

Mobilisation: A Strategy against the Crisis for Education Unions

Background

Whatever good or bad news we may hear about the crisis in the media, education is still suffering from measures taken since the onset of the global financial and economic crisis. This has an impact on teachers and education unions at all levels of education.

A high-level seminar organised in September 2009 for leaders of education unions from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Central Asia yielded some very useful results in the form of a strategy for education unions from this region to fight against the crisis. The ideas developed at the high level seminar have since been further built upon, resulting in this wider union strategy, which can be said to be more general in scope, and which is particularly useful to help us in our union work in times of crisis.

This is one of the most concrete outcomes of the EI Campaign *Hands Up for Education*, to which member unions contributed constructively.

What Should a Strategy Aim for?

Teachers are subjected to varying conditions across the globe. Poor working conditions and inadequate remuneration were issues dealt with on a daily basis prior to the onset of the current global financial and economic crisis. The situation has now become more severe, to a varying extent across the globe since the onset of the crisis. A number of teachers and academics face increased working hours, larger class sizes, salary and pension cuts, reduced social benefits, redundancies and the like. Cuts to education budgets means that teachers are not the only ones to suffer the impact of this crisis, but that students and future generations will feel the repercussions of the crisis for years to come.

We go about our union work using tried and tested recipes for negotiation and representation of our teachers and academics. *So why do we need a strategy?* This strategy represents an inward look at the work of education unions. More importantly, it stems from a sharing of good practice between leaders of education unions, and can help to stimulate us to think of recipes tried by others and not yet tested by us. This strategy aims to *empower* teachers and education unions. It is targeted towards protecting teachers' status and rights and towards advocating for education to be a solution to the crisis. It can prove useful for union work at the international, regional, national and local level, and can be built upon further in these contexts.

The Role of Unions

The financial crisis was aggravated by an imbalance between the bargaining power of employees and employers, which then led to a more severe *economic* crisis. In order to overcome the crisis, unions therefore need to push for stronger negotiating powers, in order to bridge this imbalance between the two sides. Good practice at the international level needs to be emulated in all levels of our work. In July, the International Labour Organisation agreed on an ILO Tripartite Jobs Pact called *Agenda for Global Recovery*. This involves governments, unions and employers, and shows the key role of unions. This should be a key motivator to drive our work forward. Where unions have been involved in designing

solutions to the crisis, this has led to the social dimension being included in the politics and policy of the response to the crisis. In this respect, our role is clear.

Unions have particular *strengths*. General labour unions have a special view on the social effects of economic policy and have a capacity to make counter-proposals to Government measures, based on their own research. As education unions, we have a special view on the impact of economic policy on education and are able to tap into the views of members working at the front line of education. As unionists, we are able to break down complex concepts into everyday language and we can engage educators in debates about possible solutions to the impact of the crisis.

Let's Make it Clear to Governments What We Are Fighting For!

We need to convey a clear picture to our governments regarding the goals that we are fighting for. *Equal Access to high quality education* is one of these, in connection with societal goals and labour conditions. This can be stressed via advocating for well-trained teachers; by combating privatisation of public schools as necessary (for privatisation not to become the answer to the crisis); and by advocating for the value of public education.

Another goal is the *overall importance of investment in education in the long-term*. This needs to serve as a clear backdrop to argumentation for increasing or maintaining teachers' salaries. This goal also needs to serve as a solid background for the fight against pension reforms and the protection of teachers' pension rights.

An additional goal is to *raise the level of importance of social dialogue*. Without this, the human aspect of post-crisis regeneration will be lost, and education will become the cost of the crisis, rather than the key solution. This will have a devastating impact across the globe. We therefore need to *pressure governments for a clear strategy to emerge from the crisis*, and to make education part of the solution. In this respect we must stress that all negative crisis measures (e.g. budget cuts) need to be short-term measures and must be compensated by a commitment to future investment and re-instatement of full salaries or compensation for cuts made to teachers' salaries.

Over the past years, we have been able to pressure governments to maintain or increase the levels of official development aid for education. We need to keep the pressure high, even if it is harder to find public support. In times of crisis, we need to *strengthen the acts of solidarity* within and across world regions, so that we all come out stronger. A commitment to investing at least 0.7 % of GDP in development aid must be kept.

Whatever the scope of our work, we need to have a *clear policy in relation to education, also targeting wider issues* – If children are the most valuable assets of society, why do governments tend to look for ever cheaper ways to educate them? – Economic growth in the post-industrial era has to be based on intellect and knowledge - Equal access to education is an essential component of social stability. As unions, our goals and advocacy work can *also go beyond* education, dealing with problems such as privatisation and unemployment in other sectors, as part of the public service movement against the crisis.

Let's Re-Think our Ways and Means to Negotiate!

Let's *rethink the way in which we negotiate*. First in terms of *timespan* - we can negotiate for pay rises or compensation to take effect after the crisis, when a certain level of growth has been achieved. Second in terms of *collaboration with other education and labour unions* - we need to *present a united front* across education and labour unions – so that the government

will not be able to play one union against another. Third in terms of *positions of influence* - union leaders who are members of official bodies in government bodies need to use their position to exert pressure. Fourth in terms of industrial action – we can just use the *threat* of industrial action without necessarily going on strike.

We need to *find out what the government wants and be clear with our demands*. In this context it is important to know the arguments put forward by governments for cutting public budgets or salaries and we need to be prepared to counteract each one. Research on related issues could prove invaluable to strengthen our arguments. Based on this, as education unions we also need to *come up with an alternative plan of our own*. In turn, we need to be quick in responding to the changing situation in our country, as developments often take place from one day to another.

Let's *play well with politics*. We need to *choose the right political moment* to exert pressure, such as the period just before elections, gaining commitments for positive reforms post the election period. We should *not take sides* – rather than form political alliances, it is best to stay into the margins of the political controversies. We also need to be *vigilant of governments' mistakes* and catch them out if they try to use the crisis as an excuse for their mistakes.

Finally, in our negotiations it is crucial to *aim for binding results*, such as collective agreements and legislation.

Let's Use a Combination of New and Old Tactics!

Many tried and tested measures have proven to work in our bid to exert pressure on governments. We can hold press conferences, issue Communiqués, obtain international support, lobby systematically at every level (local, national), take part in sympathetic strikes with other sectors and we can interact with the public via the use of the media.

We can also try some *new tactics* such as bilateral or multi-lateral collaboration with unions abroad; working with as many political parties as possible; developing research capabilities with researchers, higher education staff or higher education unions; and we can hold large demonstrations in the form of general strikes to show our strength in numbers. We can also *work very closely with partners* such as students' unions, parents' associations, general labour unions, school administration and higher education institutions, as well as professional or teacher associations or groupings, and NGOs working on education.

In this context however, we *need to consider the different aims of strikes that we undertake* (such as salary raises, protest to education reforms and budgets cuts, etc.) *and we also need to consider the efficacy of holding such strikes*. We also need to be *vigilant to solutions proposed by others* (such as employers) to government which may be harmful to employees. In turn, we need to *inform and involve members* in our campaign against crisis. And perhaps, more than anything else – we need to *be patient!* Positive change takes time to happen, but when it does, the fruit of our work will be evident.

We need to *use the opportunities provided by new technologies to make our campaigns more visible*. We can use the internet to develop interactive campaigning methods in which everyone can contribute. Social network-sites, video-sharing, e-cards to governments are available for us to reach more people more effectively. On an international level, this will allow us to work together more effectively.

Let's Work Together Globally and Act Locally!

EI's Campaign *Hands Up for Education* consists of a number of elements, including advocacy at the international level with a view to impacting the local level as well.

This is a key element of EI's work on the *1Goal Campaign* with the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) as well as on the *EI-ActionAid work with the Toolkit on Education Financing*. EI is also planning *Global Action Week* together with the Global Campaign for Education (GCE), in which actions related to overcoming the crisis are envisaged to take place in the national context.



Run by the Global Campaign for Education, **1GOAL** is an ambitious campaign that will change the lives of children in poverty by helping to give them an education. The campaign will take place in over 200 countries from until the FIFA World Cup final in South Africa in 2010. More information is available at www.join1goal.org.



EI and ActionAid have developed a toolkit on Education Financing which aims to help you build a strong campaign on education financing adapted to your own unique national context. This campaign is an effort to build trust between agencies that have very different histories and working cultures but very strong common goals. Together, Unions and NGOs can play a key role in both securing more money for education and making sure that it is better spent. The toolkit is available at http://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/EI-ActionAid_Toolkit.pdf

Let's be part of a global solution to the crisis together!