

Education Crisis in Israel— Payback Time for the Original Sin

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The Israeli education sector has recently faced the danger of being paralyzed by the longest strike in the country's higher education system. The 4,500 senior faculty members who work at the seven research universities have demanded to receive compensation for the 35 percent wage erosion over the last decade since the expiration of their contract in 2001.

BRAIN DRAIN: WAYS OF TREATMENT

The professors demanded a pay increase and presented the strike as a battle for stopping the brain drain that is a direct result of the erosion in working conditions at Israeli universities. The treasury claimed that the solution for receiving more funds is to fully implement the Shochat Committee reform, which the students have already rejected, because it might lead to the government raising the tuition by 100 percent instead of a 50 percent reduction in tuition fees to which the government had previously agreed.

The senior faculty members have convincingly warned about the dangers of brain drain and the deteriorating conditions in universities after more than a decade of budget cuts. Yet, professors turned the other way when more adjunct faculty members were hired without any basic rights. They were happy to decrease their teaching load without focusing too much on the students' interest or on the labor conditions of the adjunct faculty.

Two major strikes took place on Israeli campuses in the last couple of years. Students organized the first strike when the government attempted to fund higher education by raising the tuition by 100 percent. The second strike was organized by the adjunct faculty to improve their working conditions and to receive a paid vacation and pension. In none of these cases did the senior faculty join the strike or offer any support. Likewise, when the government cut the equivalent of 800 tenure positions, professors did not go on strike lamenting the brain drain as long as their own positions were not endangered. As a result, the professors had to fight their battle on their own; the public support was lower than ever; and this was the result of the original sin of apathy and indifference the professors have shown in the past during other strikes in academe.

The danger related to the brain drain caused by the disen-

agement of the Israeli government is real and seen as a direct result of the repeated budget cuts of higher education at alarming proportions. The figures say it all: the number of Israeli researchers who work in American universities is higher than those in Britain, France, and Canada combined; the statistics for 2003/04 show that the number of Israeli senior faculty who work in American institutions of higher education, not as part of their sabbatical, is 25 percent of the number of senior faculty who work in Israeli institutions—in certain fields even higher (e.g., 33% in computer science and 29% in economics). In comparison, 1.3 percent of Spanish senior faculty, 2.1 percent of the British, and 2.9 percent of the French academics work abroad. A cut of 800 tenured positions represents the equivalent of closing one entire university in a country as small as Israel, with a total of seven research universities.

Israel became an independent state 60 years ago, and during the first three decades governments invested in education in general and higher education in particular, making strategic planning for the benefit of a young nation. During the next three decades the different governments invested less and less in education and higher education. As a result, the number of senior faculty in Israeli institutions is only 10 percent higher today than 30 years ago, which considering the population increase actually equals a 50 percent cut.

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WORKING CONDITIONS

Instead of having to seek part-time additional work in order to improve their income, senior faculty members should receive a decent salary enabling them to devote all their time and effort to academic work. Nobody expects Israel to compete with the salary the academics can receive elsewhere, but senior faculty do enjoy tenure and decent working conditions. Young faculty should also have the right to expect reasonable chances for tenure and promotion in academe, although at this point the options of young researchers to find a position in Israeli universities are slim to nonexistent.

During the academic strike, high school teachers carried out the longest strike ever (63 days) to improve their working conditions. The professors obtained a 24 percent pay increase without asking for any social reforms or for an increase in the budget of universities, while the high school teachers obtained only an 8.5 percent pay increase after having fought for smaller classes, which benefit all students.

CONCLUSION

It is unfortunate that the strikers have failed to work together for the improvement of education at the secondary and post-secondary levels. The best strategy would have been to join forces toward the common goal of saving the education system before it is too late. Unfortunately, instead, the principle of the survival of the fittest worked once again.

The government has treated both strikes with apathy and indifference at best, conceivably as part of a larger plan to privatize all social aspects of society. Israel has an economy that is knowledge based. Thus, it is of concern that with an economy less problematic than in the past, the government is unwilling to invest in education, which everybody understands to be crucial to Israel's future. ■

The Relative Strength of Israel's Private Colleges

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The development of private higher education in Israel has been strong. Until the 1990s, the system had no private higher education; yet it now includes 9 institutions, with 6 more seeking government authorization. The institutions hold 26,860 enrollments, 13.1 percent of the country's total of 310,937 (2005), and that percentage is increasing.

Israel's public sector, however, remains much stronger than its private sector. Israel still lacks private universities, only colleges (usually without notable research orientation). In contrast, the public sector's 87 percent share of total enrollment is located not only in colleges but mostly in universities; the 7 public universities, all research institutions, are listed among the world's top 500 institutions. Thus, a theme that private higher education now has noteworthy strength is not based on cross-sector comparison but on comparison with the past, even the recent past.

Officially, private colleges are labeled "nonbudgeted," meaning not subsidized by government. The label avoids the use of "private," regarded by many citizens as an illegitimate concept for higher education. Such circumvention is found in other countries as well, often settling on "nonpublic." That private "universities" are not permitted is a sore point for some aspir-

ing Israeli private colleges and their supporters. One defiant private college declares it will soon call itself a university. Another uses stationery showing an address of University Road.

Compared to the rest of the Middle East, Israel was early on initiating private higher education. It is also regionally strong in terms of its share of private/national total enrollment. However, almost all surrounding countries have now launched private sectors. And if compared globally, Israeli private higher education is a late developer, and its 13.1 percent share of national enrollment is less than half that of the world average.

COMPARING PRIVATE AND PUBLIC COLLEGES

Most of Israel's private-public comparisons concur with private-public contrasts in other countries. Private institutions tend to be smaller and more geographically concentrated; not uncommonly they have higher student socioeconomic levels. Perhaps the most prestigious Israeli private college may depend on tuition for 80 percent of its income, a far higher rate than in public institutions. While, there is no government funding, private colleges would like to be able to compete for public research funding and have government directly subsidize students, although they do not ask for regular institutional subsidy. So, even amid the partial privatization of public institutions, private-public financial contrasts remain strong.

Perhaps the most striking Israeli private-public distinction lies in fields studied. Even leaving universities aside, the differences far outpace the notable global differences. A good example is concentrated enrollment in a few fields. Israel's private

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colleges have 79 percent of their enrollment in just two fields—legal studies (49 percent) and business management (30 percent). The comparative figures for public colleges are 0 and 11 percent, respectively. The Israeli private higher education network remains mostly in a narrow niche. As in the great majority of countries, the peak and breadth of the academic system lies on the public side.

Yet, in other respects, private-public differences do not appear so sharp in Israeli colleges. For example, while 62 percent of private students are in Tel Aviv and the rest of the rather privileged geographical center of the country, 41 percent of public students are there as well. Sixty-five percent of private students are identified as from the upper strata, but public students are not a close reflection of the Israeli class and demographic profile either. Only 2 percent of private students are new immigrants, but the public figure is only 5 percent. In some respects, then, Israel's private-public gaps are not so large.