

## **Karabakh Teachers Angry at Ministers' Pay**

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Schoolteachers are the latest to protest against a big pay rise awarded to members of the Karabakh government

Teachers from Secondary School No. 1 in Nagorny Karabakh's capital, Stepanakert, last week wrote an open letter that kept alive a row the government hoped had gone away – complaining about pay rises for officials.

"It is unfair and unacceptable for a select few to be 10 or 15 times better off than regular citizens," said the January 31 letter, signed by 30 teachers. "The rulers of a poor state have no right to live in luxury."

It triggered a chain reaction, and teachers all round the territory voiced their support.

Lyudmila Barsegian, director of Stepanakert's Arts Centre, said she had raised the issue with parliament. "For some reason, while the government has raised the salaries of its own members, it has forgotten about ordinary teachers," she told IWPR. "I assure you we will carry on working as before, but this is unacceptable. We used to get small salaries, but at least we knew that it was in proportion to others. However, that's not true any more."

Other public servants are just as angry. Marine Shindian, a paediatric doctor, said, "They pay us pennies, there is no transport to visit sick children and I go in a public minibus. I'm lucky that you can get to my practice on public transport, but there are some doctors who have to pay for a taxi to go to the edge of town.

"They should have thought about that, not about raising their own salaries."

The row stems from a new law, signed by Karabakh president Arkady Gukasian on December 29, tripling the salaries of executive and legislative leaders as of January 1.

The president himself now earns 340,000 drams (around 600 US dollars) a month, the prime minister 300,000, ministers 250,000 and supreme court judges 224,000.

By comparison, the salaries of regular employees were increased only slightly, and are now eight or ten times less than those of their rulers. Doctors now earn 28,000 drams (about 50 dollars) a month instead of 21,000 before the raise. Schoolteachers' salaries are up 40 per cent, but the amount now covers class supervision and written assignment grading, which used to be paid extra, so the real raise is small.

Pensions and social security benefits were also increased only marginally, with a rise in the statutory minimum pension of only 140 drams (25 cents) a month.

The salary raises coincided with price rises for bread. "They upped their salaries, and bread prices have gone up, so that's a double loss to us," pensioner Tsovinar Hairapetian told IWPR.

The government has explained the salary raises by citing the example of Armenia, where public servants' salaries have been increased on the advice of international institutions, as a weapon against corruption.

"This is common practice," Armen Sarkisian, Nagorny Karabakh's education minister, told IWPR. "The raise means that life is getting better. High-ranking officials cannot engage in private enterprise, so their salaries are their only source of income. By giving them a raise, we prevent corruption."

This explanation has failed to persuade most of the doubters. "How is a minister's family better than mine?" said Stepanakert resident Artur Egiyan. "Why do they prize their own work so highly, and ignore ours? They are saying the international community made them do it to meet international standards. But what about our living standards?"

"I don't mind if our officials start making more money, but if you earn more, you must give more in return, i.e. do a better job," said Murad Petrosian, parliamentary deputy and editor of the Chto Delat (What is to be Done) newspaper.

The critics also claim that, unlike in Armenia, the salary raises have not been coupled with a broader anti-corruption programme. "By saying their raise is aimed at deterring corruption, government officials are in effect admitting they take bribes," commented businessman Shahen Karapetian.

Unusually for Nagorny Karabakh, the normally loyal media has also given the government unfavourable coverage on the issue.

Officials hit back, saying journalists had misunderstood the story. Prime minister Anushavan Danielian told a government meeting, "We have not had a major salary raise like this in five years. They are all talking about our salaries, instead of highlighting the fact that teachers are getting a 40 per cent raise, doctors 25 per cent, and pensions will increase 54 per cent."

"You cannot ignore the social needs of the majority of the population," responded Ara Vanian, editor-in-chief of the information department of Karabakh Public Television. "Pensions are so low they don't even cover utility costs. With this in mind, it is unethical of our rulers to line their own pockets."

The issue split parliament. Some deputies approved the salary hike, saying it was indicative of a general improvement in living standards. "I work hard, and I should receive a commensurate compensation," Maior Danielian, chairman of the parliamentary finance, budget and economic commission told IWPR. "It is unfair to compare my job with that of a teacher."

The prime minister put the argument that Karabakh has 14 judges but 5,000 teachers and 27,000 pensioners. "If the money earmarked to give the judges a raise was to be divided among teachers and pensioners, they would get next to nothing," he said.

"What are we going to tell our voters?" countered deputy Rudik Azarian. "This legislation will only broaden the gap between us and the common man."

The government heeded the pressure by allocating an extra 46 million drams (80,000 dollars) in the draft budget for 2004 to help low-income families. The concessions did not win round the parliamentary faction of the Dashknaktsutiun party, but in the end both the new law and the budget were passed on December 29, with 21 votes in favour, 7 opposed, and 2 abstaining.

For a while it seemed that passions had died down, but the teachers' open letter shows that for many Karabakh Armenians, the matter is far from closed.

"If the people are silent, this does not mean they are unaware and can be ignored," the letter warned. "We can put up with a lot for the sake of our republic's frail independence and stability. We wrote this letter to make our voices heard."

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