

Progetto europeo "Rafforzare la cultura della negoziazione nei sistemi scolastici europei"

Study visit to Copenhagen (7 and 8 June 2010)

The study visits to Copenhagen, on 7 and 8 June 2010, to the national headquarters of DFL (DANMARKS LORERFORENING), the local branches of DFL in Gentofte and Copenhagen, and the headquarters of the association of Danish municipalities (KL) provided a glimpse into significant aspects of DFL's organization, representation and role in collective bargaining as well as the level of social dialogue present in Denmark's educational system.

1) DLF. AN ORGANIZATION WELL ROOTED IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF TASKS

DFL is currently the largest union (70,000 members, approximately 95% of the total) of Danish compulsory school (6-16 years) teachers and its origins are rooted in a former teacher union created in 1874.

It protects and represents teachers through collective bargaining, consulting and assistance and is strongly committed, through social dialogue, to developing training and education in institutions, society and the workplace.

It also operates in favour of dismissed teachers by contributing to the payment of the relevant benefits.

It includes among its members also students (10,000) training to become teachers and pensioners (15,000).

It also cooperates actively in favour of developing countries and manages relationships with European institutions and trade unions through a representative office in Brussels; in addition it submits proposals on the Community's educational policy.

Furthermore, as we were able to see during our visit to the local branch in Copenhagen, DFL is socially active, well beyond its institutional purpose, by making available its campuses to Danish children for extended stays.

In organizational terms, it has a national level structure – which sets the overall strategy and is responsible for national bargaining – and a municipal level structure, which is responsible for local bargaining. To have a clearer idea of the importance of such organizational and representation structure, it should be borne in mind that municipalities in Denmark play a key role in the management of the school system, considering that they are the teachers' employers.

DLF's bodies are the Congress (309 members), which meets at least once a year, the Executive Committee, with a four-year term of office and consisting of 25 members inclusive of the Executive Board, 80 local branches in the municipalities and 1900 school representatives.

2) BARGAINING: MATTERS, MANNERS AND LEVELS.

The current bargaining context is marked by the economic crisis, as in every other European country. Thus, the Danish government is trying to cut resources and staff, to increase the number of students per classroom and to curb salary increases.

The matters covered by national bargaining are salaries, working hours, job security, holidays, healthcare and retirement. As a rule, the contract is renewed every three years.

Contract proposals start to be submitted in the month of January of the year in which the contract expires. This takes place through a democratic discussion process and interaction involving the Executive Committee, the heads of the local branches, members of local branches and school members. In June the local branches notify the proposals that will be analysed by the national congress, which will decide by December and present a formal proposal. Subsequently, bargaining with the government starts, at the end of which the draft agreement is submitted to the workers for approval.

Strikes, which are covered with the union's funds, can take place by law only in the bargaining period. Outside this period the strike is considered illegal. Workers who go on strike must pay a penalty.

Local bargaining covers salaries (for approximately 10% of the total), working hours (allocation of hours between teaching and other teaching support and management activities) and environmental safety.

The union relation system in education, as in all the other sectors, is characterized by a strong mutual recognition that fosters the role and dissemination of bargaining and the reaching of agreements. This justifies the reduced use of strikes. All the conditions are in place to prevent conflict. If differences arise on the application of agreements, use is made of specific bilateral entities and, ultimately, the labour court is resorted to.

3) FLEXIBILITY IN TEACHERS' WORKING HOURS

Total working hours for all teachers, as established by national bargaining, amount to 1680 per annum, over 42 weeks. Based on local bargaining between trade unions and municipalities, they are distributed between frontal teaching (up to 23 hours per week) and activities related to teaching, planning and management. The time spent to prepare lessons is part of the working hours and are calculated on the basis of a ratio ranging from 0.75 to 1.17 for every teaching hour.

4) DIFFUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ASSOCIATIONS

Another feature of the Danish system is the diffusion of private and public associations.

The former is evidenced by a relatively large number of private schools, which, in keeping with certain standards indicated by the State and the municipalities, may be part of the concerted system (in the municipality of Gentofte, which is characterized by a high standard of living, they reach 25%, while they reach 13% at the national level) and receive state funding to pay teachers.

As to the latter, we should draw attention to the role played by KL, an association that gathers the 98 municipalities (we were able to learn about its role thanks to a visit to its office in Copenhagen), in making bidirectional relations between state and municipalities more fluid (on law-making decisions and on the application of such laws in the municipalities).

Meanwhile the association provides legislative support, prepares general frameworks, and manages trade union relations to define framework agreements. All this to facilitate the administrative activity of the single municipalities and to steer bargaining processes with the unions.

5) SOCIAL DIALOGUE: A WIDESPREAD CULTURE AND PRACTICE

The high percentage of members and the breadth of tasks and functions, also in the welfare area, attest to the widespread strength and credibility of DFL and Danish trade unions in general.

This aspect, together with a widely accepted pattern of trade union relationships and the recognition of the positive role of associations, fosters the development of social dialogue in the field of education.

Thus, not only DFL and other unions and their recognized associations are important in bargaining on salaries and on working hours, but they play an important role on general educational policies, including on more specific questions, which are the Government's responsibility, such as curricula.

In fact, DFL participates, with the other social partners and the parents' associations, in discussions which the Government activates every time that it has to adopt a decision on school policies or on the management of the system.

These formal discussions are not a simple formality but they also constitute a fundamental opportunity to exchange views and listen, a process which often results in the identification of solutions of legislative procedures related to the school system.