

Israeli Christian schools strike to protest cuts in public funding

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JERUSALEM (RNS) Israel's 47 Christian schools are entering the second week of an open-ended strike to protest ongoing cuts in government allocations, which they attribute to government discrimination against minority religious groups.

The schools, 40 of them Catholic, teach 33,000 Christian and Muslim Arab students in central and northern Israel.

Officials from various Christian denominations called the strike on August 31, after nearly two years of negotiations with the Ministry of Education failed to convince the government to reinstate the funding it has withdrawn from the country's semi-private schools during the past six years.

That funding once covered up to 75 percent of the schools' operating costs. Today that number has dropped to 29 percent, according to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

On Sunday thousands of parents, students, and teachers demonstrated opposite the prime minister's office in Jerusalem to demand the same level of funding the government provides to two ultra-Orthodox Jewish school networks that, like the Christian schools, are not part of the public school system.

On Monday, 450,000 Arab students in non-Christian public schools held a one-day solidarity strike.

Israel's Jewish schools are backed by ultra-Orthodox political parties in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's sliver-thin coalition government. Without the parties' support, the government would fall, resulting in new elections.

Our children are Israeli and should have the same rights,” said Abdel Masih, general director of Catholic Schools in Israel.

Wadie Abunassar, an adviser to the Catholic Church, said the Christian school budgeting crisis is part of the Israeli government’s “systematic discrimination” toward the country’s minorities. Christians comprise just 2 percent of the Israeli population while Muslims comprise roughly 20 percent.

“This is not acceptable in a country which claims to be the only democracy in the Middle East,” Abunassar said.

The Ministry of Education said in a statement that Christian schools “are supported equally, the way other unofficial but recognized institutions are supported” and that it is holding “ongoing meetings with representatives of the Christian educational institutions.”

During the past six years government budget cuts have hurt semi-private schools, known as “unofficial but recognized schools,” by greatly decreasing funding for their operating expenses. The Education Ministry also capped tuition fees.

During negotiations the Christian schools rejected the ministry’s suggestion to become “special schools”—a status that would permit them to charge higher tuition but not receive additional government funding—“because this will put a heavy load on the parents,” the Office of Catholic schools said in an August 31 statement. Becoming public schools would mean a loss of autonomy, the officials said.