



NEWS

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR WORKERS' QUESTIONS • NO. 1 / 2016

OVERVIEW

■ EZA Special Project for Workers' Organisations in the Western Balkans



Evaluation and Prospects Seminar in Vienna: focal issue – media *Page 2*

■ The standpoint

Mara Erdelj, President of the EZA member centre SS BOFOS (Autonomous Trade Union of Employees in Banks, Insurance Companies and Other Financial Organizations in Serbia), comments on the EU process of associating Serbia from a trade union angle *Page 3*

■ New in the EZA network



SS BOFOS (Autonomous Trade Union of Employees in Banks, Insurance Companies and Other Financial Organizations in Serbia), an observer in the EZA network since May 2015: tasks – networking, values *Page 4*

EDITORIAL

Dear Friends,

“Strengthen the Social Dialogue – Shape European Integration”, that is the title of our special project for workers’ organisations in the Western Balkans, which the EZA has been working on out since 2012. At the beginning there was a study published by the European Commission in 2010, which had comprehensively described the situation of social dialogue in Western Balkans region. The findings compiled in the study correlated largely with the actual experiences of the EZA members and their partners from the region. It was therefore only logical for us to undertake a careful stock-taking in 2011 of all existing contacts and to prepare a corresponding education and training programme to meet the particular challenges facing workers’ organisations in the Western Balkans.

In September 2012, all the organisations that wanted to be involved in the special project gathered for the very first time. The idea was to get together, get to know one another, and draw up a joint education and training programme. Since then, education and training alliances comprising EZA members and partners from the Western Balkans region have worked together on a regular basis. Trust was established and has grown, a large number of education and training events on the most diverse issues of social dialogue have been held, and co-operation has developed beyond the education and training work.

Yet huge challenges still remain: social dialogue can only work successfully and for the benefit of everyone if it is operated in a spirit of mutual respect and under binding legal framework conditions, and if the results achieved are reliably implemented by the social partners. Then it will be possible to ensure social peace, achieve economic stability, and create a decent life and decent work for everyone.

Effective social dialogue can do more, though: it can be a model for solving many social conflicts and promoting in the long run the process of integrating the Western Balkans countries in the EU. This calls for know-how, strong and recognised social partners, and receptiveness, serious willingness to co-operate and show mutual respect. The EZA’s intention with this special project is to play its part in this. This issue of EZA News is a première. It is appearing for the first time in Serbo-Croatian language, to make even more readers in the Western Balkans region – the focal point of this issue – aware of our activities. Crediting the social dialogue in this region of future importance to Europe the status it deserves still requires a great deal of time and enormous efforts. The EZA’s aim is to contribute to this process with its means, and will also commit itself to it in the future.

Sigrid Schraml, Secretary-General, and Norbert Klein, Education Consultant

Trade union media work in a tough environment

Results and prospects for the social dialogue in the Western Balkans

The issues surrounding media and the PR of workers' organisations in the Western Balkans region were the focus of the Evaluation and Prospects Seminar for the EZA special project to strengthen the social dialogue in the Western Balkans held in conjunction with the Austrian Centre for Workers' Education (Österreichisches Zentrum für Arbeitnehmerbildung - ÖZA) in Vienna from 28 to 29 January 2016. Forty representatives of workers' organisations from Serbia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Hungary, Albania, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria reviewed the education and training activities of the last budget year, exchanged ideas on the results achieved, and advanced plans for the current and coming budget year, in which projects are again to be carried out in the existing education and training alliances.

As a result of previous work, the Chairman of the Serbian Public Service Trade Union (UPRAVE) Njegos Potežica ica reported on the joint demand of all the trade unions to the Serbian Prime Minister to push ahead with the negotiations on the new Remuneration Act. The government was making the negotiations difficult, causing the trade unions to consider a general strike.

The concentration of the media in a few hands, a preference for fleeting and easy-sell news ("sex and scandals sell"), and the strong influencing of the media by governments make it hard for the trade unions to have their issues covered by the media. This was analysed by political scientist Dijana Roščić, permanent independent editor of Deutsche Welle (DW), in her speech on the media landscape in the Western Balkans and the coverage of the social dialogue issue in the region's media.

Censure, proactive self-censure and political pressure were on the agenda; often the selection of news was determined by the fear of losing advertising clients. The overall situation was that social dialogue was covered little or not at all by the media. Trade union leaders were not invited to round-tables or as interviewees. Although big strikes were reported in the media, there was no information on the background. Another problem was that



Participants at the Evaluation and Prospects Seminar in Vienna, January 2016

journalists nowadays were generalists, not specialists in a specific area.

Practical examples of media work being possible without the public or private media were shown by Anne Rothleitner-Reinisch, Press Secretary of the FCG (Austria), viz. by direct dialogue with those concerned through social media, newsletters, websites and activities in the public domain. News do not always have to be aimed at the public at large; communication with and for the trade unions' own members was also important.

The following points were made in the discussions and in the presentation of the results from the working groups:

- The media often report only "one truth", there is no room for other voices. The owners of the media and their very close proximity to those in government are seen as a problem. This prevents a free, independent expression of opinion. On top of that is journalists' fear of losing their job, which results in self-censorship.
- Church media are regarded as too weak to have trade union issues conveyed to the public.
- The dwindling numbers of members are a concern, posing the key question of how the trade unions can attract new and also young members.
- Even if trade unions can in principle prevent large companies making their profits at the expense of the workers, this is barely possible in the Western Balkans region owing to the lack of social legislation.
- Western companies are becoming increasingly active in the Western

Balkans. However, they respect the rights of workers there much less than they do in Western Europe, because the corresponding legal framework is lacking.

- The problem is that often only weak employers' associations enter into the dialogue with the trade unions. Negotiations with the existing employers' associations are therefore of little relevance because they are not of a binding nature.
- A new problem is presented by job agencies that shamelessly exploit many legal loopholes.
- A big challenge for the workers' organisations is the consistently high unemployment rate, especially the high youth unemployment figure.
- Further investments in education and training and in networking are viewed as key strategies and the precondition for good trade union work in the Western Balkans. The workers' organisations need the requisite expertise to be able to assert their rights effectively and sustainably.

Norbert Klein and Victoria Znined ■

The EU association process from a trade union angle

The trade unions in Serbia are aware that there are basically no negotiations with the European Union in the traditional sense of the word, and that the candidate country is quite simply obliged to harmonise its laws with EU legislation. What can actually be negotiated is the transition period – or rather the period in which a provision does not have to be applied in full; what is negotiated, as it were, is the length of the transition period.

We as a trade union are in favour of Serbia not joining the EU until the country is totally prepared for this step, because it is futile transferring EU legislation “on paper” unless there is real willingness to apply the laws concerned.

With regard to the EU Directives as sources of legislation, we are cognisant of the fact that they grant only a “minimum of rights”, and that more substantial rights have to be gained by first fighting for them. As a trade union we familiarise our members with this “minimum of rights” and gear our actions to extending rights on the national level.

In terms of orienting our actions to the extension of rights, we are aware of the fact that it is more expedient to focus our efforts on training our members, as practice has shown that we can achieve more through negotiations in which the trade union operates as a relevant partner than through protests and strikes.

In this respect the European Centre for Workers’ Questions (EZA) seminars are of inestimable importance, and our contacts with the EZA have produced exceptionally good and solid, fruitful co-operation, particularly in terms of strengthening the social dialogue.

The members of SS BOFOS are mainly employees in banks and insurance companies that are part of multinational companies. These companies often apply double standards when it comes to the position of the employees and their rights in the parent company’s country and in the country of the subsidiaries. From the outset, SS BOFOS has championed the adoption of employee rights on corporate level.

On the company level, SS BOFOS has achieved very good results in terms of the dialogue with the employer and exercising employee rights in the financial sector.

However, on the sectoral level we have no sectoral collective agreement, because in the Republic of Serbia there is no employers’ association as negotiation partner on the national level. The Employers’ Association of Serbia makes no secret of its view that negotiations are not in its interest, whilst the national associations in the banking and the insurance sector do not have employers’ association status, and an amendment to this status is not in their interest.

When we correlate this state of affairs with the EU Commission’s progress report on social dialogue and collective bargaining, which states that the collective bargaining partners’ administrative capacities must be increased to strengthen their skills for collective bargaining and consultation on legal solutions, and that there are only a few sectoral collective agreements, which in the majority of cases have already lapsed or are lapsing, we realize that there is a lack of will on the part of the other two collective bargaining partners to engage in the social dialogue.

The fact is that there is no social dialogue, and this is evident in legislation on labour relations being passed without considering the trade union standpoints. The trade unions are the only organisations that want to promote the social dialogue, but that alone is not enough.

That is why we expect the full support of the European Union when we try yet again to involve the collective bargaining partners in a dialogue.

SS BOFOS intends to make a positive contribution to the accession process, by action and active involvement, wherever possible: in legislative and other bodies on a national level engaged in the convergence of national laws with European legislation.

Mara Erdelj ■



Mara Erdelj is President of the Autonomous Trade Union of Employees in Banks, Insurance Companies and Other Financial Organizations of Serbia (SS Bofos) and member of the board of the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia (SSSS). She studied at the Economics Faculty of the University of Belgrade, is a chartered accountant and court interpreter for the Slovenian language with civil service status.

New in the EZA network: the Serbian trade union SS BOFOS – a trade union with personality

The Autonomous Trade Union of Employees in Banks, Insurance Companies and Other Financial Organizations in Serbia (SS BOFOS) was founded on 21 June 2002, at a time when the transition in and privatization of the financial sector in Serbia was in full swing.

We have observer status in the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA). We have established a highly successful working relationship with the Danish trade union confederation KRIFA and the Dutch Christian trade union confederation CNV International.

BOFOS has been a full member of the World Organization of Workers (WOW) since 2003.

This trade union's main activities are: exercising rights, protecting members' professional, economic and social interests through good collective bargaining, advising and representing members, training members and trade union leaders, boosting negotiation skills, strengthening the social dialogue and introducing new services for members, anti-harassment protective measures, international co-operation, sporting events, strengthening solidarity, exchanging experience and organizing joint campaigns through partnership and networking with other trade unions from the region and the EU, influencing state institutions, promoting and developing a better image of trade unions

through co-operation with media and educational institutions, promoting communication and furnishing information through our "Bofos info" newsletter and the website www.bofos.org.rs, street campaigns, appearances on radio and television, and charity events.

We focus on the member as a human being whose dignity and need for time to spend with his/her family must be guaranteed and respected.

We have gained many allies, friends and colleagues in our work. We have drawn strength and acquired a great deal of experience.

We never reflect on defeats; we have deleted from our vocabulary the terms "give up", "cannot", "are unable", "impossible", "can't be done", "hopeless..."! We always go out of our way to serve our members and aim higher as soon as we have achieved our aims. That is how we create the basis for success in the future. We are totally committed and never let up. We never look back at obstacles, always have another go, take another step forward and never give up.

We have the strength, the vision and the will to promote our members' interests to the end!

Mara Erdelj ■

Founded: 21 June 2002

Website: www.bofos.org.rs

President: Mara Erdelj

Members: 5,111

E-mail: bofos@sindikat.rs

Address:

SS BOFOS (Autonomous Trade Union of Employees in Banks, Insurance Companies and Other Financial Organizations in Serbia)

Trg Nikole Pašića 5/III,

11000 Belgrade, Serbia

Phone: + 381 (0) 11 33 35 192

Fax: + 381 (0) 11 33 35 193

Contact: Vera Radovanović

IMPRINT

Published by

EZA

European Centre for Workers' Questions

Johannes-Albers-Allee 2

53639 Königswinter

Tel. +49 - 22 23 - 29 98 - 0

Fax +49 - 22 23 - 29 98 - 22

E-mail: eza@eza.org

www.eza.org

Editorial team

Sigrid Schraml (editor-in-chief),

Matthias Homey, Norbert Klein,

Victoria Znined

Design and composition

HellaDesign, Emmendingen

E-mail: helladesign@web.de

Photos

EZA, SS BOFOS

Frequency of publication

Four issues a year



This publication receives financial support from the European Union.