

FLC CGIL - INTERNATIONAL WEBINAR 6TH OCTOBER 2023

Manuela Mendonça, FENPROF

Firstly, on behalf of FENPROF, I'd like to thank FLC-CGIL for the invitation and for the opportunity to share experiences and discuss common problems and the strategy to address them.

Secondly, I'd like to congratulate ETUCE for running this Europe-wide campaign under the motto ***Making teaching attractive*** and for calling for joint action by European trade unions in this European Week of Teachers

Answering to this appeal, 9 Portuguese teacher unions have jointly promoted a series of actions during this week, that include hanging banners in schools and billboards on the main roads, a national mobilisation at the Prime Minister's Official Residence and, today, a national teachers' strike, which is having a strong response.

In Portugal, as in many other countries, the teaching profession has become increasingly exhausting and less attractive, for several reasons: long hours, poor pay, excessive workload, precariousness, bureaucracy, accountability pressures, lack of democracy in school management, little social recognition of the importance of teachers' work.

For many years, FENPROF has tried to put pressure on the government and to raise public awareness to the need to tackle the causes of the loss of attractiveness of the profession, alerting to the extreme work-related stress affecting many teachers.

To reinforce this warning, in 2018 FENPROF commissioned a research by the New University of Lisbon on the living and working conditions of the teaching profession in Portugal. Among other things, this study concluded that 76% of teachers were emotionally exhausted and 84% were looking forward to early retirement.

But FENPROF did more than just denouncing the situation. Insisting on the need for structural solutions rather than temporary measures (which may lighten the problem in the short term, but will aggravate it in the medium and long term), FENPROF has presented to several ministers of education concrete proposals aimed at improving teachers' careers and remuneration; improving job security and professional stability; improving working conditions, making teaching more rewarding; and rejuvenating the profession, guaranteeing its progressive and natural renewal.

Unfortunately, neither the alerts nor the proposals were considered by successive governments and, as a result, thousands of qualified teachers left the profession in the last decade and are currently working in other areas.

At the same time, there are very few candidates for initial teacher training courses. According to an OECD survey, only 1.5% of Portuguese 15-year olds admit becoming teachers, well below the OECD average of 5%.

Because of all this, aggravated by a high cost of housing in some regions, we are experiencing a serious shortage of teachers (at the beginning at this school year this shortage was already affecting about 100 thousand students), and the situation will get much worse in the coming years with the retirement of thousands of teachers, as we have a very aging profession...

So currently the future of the teaching profession and its implications on the scientific and pedagogical quality of public education is a major concern for us. In fact, the motto chosen for this year's World Teachers' Day – ***The teachers we need for the education we want – the global imperative to reverse the teacher shortage*** - is of utmost relevance to our country.

As we are approaching the 50th anniversary of the revolution of 25th April, also known as the carnations' revolution – which put an end to 48 years of a fascist regime in which quality education was the privilege of a few, for us this is the time to reaffirm the universal right to quality education as one of the greatest achievements of our democracy, enhancing that this right is only guaranteed with qualified and valued teachers.

As Education International has been highlighting, the causes of teacher shortages are well known and the solution is also clear: increase funding for public education; enhance teachers' status and working conditions – demands which are in line with both the EI campaign: ***Go public, fund education!*** And the ETUCE campaign ***Making teaching attractive***.

As trade unionists, we know that strength as unions depends on our membership density but also on teachers' mobilization for collective action – the only way to guarantee that our voice is heard. Being the most representative teachers' organisation and knowing the importance of alliances to achieve goals, FENPROF has, in several occasions, invited the other unions to unite efforts and organize industrial action together. During the last school year, teachers have been out in the streets like never before, showing a determination that we had not seen for many years. As an example, on 11th February, about 150 thousand teachers participated in a demonstration in Lisbon, demanding investment in public education and respect for the teaching profession.

Teachers strong mobilization has succeeded in putting the problems affecting the teaching profession on the political agenda and on the media frontpages. **And**, responding to this pressure, there are 'negotiations' going on. However, the ministry's proposals are clearly insufficient and so the unions resumed the struggle at the beginning of this school year. And it's almost inevitable to intensify it in the next months during the discussion of the State Budget for 2024, as we still don't see political will on the part of the government (especially the minister of finance) to solve the problems we face.

So if we think about the balance between demands and results, I'm afraid we have to conclude that the results are disproportionately weak when compared to the strong mobilisations we've been engaged in. However, there's something positive: all surveys show that a large majority of the population supports teachers' demands and considers that what the government is doing is not enough. This result is important because it shows that despite the government's attempt to blame teachers for harming students with their strikes, people seem to have understood the union's message: what is harmful for

students is the shortage of qualified teachers, and that teachers are also fighting for the right of their students to quality public education.

And public support is crucial because politicians want to win elections. In fact, dear colleagues, we need allies to make governments recognize that education is not a cost but an investment and that quality public education and the status of teachers are two things that are intrinsically linked... to make governments recognize that the role of the teaching profession in society must be respected and promoted through constructive social dialogue, effective collective bargaining, and involvement in policy-making.

Besides, to make governments recognize all this, and act accordingly – act with vision and purpose–, we also need to strengthen our engagement, mobilization and collective action - at national, regional and global levels. In unity and solidarity.

And that's why these international campaigns and the work we do together are so important.