

4th Tri-National Conference examines impact of neo-liberal agenda on public education

by Nancy Knickerbocker

Despite the many differences among schools of North, Central, and South America, teachers throughout the hemisphere all face similar threats to public education from the neo-liberal corporate agenda.

That was the overwhelming message of a recent conference held at the University of Queretaro, in the central highlands of Mexico. About 200 delegates from Canada, United States, Mexico, Caribbean, Honduras, Peru, and Argentina came together November 7 and 8, 1998. It was the fourth conference sponsored by the Tri-National Coalition in Defense of Public Education, formed as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Larry Kuehn, BCTF's director of research and co-ordinator of international programs, warned of the proposed expansion of NAFTA into all the countries of the hemisphere by 2005. The Summit of the Americas process deals specifically with education as a commodity to be marketed in the global economy, but it also contains some apparently progressive rhetoric, he noted. Rather than wait and react to governments, Kuehn called upon teacher unions to seize the initiative and develop a common strategy to resist the negative consequences of globalization.

Education "reforms" faced by teachers throughout the Americas include drastic cuts in education funding, politicization of curriculum change, increased centralization of government control accompanied by decentralization of accountability, increased use of mass standardized exams with greater power to limit children's educational options, deeper socio-economic disparities creating profound differences in quality of education, concerted attacks upon public education and, in some countries, overt repression against teacher leaders. For example, since 1970, more than 150 teachers have been killed or disappeared in Mexico.

Outside the conference hall, demonstrators called for freedom for Mexican political prisoners, especially Prof. Sergio Jeronimo Sanchez, a high-school history teacher jailed last February for his political activism. On October 12, Jeronimo and two others began a hunger strike to protest their continuing incarceration. The prisoners' wives also went on a hunger strike in front of the state Supreme Court building. One woman has miscarried as a result of malnutrition and stress. Interviewed on the 27th day of their hunger strike, the women appeared frail but determined.

Canadian teachers were deeply moved by the level of commitment shown by Latin American colleagues. Jan Eastman, president of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, was eloquent in her praise for their dedication and for their faith "in the power of education to transform the lives of people." She spoke of public education as the hope for the future of democracy and social justice, and as the basis for a world in which every child has an opportunity to learn.

"The pressures on us are great, and the need to work together is paramount," Eastman said. "Who is more necessary than we to fight for public education and to put forward reforms that will expand potential for people and not squash it."

Eastman is among a group of teacher-leaders who have begun planning for a hemispheric conference to analyze the Summit of the Americas process and develop an action plan to counter its potentially disastrous impact upon public education. That conference is slated for Quito, Ecuador, in October 1999, to coincide with World Teachers' Day.

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