

STRIKE IN SLOVENIA: WHAT THE JOURNALISTS WANTED

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For the first time in its recent history, Slovenia experienced a general strike of journalists. For the duration of four days, between 3 October and 7 October, the Trade Union of Slovenian journalists organised a media blackout, breached only by the cameras of commercial POP TV and news programme "Finance". Every strike has its strike-breakers, though. Anyway, one of the three demands of journalists' mutiny has been met. The negotiations have started with the employers, organised in the Association for Press and Media in the Chamber of Commerce of Slovenia (GZS), concerning amendments and supplements to the collective contract for professional journalists, i.e. on a new collective contract, which is the sign of recognition of its national character. Furthermore, the negotiations are continuing on other strikers' demands, one of them being the valorisation of August payments and employers' deviation from collective contract signed in 1998.

"Out of the three strikers' demands, the representative of employers agreed to one, accepting to negotiate with the Trade Union on a new collective contract. However, this is not a new issue. The existing collective contract for professional journalists remains a part of legal system, and even the Trade Union cannot simply proclaim it ineffective because it is committed by the signature, which renders it responsible for the realisation of the collective contract in front of legislative system", says the message to strikes written by the organisers of the strike.

Slovenian journalists agree that no society can benefit from replacing public word with media silence. However, "our success lies in the fact that particularly those colleagues joined the strike for journalistic professional rights, who already had these rights realised in their environments - they primarily went on strike for the professional rights of those colleagues who were denied these rights by employers. Now, it is not an overstatement to say that we were on strike against "slave-masters" attitude, wherever it cropped up in journalistic profession across Slovenia", says the message by the Trade Union of Journalists.

The financial, social and professional position is especially hard for journalists in smaller media in Slovenia, where they work as free-lancers and honorarium workers. Their main problems are related to low and irregular wages, absence of social, health and pension insurance, meagre honoraria.

During the preparations for the strike, the Trade Union of Journalists conducted a survey on payments and other journalists' rights in ten media houses. They examined the height of basic journalists' salary for the first tariff class, which represents the lowest limit by collective contract. For the month of January, this essential payment was regulated to the amount of 85,375.2 tolar or around 360 euros for 174 hours of work on average, or 90,281 tolar, i.e. around 376 euros for 184 hours of work. The survey discovered lower payments in more than half cases. In one of them, a journalist was paid around 250 euros for his monthly engagement, while the maximum salary in another anonymous medium amounted to around 1,050 Euro.

The collective contract is commonly complied with by big media houses like the Public RTV of Slovenia and Publishing House "Delo". The journalists of "Dnevnik" have signed a favourable contract with their House, which respects all criteria set in the collective contract. Nevertheless, the journalists of these houses exercised their solidarity and joined the strike. The journalists of commercial POP TV and daily "Finance" are the best paid, but their earnings remain secret. Suffice to say that the journalists of POP TV not only failed to join the strike, they failed to even offer their declarative solidarity with participants to the strike. They explained they were fully content with their internal contract with the house they were employed by. They are not organized in trade union within their house. The journalists of "Finance" are also content with their conditions, but they offered their verbal support to their troubled colleagues, regardless.

Around 150 journalists have the status of free-lance journalists in Slovenia. In many cases their work is not regulated by any contracts, or these contracts are a sheer formality. The position of independent journalists is regulated by the Law on Media, which directs that "journalist is, by that Law, a person engaged in the collection, analysis, creation or systematization of information for publication by means of media, employed by the publisher or independently performing his professional journalistic activities". According to that Law, "the status of independent journalist is obtained through the enrollment into the list of independent journalists in responsible ministry, following the proficiency assessment issued by a professional organization of journalists". However, as one survey revealed, the earnings of free-lance journalists are for the most part so scanty, that they cannot afford the payment of social contributions, which is the condition of gaining the status rights. This means that free-lance journalists are excluded from the protection granted to journalists by the Law on Media, which prescribes that employers "cannot dismiss a journalist, terminate his contract, reduce his payment, alter his status in the newsroom or otherwise weaken his position for the

reasons related to his stated opinions or positions, which conform to programme platform and professional rules, norms and standards”

In the project addressing free-lance and honorarium journalists, the Association of Journalists of Slovenia has suggested a book of rules concerning payment rates for independent journalists, which would significantly improve their financial position, setting deadline for payments on the last day in a month at the latest. It suggests that a news piece should be rated at around six euros, and experts' theme up to 250 euros. All these are the topics of future negotiations between employers and the Trade Union. In case of the failure of negotiations, the Trade Union has already announced its intention to continue the strike.

The strike of journalists caused reactions among employers, too. Already in the course of its duration, the director of «Štajerski Val» Radio forced three of his journalists into a compulsory leave when they intended to submit the note on their decision to join the strike. Due to the strike of journalists, which reflected detrimentally on news programmes of national television, the council of this house decided to reduce subscription fees for this month, appealing on the director general to pay off to striking journalists the amount of 70 percent of their salaries for the duration period of the strike, to which they are legally entitled during strikes. The Striking Board has already announced its decision to cover the losses of all strike participants, caused by their involvement in the collective mutiny. According to publicised information, the strike caused losses to the public RTV of Slovenia, which amount to around 600 thousand euros. The council's report on strike stated that the strike of journalists was not legal.

The strike of Slovenian journalists was supported by all major trade unions in the country, the International (IFJ) and European Federation of Journalists (FJ), as well as a large number of national federations and their trade unions across Europe. Taking part in a round table on the strike in Students' Club in Ljubljana (ŠKUC), a member of Strike Board in the German Federal Trade Union of Journalists, Wolfgang Soergel, stated: "I came here to learn about the preparations for a strike. I cannot believe how successful it was here". In the recently held strike organised by the Trade Union of Journalists in Germany, only one third of German journalists responded.

“In the vision of new Europe, media remain in the last place”, stated Aidan White of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), reported “Medijska Preža” Magazine Ljubljana. White believes that “if in any area the process of European Union extension has failed, that area is the area of media”. “While the negotiators made their way through the intricate legal details of economic and social structural reforms, which former communist countries had to accept if they were to comply with the criteria of European accession, they mainly ignored cultural dimension thereof, primarily that of the media. This fact could have harmful result for the future of quality journalism in Europe”, said White

The strike of Slovenian journalists proved that former “socially-political workers” were deeply aware of the possible consequences of their social, financial and professional status on the quality of journalism. At that level of thinking, all those objections, frequently heard in Slovenia recently, concerning the rationality and justification of strike during parliamentary elections, can be discounted. “The strike of journalists on electoral day is unfair, because the public have the right to information”, said the journalist of POP TV, Edi Pucer, in the round table about the strike. The President of Striking Board, Iztok Jurančič, replied that “the right to information originates from the right to expression, which was violated through the disregard of collective contract for journalists”.

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