



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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Teacher solidarity across borders is essential in response to the impact of neo-liberal globalization

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March 2015

Teachers are everywhere, and more than 30 million belong to unions. And education can be an agent for social justice—or not.

Free, quality public education opens opportunity for many, in contrast to systems that have private, quality education for an elite, and poor public schools—or none—for the rest.

The value-base of the BC Teachers' Federation's (BCTF) International Solidarity Program and Fund is to support teacher unions as they work to make the ideals of public education into reality. This includes improving the working conditions of teachers and the learning conditions of students, as well as promoting accessible and quality public schools.

Raising funds to build schools, provide school supplies, and assist individual teachers seems commendable. However, for sustainable action for quality public education, effective teacher unions have a key role, convincing governments to provide resources. It is in this context that the BCTF has for four decades worked in partnership with teacher unions in Latin America and in Southern Africa.

The challenges to these unions are considerable. Education is one of the two top government expenditures in many countries. Those who argue for improved funding to improve schools often end up in conflicts with government. Many times governments consider the labour rights of teachers to be an impediment to their plans—and attempt to weaken or destroy teacher unions. It is in times like these that both moral and material solidarity are especially important.

The forces of neo-liberal globalization are having an impact everywhere and make the experiences of teachers more and more similar, whether in the richest or the least-developed countries. Inequality is growing within and between countries, while the mission of public education is more equality.

Austerity has been adopted widely. At the first sign of economic downturn and loss of government revenues, governments move to cut education instead of increasing taxes, particularly on those who can most afford it. Countries dependent on World Bank or

International Monetary Fund loans face orders to reduce expenditures, even if the government realizes that education is an investment that must be made if they are to grow and develop in the longer term. Countries not beholden to the international financial institutions, like Canada, follow the directions of neo-liberal ideology, even though austerity is a choice and not a necessity.

The ideological and economic forces pushing austerity are not the only factors increasing similarity in education policy decisions in countries across the globe. Business organizations and right-wing think tanks push for education policies that are directed to training workers, abandoning the other central aims of education which include preparing critical citizens and building equity and social cohesion.

The rapid adoption of information and communications technology leads to more links and options for similarities in education. However, these can amplify two negative elements—increased inequality based on social class, and privatization, particularly through technology.

Even in Canada, at least twenty percent of the population has no access to the internet. Those without access are more and more excluded from many aspects of daily living as well as from education. Students with rich access to technology have more and more in common with students in other countries who also have access, than with those in their own society who are marginalized by poverty and social exclusion.

Venture capitalists in the technology industries have not overlooked that education is the largest, nearly-untapped potential source of revenue. Trillions of dollars are spent on education on a global basis, and most of it is spent on the employment of educators. Getting a cut of those resources is seen as a prime business opportunity. Hardware and networks are obvious markets, but also digital resources, administrative data, edu-games, and testing are targeted by education technology corporations with products that can cross any borders.

One corporation, Pearson, has a dominant role in the global education technology business. It not only sells products and services, but also has a primary connection with the OECD PISA testing program. This cross-national testing program is aimed at influencing government policy toward harmonizing education on a global, neo-liberal model. It is a link between math teaching in Beijing, Mexican government negative policies toward indigenous teacher education programs like that of the Ayotzinapa 43, and the Fraser Institute saying that BC schools don't need more funding because we already produce high results on the PISA tests.

In the current global context, we are all part of an inter-related education environment.

How do the values of social justice, strengthening teacher unions, understanding global trends in education policy, and building capacity to influence education get translated into the BCTF international solidarity program?

The internationalism of the BCTF is almost as old as the union itself. The first BCTF General Secretary, Harry Charlesworth, participated in the creation of an international education organization in 1923, only a few years after the formation of the BCTF.

The current version of international solidarity at the BCTF has been in place for more than 30 years, with the commitment of a portion of members' dues on an ongoing basis, and the creation of an International Solidarity Committee.

Here are some examples of the range of the work of the International Solidarity Program:

- Support for the participation of women in the leadership of the unions in Central America and Andean countries. Gender workshops and women’s secretariats funded to redress the fact of most union members being women, but only men in the leadership.
- Participation in the development of regional groups on the impact of trade agreements and globalization in education: The Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education (Mexico, Canada, US—in response to NAFTA); the Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas (IDEA Network) with teacher unions, student and community organizations from around the Americas.
- Provision of resources for women who developed a program on “Non-sexist pedagogy”—materials and workshops for changing classroom practice, organized by unions and adopted by some ministries in Central America.
- Tools for solidarity in conflicts such as strikes, protests, harmful government actions. Mutual support has included letters and demonstrations at Canadian embassies when the BCTF was on strike as well as the BCTF expressing solidarity with other unions. When the BCTF was on an illegal strike in 2005, it appeared the website communications might be shut down and Mexican colleagues in the Tri-national Coalition created a website that could be used by the BCTF, if necessary. More than 100 letters of support from unions around the globe pressed the BC government to settle the BCTF strike in 2014.
- Support for a union-based school in Bolivia that is working with teachers in developing new pedagogies and resources for a “pluri-national curriculum” that recognizes and includes the various indigenous peoples of Bolivia. This project is a partnership with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) and the Rural Teachers’ union in Bolivia.
- Research and publication of a journal in Spanish and English called *Intercambio*. Its articles report on common themes in multiple countries, such as standardized testing, public schools and the environmental crisis, pedagogies for transformation, critical perspectives on education technology, and indigenous education in the Americas. (<http://idea-network.ca/category/intercambio-magazine>)
- BCTF members work with SUTEP, the union in Peru, developing union-based workshops for teachers of English. The work includes building a core of Peruvian teachers who will continue and expand the workshops developed by the BCTF and SUTEP members, strengthening the links of unions and members.
- Explore the developing role of technology in education with a series of workshops in Colombia, Ecuador, and several countries in Central America. These workshops on the political economy of technology are aimed at analysing the forces promoting the technology and the impact this may have on education.
- Support the teachers’ union in Colombia, FECODE, in developing a program to address the integration of the children of the combatants on both sides into the same schools, based on hopes for the success of peace negotiations between the rebel FARC and the Colombian government that are ongoing. The initial aspects of this project are funded by the OSSTF, the CSQ of Quebec, and the BCTF.

The role of CoDevelopment Canada (CoDev) in the BCTF programs

BCTF projects are partnerships with other unions, both in Latin America and in Canada. CoDev is a partner whose role is to facilitate the union-to-union projects, working with the BCTF and teacher unions in Latin America since its formation in 1985. Until recently, CoDev was able to access matching funds through CIDA, the federal government's international development agency. However, the current federal government eliminated CIDA and cancelled funding for the type of projects supported by the BCTF and CoDev. CoDev is one of the non-profit societies that has undergone audits as part of the apparent targeting of NGOs that have been critical of Canadian government policies.

Despite these difficulties, CoDev has been able to continue to facilitate the partnerships between the BCTF, partner unions in Latin America, and other unions in Canada.

International solidarity, not charity

Samora Machel, the first president of an independent Mozambique, captured the essence of the meaning of solidarity:

“International solidarity is not an act of charity. It is an act of unity between allies fighting on different terrains toward the same objectives. The foremost of these objectives is to aid the development of humanity to the highest level possible.”