

## Teachers unite to keep public education out of trade agreements

by Nancy Knickerbocker

ZACATECAS, Mexico—Since the advent of the free trade era, teachers throughout the Americas have witnessed disturbing changes in the politics and economics of public education. Traditionally education has been seen as a cornerstone of a nation's democratic values and the fullest expression of its cultural realities. Today, however, public education is seen as a vast untapped market and a valuable commodity to be traded.

To confront this profound shift from the social to the mercantile agenda for education, teachers in Canada, Mexico and the United States have come together under the banner of the Tri-National Coalition in Defense of Public Education.

The coalition's fifth tri-national conference took place last November in Zacatecas, a colonial city in the central highlands north of Mexico City. About 175 delegates met over three days in the ballroom, the ballet studio, and even the balcony of the Teatro Calderon, a faded but still stately theatre overlooking a charming cobblestone plaza and a stunning Baroque cathedral.

They heard from students of Mexico's National Autonomous University who suffered threats, intimidation and police brutality during their eight-month strike to resist imposition of tuition fees that would deny education to many young Mexicans. Indeed, delegates from all countries reported increasing imposition of user fees as one key symptom of neo-conservative policies. Other trends noted throughout the continent included:

- Reduced public funding for education, accompanied by increased corporate and private financing.
- Promotion of voucher systems to subsidize private schooling.
- Increased use of high-stakes standardized testing.
- Fragmentation of education systems: in effect, two-tier schooling.
- Permanent violation of teachers' civil and union rights.
- Increasing use of distance education as a substitute for direct teaching.
- Spiraling student indebtedness.

Conference organizers were pleased to see much broader participation from Canada, including representatives of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, the Manitoba Teachers' Society, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, the Centrale des Syndicats du Quebec, the Canadian Association of University

Teachers, and colleagues from at least six Canadian universities, including UBC.

B.C. delegates included BCTF Second Vice-president Jinny Sims; Executive Committee member and former VESTA President Suzie Mah; former Surrey local president Peter Ellis; and Gavin Hainsworth, from the International Solidarity Committee. Larry Kuehn, director of research and technology and a co-founder of the Tri-National Coalition, was one of the keynote speakers.

Kuehn recalled that the coalition first came together in Zacatecas six years ago, sparked by a shared concern about NAFTA and its negative impact upon public education traditions in Mexico, Canada, and the U.S.

"We do not think of education as a commodity to trade, but others do," Kuehn warned. "Privatization and commodification are key to making education tradable and profitable to private interests."

Now, we are confronting not only NAFTA, but the greatly-expanded Free Trade Area of the Americas, slated to take place in April in Quebec City. The federal government has repeatedly assured Canadians that there's no cause for worry, that they would never put education or other public services on the trade table. But teachers and other scholars of these agreements are skeptical, and many will be joining in the protests against the FTAA, which has been described as "NAFTA on steroids."

Anti-FTAA activists in Quebec and across the globe have been working for months on an alternative People's Summit, including an education forum, which they plan to hold in tents on the Plains of Abraham. (Canadian participants are urged to bring additional warm clothing to share with Mexican colleagues!)

For more information, see: [www.web.net/comfront/quebec.htm](http://www.web.net/comfront/quebec.htm).