

BCTF INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY PROGRAM

Why international solidarity?

“What we desire for ourselves we wish for all”

- Common values and experience as educators
- Impact of globalization
- Perspective on one’s own experience
- Building relationships over time

Sources of funding

- Member fees
- CIDA matching funds
- Fundraising

Types of activities

- Union capacity-building projects
- Member/staff engagement in solidarity projects
- Coalitions/organizations
- Research and communications
- Solidarity actions



Teachers make a difference—globally—at BCTF solidarity workshop

By Janet Nicol

Sometimes you have to travel outside the country to see your own society, Larry Kuehn, the director of British Columbia Teacher’s Federation’s International Solidarity Program, told 60 teachers at a workshop this February.

And what do you see?

“We have common experiences as educators,” Kuehn says. “We all deal with problems such as class size, regardless of the society.”

The one-day workshop called *BC Teachers Making a Difference Globally* was held at the federation building in Vancouver and broadcast live online via Ustream. Teachers attending had an opportunity to learn more about the committee’s programs, consider volunteering for overseas projects, and discuss global issues.

BC teachers have been working with educators from other countries since the 1920s, Kuehn points out. When the federation set up the International Solidarity Committee in 1981, sustainable links with colleagues, primarily in Africa and Latin America, were established. Funding has been made possible with an ongoing reserve, built up over time, of 1.86% of the BCTF fee.

“This work reflects the values of BC teachers,” Kuehn says, stressing the intent is one of solidarity, not charity. “We are recognizing people as equals. We have many of the same educational objectives. We want the development of humanity at the highest level.”

The BCTF began working with teachers in Peru in 1986, setting up gender-equity training programs in collaboration with the Peruvian teacher union, Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores en la Educación del Perú (SUTEP) and CoDevelopment Canada, a non-profit group in Vancouver. Kuehn says 80% of Peru’s teachers are women, while the SUTEP leadership has traditionally been male. He says the equity program is creating a shift toward gender equality.

In 2008, four BCTF teachers traveled to Peru to pilot an English language pedagogical workshop for Peruvian teachers. Working with SUTEP, the program was successful. Last summer, eight BC teachers ran workshops in five cities in Peru along with eight Peruvian teachers. The expanded program will run again this summer.

“English is a required subject for students in Peru,” Kuehn explains. He says the project gives Peruvian teachers the professional development they need and helps build membership support for their union. “SUTEP’s image has been seen as radical among some of their members,” he says. “Now as they sponsor professional workshops, they are seen as giving their members support.”

The BCTF has sent more than 40 teachers to Cuba over the past 12 years, also teaching English language pedagogy workshops. Kuehn says this program is coming to an end as the political climate of Cuba changes, but the federation hopes to continue a program in English language lessons for their trade unionists.

A delegation of BCTF teacher activists recently returned from Colombia, considered the most dangerous place on earth for educators, Kuehn says. Since 1995, 95 teachers in just one region of Colombia have been assassinated. Teacher activists are targeted by rogue paramilitary forces, and many now travel with government-supplied bodyguards for protection. Having international links with teachers offers crucial support, Kuehn

believes. The federation has also contributed funding to the Colombian teachers' union pedagogical circles program.

The federation also lends a helping hand in Mozambique, an African country emerging from sixteen years of civil war and coping with severe poverty. BC teacher, Yom Shamash, who is fluent in Portuguese among other languages, has worked with the teachers' union, the ONP, in developing a handbook for school union representatives.

BCTF has also worked with the South Africa Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) from its formation in 1990. Kuehn says funding helped in organizing SADTU as a non-racial teachers' union as apartheid was ending. Now SADTU is a union with some 350,000 members.

Namibia is another African country where the federation has worked, since 1994. It has helped develop and carry out a long-term union training program. In 2011, assistance was provided in creating an English-language-proficiency mentorship program for teachers.

BCTF representatives will travel to Mexico City in May to participate in an education forum on the impact of the North American Free-Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Canada, the US, and Mexico. The partnership between Canadian and Mexican teachers especially has been ongoing for almost two decades, Kuehn points out.

These conferences are useful as a place to discuss governments' neoliberal policies which are eroding public education, and to help educator activists identify common patterns, he says. The Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas (IDEA) network has been developed as an organization facilitating exchange of information on resistance to neo-liberal policies and the development of alternative pedagogies.

Following Kuehn's presentation, teachers divided into three groups and attended rotating workshops.

Education Beyond Borders (Africa) and BCTF Namibia Project Workshop

When Noble Kelly was in South Africa seven years ago, he found a way his teaching experience in North Vancouver could be of use. He began working with street kids, teaching them with computers and contributing technology. Kelly eventually helped found Teachers Without Borders—Canada, a non-profit NGO, now an independent organization called Education Beyond Borders.

"We've sponsored three teaching projects in Kenya, with most of the 16 teachers coming from BC," Kelly says. The program has been able to flourish thanks to funding from the BCTF and other teacher groups in Canada.

"It's all about sharing knowledge with peers globally," Kelly says. "We encourage teachers to use engaging methodology, student-based projects, learning through inquiry, and co-operative values."

A one-week teacher pedagogy workshop can be a catalyst for change, he observes. "These projects are also about sustainability. In four to five years, teachers can set up their own workshops."

Kelly says the goal of the workshops is "less and less of 'us' (Canadian teachers) and more and more 'them' (local teachers)."

"We learn, too," Kelly says. "We note that just as teens are teens everywhere, teachers are teachers everywhere, too. It's about interconnectedness."

Also involved in teaching teachers in Africa is Susan Crowley, a retired teacher from Prince Rupert. She has travelled to Namibia on BCTF projects and says the need to help teachers acquire English language skills and methodology is just as necessary today as when the project began in the 1990s.

"English was often the second or third language for teachers," Crowley says. There are 40 distinct groups in Namibia with 30 home languages, she says. People spoke Afrikaans or German as well as a 'home' language before the country became independent in 1990, and English became the official language of instruction in schools.

Working closely with the Namibia National Teachers' Union (NANTU), a union representing 23,000 teachers in a sparsely-populated country of 2.2 million, the project has also been aimed at training teachers to train each other.

"People have cell phones, but no computers," Crowley says. As well, she says there are few educational resources and overall the literacy rate is low. "Our assistance is very much needed. It's a good fit with our ESL methodology, but it's also a huge job."

Even though acquiring proficiency in English has been a long-term process for Namibian teachers, Crowley says young teachers coming up after the country's independence will help meet these professional goals.

CoDevelopment Canada Workshop—Steve Stewart

Steve Stewart, Education Program Director of CoDevelopment Canada, an organization committed to partnerships in social justice between Canada and Latin America, says half of the non-profit's budget goes toward programs to strengthen teacher practices and rights in Central and South America. Working with the BCTF's solidarity committee has been a long, enriching collaboration.

"We have been working at strengthening gender equity in Latin America," Stewart says. "About 70% of teachers in these countries are female but the union executives have mostly been male." Gender equity programs sponsored by CoDev and the BCTF have shown positive results. "We also promote democratic and inclusive teaching practices," Stewart says, "and non-sexist pedagogy."

"Since the 1990s, neo-liberalism has spread in Latin America," Stewart says. This means a smaller role of government, privatizing education, and revamping education along the lines of a business model, with standardized testing, competitive practices, and administrators becoming managers rather than collaborators with teaching staff.

"We assist unions in developing public campaigns directed at 'defending public education'," Stewart says.

But teachers who have protested these policies within authoritarian regimes have been repressed, and some have been beaten, imprisoned, or killed. Twelve teachers have been killed in Honduras since the coup in 2009, Stewart says, and attacks against teachers continue in Colombia. "We have provided support for the regional union in Cordoba, Colombia, to document all deaths and disappearances." At a future point, this documentation could assist in reparations for damages for the families of teachers who have been killed, he says.

CoDev also organizes and maintains the Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas (IDEA) network. This network monitors educational issues and involves researching, collaboration, organizing forums, and maintaining a website and Facebook page.

CoDevelopment Canada depends on union funding, CIDA matching funding, and individual memberships. Stewart encourages teachers to learn more and consider becoming involved.

Peru Workshop—Barb Ryeburn, Carol Jkanovich, Paula Naylor

Workshops on the pedagogy of teaching English to English-language teachers in Peru began four years ago, based on the successful BCTF projects in Cuba. "Our Peruvian colleagues are skilled and talented teachers," says Paula Naylor, a teacher in Vancouver who travelled to Peru twice, "but they lack resources."

"Last year we set up a new model," adds Barb Ryeburn, a teacher in Cranbrook and also a two-time participant. "We paired four BC teachers with four Peruvian teachers and mentored them at our first site in Lima, so they could teach our workshops in the second sites in Arequipa and Iquitos."

"Peruvians have training, but don't have educational resources and autonomy," says Carol Jkanovich, a Spanish teacher on Vancouver Island who has also been to Peru twice. "It's been an effective way to build union membership, too."

The trio described the challenges of Peru's teacher union in building membership support, especially since union dues are collected on a voluntary basis. With limited resources, some union leaders work without pay.

SUTEP represents 280,000 public school teachers in a country where half the student population attend private schools.

“We are building trust with their union leaders,” Naylor says of the ongoing collaboration. It’s been an uphill battle for teachers, despite the country having a wealth of mineral and other resources, and education has not been a fiscal priority for several elected governments in the past.

“People are cautiously optimistic about the new government,” Ryeburn says. “But the president has been drawn in many directions.”

This past summer, the program expanded to include a team of eight BC teachers with two additional workshop sites added to the existing three sites. The expanded program will continue this upcoming summer.

World Café

Teachers engaged in small-group discussions as part of a ‘world café’ activity with each group focused on one of the following global issues: the changing role of Canada internationally; teacher pensions and mining investments; English language teaching—a colonial practice?; the impact of neo-liberal policies on public education; solidarity versus charity; education of indigenous peoples.

Wrap-up

Discussion and feedback concluded the workshop and Kuehn encouraged participants to spread the word by telling three people about their workshop experiences.

“If we make connections globally, we all learn.” Echoing an observation by Kelly in one of the workshops, Kuehn says, “It’s about interconnectedness.”

Several door prizes, comprised of gifts from around the globe, were given out at different times during the day, including two tickets to the Cuban ballet being presented in Vancouver.

BCTF International Solidarity Committee members:

Susan Crowley (Prince Rupert);

Nancy Hawkins (VESTA),

Janek Kuchmistrz (VESTA, Adult Ed);

Barb Ryeburn (Cranbrook).

Larry Kuehn, BCTF Director; Anne Field and Sharon Taylor, BCTF support staff program assistants.

For more information, visit:

BCTF International Solidarity Program: <http://bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=6292>

IDEA Network: <http://idea-network.ca/ideas>

CoDevelopment Canada: <http://www.codev.org>

Education Beyond Borders: <http://www.educationbeyondborders.org>

Janet Nicol teaches at Killarney Secondary in Vancouver and participated in the BCTF Peru project in 2010.