ARE TRADE UNIONS AT THE TABLE?

While the Latvian government is addressing all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they are not being made a high priority or focus. The introduction to Latvia’s 2021-2021 National Development Plan states that it has been developed in line with the SDGs, but there is no further reference to the goals in the text or description of particular goals, and society at large is not aware of them. The government’s Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre, under the direct authority of the prime minister, is responsible for integrating the SDGs into national policies.

Trade unions were involved in preparing the National Development Plan, and, at their initiative, the Voluntary National Review for the UN. They are not included in the Consultative Council for Cooperation on Development. Unions are involved in the National Tripartite Cooperation Council and its sub-councils, which cover all SDGs, although there is no explicit reference to them.

Latvian trade unions are concerned about the insufficient public funding available to implement the SDGs, which translates into a lack of progress, particularly on the SDGs related to health, education, inequality and poverty rates. Reporting mechanisms are adequate given these limited resources.

COVID-19: WORKERS NEED DURABLE RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Latvian government introduced restrictions to contain the spread of the virus, encouraged remote working, and ran mandatory vaccination schemes. Employment-related measures included flexible or reduced working hours, with government support for income security; furlough benefits; and support for the unemployed. Bankruptcy declarations were temporarily suspended, and companies could initiate collective redundancies more quickly. Crisis-affected exporters received grants to compensate for wages.

Trade unions call on the Latvian government to prioritise universal social protection and free access to healthcare, with childcare support for frontline workers. There is a need to improve healthcare services and access to them, in particular the number of medical personnel. The amount and period of unemployment benefits should be extended. Rising living costs require increased minimum wages and an income tax threshold; support and lowered taxes on fuel bills; more affordable housing; and an energy efficiency programme to insulate homes and modernise electricity networks. Businesses require support to reorient international trade and a decreased tax burden on labour to compete with neighbouring markets.
To ensure an SDG-led recovery and resilience from the crisis, trade unions urge the Latvian government to:

• Improve professional development and support for teachers, especially for teaching children with special needs.
• Strengthen tripartite social dialogue and promote the further development and improvement of the collective bargaining system, especially at sectoral level.
• Develop a policy and legal framework for the arrangement of new forms of employment and the introduction of control mechanisms, balancing the tax burden for various forms of employment and reducing it for the labour force. Reduce the informal economy, in particular “envelope wages” and undeclared workers.
• Strengthen tripartite social dialogue and promote the further development and improvement of the collective bargaining system, especially at sectoral level. Strengthen the implementation of trade union rights in practice.
• Make health insurance and services accessible to all and improve care policies for the elderly.
• Increase the state budget for research and development in line with the EU average. Promote cooperation between research institutions and companies.
• Improve professional development and support for teachers, especially for teaching children with special needs.

LATVIA

TRADE UNION ASKS TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

To ensure an SDG-led recovery and resilience from the crisis, trade unions urge the Latvian government to:

• Focus on decent work in the context of SDG 8 because human capital to improve services and stem emigration is required to meet all other SDGs in Latvia. Take measures to tackle low pay and long working hours in the public sector, particularly in health and education.
• Ensure transparency of remuneration systems. Develop regulation for a reliable, stable minimum wage and a non-taxable minimum that ensures a sufficient income level.
• Work on wage and social protection policies aimed at reducing inequalities between regions.
• Develop a policy and legal framework for the arrangement of new forms of employment and the introduction of control mechanisms, balancing the tax burden for various forms of employment and reducing it for the labour force. Reduce the informal economy, in particular “envelope wages” and undeclared workers.
• Strengthen tripartite social dialogue and promote the further development and improvement of the collective bargaining system, especially at sectoral level. Strengthen the implementation of trade union rights in practice.
• Make health insurance and services accessible to all and improve care policies for the elderly.
• Increase the state budget for research and development in line with the EU average. Promote cooperation between research institutions and companies.
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