

>>> ITUC Press <press@ituc-csi.org> 26.11.2009 10:35 >>>
INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

ITUC OnLine

201/251109

Spotlight with Sergejus Glovackas (ITUC/PERC -Vilnius, Lithuania)

« Bilateral cooperation must be strengthened if we are to help migrants»

Brussels, 26 November 2009 (ITUC OnLine): The crisis has accentuated the migratory movements affecting the Baltic States(1). What can trade unions do to help these migrant workers? Sergejus Glovackas, the Vilnius Office representative for the ITUC's Pan-European Regional Council, (PERC), talks about the action taken and future strategies for international trade union cooperation.

What is happening with migration trends in the region?

The Baltic states have lost a lot of their citizens to migration recently. For example, since Lithuania's independence, around 430,000 persons have migrated. Official figures show that over 17,000 people left Lithuania to live abroad in 2008. The figures for the first six months of 2009 are even higher, proportionally, with nearly 10,000 departures. At the same time, less than 3,000 migrants have returned to Lithuania. By percentage it is the biggest number in the EU to migrate. Trade unions have lost a lot of potential members. But not all of them are economic migrants - some have left the country to unite with their families. On the other hand, many families have fallen apart due to migration, with children left with one of the parents or alone at home.

Which are the most popular destinations?

For Lithuanians and Latvians, the UK, Ireland, and the USA were the most popular countries at first. Nowadays migrants choose the Nordic countries or Germany. For Estonians, because of language similarities, Finland is the most attractive place to live and work.

The biggest migration wave we have experienced was in 2004-2005, when the Baltic states joined the EU. But in 2006-2007, when the Baltic countries experienced an economic boom, there was some tendency for migrants to return. With the current crisis, people are not coming back. Even the politicians thought that the crisis would force migrants to return, but it hasn't happened. The situation in the Baltic states is much worse than in the West European countries. In the Baltic states, wages are low and unemployment is high.

On the other hand, I have to emphasize that the crisis prevents migrant workers from the former Soviet Union from coming to work in the Baltic states. Some years ago the Baltic states were a popular destination for migrant workers from Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Most of them worked legally, with work permits, mainly employed in construction, transport or shipyards, and the migrant workers numbers had been growing rapidly. But the construction and transport sectors have been particularly

hard hit, so fewer workers are needed.

What is done by unions in destination countries to help these migrants?

Trade unions try to help emigrants by informing them about working conditions and the presence of trade unions abroad. Two to three years ago, Baltic trade unions signed cooperation agreements with Nordic colleagues. (2) For example, LPSK (Lithuania) signed the cooperation agreement with Denmark LO. Estonian EAKL and TALO made an agreement with three Finnish confederations (SAK, STTK and AKAVA). LBAS of Latvia signed an agreement with LO of Sweden. Also, Latvia's LCA (building industry branch union) signed a cooperation agreement with the Norwegian Fellesforbundet in 2007. Together with our Nordic partners, we were able to prepare and translate materials into the Baltic languages or into Russian for migrant workers to Nordic countries.

Fellesforbundet of Norway is the most active in this field. They have employed Baltic migrants as interpreters and organizers when visiting worksites. On their website <<http://www.fellesforbundet.no/>> there is plenty of information for migrants in their native languages, and migrant workers can fill out the membership application online. Also, it should be mentioned that Fellesforbundet of Norway has made available training for Lithuania trade union activists.

With the help of Fellesforbundet, Lithuanian trade unions have organized successful campaigns informing potential migrants about trade unions in Norway. For example, the LPSK Kaunas region trade union center became aware of the Norwegian employment agency information stand in Kaunas, Lithuania, where they consulted potential workers about jobs in Norway and also made their own information available for action. Wearing jackets with Fellesforbundet logos, they distributed trade union leaflets and brochures with contact addresses; explained the advantages of being a trade union member; informed people about the activities of LO Norway and Fellesforbundet, about the possibility to receive counselling there in either the Lithuanian or Russian language, and about working conditions in Norway and workers' rights; and they invited people to join the union. Surprisingly, they received a welcoming reaction from nearby employment-agency representatives.

SIPTU of Ireland is another good example; they hired Baltic migrants to provide counselling in their native languages, translated materials, and published leaflets and brochures. Some material into Baltic languages has been translated by the TUC and other unions. Migrants are more familiar with trade unions nowadays, but still, lack of knowledge or the language barrier prevents them from turning to the trade unions for help.

Baltic unions have also signed co-operation agreements with Eastern partners (trade unions of Russia, Ukraine, Georgia) on workers' rights protection, but the efficiency of it varies. This is quite a new area of work for the Baltic trade unions, but we have already prepared a lot of information in Russian. In Lithuania we had a case regarding the Ukrainian construction workers hired by Ukrainian temp agency - the workers had not received their salaries for some time. Workers approached the Orthodox Church, which contacted unions and labour inspection. Another unpaid wages case was with Moldavian and Ukrainian truck drivers who were legally employed by the truck company. Workers approached Labour Inspection, which refused to help. In

both cases the union stepped in and the outcome was positive: construction workers and drivers received their money. They didn't attract many migrant members, but unions got a lot of attention from the mass media.

What more could be done in terms of international union cooperation?

Last year in Lithuania we organized an NIS-Baltic-Nordic migrant workers workshop, "Organizing and Protection of Migrant Workers", where participants shared their experiences and drew lots of recommendations. Participants stated that closer bilateral contacts among unions, new agreements, information exchange, a better database on migrant workers, and international and local training on how to work with migrant workers were needed; that there should be structures established for those working with migrants; and that there should be networks of native-speaking coordinators/experts. Websites for migrant workers would also help inform migrants.

Due to the crisis, the resources that Baltic trade unions have to work with on the migrant issue are limited. But programs such as East-East migration (Central Asia - Russia; Ukraine - Poland and Baltic States) are needed. This autumn we expect a new large migration wave, as unemployment is approaching 20 percent in the Baltic states. The unions need some assistance in order to establish information points where potential migrants could receive necessary materials and counselling before they leave the Baltic countries.

Interview by Kestutis Salavejus

(1) See the ITUC publication « Union View » on « Latvia: The fall of the Baltic Tiger » at http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/VS_Latvia_EN.pdf

(2) See the ITUC video on trade union cooperation between Finland and Estonia, published in 2007
<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article476&lang=en>

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