

# The education world is not flat: Neoliberalism's global project and teacher unions' resistance

By Larry Kuehn

Thomas Friedman uses the phrase “the world is flat” as his metaphor for the impact of globalization in homogenizing societies. Yet, that does not really reflect the reality for most people beyond the representatives of global elites that Friedman interviewed and dined with in researching his book *The World is Flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century* (2006). It is certainly true that global brands and global media reach even into seemingly isolated villages almost anywhere. While commodities, including cultural commodities, travel across borders, most people do not and cannot. They still live in communities. Those communities need to be able to maintain education systems that reflect their needs for social cohesion and democratic development, and not just be dependent on global markets, cultural “products” and the “anonymous socialization” of the Web 2.0 social networking tools.

However, forces pushing to flatten the world of education are real. Education policies are increasingly aimed primarily at global economic competitiveness. Neo-liberal ideologues promote privatization as the answer to most problems. Commercialization and corporate intervention encourage the adoption of business methods of management in education. International tests like TIMMS and PISA are used as comparative measures. Demands of the international monetary institutions promote uniform policies. Policy borrowing is carried out by politicians and education bureaucrats. Publishers of education tests seek to open new markets. Trade negotiations and agreements treat education as a tradable commodity.

Each of these factors plays a role in the pushing for a harmonized global pattern for education. Working together they create significant pressure toward a flattening of education systems so that they look and act more and more alike across national boundaries.

Although trade agreements are only one of these elements, the trans-national resistance to globalization in education has primarily been focused on trade agreements. Trade negotiations provide a face and a place to focus that resistance, primarily taken up by teacher unions, along with their allies who share the sense of importance of public education as a central institution of democracy and equity.

We will explore here the way that trade agreements relate to the rest of the neo-liberal program. Then we will look at strategies for teacher unions and some transnational coalitions that are a part of those strategies.

## Education, Globalization, and Trade Agreements

Central features of globalization are ideology and economic power—neo-liberal ideology and corporate global capital. The main claim of neo-liberal ideology is an assertion that the market should play the central role in the allocation and distribution of goods and services, pushing the state to a marginal position in the provision of products and services. The primary role of the state becomes regulating the market so that there is a free flow of goods and services, but not for the purposes of producing more social equity (Spring, 2004). As the state recedes and markets globalize, large corporations have the best chance of operating successfully and policies favourable to corporate interests are more widely adopted. This neo-liberal philosophy applied internationally is generally described as the “Washington consensus.”

The decline of the role of the state has significant implications for education. The provision of education has been one of the central roles of the state for well over a century, both in most of the developed countries, and particularly in the post-colonial period, in most of the less developed countries. That pattern is being reversed as one element of the neo-liberal globalization process.

The share of education being carried out by the state is declining and that by private for-profit and non-profit education is increasing. In some cases, the state funds some portion of this private education through mechanisms such as student subsidies or loans for post-secondary students in private institutions, vouchers and direct state funding for private schools, such as that provided in British Columbia to “independent schools.” Privatization in its various forms is one of the significant elements of the impact of globalization on education.

The World Bank plays a significant role in promoting privatization in the less developed countries (Spring, 2004). It operates through two primary mechanisms. One is its research and publishing. The other is its power of policy imposition through conditions on loans to countries.

The World Bank produces studies such as *Education: The World Bank Education Sector Strategy* (World Bank, 1999), which outlines its directions for education. This view includes the assumption that a market economy requires a primary focus on the development of “human capital,” enhanced individual skills for economic competition. These skills must be upgraded on a constant basis through “lifelong learning,” because in globalized markets corporations will move production to where it finds the best employees at the least cost. All of this is best carried out by more flexible service deliverers. These service providers are private or non-profit groups, rather than the state. If the state continues to maintain responsibility, then the service is decentralized or “municipalized,” with limited control by the state. A section of the World Bank website is devoted to providing both a rationale and tools for privatization ([rru.worldbank.org/paperslinks/public-private-education](http://rru.worldbank.org/paperslinks/public-private-education)).

These policies are imposed on countries through the conditions set by the World Bank for loans. One of the first requirements for loans to countries in difficulty has been “structural adjustment.” This has required the reduction of barriers to import of goods and services and a reshaping of production to focus on export industries. It has also meant a reduction of the role of the state both in regulation of the economy and the provision of services. Since education is the one of the largest areas of state expenditure of most of the less developed countries, reductions of public funding and delivery of education is a common factor in this aspect of globalization.

Adopting this market approach to the development of the less developed countries was a change in direction indicated in the early 1980s when “the World Bank signaled a decisive moved away from development as a process of national economic growth to embrace a vision of development as equal to participation in and integration with the capitalist market” (Munck, 2002, p.6). As Jones says in his study of the World Bank and financing education, “It is now possible to speak of an international system of influence powerful enough to bind up the educational destinies of the world’s peoples” (Jones, 1992, xiv).

This binding of destinies is not confined to those who live in the less developed countries. Similar neo-liberal policies are promoted and followed among the developed countries and a push toward privatization of education is a common pattern. However, the mechanism for this common direction has been “policy borrowing” rather than policy imposition. “Policy borrowing” is a term used to describe the phenomenon of countries adopting policies that have been put in place in other countries, as described here by Roger Dale:

(T)he key features of policy borrowing...are that it is carried out voluntarily and explicitly, and that its locus of control is national. It involves particular policies that one country seeks to imitate, emulate or copy, bilaterally from one another. It is the product of conscious decision-making and it is initiated by the recipient. (Dale, 1999, pp. 9-10)

The process is carried out sometimes through politicians looking elsewhere for ideas for dealing with particular issues that have become a matter of public concern, although “elected officials and politicians are more likely to be interested in a borrowed policy’s political symbolism than its details” (Halpin and Troyna, 1995, pp. 307-308). Other times, it is the bureaucratic leaders within the education structures or academics who bring to decision-making the ideas and policies adopted elsewhere. As an example, when the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) created an Education Forum of ministers of education from the APEC countries, one of its early activities was a conference on the OECD education indicators, hosted by the US Department of Education, even though most of the APEC countries are not a part of the OECD (CMEC, 1995). Mishra (1997) contends that international organizations “amount to a supranational steering of social policy in a neo-liberal direction,” with global institutions that “influence social policy largely by means of policy prescription, expert advice and general economic surveillance” (p 146).

Policy borrowing in education is certainly not a new phenomenon, as ideas on education have been borrowed and built upon at least since classical Greece. It does seem, though, that the extent of pressure to harmonize education policies among countries is great, and is more substantial than at any time in the past.

The education policies of neo-liberal globalization in both the most and less-developed countries, have two primary elements: commonality about the purpose of education and reform of structures of educational governance and control. While each of these takes on a shape influenced by local circumstances, at the root they fit a pattern. The definition of the purpose of education fits what Susan Robertson calls “the new educational mandate”:

The new conditions of fast capitalism and the rise of the competition state have necessarily generated the need for a new educational mandate. A central principle within this new mandate is the educational systems, through creating appropriately skilled and entrepreneurial citizens and workers able to generate new and added economic values, will enable nations to be responsive to changing conditions within the international marketplace. Competitiveness is thus viewed as a social value and a social good which is applied not only to schools and students, but to teachers as well. Through educationally driven economic success, it is argued that a nation will be able to generate the level of economic prosperity that can trickle down to the whole of the community. The new educational mandate is thus shaped by the economic instrumentalism of the new worker citizen. (Robertson, 2000, p. 187)

While this “new mandate” may have much in common with what has come before in there being a purpose of preparing students for participation in the economy, this human capital global competition view gives priority of economic over other social objectives, as the market is given priority over the social equity objectives of the state. It pushes education systems to reorganize so that they increasingly aim to prepare students for skills and competencies required by workers in a globalizing, information technology-based world (Chan-Tiberghien, 2004, Au and Apple, 2004).

The common themes in globalized education reforms in governance and operation are identified by Ben Levin as local management, choice and markets, and testing and accountability (Levin, 1997). Although Levin's focus is specifically on reforms in English-speaking countries, these themes are global as the World Bank prescriptions "frequently reflect the current school reform proposals in the United States" (Spring, 1998) to the point that "charter schools" is a term used by Spanish speakers in Argentina.

These three elements all flow from the ideology of neo-liberalism. The apparent role of the state is reduced by decentralization. The responsibility for education is given to municipal levels of government or to parent committees for individual schools based on the claim of making the schools more responsive and responsible to communities. The state often then reduces the financial support that it provides, leaving either the municipal government or the parents to pick up financing of the schools.

With this decentralization, it is possible to open up to "choice," where different schools have different characteristics and a parent can opt to choose a particular type of school. The intention is to produce a market-like situation, even if all of the schools receive public funding. In neo-liberal theory, this kind of market choice will produce higher quality because of the competition to attract students to a particular school. Schools will improve because they change to attract more students.

Testing and accountability are also supposed to motivate improvement. The data produced is to provide parents with information to make effective choices and to provide the state with tools to direct the schools in what knowledge and skills are to be taught as well as to provide data to use to direct changes to be made in specific schools. The testing and accountability system provides a way of the state "steering from a distance." The state reduces the degree to which it is a direct provider and financer of educational service, at the same time having more effective tools to direct the intended outcomes of the educational process.

The testing regime has been expanded to go beyond the comparison of school to school and to produce international comparisons. The idea of these comparisons fits with the goal of education as a factor in global competitiveness and further harmonizes expectations and policies in relationship to education. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has developed an international indicators system to provide comparative data on "inputs" and "outcomes." The OECD developed its own comparative testing program called PISA to have data to shape education policy. The OECD Education Indicators Project is primarily interested in education as an economic factor, as was intended when the Reagan administration took away from UNESCO the resources to build an international comparative system and gave it to the OECD (Kuehn, 2004).

There are powerful critiques of this pattern of decentralization, marketization and testing, including Levin's that "these reforms embody problems of contradictory purposes" and "are weakly connected to teaching and learning and hence to outcomes" (Levin, 1997, p 253). Similarly, Andy Hargreaves says that "in place of ambitious missions of compassion and community, schools and teachers have been squeezed into the tunnel vision of test scores achievement targets and league tables of accountability" (Hargreaves, 2003).

The globalization of education has produced some common themes across countries, whether by "policy borrowing" or "policy imposition." This commonality has created the basis for challenges to these ideas to be made on a trans-national basis as well by those, such as some teacher unions, who seek a counter to neo-liberal forms of globalization. While the challenge

must be trans-national, it must at the same time respect local and indigenous formulations and democratic control and practice in education.

### **Trade Agreements as Wedge and Ratchet**

The elements of globalization of education discussed to this point have not mentioned trade agreements. Although trade agreements have not been the primary driver of globalization of education, as they have developed in the last two decades they do play two important roles in the globalization process. They do this as a wedge to open up more and more aspects of society and economy to the trade regime, including education. Further, they serve as a ratchet that allows only more privatization, never allowing the return of what has been privatized back into the public sector.

A key part of the wedge aspect is the creation of an international legal framework that commits all parties to agree not only to the existing rules, but to ongoing negotiations in the direction of trade liberalization, putting more and more limits to democratically made decisions that might go in a different direction. This one-way path is set out by the Services Council of the WTO in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) negotiations when it says “members shall aim to achieve progressively higher levels of liberalization with no a priori exclusion of any service sector or mode of supply” (Khor, 1994).

This international system puts trade and economic values above social values in political discourse and in the allocation of power. This priority is demonstrated by the situation that while many international agreements exist, some are enforceable and others only require voluntary adherence, providing an implicit evaluation of priority. For example, the World Trade Organization (WTO) trade rules are enforceable, but the conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) are not, even though those conventions are also international treaties that have been agreed to by nations. Similarly, the trade rules of NAFTA are enforceable, but the labour and environment side agreements are not. Both the ILO and the NAFTA side agreements operate by complaints, investigations and reports, but with no compulsion for countries to abide by the recommendations from the reports. In contrast, breaking the WTO and NAFTA trade rules brings economic consequences (unless, apparently, you are a powerful US industry, like lumber production that was able to control lumber competition from Canada).

In addition to defining power relations and continuously working to expand what is covered, the second key role of trade agreements in the neo-liberal globalization is to freeze democracy through a ratchet effect. To prohibit backsliding, a country that has agreed to the rules of the WTO and NAFTA can never change its policy to bring in new state regulation or return services that have been privatized to the public sector, without a great penalty.

The trade officials negotiating trade agreements have not likely had the impact on public education high on their agenda—or even consciousness. Nor, often, have education officials been aware of the impact on education until after negotiations have been completed. Yet, the explicit commitment to continued movement toward the liberalization of rules limits the ability of a government to change directions, even if the populace votes for the change and wants to take services outside the trade regime—thus these agreements are a freezing of democracy.

## **Trade Negotiations Provide a Place and a Face to Globalization**

Trade agreements are not the primary tool for globalization of education, but rather wedges and ratchets that assist in neo-liberal policy borrowing and policy imposing. Yet trade agreements have become an important focus in the organizing in opposition to neo-liberal policies in education. Why would that be?

A key factor has been that the negotiation of trade agreements has brought attention to elements of globalization in a concrete way. It is possible to read the text of the agreement and, with some serious study and predictive imagination, to discern in it possible implications in practice, including in education. The trade agreement is more concrete than the ideology on which it is based.

As an example, when one reads the “requests” from the United States Trade Representative (USTR, 2000) in the GATS negotiations, that educational tests be considered as a tradable service covered under the GATS, one can see that the creation and marking of educational tests is being considered as an economic function, rather than as a primarily educational issue. Tests are on the negotiating table not because the tests have proven educational value. Rather, they are there because they are a potentially profitable business for corporations. Allowing a country to choose who will create and mark tests based primarily on the basis of wanting people from one’s own education system to do the work places a limit on them as profitable economic activity. Education is seen by trade negotiators, as Robertson (2000) describes it, as “a new service industry in the global economy.”

Looking at the text of what has been or is being negotiated can be used to provide a concrete way of understanding the ideological direction behind it. Examining the text and the process of negotiating trade agreements is a strategic approach to get attention to the nature of the changes taking place. Further, because trade agreements go through a negotiation and ratification process that has some public element, they can become a focus of action.

There is no concrete place or face to neo-liberalism. There is a place and a face to a trade negotiation—Seattle, Doha, Quebec City, Genoa, Cancun, Miami and on and on. Trade negotiators would have been happy to continue their work in the back rooms without any public attention. However, a number of civil society groups have brought the attention to these negotiations and their impact: unions and international labour bodies, environmentalists, progressive think tanks like the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Third World Network and activist groups like the Council of Canadians.

### **New forms to trade, new forms of resistance**

The first trade treaty to include services, including education, was the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement of 1988. This agreement was opposed in Canada by a coalition of labour and other progressive organizations, as well as the Liberal and New Democrat parties in the election of 1988. The opposition focused on the nature of the relationship of Canada with the US and the ground-breaking element of including trade in services was little recognized. While the Canada-US FTA was a major issue in Canada, it was little known in the US.

NAFTA, on the other hand, had a high profile in all three countries—Mexico, Canada, and the US. Opposition in Mexico was primarily from the unions independent of the control of the PRI, the dominant political party in Mexico. This included the “democratic current” opposition within the SNTE, the teachers’ union. This opposition—organized as the CNTE (coordinadora)—had

the majority in some states in the south of Mexico and among the elementary teachers in Mexico City, as well as a presence in other states.

In the US, both the NEA and the AFT opposed NAFTA. The opposition, though, was based on the general labour concern that it would lead to the loss of jobs in the US, not concerns about a particular negative impact on public education.

The same labour and progressive organizations in Canada that opposed the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement also opposed NAFTA. However, by the time NAFTA was being negotiated in the early 1990s, Canadian activists had an awareness of the possible implications of including services within trade agreements. One of the elements specific to education that was initially identified as significant dealt with the certification of professionals. Under the NAFTA definition, public school teachers clearly fit the definition of professionals covered by the proposed agreement.

The model for transnational recognition of common professional qualifications in NAFTA was that of accountants. This is not surprising, since businesses that operate in a range of different countries would find it an advantage to have accounting and auditing carried out following rules and standards that provide comparability. However, the further one gets away from business into social and cultural areas, the less sense it makes to insist on common recognition of the professional qualifications. At least that was the perspective put forward by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) in its response to the proposals for NAFTA.

Professional certification requirements were an area of potential impact of NAFTA discussed at some length in the BCTF brief to the Canadian Parliamentary Committee on the North American Free Trade Agreement in December 1992. Section A.1 of Annex 1210 of NAFTA states that: "This annex applies to measures adopted or maintained by a Party relating to the licensing and certification of professional service providers." The BCTF described some differences in the certification practices in the US, Canada and Mexico and put forward its concern:

The point here is not to argue that one is the better than the other, but that they are significantly different. Those differences reflect the fact that certification of teachers is imbedded within complex cultural practices that make up education. Because of that, they are not easily changed, nor should they be.

But because NAFTA is based on a view that sees education and all other services as primarily economic exchanges, it demands negotiation to make the practices in each of the countries more similar to each other.

Specifically, Annex 1210 calls for "development of mutually acceptable professional standards and criteria." The areas defined for common standards include "conduct and ethics, professional development and re-certification and scope of practice." It is in these areas, as indicated above, that there are differences between what generally applies in Canada and the US. (BCTF, 1992, p.7)

The concern about certification was fueled by a paper from the University of Southern California and the Educational Testing Service that included a proposal for

transnational educational certification, e.g. teacher certification, language proficiency certification, technical certification, and other forms of professional certification and testing standards.

A trilateral commission should consider how the three North American countries will determine fitness to work or provide services. The establishment of a common set of education standards could be formally enforced through a certification system acceptable to all three partners. (University of Southern California and Educational Testing Service, 1992, p.5.)

In the more than a decade of NAFTA has been in place now, this idea has not been pursued seriously. The NAFTA commission working on common certification has mostly focused on areas directly related to business, such as engineering. Both the US and Canada have degrees of state and provincial authority over education, creating barriers to common certification recognition. However, Canada is moving toward common recognition within the country, the initial step necessary to create common certification in the longer term. To the degree that education becomes homogenized through the various other aspects of globalization, the issues of common certification are more likely to arise.

This examination of teacher certification opened awareness to other elements of trans-national harmonization and thus the implications of trade agreements as a concrete element of the neo-liberal globalization process.

### **The creation of the Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education**

The trans-national nature of trade agreements seemed to demand that effective responses would require a trans-national basis. While international teacher organizations existed, in the early 1990s they had not developed a consciousness and program on globalization related to trade agreements.

The first of the international teacher union coalitions that grew out of trade agreements was the Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education. In January, 1993, the Labor Center at Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington, brought together 200 educator-activists from the three countries. Concerned about attacks on public education reflected in trade agreements, the participants drew up a strategy for protecting and promoting public education in North America in the face of further economic integration along neo-liberal lines.

The strategy involved forging a long-term coalition of teacher unions at the national, state, and local levels. A fledgling organization was built through a number of meetings coordinated by the then Labor Center Director at Evergreen, Dan Leahy, who took a sabbatical in Mexico. Following the first of those meetings, important Mexican and Canadian teachers' unions formally joined the fledgling coalition, including the unions representing instructors at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) and the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM) in Mexico City, the Michoacan section of the Mexican teachers' union (SNTE--Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion), the Canadian Teachers Federation, and provincial unions in Quebec, British Columbia, and Ontario.

The NEA sent participants to an initial meeting, held in Zacatecas, Mexico in 1994. However, the NEA declined to participate in the coalition, with the leadership indicating that the effects of neo-liberal trade policies on education were not clear. The NEA opposition to NAFTA before it had been signed had been on the more general concerns about jobs and industry, and not on analysis of its potential impact on education.

Participation by the NEA was also problematic because of the nature of the formal international teacher organizations. The participants in the coalition from Mexico were from groups that did not have a majority in the overall union, the SNTE. The SNTE supported NAFTA and the neo-

liberal policies being followed by the PRI-controlled Mexican government. Both the NEA and the SNTE belonged to the Education International, the international grouping of teacher organizations.

Despite lack of participation by the US unions, the Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education developed as an organization with a range of activities in opposition to neo-liberal policies.

The Mexican participants created a structure that brought together unions representing university faculty from several universities, along with teacher unionists participating in the CNTE, the opposition grouping within the SNTE. This Mexican Section of the Tri-national Coalition has a coordinating committee and holds meetings where representatives of all the participating groups carry out analysis of issues and develop reports. The Mexican Section has been active in organizing and sending participants to the seven Tri-national Conferences in Defense of Public Education held between 1994 and 2006, five in Mexico and two in Canada.

In addition to the international participation, the Mexican Section has carried out campaigns within Mexico in opposition to specific neo-liberal policies that have followed from the integration that NAFTA initiated. For several years the Mexican Section has campaigned in opposition to the *examen unico*, a standardized test being administered as a requirement for post-secondary education placement. The test is administered by CENEVAL, a non-government agency modeled after the Education Testing Service. This agency was created after NAFTA as a part of the patterning after the US in the homogenizing process. The Mexican Section has also been active in opposing the restructuring of the public pension plans proposed to reduce the contribution of the state to the pensions of public employees.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Tri-national Conference was held in Oaxaca, Mexico in March of 2006, just six weeks before the beginning of the teacher strike in that state that exploded into a social struggle engaging social groups well beyond just teachers. The Tri-national Coalition played a role in developing international solidarity among unions outside Mexico in support of the teachers in Oaxaca in the strike and occupation of the centre of Oaxaca City that went on for nearly six months.

That conference in Oaxaca also marked the first significant participation of US unions in the Tri-national, with delegates from the AFT local at the City University of New York and from the United Teachers of Los Angeles, a joint AFT/NEA local.

Canadian provincial teacher unions have played a major role in supporting and participating in the Tri-national Coalition throughout its existence. The BCTF international solidarity program has provided funding and the union has played a coordinating role on an ongoing basis. The national umbrella for English Canadian teacher unions, the Canadian Teachers' Federation has participated at most of the conferences and some university and college faculty unions and the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) participated in conferences, as well.

### **Lessons from the work of the Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education**

Building long-lasting international coalitions is difficult. The nearly fifteen year life of the Tri-national Coalition reflects some particular conditions in leadership and resources.

One of the key conditions is a common understanding of the context and the consequent need for a coalition. NAFTA was seen as a concrete manifestation, as well as a symbol of the neo-liberal integration of economies and thus a threat to public education—by at least some union activists

in Mexico and Canada. Those who saw this as a significant need organized around the issues, even if they represented only a part of the teacher unions.

The first stage of building the coalition was information. The 1993 conference at Evergreen State College was key to this. It was the first time that teacher union activists from the three countries had been together to share information about the realities of education in their countries and how neo-liberal policies might affect these. Out of that conference, reports and further analysis was developed, again particularly in Canada and Mexico. Both of these countries are in very unequal relationships with the US, meaning that harmonization is likely to require the most changes from those two countries, thus creating more urgency in concerns.

Because coalitions are not usually formal organizations, they often appear around an issue, then disappear. If there is no formal affiliation and organizational structure, they are likely not to last. The Tri-national has confounded this primarily for two reasons—continuity of leadership and resources. A person in each of the three countries was prepared to undertake maintaining the coalition as a project and each has continued to do so over the fifteen years. The resources for the activities have come from a number of unions, but the continued support of the BCTF International Solidarity Fund has provided a consistent financial base for activities. These leadership commitments and resources have been key.

While the Tri-national Coalition began in response to NAFTA, over time the focus has been much broader than the specific impact of trade agreements. The neo-liberal reshaping of societies has many manifestations. It is sometimes easier to see these when one looks from outside of one's context, and, in particular, to see that similar patterns appear through the variety of elements contributing to the dominance of neo-liberal policies in education.

### **The Coalition expands to the hemisphere of the Americas**

Just as NAFTA was the impetus for the formation of the Tri-national Coalition, so the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was the impetus for the formation of a similar, but broader coalition that encompasses the Americas—North, Central and South.

The US initiative to expand NAFTA to cover the Americas in the form of the FTAA was intended to be developed through a series of summit meetings, bringing together the leaders of all the countries in the Americas (except Cuba). The second summit meeting, in Santiago, Chile, in 1998, adopted a program of action on education that were supposedly commitments of all the governments, in addition to continuing the negotiating of a trade agreement.

An alternative People's Summit was held at the same time, organized by a Hemispheric Social Alliance and the regional labour organization for the Americas, ORIT. Despite education being a major topic at the official summit, the education component of the People's Summit did not provide an alternative program that challenged neo-liberal ideas about the role of education that were reflected in the official program adopted by the governmental leaders.

In response to this gap in presenting an alternative to neo-liberal education policies, CoDevelopment Canada and the BC Teachers' Federation, proposed a conference to develop an alternative program. CoDevelopment Canada is an international NGO that works with the BCTF and other unions on international solidarity projects in the Americas. The two organizations invited participants from regions around Latin America to meet in conjunction with the 1998 Tri-national Conference in Defense of Public Education to explore forming a broader coalition to focus on the FTAA and the education commitments of governments made at the Santiago Summit.

This group of a half dozen participants organized a conference in Quito, Ecuador in 1999 to explore education issues related to the negotiation of an FTAA and the Santiago commitments on education. This IDEA Conference (Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas) created the IDEA Network (Red-SEPA in its Spanish acronym), which included teacher unions, but also student and community organizations committed to public education. The IDEA Network participated in alternative conferences at the next two Summits of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 and Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 2005, as well as at the World Social Forum and the World Education Forum.

As with the Tri-national experience, the focus of the IDEA Network has gone well beyond trade agreements to include research projects and targeted meetings on a range of issues related to neo-liberal policies, including standardized testing, decentralization of funding and gender issues.

A paper adopted at the initial IDEA conference identified several elements of strategy:

1. Defend public education at the local and national levels with a strategic consciousness of the global context. Inform and mobilize teachers to take part in this defense.
2. Counter neo-liberal ideology with an alternative program for public education nationally and internationally.
3. Conduct research and analysis and share it with other organizations throughout the Americas.
4. Build communication links among organizations with conferences and with communication using the Internet.
5. Work in international and regional teacher and labour organizations (e.g., Education International) to develop common understanding and common strategies.
6. Take part in international campaigns aimed at achieving social rights, including the right to an education and the right for workers to form organizations that provide protection.
7. Constantly challenge the “cult of the inevitable”—the claim that there is no alternative to neo-liberal policies.

With varying degrees of success, these have been elements of the work of the IDEA Network. The IDEA Network has produced publications and posters as elements of campaigns, organized support actions around the Americas to support teacher unions in conflict with governments, held conferences on specific issues, created a research network of union researchers and is developing an online journal examining issues related to trade agreements and neo-liberal education policies.

### **Opposing education in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)**

As preparations were being made for the Quito conference, advocacy organizations working on trade issues identified the proposed expansion of the GATS as one of the elements that was on the agenda of the WTO. This information became part of the discussion at the IDEA conference and a central issue in campaigns that would be carried out by the IDEA Network.

The GATS had actually come into existence with the formation of the World Trade Organization in 1995. Because it is a part of the WTO, it covers all countries that belong to the organization. However, the commitments made by most countries on education were very limited and its existence had not been noticed even by activists involved in campaigning on trade issues. It came

to wider notice primarily because it was one of the central topics to be on the agenda for the WTO meeting to be held in Seattle in December of 1999.

Negotiations on the GATS have been going on throughout the current decade, but fortunately with little achieved by those trying to expand its coverage. The lack of success with the GATS has been largely a result of the failure of other aspects of the WTO negotiations, particularly in agriculture.

The so-called Doha Development Round was supposed to provide gains for the less developed countries. Expansion of openings for services in the less developed countries would have been one of the tradeoffs for improved market access for products of those nations in the US and Europe.

The service sectors represent a significant and growing aspect of all economies, but particularly those in the most developed nations. For the US, for example, services make up more than 65% of Gross Domestic Product and 80% of employment (US Trade Representative, 2005). The US has a huge trade deficit with the rest of the world. With a significant portion of its economy made up of services, the export of services is key to reducing trade deficits. Education has consistently produced a trade surplus for the US.

Post-secondary education already reflects a significant export/import market for the US, Europe, Australia and, to a lesser degree, Canada. The WTO defines four types of trade in services as the supply of a service:

- (a) Cross-border supply. From one territory to another, such as education over the Internet.
- (b) Consumption abroad. Students studying abroad.
- (c) Commercial presence. Foreign direct investment—such as universities with international operations or companies selling tests.
- (d) Presence of natural persons. Providing service on a temporary basis in a foreign country.

The WTO also makes clear that “The sector includes primary, secondary, post-secondary and adult education services, as well as specialized training such as for sports.”

Education International (EI), the Global Union for the education sector with some 30 million teachers in its member organizations, has coordinated a campaign in opposition to the inclusion of education in the GATS. It has worked, as well, with the Public Services International in the campaign against public services as a whole being a part of the GATS. Together these union internationals make up the largest share of the global membership in trade unions.

The Education International campaign has included resolutions at its tri-annual congress, monitoring of the negotiations, and taking teams of union representatives to Geneva to meet and lobby national representatives in negotiations.

Education International publishes TradEducation News, an online newsletter that follows the state of negotiations and opposition to inclusion of education in the GATS. It also has on its web site a GATS Information Kit that details the positions of all countries in the GATS negotiations related to education ([www.ei-ie.org/gats/en](http://www.ei-ie.org/gats/en)).

### **New forms of negotiation after FTAA and GATS failures**

The Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 2005 was a disaster for those pushing for a Free Trade Area of the Americas. The countries could not even agree on a communiqué saying that they did not reach an agreement.

Despite periodic rumours of new negotiations breaking out at the WTO, new agreements on the GATS seem unlikely, although possible.

However, two new directions are apparent. One is that of an alternative to a US-dominated trade bloc in the Americas. When Venezuela joined the MERCOSUR (Southern Cone trade bloc) after the FTAA failure, MERCOSUR grew to encompass the major economies of Argentina and Brazil, along with Uruguay and Paraguay, with Chile as a sometime associate. The teacher unions in two of those countries, Brazil and Argentina, have agreements made by their national governments that they will not include education in trade agreements.

The other is the negotiation of bi-lateral agreements that build a new trading regime one country or region at a time. Both the US and Canada, separately, have reached a number of agreements on a bi-lateral basis. Both Canada and the US have signed free trade agreements with Chile. The CAFTA, the Central America Free Trade Agreement with the US includes most of the countries of the region, along with the Dominican Republic. Agreements with the US were reached with the Andean countries, with the recent elections returning regimes in support of the agreement in Colombia and Peru, but opposed in Ecuador. Both the US and Canada are negotiating FTAs with South Korea and other countries in Asia.

As Education International points out in TradEducation News, the education commitments in these bi-lateral agreements often are more extensive than those existing in the GATS or proposed for expansion of the GATS.

Teacher unions have been in the lead in opposing many of these agreements. In Guatemala, for example, the union and its leadership have been targeted by the government after playing a central role in the demonstrations opposing the country joining CAFTA.

### **The future of transnational resistance to education in trade agreements**

The building of international coalitions to challenge education being considered a tradable commodity covered by trade agreements depended to a significant degree on the multi-national nature of the negotiation of those agreements. It was the formal public meetings that provided the face and the place for organizing resistance to trade agreements, but also to the many other aspects of neo-liberal education policies.

With the failure of the large scale, multi-country form of negotiation to reach new agreements, these meetings as a way of focusing opposition becomes more problematic. The challenge for teacher unions and others seeking to protect public education from destruction through neo-liberal policies is to find new points of focus that allow for the deepening of teacher union internationalism in support of an education world that is not flat, but reflects indigenous values and social diversity.

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