

## **TEACHERS' ARE THE TARGET OF THE HIRING FREEZE**

**T**his past Friday, February 26, 2021, the sitting Minister of Finance, Neal Rijkenberg tabled the Appropriation Bill for the Financial Year 2021/2022 in parliament with a proposed National Budget of E24.05 billion.

During this spectacle, approximating a doomsday scenario, the minister revealed to all listening that government would continue to stick to its Fiscal Consolidation Plan [FCP] which will see a hiring freeze for the next three [3] years. The mention of the phrase hiring freeze sent a chill in my spine, reality sinking in on what it actually entails for us in the education sector. My mind veered in perforated circles as I digested what the Minister of the Crown was pronouncing to teachers in particular. In fact, the statement was a spit in the union's face as we have been demanding that more teachers be employed to reduce the burn-out and high teacher-pupil ratio in schools, particularly during this COVID-19 era of social distancing.

As I listened to the Budget Speech, it struck my mind that the fiscal crisis in the country is not our making. Teachers are now thrown under the bus, made to incur consequences of the long-drawn-out man-made financial crisis. Questions would be: is it our fault that the economy is presently in tatters? Is it our fault that we have a purported fiscal crisis in our shores? Even a lay man in the street can attest to the fact that the government is being disingenuous in its stance to freeze hiring.

The so-called excuse of a fiscal crisis in the country is not a novel issue altogether. In 2011/2012, at the height of the country's cash flow crisis, the IMF recommended that the government needed to reduce the bloated public service by cutting 7 000 jobs. We could not agree with that as civil servants knew they were not to shoulder the blame in plunging the economy into the cliff it was in, back then. I recall government unsuccessfully fired hundreds of teachers in 2012 after the eminent Waya Waya Strike where we were demanding a justified 3% CoLA.

Many will recall that in 2010, the government had, with the assistance of the African Development Bank [ADB] developed and introduced what was termed as a Fiscal Adjustment Roadmap [FAR] to restore fiscal sustainability. The roadmap, which was monitored by the IMF, also

included short-term measures such as tax increases and a hiring and wage freeze. The roadmap also carried measures to be implemented over the medium term, largely focusing on strengthening Finance Ministry functions such as public financial management, expenditure policy, tax policy, and revenue administration. The package also proposed reducing the civil service by 20% through an Enhanced Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme [EVERS]. All this was playing to the gallery by the government: a smokescreen exercise.

Fortunately, the IMF management approved the programme on April 4, 2011, to encourage the needed fiscal adjustment whilst safeguarding Swaziland's spending on education and health. I am at ease that the government was advised to prioritise education as a critical area of the economy.

I further recall a Memo dated May 21, 2014, as issued by then Accountant General (AG) Fanisile Mabila to Secretary to Cabinet, all Principal Secretaries and all Heads of Department informing them that due to cash flow problems, advances were suspended with immediate effect, until further notice. That was seven [7] years ago. 2021, still the government is struggling to resuscitate the economy, subjecting teachers to the after-effects of the hiring freeze.

Erstwhile PS in the Ministry of Public Service, Edward Madlopha's Circular No. 3 of 2018 was a lethal blow to the teaching profession. The Circular from Cabinet, titled 'Freezing of vacant posts and creation of new posts in all government ministries and departments,' was two [2] years down the line, breached by the same Ministry of Public Service, promoting civil servants to higher posts that were bloating the already high wage bill. The attempts to rationalise this contemptuous act by PS at the MoPS, Siphon Tsabedze drew blank with some of us, knowing the character of the establishment.

Many would share similar sentiments with me that for teachers, as it has been happening in schools, a hiring freeze spells doom and gloom. The freeze has translated into a larger number of students per classroom, which meant less one-on-one attention for every student. At any given time, a pause on hiring new employees leads to an increased workload for

existing employees because the work that may have been the responsibility of the new employees can only be allocated to them.

Similarly, the workload resulting from exiting employees must be divided among the existing employees. It can result in a negative impact on morale and employee productivity in the long term, which may ultimately cause more employees to leave the employer [high attrition rates].

It has not slipped our minds that during the 2016 Salary Review, we were given a raw deal. Our memories are not short in recalling, as clear as day, how hefty increments were awarded to civil servants in Senior Management, including politicians who never even raised a single finger in demanding the protracted SR. The increments saw politicians, judges, and senior bureaucrats being awarded as high as 32 per cent. The salaries of low-paying occupations were increased by between 15 and 18 per cent. All this unfolded in full view of the entire world. Circular No.3 of 2013 determining the irrational terms and conditions of unqualified persons [politicians], was drawn, replacing Circular No.1 of 2010 in the midst of a cash flow crisis. We can't afford to bury our heads in the sand as if we are oblivious of all these issues. We know them.

In appreciating the significance of engaging enough teachers in schools, the UNESCO concluded a report in 2016 which reiterated the importance of retaining staff and posited that this will require teaching to have a competitive salary and contracts which will give teachers job security. The UNESCO further revealed that almost 69 million teachers need to be recruited around the world by 2030 if international pledges on education are to be kept. This includes Swaziland as the report indicates that the biggest gaps in staffing are in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia. It is in that breath that the UNESCO conclusively noted that there needs to be a "seismic shift" in recruitment to overcome "massive shortages."

Neal's statement on Friday can surely be seen as an ultimate straw that will break the camel's back. It just does not make sense on why then should there be annual admissions at UNESWA, William Pitcher, SANU, SCOT, Ngwane Teachers Training College etc if there'll be no new entrants in the education system? In all these shenanigans, it does not require one to be a Rocket Scientist to connect the dots that the central

government is hellbent in destroying collective bargaining, union density and treating the ILO's Decent Work Agenda with utmost contempt. We cannot afford to have this fiscal consolidation plan pop song resolve hanging over our heads in the name of a cash flow crisis that is not our making. We know that there's not even a single assessment and evaluation of this illusion of a Roadmap. The Cabinet should just cease to pass the buck; instead, approve the waiver, as it happened with health, recruit more teachers in schools. We submit.

For comments and feedback, send to [motsamcolisi@gmail.com](mailto:motsamcolisi@gmail.com) or +268 7606 5972.