

Periféria Policy and Research Center, Hungary

*Learn more about the work of Electronics Watch monitoring partners in production regions, and how they support workers in attaining their rights. In this first interview in a new series, we talk to **Linda Szabó**, co-founder of Periféria Policy and Research Center in Hungary.*

Periféria is an independent research and policy organisation focusing on monitoring, consultancy and awareness-raising, and creating connections between academic institutions, policymakers, market actors and the general public in the fields of labour, housing and urban transformations.

What are the top issues facing the workers you support in Hungary?

Hungary is becoming the second largest battery manufacturer for electric vehicles in Europe, and plans to employ over 30,000 workers in the industry by 2025. Temp agencies have a growing role in recruitment, which results in the fragmentation of labour, less protection for workers, and more difficulties in organising.

Battery plants create relatively low-paid, low-skilled jobs, which means the 'foxconnization' of labour conditions. Base wages compose only 50% of monthly incomes, while the rest derives from unclear and highly volatile bonus systems. Occupational health and safety institutions and regulations are relatively weak in Hungary, and working with chemicals at battery plants can cause severe accidents.



Linda Szabó, co founder, Periféria Policy and Research Center

How does the partnership with Electronics Watch support your work?

Our partnership with Electronics Watch helps us increase our capacities and do elaborate fieldwork driven by workers' interests, which rarely happens in the policy world. The evidence we gather during our monitoring work uncovers major labour issues in the electronics industry and battery manufacturing, and provides us with stories to tell about different groups of factory workers. This helps in awareness-raising among trade unionists, workers themselves, and the broader public, including policy experts and the academic world, too.

Along with Electronics Watch, Periféria Center fulfils its aims of being a matchmaker between the transnational and the local levels of trade unionists and labour organizers and by connecting to other monitoring partners working along the value chains.

Our work with Electronics Watch also inspires us to learn more details of international and national labour protection legislation.

Tell us about the workers' rights success story or achievement you are most proud of.

It gives us particular satisfaction when our work has a direct impact on workers' lives, like by channelling prompt legal advice from experts we are in continuous contact with to workers in need.

There was a case when migrant workers were to be dismissed, unfairly, by having them sign a contract of mutual agreement, weakening their right to complain. Being unaware of their legal rights, it was vital to inform them that they had the option to not sign the document, and in the end, some of them decided not to. Also, when we visited workers' dormitories which were in really bad shape and repeatedly asked people about their living conditions, they became more aware of their situation and initiated a discussion about it with the management.

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What are the biggest challenges in your monitoring work right now?

The weakening institutions of labour protection in Hungary constitute a major challenge for our work. Current industrial policies favour large-scale investors of battery production by further loosening labour and environmental regulations. Labour shortage is addressed by the implementation of highly selective migration policies which allow migrant factory workers to the country only under strict rules, which can intimidate workers and make migrant workers



coming from Asia more reluctant to talk to us. Reaching out to workers, in general, is never easy.

How helpful it is to have a trade union present at sites we monitor can vary, since we happen to encounter yellow trade unions (company controlled and not independent). Instead of being natural allies, they hinder our work. On the other hand, without trade unions, building trust among workers can be difficult and take much longer, especially at sites where union busting is a major issue.

What are Periféria's goals for the next 2-5 years?

In the field of labour, Periféria's main goals are manifold: uncovering issues that are of key importance to factory workers; building strategic alliances and creating synergies between different workers' advocacy tools in the electronics and battery industry along global value chains; connecting trade unions and labour activists on transnational and local levels, and strengthening workers' solidarity; developing evidence-based proposals to address questions of social reproduction in labour struggles, with particular concern to workers' access to housing; developing effective housing solutions for specific workers' groups; and raising public awareness of factory workers' situations in Hungary to shape both local and transnational policy and academic debates.

What changes would you like to see for workers' rights, in Hungary or internationally?

Green transition is the focus of various international and national state actors. However, in practice, from the side of policymakers, this oftentimes means prioritising company competitiveness and taking away risk for private investors. It is less about the formation of policies leading to just and inclusive transformation, which would pay enough attention to the status of local workers and the impact of changes on the local environments.



Considering the current reconfiguration of Hungary's integration into global value chains, especially the global automotive industry, for the improvement of workers' transnational solidarity and of labour rights, a more progressive interpretation of the principles of 'sustainability' and of 'just transition' should prevail in the local and transnational policy fields.

What is the best thing about working at Periféria?

Currently, we are a group of eight people working at Periféria, and there are common values which we all share and take care to maintain in the course of our internal operations, like professional autonomy, a safe and supportive work environment, organisational flexibility, and intellectual stimuli.

With these at our workplace we keep up a strong community, which also contributes to building the ecosystem within which Periféria is embedded, through its collaborations and strategic partnerships, along with the incubation of new organisations, movements and projects.

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