

ICFTU OnLine

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Spotlight on Stavri Liko (FSASH- Albania)

Child labour - "attitudes" are a problem

Brussels, 19 June 2006 (ICFTU Online): How can teachers be encouraged to work with local communities to ensure that those children who have left school or never went there receive an education? Stavri Liko, the Federal Secretary of the FSASH, the Education and Science Federation of Albania (1), one of the poorest countries in Europe, presents the initial results of their project.

What is the child labour situation in Albania?

There are no comprehensive national studies on this, but it is reckoned that there are some 50,000 children working in Albania. That estimate is based on studies made by our union, by ILO-IPEC and by NGOs. To that figure we should add the 5,000 or so children trafficked to Italy and the 3,000 or so trafficked to Greece (according to official statistics). Most child workers in Albania are street workers, involved in small-scale selling, begging, etc. There are also some working in agriculture, light industry (such as the shoe and textile sectors), construction and other sectors.

What are the underlying causes?

Some of the causes are economic: the unemployment rate is very high, there is a large informal economy and wages are very low, between 180 and 200 euros on average. Some families earn just 100 euros per month though a four-person household needs 500 euros just for food.

A second set of causes is related to mobility: there is a lot of internal migration in Albania, with families leaving rural regions for the outskirts of big cities. These internal migrants are unable to find accommodation or jobs in the city so they find it very hard to survive and, as a last resort, ask their children to contribute to the family income by working.

Other causes are linked to family or cultural situations: some of the children working have parents who have gone abroad whilst the parents of others have died or are having relationship problems. In certain remote areas some parents maintain that girls who have passed the stage of puberty should no longer go to school.

However, the main causes of child labour are linked to the educational situation and attitudes. The lack of schools in certain regions and children's own lack of interest in education lead them to give up school. Attitudes are also a crucial contributory factor to child labour: whilst many parents barely manage to make ends meet but struggle hard to send their children to school others do not understand its importance.

Is it expensive to educate a child in Albania?

Registration is free but textbooks, exercise books, transport, food, etc., all have to be paid for. So it can end up cheaper not to send your child to school.

How is your union involved in the campaign against child labour?

The FSASH has existed since 1991. Until 1999 we were only concerned with defending our members. We then started to address broader issues like education reform and child labour. At first sight it seems child labour

has nothing to do with protection of teachers' rights, but in fact there is a direct link between them: unless there is high-quality education children will tend to leave school, poverty will rise and that will end up affecting the teachers themselves.

We began our action against child labour through the campaigns launched by the ICFTU and Education International. The Albanian office of ILO-IPEC and the Dutch teachers' union AOB, an FNV affiliate, supported us. One of the vital aspects of our project is to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of keeping tabs on children who have dropped out of school or risk doing so. Teachers are best placed to take the initial preventive steps: they are well-educated, there are many of them and they have the closest daily contacts with children in schools. We are training them to work with the children's parents and communities.

How are they convincing children to go or return to school?

It's a complex task which cannot be achieved in a day or a week. They start by talking with the child. Then follows what is often a very difficult discussion with the parents, aimed at encouraging them not to send their child to work but to school. Where there are financial obstacles teachers try to contact the local authorities to see if they can find ways of helping the family. This is a hard task so we try to provide extra incentives to those teachers doing this extra work, often in the evenings: we are negotiating with the Education Ministry to get extra pay for such teachers in the next collective agreement.

What forms of training on combating child labour are you giving your members?

We mainly use seminars for this. So far we have trained 75 teachers under the IPEC programme and 50 under the one supported by the AOB. We will be holding two more courses for 50 teachers this year. These seminars last three days and basically consist of theoretical training on ILO conventions and Albanian legislation on child labour, followed by a meeting in a school between the seminar participants, the local authorities and the school's management. At the end of the seminar, recommendations and an action plan are drawn up. We then expect the participants to go back to their schools and put into practice what they have learnt. The participants also try to convince other teachers at their schools to take similar action. One of the best methods is to show concrete situations where teachers' actions have helped bring children back to school. In order to do so we held a meeting in Tirana between teachers involved in that kind of work, children who had left school but returned, and other children who had still not gone back to school. The Albanian media gave excellent coverage to the meeting and it showed just what teachers can do in fighting the school drop-out rate.

What has the project achieved so far?

We have focused on four districts where we have the best information on the child labour situation and the size of the school drop-out rate. The official statistics indicate that 8,000 children dropped out of school in the 2004-2005 school year, however the real figure is definitely much higher. In the region of Elbasan, where 472 children had given up school, 110 returned after teachers took action. In Fieri, where 400 children had dropped out of school (mostly Roma), 90 went back including 40 Roma. In the suburbs of Tirana, where the inhabitants are internal migrants, our working group initially consisted of five teachers but they recruited more and 20 children went back to school, after cooperation with their parents and the local authorities. Those results are just the start, though, since the programme has only been running for a year and a half.

Are other Albanian unions involved?

We are trying to get other federations involved, above all in the sectors where children are working. We have received support from the

ICFTU and the FGTB with producing a report on child labour in Albania (2) and trying to involve unions from other sectors. A conference organised by the ICFTU with its two Albanian affiliates in October 2004 was used to present this report and reach some conclusions leading to an action plan. Leaders of other Albanian unions are now involved in this campaign against child labour.

Can your experience be passed on to other countries?

Yes, we are trying not to restrict our work to Albania. On 20 and 21 October 2006 we shall be holding a regional conference in Tirana bringing together members of teaching unions from Serbia-Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo, Bulgaria, Rumania and maybe also Moldova. We will try to show what we have been doing, to share our respective experiences and draw up a regional action plan.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) The FSASH is affiliated to Education International (EI) and to the KSSH, one of the two Albanian confederations affiliated to the ICFTU.

(2) ICFTU report on child labour in Albania (10-2004) here:

<http://www.icftu.org/www/PDF/AlbaniareportEN.pdf>

-Video on Jonathan, a young 12-year old Peruvian (12 June 2006) here:

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224579&Language=EN>

Interview with Majda Fahchouch (SNE/AOB - Morocco) : "School is the best place for a child to be" (12 June 2006) here:

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224576&Language=EN>

Interview with Mohamed Mdaghr (AOB - Netherlands): "The Moroccan community in Europe - a key ally in combating child labour in Morocco" (12 June 2006) here:

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224574&Language=EN>

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