, and this is much more limited at the regional level. Only on very few topics is there something like a negotiation at the regional level. It exists more for primary school than secondary school, but some topics for secondary school are also at the district level. So the role of the S1 is to pass information to S2, and S2 has a more coordinating role of the S1 networks that are at the local level.

How are local leaders identified and developed?

Since in SNES all unionists are workers 'in production', no matter one's level of responsibility, '*union officers always remain a colleague*'. All union officers are in class for some hours. From the school-based representative to the general secretary, leaders are in class, even if it is for a few hours a week. This is a core principle for the way the union works with a membership that always directly connected to the workforce.

At the level of the individual school the S1 leader, according to the bylaws, should be elected by the section of the school – that is by the union members in the school. However, in many schools, there may be a limited number of members and so the designation is more by acclamation. The vote is not contested and can be described as a formality.

While the union tries to encourage formal meetings of the local section, the organisation of those meetings has become increasingly complicated over recent years. Rising workloads cause major problems and it is now quite impossible to have all the sections in a school free at the same time. An increase in workload during the last year has had a particular impact on staff and this can militate against organising members. The organising by emails or WhatsApp groups has become crucial and very helpful but there is a view that the lack of in-person contact is a loss. One union official commented:

This is a problem we are trying to solve. Unions have the right to convene one one-hour assembly every month during the workday, but members are always running against the clock.

In this context, the S1 leader acts as a relay for the union. They are expected to explain to members or their colleagues the union's analysis and the political perspective of the union. As indicated they are expected to pass information from the national level to members but also to gather '*the sensations*' on the ground. It is considered important that local leaders must give a

good impression of the union; and it is recognised that the personality of this local leader is very important to build credibility and, in turn, acquire more members.

Another mission local leaders have is to be a key interlocutor with the Director of the school – ‘*we expect them to defend the interests of their colleagues and to be a landmark for the union at the local level*’. It was argued that many S1 leaders are proud of their role, but their experience can be very different: ‘*you can have an S1 leader with a lot of experience or a young member who is building from nothing*’. To support them, the union has a specific mailing list to pass information to receive or to share information between the S1 leaders. There are also specific publications for them on professional and political issues and on how institutions work. These publications provide information on laws on education, but also more practical information on negotiation and local bargaining. The union has a very good website which is obviously national in its orientation but which provides important advice to help the S1 leader to explain situations to their colleagues. When in doubt, S1 leaders are encouraged to seek advice at the district, regional or even national level, to have more precision.

In the event of a strong conflict with the Director of the school, for example, the S1 can ask for an intervention at the district level to S2. There is no need for them to be alone in a face-to-face with the director – ‘*We are very present with that*’ commented one official.

The union places a strong emphasis on training its S1 leaders. Coaching and mentoring are available and this is both formal and informal. Mentoring is considered very important to pass the experience from the oldest members to the youngest. Training is not obligatory but is recommended to local leaders. The union trains its leaders about educational and professional topics as well as on industrial issues. Within the union a very important tool is ‘*Constituer un réseau de S1*’, a network of S1 leaders useful to strengthen the network at school, and also for the S2 level to make better connections with S1 leaders. A second tool is *Journée du SNES*, (Days of SNES FSU). This is a huge training programme involving very many S1 leaders participating in two two-day activities in Paris:

During these two days we talk about the history of SNES, the political position of SNES, who we are, and why we are like we are.

The union places a strong emphasis on building a union identity in which S1 leaders develop a shared outlook on all the key issues facing the union and its members.

How do local leaders link to the formal democracy of the union?

In SNES, as in other unions, internal democracy is very important. It has internal votes that work through congresses. Many votes are quite traditional *'we vote with paper and a box at the school, inside the school'* – but this is valued. The experience of voting is real, and shared with other colleagues at the workplace. Members experience their democracy as something tangible. The National Congress is composed of elected delegates from the local level. Therefore, the S1 leader also has the responsibility to ensure their colleagues vote and to build membership. *'Having more voters, and more members participating in the internal democracy of the union, is a key objective for the union. This is very important to us'*.

Are there dedicated programmes to support particular groups in the union?

Gender balance is very important to SNES-FSU. The union is committed to increasing the number of women with key responsibilities, also at local, regional, district, and national levels. The union has specific training about equalities issues within the union, but there are no special programmes for ethnic minorities or for younger members. The union may consider expanding work into these areas, but this does not exist at the moment.