

News & Views item - October 2007

Israeli University Lecturers Set for Long Strike. (October 24, 2007)

This past Sunday was the start of the academic year in Israel but a long simmering dispute between university staff and the Israeli government has now erupted into what looms to be a prolonged strike.

According to Moran Zelikovich of y-NetNews

4,500 lecturers and academic staff are now on strike at Israel's seven universities: Tel Aviv University, Ben-Gurion University, University of Haifa, the Weitzman Institute, Hebrew University, Bar-Ilan University and the Technion.

Some 4,500 lecturers and academic staff are striking in an attempt to reach a new agreement with the Finance Ministry over their wages. The last agreement between the government and the teaching staff was signed in 2001 and since then, the professors claim their salaries have suffered "erosion".

According to the academic staff, their salaries have "eroded" 15% in the last six years in addition to the 5% supplement that public workers received as part of a Histadrut (labor federation) deal.

The junior staff supports the senior faculty members in their efforts, but are holding classes. However, the junior staff does not intend to fill in for the senior staff.

According to the report: "following budgetary cuts in the higher education sector, there are thousands of substitute lecturers that are now employed in Israel's universities. These 'surrogate' lecturers receive a low salary, are not entitled to a pension or severance pay and receive no social benefits.

"Substitute lecturers currently constitute about 40% of instructors at Israeli universities and makeup 80% at Israeli colleges. They are not protected by labor unions and as such are not scheduled to participate in Sunday's strike."

Prior to the strike the following announcement was posted on Tel-

Aviv University's internal list on Tuesday, October 23, 2007 from Professor Asher Cohen of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Professor Cohen works with the Coordinating Council (Mo'etza Me'ta'amet) of the Senior Faculty Associations in the Israeli universities in leading the current strike:

On Sunday and Monday there were general assemblies in 6 universities (all the universities except Weitzmann Institute). In all 6 assemblies there was overwhelming (and sometimes unanimous) support for the unlimited strike that we declared and for the two basic demands of the coordinating council:

1) We demand a full compensation for the erosion in our salary since 1997.

2) We demand a mechanism that will prevent future erosion in our salary.

We expect a very long strike. The sad reality in Israel is that wage corrections, even if they are fully justified, do not take place without a power struggle.

Yesterday the Coordinating Council met in order to prepare for the long strike. You may have read in the newspapers that the Education minister suggested a mediator ('megasher'). We also first read about it in the newspapers. Eventually we even got a brief letter from the minister in which this possibility was raised and it was discussed in the meeting. Our stand has always been that we are willing to talk at all times with anyone that wants to talk to us. The strike, however, will continue until our demands are met.

Finally, a word is in order concerning the stand taken by VERA (the committee of the university presidents). In 2001 VERA wrote to us an official letter (which we distributed to all of you in the mail) in which they essentially acknowledged that we our salary has eroded prior to 2001, and that it should be corrected. Since then our salary has further eroded. We expect VERA to stand by its written and signed document and support our cause. Many of us believe that this should be the case even without this letter.

Unfortunately we have been in similar situations before. We do not expect any significant developments in the next few days (and possibly weeks). In any case I will keep you updated on any new development.

