



Reykjavík 17th of June 2015

News from Social Workers in Iceland - The fight for better wages.

The following information is written to give more information on the situation of Social Workers in Iceland.

The Association of social workers in Iceland is a union and we are a member of the Association of Academics in Iceland. Therefore we often make wage setting agreement in cooperation with other associations of Academics if we think that will lead to a better conclusion. Since the beginning of 2014, social workers and other academics in the association of Academics working for the State have been fighting for better wages.

The reason for the joint fight of the academics for better wages is twofold:

1. Since the economic crisis in 2008 wages of public professionals has been frozen with our acceptance due to the economic situation in Iceland. The aim was to help the economic situation. Last year a report which all partners of the labor market wrote showed that the wages of the public professions had risen considerably less than the wages in the general market. This is understandable, since wages in the public market only rise by mutual wage setting agreement whereas in the general market wages can be agreed on personal bases. After this report and because Iceland's economy is on a rise, academics in Iceland made a claim for higher rise of wages than had been agreed upon in the general market. This was denied on behalf of the State. In May 2014 we signed an agreement that was really a cease fire and the State was very well aware of the situation.
2. Since the economic crisis our wage setting system has been ruined due to the downsizing in public welfare and other organizations. The wage setting system relies upon the organizational capacity to evaluate the jobs and the wages of their employees. This has not been the case for several years and when the unions ask for new agreements on wages with the organizations the answer has been: „That is not possible, we do not have the financial capacity to make any changes”.

On top of that Social Workers in Iceland working for the state have three more reasons to fight for better wages:

1. Most of the Social workers working for the state work in hospitals, health care and third line organizations such as The State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre and the Government Agency for Child Protection. Social workers working for the state have

considerably less wages than other social workers, working for the municipalities in child protection and social services. The difference is about 20-25%.

2. Since 2010 social workers have been graduating with five years MA degree in social work which is a regulated profession in Iceland (No one can call themselves a social worker without having a special license from the Directorate of Health). The social workers working for the state have not yet had their wages corrected in relation to more education.
3. Last but not least social workers are fighting for better wages with regard to the fact that their wages are up to 16% lower than the average wages of other academics working for the state.

The strike of academics in Iceland 7th of April to 14th of June 2015

Social workers working for the state decided in 2014 not to give up the fight for better wages and when asked in a poll sent from the Association of social workers, more than 95% said that they were willing to strike to support their claim for better wages.

In March it became clear that the majority of academic professionals working for the state agreed with social workers, they were willing to strike to support their claim for better wages. Therefore academics decided to strike together. The strike was organized in a responsible way, we wanted the strike to have considerable effect right away and professions and certain organizations were chosen to strike with regard to the general effect of the strike. Social workers were not chosen to strike, neither were psychologists or physiotherapists for example. All the unions paid jointly for the strike that started on the 7th of April, just after Easter. Altogether there are 2300 academics in 17 unions in this fight for better wages together, but only 700 were striking (midwives, x-ray specialists, biomedical scientists, lawyers, veterinarians, and other professions working in the National Hospital and in the Icelandic Food and veterinary authority).

The State has offered the academic professionals, including social workers, the same increase in wages as has been agreed on the general market which does not include a possibility to correct their wages and the special claims of social workers have not been met. The state has argued that correcting wages for some groups will have difficult consequences for the Icelandic Economy. However, this winter the state agreed to increase wages of doctors and high school teachers considerably more than the common increase was. Therefore academics are furious when met with this argumentation that does not include all professionals working for the state, just some.

We had a general strike on the 9th of April and since then we have been protesting many times, on 1st of May, in front of the Government offices of Iceland when the government had a meeting, and in front of the parliament, Althingi, when it was known that the government was going to stop the strike by laws.

Law on strike

Last Saturday, the parliament passed a law ordering striking academics to go back to work. The law gives the debating bodies two weeks' time to reach an agreement. If not, an arbitration committee will be appointed on the 1st of July. The committee will have the power to decide the new collective bargaining agreement and it is especially stated in the law that the committee shall take account of the recently signed bargaining agreements in the general market. The committee could decide to have the duration of the agreement for many years. The committee is given until the 15th of August. During this time, the professionals, social workers included, are expressly forbidden to engage in any strikes, work stoppages, lockouts, or any other action authorities could deem as organized worker action against management. We experience these laws violating our rights to make an independent collective bargaining agreement on behalf of our members as well as our right to strike to support our claims. People are angry and sad.

We have criticized the laws and think they were not necessary at this stage of the strike. The Association of Academics with the support of their unions have decided to take the Icelandic government to court over the matter, arguing that the legislation violated our constitutionally protected right to strike.

Today, the 17th of June, is our Independence Day and on the 19th of June Iceland will celebrate that it is 100 years since women in Iceland got the right to vote. We have a huge celebration that day in Reykjavik and it is very strange to celebrate women's right when so recently the women's professions such as social workers, nurses, midwives, have had their right to strike for better wages taken from them by law.

Best wishes from Iceland, we thank you for the support, it means a lot to us.

On behalf of the Association of social workers in Iceland,



María Rúnarsdóttir
Chairman