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Spotlight on Baiba Čadore (LIZDA – Latvia)

IMF's anti-crisis policy wreaks havoc in the education sector

Brussels, 28 August 2009 (ITUC Online): Baiba Čadore, 29, works as a teacher for Riga's Light Industry Technical College in Latvia. As a consequence of a strict government reform, recommended by the International Monetary Fund, Baiba, like her co-workers, is at risk of dismissal.

As we approach the start of the new academic year, are you one of the many in the education sector who are at risk of losing their job?

Yes. The Ministry of Education and Science has decided to close Riga's Light Industry Technical College where I work. The Ministry is trying to save some money on our college, since the number of students in training is getting smaller. It appeared that the director of the college was aware of the reorganization plans but did not tell the teachers about it. When the Ministry sent a final project draft, then we were informed about it. A strange situation has occurred in the education sector. The salaries for teachers were reduced. At the start of the year teachers' salaries were cut by between 15 percent and 30 percent. Personally I've lost 15 percent since January and the government announced in June that teachers' salaries will be halved in September (1). The schools' directors received full pay so that they would not complain, keep calm and stay away from the colleagues in their struggle.

What kind of special education programs does Riga's Light Industry Technical College provide? Are they not needed for the labour market in today's Latvia?

This is the only place where textile design is taught. Overall, it is the only Technical College in Latvia to train light industry specialists. Although light textile manufacturing is on the decrease in Latvia, it doesn't mean that such specialists are not needed.

I've been teaching computer design there for already 3 years.

As of my knowledge, the EU supports renovation of vocational schools and development of educational programs. Has Riga's Light Industry Technical College used these funds?

Yes, for renovation of the college, lots of money is used. With these funds, the material basis of the college was renewed. But the Ministry of Education and Science is willing to close not only our college but some others too. But they don't have clear numbers of schools to be closed and the reason for it. Some of the schools will be reorganized by merging them together.

How many people are laid-off?

Our college employs 34 teachers and the administration. After the reorganization, half of us will get back to work, but only for part-time work, and the salary of these teachers will be reduced by half.

You and your colleagues are forced to move from Riga's Light Industry Technical College

premises? Do you know what will be the fate of these premises?

The Ministry of Education is apparently scheduled to take over the building for one of its agencies, as the lease in Riga's Old Town is very expensive. Because the Ministry of Education controls our school, it's easy to take over the building. There is no clear reason why a building will be taken. However, a few days before, the representatives of the Ministry came and mentioned that they just needed the building.

Will you get an allowance if they fire you?

Yes, I will get paid, but only one month's allowance. The government recently adopted the new law. According to it, young workers will get only one month's salary allowance, while those who have already worked for fifteen years or more will get one and a half months' salary allowance. I will join the unemployed ranks, will sign up with the Labour Exchange Office, and probably will get the unemployment benefits for three months, maybe less. I do not even know for how long because we have laws changed every week.

Has the government announced about funding the re-qualification programs for unemployed people?

The Ministry of Education has promised 20 million Lats of re-qualification grants. But as always, their declared plans are very unclear, and I'm not sure if the money will be really used for it.

Does your husband work?

Yes, my husband Regn?rs is working in the construction sector. The company carries out the state orders, so with all budget cuts the jobs might disappear soon. The salaries are delayed already, and later on he could be without a job.

How has your life changed?

We are living in pessimism and uncertainty. I'm not sure what we will do next. I have started to look intensively for a new job. Started thinking if I should change my profession. We have been thinking even of moving from Riga – to live somewhere outside the capital, where the living expenses would be much cheaper. We give more attention to sales at the supermarkets, to what to buy.

Do you think reduction of the education budget was an International Monetary Fund or Latvian government initiative?

It was the IMF that gave us the "homework". The recommendation was made to reduce costs. In addition to the education employees, some healthcare workers, policemen, and firemen lost their jobs. Salaries were cut for the whole public sector, as wages fell by 20 percent. They are closing schools, hospitals, even the Police Academy.

What is your opinion about whether the government had to take these actions or would have been able to do it in different way?

The government had to create a system in which the people who earn more money pay more taxes. At the moment, having less working places, higher unemployment, the government does not collect enough taxes into the budget, and cannot provide more resources for social needs. The situation has deteriorated, and I do not know how this problem should be addressed.

Do you think you would be able to survive without the IMF loan?

I do not know. I do not have enough information to say that. There is not much discussion about it.

Are you a member of a trade union?

Yes, I am a member of the Education and Science Workers Trade Union for more than a year now.

I had participated in various trade union events, met colleagues, and received some advice.

Do you feel that the Latvian trade unions are active enough during this crisis and able to help workers?

Understandably, trade unions help a lot. Representatives constantly negotiate with the government the amendments that they want to adopt. Trade unions managed to reduce the number of redundancies. Trade unions actively monitor the ongoing process, and organize demonstrations.

The April 2nd demonstration was attended by thousands of teachers. Teachers marched for couple of hours in Riga.

How about the demonstration in January, when the riot took place?

Yes, there were lots of people. I participated in it. But I felt the threat from the beginning of it, as I saw many young people who often spoke in Russian who were determined to have negative actions. The whole of Riga's Old Town was full of drunken youngsters. Then the riots started. Trade unions did not organize this event. One of the Latvian parties is responsible. Although this was a peaceful meeting of the people who would like to draw attention to human rights, and to wrong legislative acts lately adopted by the Parliament, it ended the wrong way.

Do you think the situation in Latvia in the near future will improve or deteriorate?

I think that it will only deteriorate. There are no signs of improvement, and the autumn is likely to be even worse. The authorities should think and not dismiss such a large number of people. Each employee contributes to the budget every month, and each lay-off only deprives the budget of funds. I would suggest it's better to reduce taxes and stimulate small and medium-sized businesses, improving the economy and bringing more money to the budget. There is a need to create new businesses, but not close them. Farmers are also in a difficult situation, because the purchase prices for milk and milk products has also fallen. But it does not affect prices at the store.

Do you think that Latvia will have even more social unrest?

I think that there will be some, even from teachers who lost their jobs. I think they "owe" it to the government. Certainly, the education workers union will contribute.

The government says that there are too many teachers. According to recent data published by the Ministry of Education, the ratio of teacher to students in Latvia is only one to six. I do not know whether this is the correct figure. They say that there is a decline of students. Although if you look into kindergartens, the birth rate numbers are so high that there are not enough places for the children. If one child gets accepted to the kindergarten, another one has to register and wait in line. In particular, there is a lack of kindergartens in the city of Riga

My 7 year-old child Renarts now is a first grade schoolboy. His primary school is also reducing the number of teachers. Previously, primary classes were formed with at least 15 children, and now there are supposed to be at least 34 children in class. Two primary school teachers already lost their jobs because of a "lack" of students. Thus, our son Renart's school has also suffered.

Interview by Kestutis Salavejus.

(*)Latvijas Izglītības un Zinātņu darbinieku arodbiedrība (LIZDA): Education and Science Workers Trade Union

(1) Civil servant salaries had already been cut by at least 15 percent last December and in mid-June the government announced that teachers' salaries would be halved on 1 September. On 1 July this year, pensions were slashed by 10 percent for pensioners no longer working and by 70 percent for pensioners still in work. Working parents were also set to lose 50 percent of their parental benefit.

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