

FENPROF Congress 12

FVL Remarks

28/04/2016

Caros colegas /Dear colleagues and distinguished guests.

Thank you for inviting me to your 12th National Congress. Thank you also for your contributions to Education International's work at the global level and in Europe. Without you we would be unable to make the voices of teachers heard in the international community. And we are being heard, I can assure you.

On all continents our Unite for Quality Education Campaign has been very successful. Our messages are coming across. The world knows we are determined to deliver quality education to all children and young people irrespective of their background.

Last month I visited a school in Berlin, which, I was told, hosted a large group of refugee children from Syria. "How many refugee students do you have?" I asked the principal. "I have no idea," she said. "We don't count them."

It then occurred to me that this is one of the characteristics if not the very soul of the teaching profession. The desire to build equity - in the classroom, in the school, and yes, in the society at large.

It is not a coincidence that many of our colleagues are deeply worried about the tens of thousands of refugee children currently on their way to Europe, stuck at EU borders in miserable conditions or held - in violation of international conventions - in detention camps in Greece.

While Europe is making questionable deals with Turkey it is not living up to its own high moral standards.

Let me take this opportunity to ask you to appeal to your government to do what is right and take in its fair share of refugees. We will also take our responsibility.

This autumn Education International will bring together leaders of member organisations and class room teachers from several countries to address the plight of refugee children and exchange teaching methods and practices. Events like this represent the collective power of our unions and of our profession.

Colleagues, the issues you will discuss in the coming days are not only relevant to Portugal but to scores of countries around the world.

Quality education is no longer a domestic issue, it has become a global challenge. Last September we succeeded in having the United Nations officially declare quality education, free primary and secondary education, and affordable tertiary education, as one of its main Sustainable Development Goals for the coming 15 years.

The one-million-dollar question of course is how to put this promising statement, these encouraging words, into meaningful national policy and measures. You may have your doubts.

And I do not blame you. I am all too aware of the difficult conditions many of you have experienced since the fall of the global economy eight years ago.

Within the EU, no countries have been hit harder than Portugal and Greece. More than a quarter of the teachers in this country is working without proper job certainty.

Frankly, if we need a definition for "precarious employment" of teachers, one needn't look any further than Portugal. It is shocking. Limited contracts, low salaries, poor working conditions.

These results are the consequences of enduring austerity, a policy divorced from what is required to build a quality education system. Completely removed from what our children need to succeed in the world.

Just last week, the ETUCE, Education International's European Region, published a report detailing the state of education systems across Europe. It's not pretty. It reveals that your own government has reduced education spending to roughly three percent of GDP. That is far from adequate. And where we see governments pulling out of their responsibilities private entities are eager to rush in to fill the void.

This leads me to the global debate about the future of education, one that involves two competing educational visions, and all of you here are in the very middle of that debate.

The first vision is grounded in the understanding that without publicly funded schooling and highly qualified, and highly motivated teachers with a high degree of professional autonomy, there is little chance of all children getting the education they deserve. Neither is there much chance of countries having stable societies or sustainable economies.

The second vision is sustained by the illusion that education can be delivered more cheaply and efficiently by the free market, preferably with fewer, less qualified staff and a liberal dose of one-size-fits-all online programmes and standardised testing.

I think that we can all agree that this is not our vision.

In places such as Liberia, Kenya, the Philippines, but also closer to home, in England for example, portions of public school systems are being carved out and outsourced to private businesses. Mind you, we do not oppose businesses to build schools and produce learning materials. They have done this throughout the ages.

Where we draw the line is where corporations start running our schools on a for profit basis causing social inequity or where they would invade teachers' professional space and tell us what and how to teach.

One year ago we started a global campaign mobilising education unions around the world to stop market forces from seizing control over our sector.

Let us be clear: as long as in the global economy the rights of investors prevail over our rights, prevail over the rights of our students and prevail over human and trade union rights in general, we cannot allow private corporations to conquer the public domain.

We must put this misguided vision on trial. We must resist international trade agreements downgrading education to a commodity. We must make our vision of quality education to be a basic right protected by governments the only viable option.

The argument that we cannot afford flourishing public school systems is false. There is enough money, but it's stowed away in the wrong places. The ongoing fiscal engineering by global corporations and the so-called "Panama Papers," released a couple of weeks ago, prove what we have long known: that too many are skirting their tax responsibilities. The question is how to get the trillions of dollars circulating in the private sector working for the public good.

Your congress coincides with a significant year in the history of education, of teachers. On October 5th, World Teachers' Day, our profession will mark the 50th anniversary of the ILO/UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Teachers.

Although written in a bygone era its foundation remains true to this day by which, and I quote, it recognises "the essential role of teachers in

educational advancement and the importance of their contribution to the development of man and modern society.”

When adopted in 1966, your country had yet to become a democracy; the world’s population was half of what it is today; and we were still three years away from stepping foot on the moon. And teachers were seen as essential!

I would argue that this should be more true today. As we enter the so-called ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution,’ the world desperately needs a highly qualified, strong teaching profession to lead our young people into the future. Yet, here we are today, living in the very ‘modern’ society that the authors of the Recommendation imagined.

I’m relieved that they are not here to see with their own eyes that in your country and in many other parts of the world teachers are overworked; overburdened; underpaid; and undervalued.

If national governments are serious about improving education, then they need to start listening to teachers and to improve their employment conditions. In too many countries, even in countries where collective bargaining rights are fully applied, a meaningful dialogue on our professional challenges does not exist. There are some disturbing examples of a complete disregard of the professional expertise we, collectively, represent.

Am I a messenger of doom and gloom? No I am not. There is light at the end of the tunnel. In fact, I believe that the tide is turning.

You may not yet experience this in your country, but influential organisations such as UNESCO and OECD, as well as a growing number of internationally renowned academics, are closing ranks with Education International.

In the battle of arguments they have moved to our side of the aisle, are subscribing to our view that governments must take their responsibility and protect and improve their public school systems by funding them properly and help strengthen the teaching profession.

This brings me to my last point, colleagues. We need to re-gain control of our own profession. We should not allow outsiders, self-proclaimed experts, consultancy agencies, and corporations to determine our professional standards.

For that reason we have started developing our own international guidelines for the teaching profession, that will help member organisations to take the lead in setting professional standards in their countries. Our profession is our most valuable asset, our most effective weapon to realize our democratic ideals and progressive aspirations.

Last year the international community agreed on a path to create a better, just world. The Sustainable Development Goals reflect the world we want. When I look through all of the 17 Goals, from gender equality, to clean water and the eradication of poverty, I see the education Goal as a central component in all of them.

From the earliest age to advanced university and tertiary studies, education is an equaliser, it lifts people out of poverty, and it fuels innovation. For our organisation and our affiliates in 170 countries, along with our 32 million members, we are certain that the pathway to a sustainable future travels through the classroom. And it begins with you.

I wish you well in your deliberations and debates over the next few days, and I look forward to hearing the outcomes.

Obrigado