

**THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST**

**Chalk, Not Talk! Kosovo Teachers Urge Dialog with Government**

**Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director**

**Guest: Rrahman Jasharaj, chair of the Kosovo teacher's union, SBASHK**

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Hello, sisters and brothers and welcome to the Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau.

We all know teachers shape our children's future, and by extension, our own. So why isn't more done to ensure teachers are paid what they deserve for this monumental task and that students have access to quality classroom resources? Today we explore these questions with our guest, Rrahman Jasharaj, chair of Kosovo's Teachers Union, SBASHK.

Two decades ago, Kosovo was struggling in a war after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Teachers there, including Rrahman, endured difficult and dangerous conditions, but that only steeled their resolve to nurture the children in their care despite their sacrifices. Teachers in Kosovo today struggle to support their families on low wages, teaching children in poorly equipped classrooms. They want to partner with the government to meet these challenges. But as we hear from Brother Rrahman, they are being shut out.

Well, hello Brother Rrahman Jasharaj, leader of SBASHK Teachers Union of Kosovo. Welcome to the Podcast.

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

Greetings to you all from myself, Rrahman Jasharaj, and also I'm passing the greetings from all education employees of Kosovo.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Thank you. It's a real honor to have you on today. You know, before we get started talking about the current work of your great union in Kosovo, I know that you personally were a teacher back in the 1990s and that you taught through a very difficult time of war and turmoil. Can you tell us a little bit about that? What was that like?

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

Telling you the truth, myself and my education colleagues have been going through very tough periods. But we have been proud at the same time because we consider that we were doing a great favor to such difficult situation. In '90s, our rights were protected, our rights which were guaranteed through international conventions. But at that time, the violent government installed by Milošević, which was denying us this right. But during this difficult time, we got united in order to get organized and do our job properly because during this period of time, our salaries were discontinued and we were also dropped out from the educational institutions at this very difficult time for Kosovo. These were the initial steps of SBASHK, which steps have been very difficult ones. We had to take care of the educational process, and at the same time, we had to provide the basic tools for the maintenance of education system and process.

We were also making efforts to get the support either from our compatriots or from international friends because some teachers were living in very difficult conditions. Although living in very difficult and poor conditions, our people shared the livelihood and they assigned some means of living to these people in order for the teachers to be able to feed their families and family members. These were

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dramatic times and we started to feel tired. But this tiredness was taken away by the constant support of our international friends.

SBASHK is always grateful to the American Federation of Teachers, the Union of Education of Netherlands and also the Education International. At that time, prominent people from these institutions and organizations started to pay visits to our country, which served as a great support and encouragement for us. We felt very good when the then Secretary General, from UN, was able to invite our president to be part of the international convention in order to present the difficult situations we were in at that time. This support provided by Netherlands, Slovenia, Germany and other European countries made us strong and encouraged us to pursue our path. When we were feeling lonely, these prominent people from education sector were coming to us, they were visiting us and they were encouraging us with a hope that the worst day will pass.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Brother Rrahman, that's a really powerful story of global solidarity. You mentioned the American Federation of Teachers, the Global Union, Education International, trade unions from across Europe providing solidarity and support. I also heard you say that teachers were really doing more than just teaching, that you were caring for the whole institution of education, the schools. And also the livelihoods, food and caring for each other in community, other teachers and other students who needed help. What does this say to you about the value of teachers?

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

It was a great honor for me at that time to lead the union and initially in '90s, I was the head of my union for Peja only, for the City of Peja. In the meantime, I became the head of the Unified Union of Education, Technology and Culture for entire Kosovo. This was a great pleasure.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Brother Rrahman. Why did you become a teacher?

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

It was a wish of my mother. Unfortunately, I became orphaned at an age of 14. I lost my father and my mother wanted always one of the family members to become a teacher. Unfortunately, she choose me to become a teacher with her great efforts by doing handycraft works in order to support my schooling. I kept the promise I gave to my mother and sometimes she used to ask me to walk together with her in the street where the school was located in order to see the teachers, to see the students, to see how things were going on and to get a better feeling of this.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Your mother sounds like a wonderful inspiration. And becoming an orphan at a young age as you were, and then becoming a teacher, I wonder how that influenced your decision later in life to become a union activist. What got you involved in the union?

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

The time we were passing through required all of us to take some certain actions to get a hold of this situation. And the trust my colleagues had on me during this difficult period of time made me believe

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that we were doing the best for education and we were supporting the right cause of education, by getting involved in the union issues.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

It's clear that you cared so much about education, about the other teachers and about the students and the great value that you brought to the union movement and to Kosovo is just coming through as you tell this story. And I really want to then fast-forward to now. I understand there was a major strike of teachers in Kosovo. And as a result of the strike, teachers won a big pay increase. But given how much you all love the students and love and value education, I wonder if that decision to go on strike was hard. How did teachers feel about going on strike? Tell me a little bit about how they decided to take that action.

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

With my full heart, I want to say that the most hated word for me is the word strike. But considering the fact that the then government and the current government could hardly listen to the concerns of education staff, we were forced and we had to strike and get organized in order to have the voice of the teachers heard by the responsible institutions.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Tell me a little bit about some of the conditions today for teachers in Kosovo. What's it like to be a teacher today? Do you have the resources you need to provide good education? What's it like in the classroom today?

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

It was a pleasure before to have a teacher among the family because this teacher contributed a lot to the society in general. And it was a great pleasure to have one of your family members operating as a teacher. We were quite happy to see when the faculty of education was a target by thousands of young people who wanted to become teachers and contribute to the students of Kosovo. This conviction was somehow diminished due to the fact that there has been no salary increase recently or for many years now, and teachers have come to a situation that they can hardly afford the livelihood of their families and they cannot even manage to pass through from one month to another month with their livelihood.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

So the great pull and drive of so many people in Kosovo to become teachers is like diminished and undermined when their salaries are low. When they can't provide themselves for their families, it makes it hard for them to survive and continue to love teaching. I wonder if you could tell us, Brother Rrahman, how teachers were feeling when the government refused to negotiate over salaries. How did that make teachers feel?

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

Always, the government is the one that decides for the dialogue or for the strikes. By doing or by opening the door to dialogue, we have been able to negotiate and get involved with the previous governments to implement 100% the requirements and legitimate requests of educational staff. When the government decides to block the doors and dismiss the dialogue as a tool for a solution, then there is no other option but striking. And this is a very difficult situation for all of us. For nine months we have

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been trying to negotiate with the government by sending communications and trying to establish a mutual corporation network, but it was impossible. And I want to mention that the apple of discord for last year's strike was especially this attitude by the government not to sit down with the union and discuss the issues concerning to the staff.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Brother Rrahman, when you think back to the days of the 1990s and the difficult times you endured as a teacher, but also the beautiful coming together of the people of Kosovo, to protect education and students and each other, I wonder when you think about the union today and your union that went on strike in solidarity, all of the teachers together on strike in solidarity, do you think that experience of the 1990s has shaped the way teachers feel about education, feel about each other and feel about their union?

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

Of course, '90s served as a great pillar for our organization and solidarity. And with the support and advice provided by our international friends, we managed to get organized and serve as the most successful, strong and a very good organization that did not only protect the rights of its members, but also served as a strong pillar of education.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

And I know the very brave strike action, the very strong brave strike action that the teachers of Kosovo took in January got a lot of global attention. I know your brothers and sisters, who are teachers in other parts of the world, noted the strike and lent their support. I saw a letter from the American Federation of Teachers, for example, AFT, in solidarity with you on your strike. I'm thinking about the experiences you've had as a leader from the time your mother got you inspired and encouraged you to become a teacher to your early days teaching, during war, to your longtime now union leadership, all that experience that you've had as a leader in Kosovo. I wonder with all these other sort of wars and conflicts in the world right now, I think about places like in Ethiopia, Myanmar, different countries that have experienced war and turmoil. I wonder if the teachers of Kosovo would have a message to those other teachers who are experiencing such difficulties, but are still trying to bring a good education to children. With all your experience, I wonder if you have a message for them.

**Rrahman Jasharaj:**

... in this situation. And we share the concerns and sympathy with all our brothers and sisters throughout the world. And once the conflict in Ukraine broke out, we sent a message through our schools to all students in support of Ukrainian people and also in support of other people in other countries of the world.

**Shawna Bader-Blau:**

And now that you've achieved this great success of a powerful and important strike that has now made a difference for teachers and raised wages, and now that you have the government's attention and you have the attention of the Prime Minister, what's next for your union? What are the other improvements you might want to see? What's next? What are your desires for the education sector that you are going to bring into negotiations with your government for the future?

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#### **Rrahman Jasharaj:**

We hope that in February, the teachers and also the civil servants will receive the salaries according to the new law, which was recently adopted. And then we will make our effort in creating better conditions for the whole education system and teaching sector in order to prepare our staff and our teachers for the challenges of 21st century, and be successful in our efforts.

I want to share a painful experience with you because anytime when we have an election, the political entities proclaim that education will be their first priority. But when they took the office and when they sit on the chair, they always forget about their promises. My colleagues in all Kosovo schools are currently battling for education only by a chalk, sponge, whiteboard, and lacking basic tools and requisites for conducting the proper teaching process.

#### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

We stand with you Brother Rrahman and the teachers of Kosovo, your great union, SBASHK. We stand with the children and the future of Kosovo with you and we loved this podcast. It was so great to talk to you. Thank you so much for your inspiring story. And I'm really curious, as we close here, if there's anything else that we haven't talked about that you'd like to share.

#### **Rrahman Jasharaj:**

I would like to thank you for this opportunity for this Podcast and I would like also to recognize the efforts made by the American union, by sister unions throughout the world in supporting our union at the most difficult times. And we are moving forward jointly in our common path to reaching knowledge and making education better. And our efforts will be focused on creating a better education system. And we believe that we will enjoy full support by the American Federation of Teachers and also other education unions.

#### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Brother Rrahman Jasharaj, leader of SBASHK Teachers Union in Kosovo, thank you very much.

Rrahman Jasharaj talked about a time when being a teacher was a prestigious, well-regarded position with salaries that could support their families. He described—and embodies—the dedication of teachers for whom educating and nurturing children is not just a job, but a calling, one they do in whatever circumstances they face. Yet in Kosovo, as around the world, teachers are too often undervalued and their students, our future, study with outdated learning materials in poorly equipped classrooms.

Teachers in Kosovo through their union, SBASHK, are working actively to improve these conditions. We stand with teachers and their rights to have unions too. Because just like we heard from Rrahman in this Podcast, teachers everywhere love to teach and they love their students. And their voices matter.

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The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network, and our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, they work to ensure a righteous future for workers fighting for dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. For the Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.