

Letter from the director

Ignacio Restrepo Abondano

The teachers again...

The deep problem of education in Colombia has been the subject of frequent comments in this column. And for this occasion it is again an obligatory comment. Because public education has gone through an almost unprecedented crisis in terms of duration - for an indefinite period - and the confrontation with the national government is extremely sharp. More than a month of class absence for about eight million children is not anything.

And the economic demands of the teachers are again present in this situation, so they have wanted to disguise them with “the future of our children’s education” in Colombia. Basically, these are premiums, so-called “salary leveling” and wage increase in general. It is not a question of anything insubstantial, since they demand a 28 % increase in wages. In addition, the union demands a “worthy health service” for teachers. This seems to be the bulk of the strike motivation.

Because they also talk about the single day program, which - according to them - has not been well organized by the national government, because there are missing classrooms and teachers, in addition to extra payments for them, and demand a better education for teachers and changes in standards of evaluation. And lastly, they insist on the “Single Teacher Statute”, something that the Government has not complied with either.

It is evident that the economic expenditures demanded by teachers do not seem possible in an economy as precarious as the present one: an economy struck by the excessive expenditure of the central Government in bureaucracy is calculated by *Revista Semana* in 2.5 trillion pesos; in advertising or official propaganda is calculated by the same magazine in 2.3 billion pesos between 2012 and 2014, and the undoubted fiscal gap left by the drop in oil. Add to this the decline in demand, due to tax reforms that seriously affect the economy.

And let’s add that the Ministers of National Education have been for the president a kind of political jokers to fill quotas, without having had during the last seven years a holder with a great specific preparation to deal with the problems of education.

The specific response of the Government consisted of special increases for teachers of two points above the general salary increase for public servants in 2016 and another three points that

will be made in 2018 in the same circumstances. And the general answer is always: “there are no budgetary possibilities”. The rest are promises.

And between the give and take of the ones and the others, eight million children are in their homes with the consequent damage to the parents. And so the Government promises that Colombia is going to be the “best educated country” by 2025 in Latin America.

This strike of the teachers and these government responses are but one more sign of the tremendous underdevelopment in which we find ourselves in education and the hopelessness in the future of substantial improvement. Because while we have had educational breaks here in 2015, 2016 and 2017, children in China leave school at four or five in the afternoon and go to other schools to take classes, until well into the night, in other knowledge and skills.

Deep down the vocation of teacher was lost in Colombia and the main concerns of teachers are wages. They passed from the unselfish masters to the union teachers. No one can deny that the country needs well-paid teachers, but the salary privilege should not correspond to situations of force, but to the conditions of excellence exhibited by a teacher with a vocation to teach.