



Anastasia's burden

an optimistic story concerning the living wage

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Anastasia was waiting at the village center bus stop. She was alone. Olia and Ala, her female coworkers at the „Conftext” garment factory, did not arrive yet.

It was cold outside, as it is the case with every autumn morning. Anastasia took a look at her dirty and wet boots: several layers of dew and dust clung onto them. She exhaled air into her palms in order to get warm. The hot steam lingered for a short while in her palms, then dripped between her fingers.

Anastasia checked her watch.

„There’s still time”, she said to herself.

... A thick curtain of mist lingered over the village. The silhouettes of the trees planted along the road could barely be seen through the fog. Dog barking was discernible in the distance. The morning silence was being interrupted by a rooster. Somewhere from another part of the village you could hear the voices of people, the sounds of animals and the hoarse noise of a tractor engine that was refusing to ignite.



Two shadows emerged from the fog. It was Ala and Olia. Huddled and enveloped in the steam of their own breath, they approached the bus stop.

„Morning, girls.”

„You are more diligent than us, Nastia. Do you think that they will offer you a bonus for coming early to the station or perhaps you want to count your waiting time as paid working hours?”, Ala asked jokingly.

„Nah, I know that I wait & freeze at my own expense”.

„That’s the way it is. We wait at our own expense,

we freeze at our own expense, we work at our own expense, we get sick at our own expense...”

One by one, other women joined them shortly...

After a few minutes, the bus arrived. The women were in a hurry to get on board.

The air was slightly cold inside the bus, as were the seats; however, as soon as the bus filled up, it got warmer.

„A half an hour trip to the city is not that long”, someone said jokingly.

„You can neither freeze during the length of the trip nor can you properly warm up nor do you have time for a nap”.



„Perhaps we should ask the driver to take another, longer route, in order to be able to take a nap and warm up?“, added another woman.

As the women exchanged quips, the bus reached the factory...

The „Conftext“ clothing factory is quartered in the halls of the former „Lenin“ factory. The mosaic above the factory entrance, which represents Lenin talking to a few seamstresses, is the single testament that remains from that era, apart from the factory director and union inherited from the old factory...

The women passed by the hallway coffee ma-

chine, where Anastasia got a cup of tea in order to get warm, then moved forward.

She greeted the entrance security guard, touched her electronic card at the turnstile and entered the premises.

A new work day has begun... Over the course of the last three years, each and every work day was the exact copy of the previous one. For three years, Anastasia was manning the garnish machine, where she performed the edging on dresses, which was the final operation before a dress was complete.



It was Friday night. The workday just came to an end. It was raining lightly. Anastasia got off the bus well after nightfall. The village was cold and dark, as it was during the morning.

She went to the small village shop, which the villagers call Maria's bar, to get bread, milk, soap, butter and rice. „I shouldn't forget to buy something sweet for the children", Anastasia said to herself.

She had no money, so she asked Maria to put the costs of the products on her tab. Opening tabs was common among the villagers. On a few occasions,

Maria joked that the amounts registered in the debt notebook are ten times higher than the value of all the goods in store and that if the notebook would catch on fire, higher losses would incur than if the whole store burned down!

Anastasia left the store and slowly headed home. She was exhausted.

The entire family - Nicu, Dan and her mother, Elena - were waiting for her at the table.

„How lucky I am to have mum around. If it weren't for her, the children would have had to wait for another hour until I cooked something to eat".



She remembered how Olia confessed that she was discontent that every night, after work, she had to come home and cook food. Her husband claimed that cooking was a woman's business and even if he were at home, he would not cook anything until she arrived...

During times like this, a hot plate of chicken soup is a blessing.

In the background, the news of the day was aired on TV.

„Fires in Australia. Heavy rains in India. Flood displaced houses. The president met with district/county farmers. A group of citizens held a protest

in front of the Chişinău Shopping Center”.

Anastasia started to pay attention.

„Who are they protesting against and why do they protest at the mall? Are the prices too high?”

She continued to listen...

„The group of citizens protested in front of the shopping center in order to express their solidarity with the workers who manufacture shoes and clothes. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the working conditions in the textile industry and demanded that global brands that produce in Moldova, such as Bike, Prinark, Xara and Rochia-to, pay a living wage to the workers. Additionally,

the protesters called on all consumers to join the movement, which demanded from global brands more responsibility and better conditions for seamstresses”.

Anastasia turned towards the TV set and paid close attention. She saw a group of about 30 people standing in front of the shopping mall with signs and megaphones. She attempted to read some of the messages written on the signs.

„Stop the consumerism!”

„Living wages for workers!”

„People before profit!”

„Clean clothes, not dirty profits!”

...The News anchor explained that „the protest was held on Black Friday, the day when stores display major discounts on all products in order to attract more buyers and increase sales”.

A female protester further explained that “the price at which clothes are sold on Black Friday is the closest to the real price of clothes. If a garment is sold at a 70% discount, this means that over 70% of its price is profit, while the other 29% represent the costs paid for raw material, design, promotion and transport. Only 1% of the garment cost is directed to the seamstresses who manufactured it. That is why we’re protesting. We demand that labouresses receive adequate pay for their work. Companies do not suffer losses on Black Friday. They lower their prices in order to attract more customers”.

Another protester said that „If brands can afford to offer 70% discounts on Black Friday without suffering losses, we demand brands to direct at least 3% to the workers, so that workers receive a living wage. A living wage is a wage that covers their and their family’s basic needs: food, clothing, housing, education, transportation and health care. In addition, a living wage would allow workers to save money for unforeseen expenses. According to estimates, the Moldovan living wage is about 12 000 lei”.

Mum Elena burst out laughing.

— Did you hear that Nastia? You should receive 12 000 lei. How much do you get now? 4500 lei?

— Yes, about 4500. Sometimes slightly more, sometimes slightly less.

— Mommy, mommy, Nicu intervened, if you get a 12 000 lei wage, will we finally travel to the seaside?

— We sure will, babycakes.

... Anastasia could not believe her ears. She was surprised. It was a rare occurrence for TV news to cover issues and protests concerning her work, factory labour conditions and low wages.

She has previously heard from her sister, Tamara, who worked in Spain, about people protesting in front of shops and malls against discounts and consumerism. She has also heard, of course,



of protests demanding higher wages. In fact, she was talking to other factory colleagues about demanding higher wages starting next year. However, she has never heard of a „living wage”.

„These people are talking about a living wage. I understand what this is and it sounds extremely simple; however, I feel as if I hear about it for the first time. I have to make heads or tails out of this living wage...”

Even so, research about the living wage had to wait...

Following the news bulletin, the children watched a movie while Anastasia was doing chores around the household. She had so many chores to do!

While grandma cleaned the dining table, Anastasia filled a washing machine, then did the dishes.



„I have to sew Dan’s pants button. Nicu told me that he tore his jacket sleeves at school. The jacket will still fit him over the course of this year and he will wear it, because it is still good and I can’t afford a new one. However, it won’t fit him anymore next year, because he grows so fast, so I’ll have to buy a new one then...”

While she was sweeping the house, Anastasia reminded herself that she should, either on Saturday or on Sunday, check whether Nicu’s winter shoes still fit him or if the shoes aren’t damaged beyond wear. Due to financial constraints, she couldn’t buy new shoes, that’s why she told Nicu on a daily basis not to hit every rock on his way, even though she knew that Nicu probably doesn’t listen.

„He’s a child, Anastasia thought to herself. Children should play. It’s not his fault that I don’t have money...”



Eventually, after the children fell asleep and grandmother went to bed following her evening prayer, Anastasia found some time to doze off in front of the computer.

She wrote a couple of messages to her sister in Spain and to a former classmate who was working in Israel. Then she watched some short video clips regarding cooking, home repair ideas and room flowers... Then she remembered about the protest held in front of the mall.

She entered „living wage in Moldova” in the search field. The search engine generated several results.

„Hm, there’s a lot to read,” Anastasia told herself.

She found a study that researched the Moldovan living wage. Once again, she encountered the 12 000 lei figure. She was curious about how the study authors reached this number. „Why not 14 thousand? Or 10 thousand? Why is there such a big gap between the living wage and the wage working people receive? What is the government position on the living wage? What is the position of private companies on this matter?”

It was past midnight, but Anastasia continued to read with interest.

Presumably, the journalists who calculated the Moldovan living wage surveyed the clothing labouresses at a factory located in the south of the country. They asked the workers to write down their monthly food expenses and the real prices paid for each product. Then the journalists calculated some kind of typical diet, which, as Anastasia understood, was somewhere in between what people usually eat and what they are supposed to eat in order to stay healthy. A unit of consumption was the equivalent of the daily ration of an adult, while half a unit was the equivalent of a child's daily ration. The average consumption of the average family is three consumption units, for two adults and two children, which is representative of Anastasia's family. Subsequently, the authors calculated how much it would cost the average family (three consumption units) to eat healthy for the course of a month. In Moldova, according to their measurements, people spend almost half of their income on food. Afterwards, they multiplied monthly food expenses by two in order to cover non-food expenses. This is how they reached the 12 000 lei figure...

Anastasia thought to herself that she had a four member family or, as the study puts it, „three consumption units” or three consumption mouths, as Anastasia would call them. Out of the four member family, she alone was employed and received a wage, while her mother had a 1000 lei pension, which did not have much of an effect on the family budget.

Anastasia couldn't help but dream of what her life would look like if she had a 12 000 lei wage. She would have been able to afford better food for the children. She would have been able to afford a new pair of boots for her mother. She would have been able to leave more often the village with the children (at least visit a puppet theater). She would have been able to purchase new doors (the children's room door has swollen and would

not close, thus contributing to a decrease in room temperature). She also imagined about how she would finally be able to go to the dentist and get the jaw tooth that bothered her for about two months fixed.

„That would be nice,” she thought to herself. „If I didn't have to wake up at the crack of dawn, I'd keep researching more about the living wage...” She turned off the computer and went to bed...



Anastasia's house is located at the outskirts of the village, two blocks away from the only paved street. Every morning, when the village roads were muddy, Anastasia wore a pair of galoshes until she reached the paved road. Then she left the galoshes behind the gate of her coworker, Ala. In the evening, she did the opposite: she left her boots and put on her galoshes to get home.

The house has seen better days and should have been repaired a long time ago. Additional layers of paint have been applied on the gnawed window frames, which should have been changed ages

ago. The doors have swollen and deflated and did not close properly. A few cracks appeared on the exterior walls.

„What can you expect from a single woman?“, Anastasia comforted herself.

„If my ex-husband drank less and periodically remembered that he has two children to feed, maybe I would have been able to save some money and repair the house. I am lucky that my mother does the impossible and manages to set aside 100-200 lei from her pension. That's how we managed to change the fence this summer. All the



animals from the road could access the yard. And Dan reached that age when if you lose him out of sight for 2 seconds, you will find him far away, near the well. He already knew all the openings in the fence, while the asbestos raft used to patch the fence didn't help us at all. Blessed be my mother for contributing money, which allowed me to buy seven cubic metres of firewood. We are ready to face the winter cold."



Anastasia has been working at „Conftext” for 7 years. For the first six months, as a beginner, she ironed the dresses sewn by other labouresses. Then she switched to sewing - she liked to sew more than to iron, because she found the occupation more „creative”. Other more pragmatic reasons involved not having her hands scorched with the iron - which were completely burnt - and the higher seamstress wage. Instead of 2000 lei, she was receiving between 3000-4000 lei as a seamstress, depending on her performance. She joined the factory union right from the start. Union membership was an unwritten rule bun-

dled with the employment contract.

Last month, after Alexandra, a company union committee worker, retired, colleagues put forward Anastasia's candidacy for the position.

„Girls, don't you have other topics to joke about? Imagine me on the union committee. What would I do there? Call me scared pants but I'm afraid to speak at meetings, especially in front of bosses. I'm going to freeze. Can't you pick someone else?”

However, her colleagues insisted and Anastasia joined the union committee.

At first, she felt intimidated that she would have to speak at union meetings on an equal foot-

ing with the bosses, whom she had to listen to carefully during work hours and whose gaze she feared and that she would have to contradict them on some occasions... However, she overcame her fear when she realized that she had not only to speak on her behalf, but also on the behalf of her fellow labouresses.

She was ashamed to be ashamed. Union work was too responsible to leave room for shyness. She understood that her colleagues' families and her colleagues' ability to put food on the table often depended on her.

Anastasia felt that she was becoming more determined, bolder and more combative.



On Monday morning, Olia and Ala arrived at the station before Anastasia.

— Nastia, I saw your Facebook post from yesterday. Did you like the protest held in the capital?

— Should we hold a quick protest in front of the county market? Ala asked jokingly.

— No problem! But keep in mind that Rochiato dresses are not sold at the county market. They are too expensive and we are too poor to afford them. But if we think seriously about it, wouldn't you like to have wages that provide for a decent living and provide the ability to raise our children? Or, do you want us to immigrate to Italy or

Israel as Valia from assembly line one or Tania from assembly line two did?

— Does the fox want cheese? Of course we would like to have a 12 000 lei wage, but who will pay us that amount?

— Olea, the fox doesn't have to send the kids to school and the fox doesn't need to buy firewood for the winter. If the attic collapses, the fox quickly digs another burrow and, last but not least, the fox doesn't need clothing and shoes once every season. If I were a fox, my current wage would allow me to eat cheese three times a day. How about you, Ala, when was the last time you ate cheese?

— At Andriuşa's birthday, last month. I can't deny that I like cheese and I wouldn't mind caressing myself with cheese on other occasions other than the holidays. Nastia, do you really think that this living wage is more than a bedtime story for children?

— I don't know about the children, but I had a hard time falling asleep. I read about the living wage on the internet in order to unriddle it, then I daydreamt until about two in the morning. I hope I don't fall asleep at work today.

In the meantime, other women arrived at the station. The bus also arrived shortly.

During the trip to the factory, the women continued to talk about the living wage. What first started as a joke, gradually morphed into a serious discussion about the living wage.

— Girls, at the end of each month, I feel like screaming and crying due to sadness and helplessness, right after my wage evaporates after I return my debts to the grocery shops, after I pay the public utilities and after I buy something for the children. I come to the sudden realisation that I don't have any money left and that I have to survive for an entire month by taking new loans. This situation repeats itself every month. Every month I pray that unforeseen incidents that require spending do not occur, because I can't afford any.

— Good thing we can start a tab at the store. Otherwise I would not survive paycheck to paycheck.

— If I couldn't grow 20-30 geese in the lake, my children wouldn't eat meat, said Anastasia.

— Is that moral? Is this right? I mean, I'm busting my hump to fulfil the production quota and I work hard to survive, while the Rochiato boss, as I've heard, lives in a palace in Milan, owns a private yacht and travels around the world whenever he feels like it!

— Well, his yacht is paid for by our sweat & labour...

— Neither is Mr. Vasile, our boss, faring bad. He owns a house in the county and a second house in Chişinău - I wouldn't say that he works harder than us.

— I don't think that they would starve to death if they shared the gains with us, which would allow us to lead a decent life. Perhaps, this would allow them to have a clean conscience and sleep better...

— Listen, Anastasia, would you please raise this issue before the committee? Maybe 12 000 lei is too much, but even half of it would still mean the world.

— Girls, I've been thinking about this all Sunday. How about we talk to Tamara, the union leader, about this? We shouldn't ask for better wages. We should demand better wages. I'm going to talk to her today.

Due to the conversation, the bus trip seemed short. During the lunch break, Anastasia approached Tamara at her sewing machine.

— Tamara, do you have a couple of minutes?

— Sure, Nastia. Go ahead.

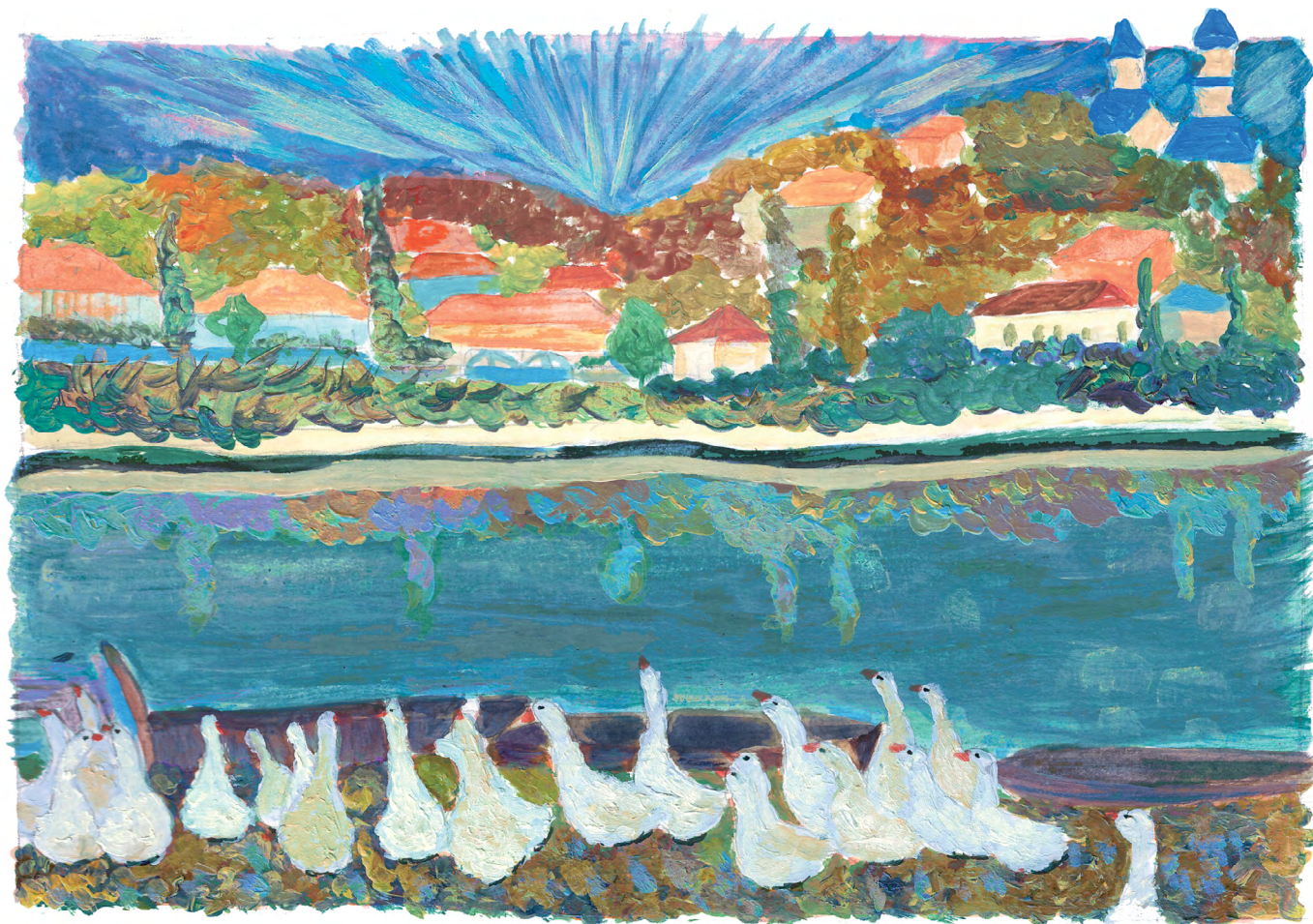
— I saw a TV news report on Friday about a protest held in front of the mall...

— The one concerning the 12 000 lei wage? I saw that as well. It got my attention too.

— Yes, that one. Those people brought up the issue of a living wage. I searched the internet and found plenty of information on the issue - it was even researched in Moldova.

— Do you know how they got to the 12 000 lei figure? To me it seems made up.

— No, it was not a made up number. They carefully estimated the amount based on expenses for food, for clothing, health care, education, housing, transportation and even unforeseen expenses, after interviewing workers from various factories. The amount is real. I've been thinking a lot about this. I understood that our wage is low and that we have to pay for all of this out of



our own pocket, in addition to the 2-3 mouths we have to feed on top. If my understanding is correct, the problem is that the factory does not want to help us cover these expenses.

— What do you want from me, what do you want from the union?

— Well, I want your advice on how we can make the factory take on more of these expenses. Thank God it has that ability.

— Do you mean that you want us to ask for this living wage?

— That's precisely what I want.

— Are you insane? Do you really think that Mr. Vasilie is waiting for us to demand higher wages? Do you think that he has a bag of extra money in his security safe and that he never considered to share it with us? Let's not be naive, Anastasia... Secondly, how can the two of us decide on behalf of the union without consulting with the other members?

— Tamara, I want to bring up this issue at the next union meeting.

— I don't think that's a good idea and I'll tell you why. You are new and have little experience working with unions and directors. Do you know how many garment factories are unionised? At



most 10% and that is a generous guess. Of the new ones, almost none are unionised. In some sense, we are lucky that the union was preserved after the factory was privatised. For all these years, it has not been easy for us. We fought for workers, but our fight was prudent. Please don't get upset, but we never asked the bosses for something we saw on TV the other night. That's not how things work. Real life is different from what you see on TV... Oh, and the protesters you saw? It may be easy for them to demand higher wages in front of the shopping mall, because they have nothing to lose. However, it is very difficult

for us to do so from inside the factory, because we risk losing everything.

— Tamara, if they are demanding a living wage in front of the shopping center it means that we are not alone in this and that the unions have friends outside the factory.

— Anastasia, you are well intentioned, but you are very naive. If you want a high wage, a living wage, as you saw on TV, go by yourself to Mr. Vasile and demand it. Let's see what his answer will be! Or you could fulfill double or triple production quotas!

— Tamara, that's why we have a union, so we don't have to fight for our rights by ourselves

with Mr. Vasile. Labour unions mean that we can do things together.

— Anastasia, calm down and think about this once again. You will reach the same conclusion: it is impossible... I told you that not all factories are unionised. Do you know why? Because employers consider unions to be a cancer for the company. We are lucky to have a union, as it is. If we rock the boat too much, we might sink it.

Anastasia wanted to verbally burn her, but preferred to leave. Burning Tamara would not have solved anything. She knew Tamara. Tamara would give up anything to keep her position as head of the factory union committee.

Anastasia, on the other hand, was not willing to give up. The following union meeting was scheduled for Friday and Tamara would not be able to shut her down during the meeting. In the meantime, Anastasia decided to read more and to talk with other workers in order to gather support.



On Friday morning, Anastasia told her mother not to wait for her for dinner, because she would be late. The union meeting was scheduled immediately after work hours and could last until midnight. In fact, that was the standard duration of union meetings.

Anastasia was excited. In the meantime, she managed to talk about her living wage idea with several colleagues. However, she caught wind that Tamara has been spreading the word that Anastasia's idea was dangerous.

„Whatever happens, we will speak freely before all of our colleagues. Let it be known which side

people are on. We aren't children, to whisper in the shadows”.

Tamara started the meeting by reading the agenda.

“1. Organisation and unfolding of winter holiday cultural activities.

2. New Year bonus payments.

3. 2021 annual leave schedule.

4. 2021 distribution of subsidized vacation passes for union members”.

Even though Tamara did not include the living wage issue on the agenda, she started the meeting by talking about it.

— Dear female colleagues and you two, male colleagues, over the course of the last two weeks I have heard at each and every sewing station discussions about Anastasia's naive dream, according to which, everyone in the factory could receive, thanks to some miracle that even Anastasia isn't aware of, a wage of at least 12 thousand lei. Anastasia calls it a living wage and she heard about it on TV. Needless to say, everyone would be happy to receive such a wage. However, unlike some, I wake up from my dreams when I come to work and I do not confuse dreams with reality. Not only is this impossible and unreal to achieve, it is also dangerous, because we risk losing our jobs and risk being kicked on the streets. Do you think that Mr. Vasile is so fond of us and can't live without us? He can find replacements anytime. Need I remind you that job offers do not grow on trees? Here's the deal...

Anastasia felt the need to intervene, so she stood up and interrupted Tamara:

— Dear colleague, it is only fair for the issue initiator to advocate for the idea in front of the assembly, so that we could properly debate it. Instead, you strawmanned the idea and misrepresented it so badly, that any sane person would have thought that I was crazy... Allow me to advocate for the idea, since I brought it up...

— Well, the issue was not even on the agenda, Tamara defended herself.

— Seriously? Is that why you started the meeting by talking about it? If you can bring up issues that are not on the agenda, I have the same right to do so...

— She has that right! Let her speak, said an encouraging voice from the chamber. The voice belonged to Olga, a woman from Anastasia's village. Kudos to her, Anastasia thought to herself, as a true friend, she knew when help was needed most.

— Yes, I will speak. In fact, I've talked to each of you about the living wage over the course of the

last two weeks. I will not repeat again what the living wage is. However, I will ask you to compare the information, the tone, the due attention and the enthusiasm with which I spoke to you about the living wage, in contrast to Tamara. For starters, I spoke respectfully and I held the belief that achieving the living wage is possible, which compels us to try. From the get go, Tamara told us that it is impossible. Secondly, I want to add something that I understood after reading about the living wage and about the struggle of other workers to achieve it. Let me tell you a secret: the living wage is not a favour that we ask for from either the director or from Rochiato. It is not a favor or a whim that we would like them to fulfill for us. All over the world, workers who fight for a living wage, they fight for an inherent right, which they deserve. I did not come before you with this issue because I saw a news report about a protest on TV. I started to take this seriously after I considered my experience of having to do the impossible in order to survive. In other countries, workers, unions, activists and other organizations have been talking and demanding living wages for decades. You may be wondering what have they achieved over the years?! Perhaps not everybody is being paid a living wage, but at least in some companies this has become a reality. It was achieved by simple, hard working people just like us. At the beginning, the living wage seemed like an impossible idea to them as well. At first glance, it may not seem like much, yet these people have managed to raise awareness about the issues that workers in the clothing industry are facing and to build alliances with workers from other factories and countries. Do you think that Rochiato only manufactures clothing in our factory? It also owns factories in Romania and in Ukraine, where their employees get crumbs, just like us. Do you know how much a dress we sew costs? Take for example the evening dress we sewed today.

— How much could it cost? 500 lei?

— Somewhere along those lines. Try 2400 instead of 500. That's the selling price of the dress.

— 2400 can not be true. Aurica, how much does it cost to sew tweezers?

— 1 leu per operation.

— Well, how many operations does it take to sew a dress? Tailoring the skirt, the bodice, the straps, the cuffs, the cord; the linear elastic processing of the collar, of the cord, of the cuffs; processing the straps on the lining machine, sewing tweezers, attachment via strap tightening, sewing the sides of the skirt and of the bodice; sewing the cuffs, overcasting the cuffs, attaching the cuffs, attaching the collar, attaching the straps; sewing the embroidery frame at the sewing machine, edging the 3-thread dress on the lining machine.

— That's over 20 operations, someone from the audience said.

— Is it safe to say that the cost of each operation ranges from one to four lei? We get paid about 100 lei per dress, for the entire production process. We sew a few hundred dresses per day. Let's perform the cost-profit analysis of a single dress. The workers are paid 100 lei for producing the dress. Who pockets the other 2300 lei? We split 100 lei between a few dozen people, while a select few split 2300 lei, which, obviously, is very disproportionate. What I am trying to say is that the factory can afford to increase our wages. If they paid us at least 300 lei per dress, that would make a huge difference for use, while the owners' bottom line would not be significantly affected.

— I bet they will neither starve nor will they eat rusks.

— You think you're so smart. Nastia, you said it yourself that Rochiato owns factories in Romania and in Ukraine. Did it occur to you that the owners could simply pack their bags and move the production operations to Romania or Ukraine or elsewhere, if we foolishly ask for a triple or quadruple

pay raise? Why don't you appreciate what you have?! You should thank the Lord for having a job and you should stop looking for trouble. Trust me, trouble is not that far away. Let's get back on track and discuss our issues at hand. What carols and greetings should we prepare for the New Year? How much money should we allocate for gifts for children?

— Tamara, I have a feeling that we haven't graduated middle school yet. Can't you see that we're talking about something that is really hurting us? How can you switch to carols?! What did the union do to increase our wages? This is not a new topic of discussion. For how long have we been talking about the fact that the quotas keep going up, while the wages stagnate.

— Salaries will rise when the government will raise the minimum wage. This should give you a hint about what to ask for during the next election campaign. Until then, we shouldn't be barking up the wrong tree. Anastasia, if you are so unhappy with how the union works, you can establish an alternative union and continue dreaming about a living wage or other crazy ideas.

— Tamara, the union is not your personal property. However, I will leave anyway and I will establish a new union. The current union is half full with people who are too afraid to act. The same principle applies up the chain, up to the confederation. Even if I succeed in convincing you, I'll run into your bosses afterwards.

— Good riddance!

Anastasia would have liked to fight back, but she felt that the discussion was no longer constructive. It degenerated into an exchange of angry remarks that could not affect change. She took her bag and left. Ala, Olia and a few other colleagues followed her. Tamara was upset. She felt that no one was interested in the agenda anymore, so she angrily ended the meeting.

— We will see each other when we learn to cherish what we already have. Have a good evening.



On the way home, Anastasia was crushed by doubts. „Was I too harsh? What was I thinking when I confronted Tamara? We still have to work together. Going forward, will I be able to deal with her? Establishing a new union? Does a single woman, with two children and a sick mother in a damaged house, have nothing better to do than to establish a new union? I have no idea how to establish one...”

Her friends tried to comfort her by making jokes. „It's high time our village produced a leader, at the very least a union leader. It produced simple workers more than enough...”

They reached the village.

The house entrance light was burning. It was a

sign that Nastia's mother wasn't sleeping yet and that she was waiting for Nastia. Right near the entrance, she saw two sacks of cabbage.

„I'm so glad that mother bought cabbage. We kept postponing it until winter came. I'll have to wash the barrel tomorrow and pickle these cabbages”...

On Saturday morning, Anastasia kept sleeping like a log. She felt a warm breath beside her.

— Ma-ma-ma-ma

Dan pulled her with his hands by the nose, then by the ears. Afterwards, she felt the full weight of his body pressing against her belly. She smiled, then opened her eyes. Anastasia kissed Dan and crammed him near her. Nicu joined them. He also wanted to be hugged. Anastasia kissed them both.

— Morning, mama's beautiful boys. Are we having breakfast together this morning? What shall we eat?

— I want pancakes with chocolate and tea, said Nicu as he looked hopefully at his mother's reaction.

— Nicușor, mother will make you pancakes, but we don't have chocolate at the moment. What jam do you want? We have strawberries jam, apple jam and quince jam.

— But Mommy, I want chocolate. Andrei eats Nutella pancakes every morning.

— Nicușor, you know Andrei's mother works in Italy, while I'm here...

— Okay, Mommy, I really don't want you to leave for Italy. Strawberry jam will do. Dănuț, will you be joining us?

Danuț clapped and laughed in sign of approval.

After the meal, Anastasia washed the tub, while grandmother cleaned the cabbage.

The children tried to be of help. They gathered the cabbage leaves from the table and delivered them to the chickens. However, they got bored quickly and went to play in the yard.



For a few moments, Anastasia was dejected. Her thoughts were elsewhere. She could not help but think about yesterday's situation. The night before, she could not fall asleep because of the conflict with Tamara. She had all sorts of thoughts. On the one hand, she considered that she did well and was pleased with herself for having the courage to eloquently address the audience. On the other hand, she felt as if she took a rushed decision, that she was a little naive and that she should have kept her lips sealed. In the morning, she was split between the two conflicting states. The voice of her mother, Elena, snapped her out of it.

— What happened, dear daughter? Your body is present, but your mind is wandering somewhere far away. Did something happen?

— Nothing serious, Mum. I took a decision yesterday and I can't decide whether it was stupid or good. Mother Elena looked at her for an answer. Anastasia continued.

— Yesterday, at the factory union meeting, I wanted to talk about a very good idea, but it so happened that I had an argument with the union leader. Then, I left the union.

— Dear daughter, the union is no big deal. What has the union ever done for you? It gave you two



bags of candy? Don't worry, next time, I'll buy the candy out of my pension. Leaving the union was no big deal... Do you mind telling your mother what your idea was?

— No, mother, the idea of a union is not bad in itself... On the contrary, the union is a must; however, it should fulfill other duties than to give out gifts on New Year and on March 8. We can give out gifts without a union. We need a union in order to get better working conditions and wages... In fact, my proposal concerned getting better wages. Remember the mall protest?

— The one concerning the 12 thousand lei wage?

— Yes, that one. I was really moved by that idea. I could not fall asleep on that fateful evening until I spent the better half of the night searching for information about the living wage. In particular, I was interested in how they determined that 12 000 lei is a living wage. To put it simply, the living wage is the amount which would cover the monthly expenses of a four member family, just like ours. This amount covers expenses for food, clothing, housing, public utilities, transportation, medical care, school expenses and even allows you to make some savings. Currently, we barely survive, not to mention dreaming about saving a single leu. We have to pay off monthly tabs at

the grocery store. After paying off the debts and paying for the public utilities, I have to open a new tab at the grocery store. Our boys are still young and don't require many expenses, but how am I going to pay for Nicu's university fees once he grows up?!

— Oh dear, it wouldn't hurt us at all if you were to receive a higher wage. Are you saying that you brought up the issue at yesterday's meeting?

— I tried, Mum, but I can't say I succeeded. However, I managed to talk to several colleagues about it before the meeting and they were supportive of the idea. I was thinking of convening a special meeting for this issue alone, but Tamara beat me to it and started the meeting by talking about the living wage, even though there were another four

items on the agenda. She presented the issue in a very twisted way, which prompted me to stand up and defend myself. I told her a few choice words, Tamara responded in kind. I urged her to make an attempt to promote the living wage through the union, but she replied that the union would never support such a thing. Afterwards, I told her that we don't need such a spineless and toothless union and that I'm leaving it. She said „good riddance". That's about it.

— Honey, do you believe in this idea? If you have faith in this idea, then you made the right decision, even if you are left alone and none of your colleagues will support you. Keep in mind that your mother will always be with you. My advice is, go ahead with this idea. Don't be scared. You'll regret not going forward with it. Don't be afraid of getting fired, because you'll find some other job that implies a lot of labour and small compensation.

— I have faith in this idea, Mum, and I want to move forward. The thing is, I don't really know how to move forward.

— Why don't you try talking to those people from the capital, the ones you saw on TV. Maybe they can help you. I'm sure it won't hurt.

— Mum, that's a great idea. Pass the bag of salt and let's pickle the cabbage.

— Nicu, please bring your mother the salt from the kitchen and the quinces from the table.

Anastasia placed the cabbages on top of each other, cramming them in order to fit as many heads as possible. She put a few quinces in-between the cabbage heads. Mother Elena dissolved the salt in the cauldron, which Anastasia later poured over the cabbage... The work was done in a few hours and the tub was full of cabbage. The women set the winepress on top.

We've done it again, said Anastasia. We have food for the entire winter. I really want some borscht.



The cabbage will be ready for the borscht in a month. Mother could make you some potato soup.

Afterwards, the family continued its Saturday routine: Nicu swept the yard, mother Elena prepared the potato soup, Anastasia did various chores around the house. She dusted around the house, she did the laundry, she shook the rugs and fed the chickens...

Anastasia wked up until the evening, when she dropped dead and immediately fell asleep.



On Sunday, among other things (preparing Nicu's school clothes and supervising his homework, Anastasia used the computer: she wanted to reach out to the people who protested in front of the mall.

She was quick to find them. A few newspapers covered their protest, while a media portal made their names and the name of the organization they worked for public. All it took was a few clicks to find the contact page of the organization's website.

A phone number and an email was made available.

„How could I call them if I don't know them? What if the provided number is a personal number and the owner does not answer calls from unknown

numbers... I should better write an email message. That's easier. How should I word my letter? After introducing myself as Anastasia Moraru, "Conftext" worker, what should I write next? That I heard about their idea? So what? A lot of people heard of it?" After much hesitation, she wrote a short message.

„Dear Sir or Madam,

I am contacting you in regard to your living wage protest. My name is Anastasia Moraru. I have been working for 7 years at the Conftext factory in Ploieni, where I am sewing dresses for Rochiato. I saw the Civic TV news report on your protest. I was glad to

hear that people are interested in our fate, the fate of the clothing industry workers. I liked the living wage idea very much. I've talked to several factory colleagues about the idea. Everyone is excited about it. However, the union doesn't want to hear about it. We would like to know whether it's possible to somehow move things forward? Could you please help us?

Faithfully yours,
Anastasia”..

It was a quiet day at the factory on Monday. Tamara pretended not to notice Anastasia. However, neither was Anastasia very talkative, thus the ladies ignored each other. Everyone was calm as if nothing had happened. Unlike other occasions, Mr. Vasile did not give a lecture. He was surprisingly polite. That meant that either Tamara did not pass the word yet or Mr. Vasile was good at acting. „Perhaps it's better this way”, Anastasia thought to herself. „We shouldn't get ahead of ourselves”.

Over the course of the entire workday she was eager to know whether she received a reply to yesterday's letter. The wait made the workday seem longer.

...The workday was finally over and Anastasia headed home. After putting the children to sleep, she sat at the computer.

She opened the email inbox. She received a message from a relative from Spain, a few notifications from the social network and ... a message from livingwagenow.md

Her heart stopped for a second.

„I received a reply!”

She clicked on the email message, which opened in a few moments.

„Dear Anastasia,

We are extremely pleased that you have reached

out to us. All the more so, we are happy that you are interested in contributing to the effort of making the living wage real. Oh, how well you've named it – the living wage!

We think that it would take too long to communicate on this topic via email or phone. If it is inconvenient for you to get to Chişinău, we could come to Ploieni. Please tell us when you're available.

With kindest regards,

The Living Wage Now team”

Anastasia took into account that Nicu outgrew his boots and needed a new pair. So she decided to go to Chişinău and visit the team's office after purchasing boots for Nicu.

They agreed to meet on Saturday at 12 noon.



It was easy to find the office indicated in the email. The office was quartered in an old building, right in the town centre. The office was situated on the fourth floor. Anastasia was standing in front of a metal door.

She knocked lightly.

— Come on in, a voice invited her!

She entered the office. It was small. A long white desk made of pressed and laminated particle boards filled the room. Sunshine lit the desk through a large window, which was situated on

the opposite side of the room. The walls were covered with newspapers. Some of them were yellowed by the sun. Three people sat at the table...

Anastasia had a seat right next to the window. Through the window she could see the city centre. Since the leaves had already fallen, the city looked like an indeterminate shape colored in various shades of gray.

She didn't know how to start the conversation. One of the activists broke the silence... A very long conversation ensued.



On her way home, Anastasia stopped by a store and bought a jar of chocolate. She was in an excellent mood. Most importantly, she had hope - she was not alone and she was not crazy. She knew that she had allies. Tomorrow she would make chocolate pancakes in order to make the children happy as well.

The trip to the village typically lasts half an hour. She managed to take a seat near the window, which allowed her to relax. Over the course of the entire trip, she held an internal monologue.

„At least now I know what has to be done in order to register a union. It's not complicated. Three people have to establish it. I think Olia and Ala would support me. We should gather someday

after work hours and hold a union meeting, where we should choose the head and write a request to the Ministry of Justice, which would subsequently be forwarded along with the union statute and the union establishment decision. Ion, Ana and Octavian from Living Wage Now said that they would send me a statute model via email and that they would help me draft it. Afterwards, I'll have to return to Chişinău and submit the documents to the Ministry of Justice. With this, the union establishment process is complete. This is the easy part. The hard part comes next. I will have to wage war on two fronts. On the one hand, I will have to fight the other union and headhunt its members. On the other hand I will have to fight for rights and for a living wage against Mr. Vasile and the factory administration.

Additionally, now I know how to rebuttal Tamar's talking point about being naive in regard to Rochiato's ability to move the production process abroad. As it turns out, it's not that easy to step over the workers' heads. On the internet, Ana identified other factories that work for Rochiato - two Moldovan, three Ukrainian and two Romanian factories. Most likely there are other such factories, which are not as transparent, but are subcontracted by Rochiato, as Ion explained...

Maria said something about a European organization, which is called CCC, that could help us contact the workers and unions from other factories subcontracted by Rochiato. We should ask them to join our effort to get Rochiato to pay a living wage for our labour”.

„This is how the Solidarity for Living Wage union was born. It's been one year since its official establishment. It has been an interesting year, albeit, at times, an extremely difficult one. Our journey was the hardest at the beginning, when we registered the union. Tamara, from the legacy union, attempted to sabotage us. She accused me of headhunting her members because I wanted a union leadership position for myself. She even complained to the factory head, saying that I would like to form a new union in order to create trouble for Leadership.

We overcame this obstacle. By the time Tamara and Management found out about the new union, we had already submitted documents to the Ministry of Justice. When she found out that we were forming a new union, Tamara suddenly became very active. The legacy union, which until then had only engaged in event management, suddenly

began to demand better working conditions, a lunch break and ventilation. At one point, Tamara promised that the union would demand to set up a kitchen connected to the gas line, with kettles and a few microwave ovens which would allow workers to heat and eat their food on the spot. However, after so many years of doing nothing, it was too late and too hard to convince people that the legacy union would be able to accomplish anything...

Engaging management wasn't easy, but we handle ourselves. The factory already had an existing union and it was hard for Mr. Vasile to accept that it is not up to management to decide whether workers assemble in a new union.

When we created the union, we promised the colleagues who joined us that we would fight together for a living wage. We did not promise a living wage on the spot, because the union could not bear such costs. However, we promised that we would fight



together, side by side, and that the fight for a living wage would be the main mission of the union.

We've been fighting the good fight for a year. We have organized protests and even marched several times on the central street of the town. You might ask what did our fight get us? We got a larger group of fighters for the living wage. We were just a few members at first.

Then, with the help of the Living Wage Now group, we made the first steps.

We met a few times with the factory management. We told them about the living wage and we officially handed them our demand for the factory to pay its workers a living wage. Mr. Vasile told us that he would gladly pay us two times the living wages, if it were up to him. He said that it is not up to him. He usually issues certain production conditions and costs to large brands, who in turn subcontract the factories who asked for the least amount for their labour. According to Mr. Vasile, it is not possible to pay a living wage and be competitive, when all the other factories are asking for pennies from the big brands.

Management told us that we had to forward our demands to Rochiato.

They thought that this would discourage us and that we would drop our demands. However, we took their advice.

Living Wage Now helped us identify two other Moldovan factories that were subcontracted by Rochiato. Both factories were unionized. We were lucky to establish a relationship with active union members who shared our goal. You can't lose with such allies!

We agreed with those unions to issue joint demands to Rochiato. The naysayers told us that it was a terrible idea. What if Rochiato left Moldova altogether?

But where would it go? To Romania? To Ukraine? To Poland? Well, workers just like us labour there. They are people with whom we can get along, even

if we speak different languages. With the help of the CCC, we reached out to the Rochiato workers from Poland (two factories), from Romania (two factories) and from Ukraine (four factories).

It took us months to talk, to align our goals and to determine what the living wage is in Romania, Ukraine and Poland. In absolute numbers, compared to Moldova, their living wage might seem high. In reality, it only covers the cost of living, which is higher there...

It was worth it. We managed to send Rochiato the joint claim signed by union committees from all East European factories subcontracted by Rochiato. All demanded the same thing: a living wage.

It was a very special moment for us, one that we have been waiting for a long time and that we only dreamt of. The moment when workers joined together, in an effort of solidarity that transcended national borders, rivers, mountains and languages that stood between us. Our voices were one and we demanded the same thing: a living wage.

It's just the beginning. Rochiato is not the only brand that should be „asked” to pay a living wage. All other brands should be „asked” as well. Afterwards, we should do the same in all other industries.

Today, I present to you the result. It's an official letter from the Rochiato leadership in Milan. I received the letter a few days ago and I kept the good news a secret, which was very hard. I kept it a secret because I wanted us to share this joy together, just as we fought and shared hardships together.

The news is that Rochiato commits to pay, starting with January 1st, next year, a living wage to all the labouresses who work for Rochiato in all the factories around the world”.

A wave of applause flooded the room after Anastasia finished her presentation.

A second wave, of tears, flooded her eyes. She was crying. These were tiers of joy.

She felt that these women who listened to her and who walked with her a most difficult path were like family. She was part of a big family...



AFTERWORD

Concerning the living wage

The case for the living wage

In Moldova, similar to other countries, the minimum is officially determined based on the minimum cost of living. The minimum wage is calculated every year and is adopted by the executive after negotiations with trade unions and employers.

In 2020, the Moldovan **minimum gross wage** was **2935 lei**, while the **minimum net wage**, which is the amount that employees receive for a month of work, was **2311.60 lei**.

This amount is not nearly enough to cover the basic needs of a single person, not to mention a family of four.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (BNS), Moldovans spend 44% of their monthly income on food, while the other 56% cover non-food expenses. If the ratio is applied to the minimum wage, this would imply that 1017 lei should be enough for food expenses per person, while 1294 lei should be enough to cover public utility costs and expenses related to clothing, hygiene, medicines and medical checks, etc.

It's hard to imagine that someone could, in fact, survive on such a small amount. Now imagine that the minimum wage earner has at home two minor children and an old woman, who all depend on this wage in order to survive, similar to Anastasia's case. While Anastasia did not receive a minimum wage, she received the average net wage in the clothing industry, which, according to the BNS, was 4431.3 lei, per woman, in 2019. For comparison purposes, a man employed in the clothing industry received an average of 5476.3 lei (about 24% more).

As long as the minimum living cost is the only instrument used to shape minimum wage policies, the clothing industry and other industry wages will remain very close to the minimum wage, which is less than enough for a decent living.

The living wage is an alternative for the minimum wage. It estimates the relative wage level that allows workers and their families to lead a decent life. The methodology used to determine the living wage in this book takes into account the living expenses, food and non-food related, for a month for 3 consumption units. A consumption unit is the equivalent of one adult or two children. The living wage also includes an extra 10% for unfore-

seen expenses or for saving purposes.

Obviously, living wages differ across countries, because living costs vary. However, regardless of country, it measures the same thing: the monthly cost of living of the average family.

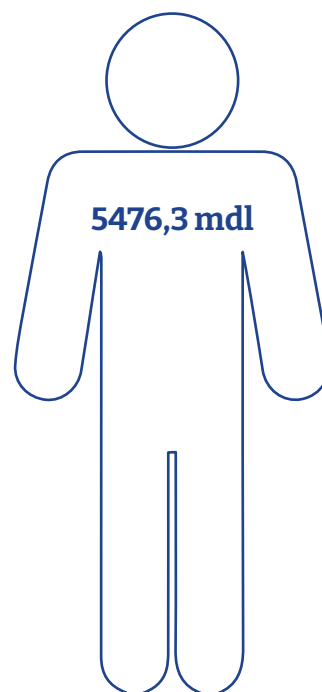
What does the living wage account for?

It accounts for expenses related to housing, health care, education, clothing, transportation, food and savings.

For this reason, the living wage, as opposed to the minimum wage, is better for assessing the cost of living for workers at regional, international and even at global level.



Medium wage in clothing industry according to the National Bureau of Statistics of in 2019



Medium wage in clothing industry according to the National Bureau of Statistics of in 2019

For the purpose of this example, let's consider the clothing and footwear industry.

The industry is structured in global supply chains, which represent interconnected networks of companies located in different countries, which manufacture clothing products.

This book showed Moldovan workers, such as Anastasia and her colleagues, who worked for a foreign brand (an Italian fictional brand - Rochiato). Rochiato bought raw materials, such as cotton, fabrics, buttons and accessories from several suppliers from Bangladesh and India. In Italy, several designers produced the dress designs. The dress designs, along with the raw materials, were transported to sewing factories in Moldova, Ukraine, Romania and Poland, factories which were subcontracted by Rochiato. The workers who manufactured the Rochiato dresses received for their labour up to 1% of the dress selling price. Upon completion, the dresses were transported to Italy, where they were sold in retail stores, via retail companies. The fictional brand Rochiato did not sell dresses on the Moldovan market, even though the products were manufactured there. Moldovan consumers cannot afford to buy dresses from Rochiato, which are too expensive, because they are not mass-produced.

How is it that Rochiato started to manufacture dresses at the Conftex factory in Moldova? Global brands identify labour in the poorest regions of the globe. The most luxurious and expensive clothes, as well as fast-fashion clothes, meaning cheap clothes, are manufactured in the poorest regions of the world - in the Global South and East (i.e. South and East Europe, South and East Asia, Africa, South America). You might ask yourselves „Why?”. Because brands save enormously on production costs - they pay low wages and offer bad working conditions, as well as they enjoy tax facilities and flexible environmental regulations, etc.

Global Eastern and Southern countries are in a constant competition to sign production contracts with big brands. In this competition, countries sacrifice decent wages and keep minimum wages low in order to attract brands. This often translates into a race to the bottom between countries for lower wages and exemptions for brands. The biggest fear that these Global South and East countries, governments and workers face is that one day some other country will offer more advantageous conditions, namely lower wages, and brands will relocate their production operations to that country. Brands are aware of this and exploit it to the fullest, threatening governments and workers that they will relocate their production operations, if they demand higher wages. This rhetoric is employed not only by global companies, but also by governments, factory managers, and, unfortunately, by union leaders. This was the argument employed by Tamara, the head of the Conftex trade union committee, who told Anastasia that she was naive for thinking that Rochiato would not pack its bags and move production operations to Ukraine or Romania.

How can we counter the threat of relocation?

The exact same thing that Anastasia and the Solidarity for Living Wages union did when she contacted other factories subcontracted by Rochiato. First, verify if living wage studies have been performed in those countries. If said studies don't exist, encourage local unions and organizations to determine it. Subsequently, all subcontracting factories demanded from Rochiato to pay a living wage to all workers, regardless of country.

Production is global, which requires solidarity to be global as well (exactly what Anastasia did. She built a common front of solidarity, based on a regional alliance of unions).

Currently, trade union coalitions, organizations and initiatives such as Clean Clothes Campaign

in Europe or Asia Floor Wage in Asia are making efforts to build regional alliances that promote the regional living wage, so that regardless of the country, brands are forced to pay a living wage, dependent on the cost of living.

Read more about the living wage in Moldova:

Lilia Nenescu, Vitalie Sprînceană. Living wage in the Republic of Moldova. Case study: the clothing industry. Chisinau, 2018.

Link:

fes-moldova.org/fileadmin/user_upload/2018/publications/Living_Wage_Moldova_Rom.pdf

In order to anonymously report a work violation or abuse, we urge you to access IDA.md, a platform for employee rights violations.

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