

Interview with Cristian Asensio ▶ The SAT does not approve the proposed pension reform

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The Andorran Workers' Union (SAT) is following its formalization procedure, finalizing its statutes in order to be able to register as a trade union. This task is being carried out by Cristian Asensio, who is the head of the SAT management board, and four other colleagues. However, they are also working with the Andorran Trade Union Union (USdA) to make a counter-proposal to the reform of the pension system proposed by the Andorran Social Security Fund (CASS).

–In what situation is the SAT?

–We did an assembly, which due to the covid, had to be telematic, and that didn't help us much. However, we were about eighty people in attendance. At this meeting it was agreed to establish a management board, consisting of five people and which we currently have, to carry out a series of actions, especially with regard to the statutes. We then agreed to bring them into the Government, a step we have not yet taken because there is a fringe to finish closing, as there is a member of the management board who has not just seen it and would like to change it.

Another task we have done has been to collect the data of people who are sympathetic and previously affiliated with the union, which we have from the former general secretary, Guillem Fornieles. All in all, we have been contacting them and they now number about 300 people, of whom about 80% would rejoin or sympathize with the union. This was very important to do, because setting up a union without the support of workers behind it would be tricky. And we're happy that these people have agreed that it's time to stand together and work hard.

–Given this, do you find it difficult to carry out your work?

–Yes, the fact of not being in the register of unions is a problem, and from the SAT we are aware of it. That's why it's one of the jobs we're doing, but it's cumbersome and it's getting longer, especially considering we do it among the five board members. We hope that, with a little luck, we can have this task completed by Easter and be able to enter the documentation, so that the Government can keep us more present.

–How long can it take from the time the application is filed until it is approved?

–We don't know, but due to other experiences I've had with sports organizations, for example, the two months no one will take them away from us. If all goes well, I think it could be resolved by the summer or last Meritxell, which is when the resumption of public activity and the start of the school year.

Anyway, at least I didn't go down without explaining myself first. USDA Secretary General Ga-



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briel Ubach contacted us from the beginning and has always been very attentive to us. Right now, we are going under the protection of the USDA, I will not say no, but we are a completely independent union. It is clear that right now, if the government has to summon union representatives, it will summon the USDA because it is legally registered.

–What is the profile of the people on this board?

–We are workers from very different fields. There is a person in the private car park, one in a factory, one in occupational risk prevention, one working in the SAAS, and me, who is from the administration. In any case, once we are registe-



«González's proposal is more similar to the European trend, setting up a tax collected by the government»

red and we are a union of all of us, there will be an assembly where we hope that many people will come to finish choosing the members of the board leaving, the steps we need to take, the goals of the union, affiliations and all that.

–And do you think that in Andorra there is a lack of involvement on the part of the workers with the unions?

–There is a lack of involvement, and it is one of the difficulties we face. I think there is still a lot of fear of joining a union, as if the business community had to cross you to participate. And on the other hand, there are people who don't believe in it or who come from other countries where their lives are worse than here and they don't want problems. But all this is gradually changing. In Andorra, associativism has grown, and it is seen with the weight that groups like the ADA, Acció Feminista and others are gaining. It is palpable that there is more and more mobilization.

Above all, I think we need to learn to claim more. At the bar we all make our announcements, but going all out at once is more complicated. Thus, one of the objectives that we should have with the debate that we want to carry out for the reform of the pensions, and that the State should be clear about what should happen, is that the citizens should have their say.

For example, from the SAT we have contacted the association of Portuguese residents in the country and the Portuguese Honorary Consul, and he has invited us to meet with the ambassador, who is coming in sight this April. And

Cristian Asensio

Acting President of the SAT Management Board

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the USDA is also making contacts with other entities, so it's a matter of getting everything out.

-Speaking of pension reform, how do you rate the CASS proposal?

-We've been talking to Gabriel Ubach about this for days. We held meetings and also participated in a meeting with the adviser contacted by the USDA by the pension reform commission promoted by the General Council, Antonio González. They told us the details of the study carried out by this adviser, who comes from the UGT in Madrid, and we completely agreed. And now this issue has resurfaced, as a result of the publication of the CASS proposal.

We met again last week, and this time, including many of the public sector unions. And these meetings continue, in order to make a good comparison of González's proposal with that of the CASS, and to make weighted counter-proposals, because we do not agree at all with these 14 measures. They seem more like a patch, because even the document itself says that these proposals may need to be revised, again raising the retirement age or the contributions that need to be made.

-And what action would you take in that regard first

-From the SAT management board, we do not agree at all with these measures, and we are in line with the USDA opinion that who should

decide the changes and if a change in the pension system should be made is by the same affiliates, be they employees, employers or self-employed, because in the end, we are the ones who put the money every month.

In this sense, we were able to see the statements of the representative of the pensioners on the Board of Directors of the CASS, Jacint Risco, saying that it was unthinkable to consult. I don't think it's that complicated to do a participatory process within CASS with affiliates to see what model needs to be implemented.

On the other hand, Risco himself said that he agreed with the CASS's proposals, citing Iceland as an example. We can't compare ourselves to this country: its average salary doubles or almost triples that of Andorra; pensions have three legs, from state taxes, workers contributions, and another part that is private and mandatory. And it is true that the retirement age is 67, but for the rest of the points we can't compare, because then we could also compare ourselves with Burundi, and then we would be better off. So I find it a bit incongruous what he said.

-And with whom are you sharing your thoughts?

-We want to hold meetings with parliamentary groups. And as I said before, we also want to meet with other groups and entities in the country, such as residents' associati-



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ons, business representatives, and others. The aim of these contacts is to be able to present our model to them in comparison with the 14 measures of the CASS. González's proposal is more similar to the European trend and consists of setting up a tax collected by the Government that goes to the branch of pensions or health.

-That is to say, do they agree that it is necessary to increase the quotations?

-Yes. In fact, we are lucky that the tax side of this country is minimal, unlike in most European countries, where tax obligations are quite high to cover the needs. I think that by establishing a direct tax, and perhaps also increasing the contribution, we can start to find better solutions, but it would be with a completely different model than what they propose.

For example, the health part is subsidized throughout Europe by the state, and not here. So maybe we should start reviewing these elements before we reach retirement age. If you have to tell a hard-working worker, such as a worker, to retire two years later, it doesn't make sense. Also, because we are a small country, it may be easier to change.

-In which aspects of the reform do you feel most distant?

-Well with the 14 measures. It's just that the paragraph that tells you it's a makeover, and maybe se-

ven years from now, will have to be tweaked to tell you that the ox isn't being caught by the horns. I insist, a patch is being saved to save a few years, but it will have to be reviewed again, and we think it can't be. If we address it, we do it right. We're still on time, because the pension fund is scheduled for 2040, so you don't have to run so much. We cannot mortgage the pensions of all the workers in Andorra because now the elections are coming and a reform must be approved. We have to sit down and discuss it, and above all, it will be the employees themselves who will have to give the final approval, and we are very clear about that.

-In the short term, what action do you think CASS should take regarding the reform?

-I think one of the important things would be to give a practical example of the new proposal. Explain the specific case of a worker who is 45 years old and receives 1,500 euros, to see what pension he will have left at 67. I am convinced that with the new system, he will have a pension of around 40 or 45% of what he receives, which is laughable. I encourage you to set clear and real examples. The CASS Board of Directors should make it more understandable, because in the way they have communicated it so far, you have either studied it a lot, or you have a plan, or it is impossible to understand. More pedagogy is needed, because if not, they seem to want to hide something. ≡

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