

Working across borders to defend public education

by Nancy Knickerbocker

This year, Mexicans are celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Benito Juárez, Mexico's greatest president and the architect of its constitution. The son of illiterate servants, the first and only indigenous person ever elected president, Juárez helped build a civil society based on the rule of law and the principles of social justice.

Countless public schools throughout Mexico are named for Benito Juárez, but the one in his hometown of Guelatao is special. High in the mountains now called the Sierra Juárez, his vision lives on in the school that bears his name.

The 179 students, aged 6–14, all come from impoverished indigenous families that do not have the means to provide their children with an education. But, through federal funding, each child gets a full scholarship for schooling and room and board during the academic year.

The children welcomed us with songs in Spanish and Zapotec, Juárez's mother tongue. Two girls beautifully recited dramatic poems of tribute to Juárez and his dream of freedom from poverty and oppression.

Nothing could be further from the Canadian residential schools, where Aboriginal children were punished for speaking their native languages. Here the language of instruction is Spanish, but the many indigenous languages—Zapotec, Mixtec, Mixe, and others—are taught along with a rich variety of ancient customs, handicrafts, visual arts, music, and dance. The teachers speak with great pride of the role they are having in the rescue and renaissance of indigenous languages, some of which are on the brink of extinction.

"Despite the extreme poverty and deep racism suffered by indigenous people in Mexico, they are miles ahead of us in terms of language and culture being a priority in public schools—even under the cloud of Spanish colonialism," said Christine Stewart, BCTF's co-ordinator of Aboriginal education.

It was an inspiring first day for Canadian, American, and Mexican delegates to the 7th Tri-National Conference in Defence of Public Education, held in Oaxaca. At the conference opening plenary session, held under a tent canopy in the central courtyard of an elementary school, teacher and organizer Jorge Magariño welcomed about 300 delegates.

He spoke of the solidarity of teachers throughout North America as "the force that sustains us." In Mexico, where 70 million citizens live in poverty and another 20 million live in extreme poverty, "only education will allow us to emancipate ourselves," Magariño said.

Enrique Rueda, secretary general of the Oaxacan teachers' union, said that Mexican teachers are "proud of their long history of struggling to defend the inalienable principle of the right to a quality public education."

"Now we have come together to evaluate the ways in which neoliberalism and privatization have been creating a situation in which education is more of a privilege for the few than a right of all," Rueda said.

BCTF President Jinny Sims shared the experience of BC teachers during last fall's strike, and noted that teachers throughout North and Central America share the same concerns about the impact of neoliberal policies. "We are all facing the same agenda to underfund, destabilize, and privatize public education," she said.

Larry Kuehn, BCTF director of research and technology and Prof. Hugo Aboites of the National Autonomous University of Mexico presented their shared concerns about the impact of international trade deals such as NAFTA.

As the teachers' conference opened in Oaxaca, Prime Minister Stephen Harper was in Cancun meeting with US President George Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox to discuss an initiative to "upgrade" NAFTA and promote "deep integration" of all three countries, not only economically but socially and culturally as well.

"NAFTA has not been good for either Canada or Mexico, so an upgraded NAFTA is likely to be worse," Kuehn said, adding that one of the goals is "a new identity as North Americans." That goal implies an increasing dominance of the US, at the expense of the Canadian and Mexican cultural identities, he said.

Aboites said the impact of free trade deals in Latin America has been "a brutal, radical reduction in education." He particularly lamented the neoliberal view of education as a commodity and the "loss of the idea of education as a transformative exercise in nation-building."

Rosemary Lee of the California Teachers' Association decried the Bush administration's attacks on education budgets, academic freedom, and teacher autonomy, especially the imposition of "scripted curricula" that require every teacher to be on the same page on the same day.

"The elephant in the room is the war budget," Lee said. California's share is more than \$31.5 billion US—enough to hire 546,000 public school teachers for a year or to send more than 4 million children to Head Start programs. "A war budget leaves every child behind," Lee said.

Dr. Maria de la Luz Arriaga, one of the co-founders of the Tri-National Coalition, helped to organize a demonstration in front of the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City during last October's BCTF job action.

"When we heard why the BC teachers had to go on strike, we couldn't believe it! Even in Mexico teachers still can go on strike and have more rights to negotiate. It was like Canada had gone from a developed country to an under-developed one," she said.

Teachers Susana Lopez and Marcelo Flores built a web site in support of BC teachers last fall and were enthusiastic about enhancing the collegial relations between Canadian and Mexican teachers. "We want to broadcast the video about your strike to our colleagues in Queretaro," they said.

Conference delegates agreed to continue working together, specifically on a continental day of action in defence of public education.

Nancy Knickerbocker is the BCTF's media relations officer.