

The ELT Worker

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"Abandoned by IH": layoffs and street protests in Eastern Spain

“If it can happen to us, it can happen to you”: An interview with IH Eastern Spain teachers

Can you describe the situation after the closure of IH Eastern Spain – why are teachers protesting?

We're protesting because we feel the administration are looking after their own interests rather than those of the workforce. And because we believe this whole mess is largely their doing, though they'd like people to believe it is down to the pandemic. We have not been paid in full for September. We are currently still under contract but won't be paid. We are in legal limbo. Staff, some of whom have worked for the company for more than 30 years, are scared they won't receive their redundancy money. We feel abandoned.

What is the timeline to the dispute between teachers and IH Eastern Spain?

At the end of September the company announced that they couldn't continue to function as a business, and that they wouldn't be starting any courses in October (incidentally some students had paid in July for the term, or even the whole year, although no new payments were accepted in September).

They then took two weeks to take the official steps to file for bankruptcy, but in the meantime the company still exists, and they have to keep all staff on contract. A judge will eventually appoint an administrator to see if the company, or part of it, can be saved (if not the court will liquidate the assets to pay off the debts). The problem is that, at the moment, IH staff are still on contract, but there's no money to pay any salaries. The ERTE [furlough scheme in Spain] finished at the end of September, so there's no money coming from the SEPE (who make the furlough payments), no salaries being paid, and staff can't sign on the dole.

Someone described IH Barcelona as the *Barça* of ELT, due to its reputation for teacher training and some of the people who've taught here. I, for one, expected more from them. A dignified end at least.

Are you represented by a union?

We're with the CCOO [The *Comisiones Obreras* or 'Workers Commissions', Spain's largest trade-union federation].

What do the teachers want?

We want to be *officially laid off* so we can claim welfare benefits, and we want to be paid our missing salaries and our redundancy money.

What has been the response to the teachers' demands from IH Eastern Spain?

Delayed action in putting everything in motion and silence for long periods when pressed about it. Their lawyer stopped taking calls from our lawyer, for example.

How has this situation affected you personally?

I used to be proud to work at IH Barcelona. To see it come to this is shocking. It was hard to see esteemed colleagues, some of whom are only a few years away from retirement, standing outside the school with placards.



Having spoken to many local teachers, it's clear that IH Barcelona has been an integral part of their lives here in the city, as it was to mine. I did my CELTA there in 2004, went on to study Spanish and I made friends there. Companies come and go, but I don't think anybody expected that it could happen to us.

Unlike Merit, who closed in July, IH waited till the end of September. This made it difficult for teachers to find other work as they'd missed the all-important September recruitment window. For part-time staff it's been a mad scramble. Full-time teachers are in limbo.



I have to say I've also been touched by the people who've reached out and shown support. While my respect for the company has plummeted, my faith in the inherent goodness of people has not.

How has this affected other teachers you are in contact with?

Some teachers waited for months to receive any furlough payments. Some are still waiting, having had no income for six months, and are in danger of being evicted. Many teachers are neither employed nor able to sign on the dole. There are also several families with children where both parents work for IH Eastern Spain and it's been particularly hard for them.

What is the ERTE (furlough scheme in Spain) and where are things now?

The ERTE scheme here is different to the furlough scheme in the UK. I was on a part-time ERTE and the government paid 70% of the remainder. After Easter, the vast majority of the staff went onto an ERTE but the percentage varied. The company paid at the end of the month for their share, but with the ERTE money some people got paid on time at the end of the month by the government while others have had to wait for months.

As regards IH Barcelona, it seems that the company are going to a *concurso de acreedores* (like receivership). This process can take between 2 to 4 months and at the end of it a judge makes a decision, we are then legally *de baja* and can claim dole or get another job. Until then, we are in the horrible position of being under contract to the company but we are not being paid. If we quit, we lose the right to redundancy. In theory, we are on paid leave (*permiso retribuido*). Why exactly we are in this situation of legal limbo, I'm not 100% sure.

What message would you like to send out to other teachers who might be worried about their jobs at the moment?

If it can happen to us, it can happen to you. IH Barcelona had a good reputation and it's been hard to come to terms with the fact that a company you respected and trusted can treat its staff and students in this way. I'd say if you don't know what everything means on your payslip, find out. If there's a union, join. It's incredibly sad to say but *trust less and know your rights*

DISCLAIMER: This article is distributed in the public interest, to help ELT teachers to claim their rights under relevant employment law, and is based on opinions and experiences of workers at IH Barcelona/ IH Eastern Spain only. An online press release by IH World dated 30.09.2020 states clearly that "International House is not a franchise. All IH schools are independently owned and managed companies, so no other IH affiliated schools are directly affected by this closure."

THE ELT WORKER'S MESSAGE TO IH EASTERN SPAIN

- Settle the employment status of your teachers!
- Pay your teachers the wages they are owed!
- Pay your teachers their redundancy money!



DON'T ABANDON YOUR TEACHERS!