



THE PERU PROJECT

~ Building International Solidarity Between Teachers ~

HOW DO YOU SAY “SOLIDARITY” in Spanish? With a suitcase full of English-language lessons, I travelled to Peru this past summer, along with four other Canadian teachers, to find out.

Giving English-language methodology workshops to teachers and building union support was something I had done in Mongolia a decade ago. I also toured schools in Cuba and visited Guatemala, inspired by the international movement to accompany indigenous refugees back to their villages after civil war. But I had never crossed the equator to South America. So, when I heard about the B.C. Teachers’ Federation project in Peru, I was eager to work with my union sisters and brothers, all fluent in Spanish, and keen to support SUTEP, the teachers’ union in Peru.

Our teaching brigade travelled by plane to Lima, Peru’s capital. We glimpsed the city’s seemingly haphazard residential outskirts as a taxi transported us downtown to a hotel across from a yellow-painted cathedral. Up a spiralling staircase, lugging suitcases, we arrived to rooms by an open terrace. A parrot, clinging to a Romanesque statue, called out “hola.” Along distant rooftops were perched rows of vultures. All signs, I thought, of an intriguing journey ahead.

By Janet Nicol

Monday rolled around and we loaded our packs with worksheets, books, poster paper and a guitar. Even with two taxis it was a tight fit in the back seat, as drivers with steel nerves sped across the city in mid-afternoon traffic.

Arriving at the workshop destination, we were greeted by a friendly security guard who led us through a locked gate to a large one-storey public school. Female teenagers dressed in school uniforms spilled out of classes as we came through the courtyard. They eyed us with curiosity, some calling out a few English words and then smiling as we greeted them back in Spanish.

Passing religious statues inside wall nooks, I claimed a classroom and cleared the chalkboard. A fiesta was coming up, I learned, as Peruvians celebrated their independence from Spain in 1821. Students had been practising drills in the courtyard during and after school, though some SUTEP activists were critical of the amount of lost learning time.

The sound of marching feet drifted in from outside the classroom door as I prepared five hours of lessons for our Peruvian peers in creative ways to teach English. Our team aimed to make language learning fun by covering topics such as art, heroes, social movements, folk songs and stories.

PHOTOGRAPH: BARBARA RYEBURN



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LEFT (page 32): B.C. teacher Carol Jokanovich (right) mentored Peruvian teacher Candi Mendoza (left) in Lima, and then Mendoza taught a workshop in Arequipa.

ABOVE: Participants in the Peru Project, from both Canada and Peru, hold SUTEP posters advertising the project's workshops in Lima. Left to right: B.C. teachers Paula Naylor, Yom Shamash, Janet Nicol; Julio Alberto Mora Huapaya, vice-principal of Colegio Maria Parado de Bellido; B.C. teacher Carol Jokanovich; Heli Alejo Ocaña, Secretary of International Relations for SUTEP.

RIGHT: B.C. teacher Paula Naylor (left) runs a workshop in Lima.



PHOTOGRAPH: JANET NICOL

Opening ceremonies for the workshops began with a lengthy national anthem fervently sung by 60 teacher participants, as we Canadians watched on. SUTEP leaders followed with speeches delivered with equal passion.

"The government of Peru does not make education a priority," says Emilia Bobadilla, one of the many participants I got to know. Like me, Bobadilla teaches the history of her country to teenagers — but she also faces uphill battles unique to Peru. "The school where I work has no walls to separate classes," she explains, "and no computers. Even if they have a cell phone and television, they are poor in their minds. They think they can't learn the English lessons or achieve other things. Many of my students do not see a promising future for themselves." Bobadilla's parents live in the mountain city of Arequipa but she moved to Lima, where she married and raised three sons, the youngest still in secondary school.

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Shrouded in cloud cover and nestled in the foothills of the Andes mountains, Lima has 9 million residents. Most, like Bobadilla, are from another part of Peru, driven to the port city by economic necessity.

Bobadilla supports her union and hopes SUTEP (Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores en la Educación del Perú) can fight against recent laws passed threatening her wages and working conditions.

This is the third year SUTEP and the BCTF have worked together, in a country rich in minerals, agriculture and tourism, but with almost half its 29 million citizens living in poverty. Peru is a democracy but struggles against a long history of authoritarian governments resistant to social reform.

"It's so important to have a union for teachers,"

Many students do not see a promising future for themselves

says Francisca Alvarado Coronado, who has been teaching in Lima for 25 years. "We can win our rights if we join the union. We are stronger." Coronado is raising three sons on her own. With one teenage son left to finish school, she still managed to find time for this project.

Espraza Cabella, another workshop participant, worked as a teacher for the first time in August. Gaining the support of new teachers like Cabella is crucial for SUTEP, considering union dues are voluntary and not remitted by a unionized employer as a paycheque deduction, as is done in Canada and the U.S., through the Rand formula. "I am going to join SUTEP," Cabella told me. "They help teachers. This week was a good experience. I learned many techniques to get students involved in my class."

Barbara Ryeburn, team leader of the BCTF group and an elementary school teacher in Cranbrook, B.C., points to the mutual rewards of the project. "We can share teaching strategies," she says. "This allows teachers to practice and improve their English and helps them develop leadership roles so they can lead workshops." She also sees the political lessons Canadians can draw from Peru. "We have identified common problems," Ryeburn says. "We see that privatization has been widespread; governments spend less on education; and children have many deficiencies in health and nutrition."

After teaching in Lima alongside four Peruvian teachers whom we mentored, we divided forces to teach a second week outside the capital. Four of us travelled to Arequipa, Peru's second-largest city, and five others travelled to Iquitos, a city in the Amazon jungle. Travelling by airplane for some of the Peruvian teachers was a luxury — and a first-time experience.

Social and environmental problems were observed by the BCTF teachers while they were in Iquitos presenting the workshops, which were attended by 100 teachers. But they also saw lots of positives among local residents. "People are rooted in the environment," says Paula Naylor, a Vancouver elementary school teacher. "They feel connected to nature." Naylor was also impressed with her Peruvian colleagues' professionalism in this remote jungle region. "They use humanistic learning," she says. "The people I talked to indicated that their students' needs were more important than the textbooks."

"Workshop participants were enthusiastic learners," adds Carol Jokanovich, a high school Spanish teacher on Vancouver Island. "They have an excellent modern languages department in Iquitos, so we had many fluent English speakers in our workshops," she says.

The team slept under mosquito nets at night and good-naturedly endured the heat, taking at least



PHOTOGRAPH: JANET NICOL

TOP: Heli Alejo Ocaña, Secretary of International Relations for SUTEP, is proud of his union's founder, Horacio Zeballos Gamez, a revered poet and teacher whose portrait is in many local SUTEP offices.

ABOVE: Yom Shamash (left) was one of the group of teachers who gave workshops in Arequipa.

two showers a day. Staying cool sometimes also meant jumping into the mud-coloured Amazon, despite thoughts of what might lurk below the river's surface.

In Arequipa, I worked alongside Yom Shamash, an adult education teacher in Vancouver. Blue skies and sunshine greeted us each morning in this popular tourist destination with its many Spanish colonial buildings, 2,500 metres above sea level.

Teachers were on one-week holidays and so more than 100 were able to enroll in our morning workshops. A few even travelled in from Cusco, a city near the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu. Some workshop participants also spoke Quechua, the dominant indigenous language of the Andes.

Shamash brought a guitar to the classroom and taught English-language songs and storytelling skills. Participants were asked to share the name of someone they are very close to, and then all sang, "You are My Sunshine." Shamash also gave teachers

a DVD of song lyrics, stories and grammar exercises, compiled during his many years of teaching in Canada and with BCTF projects in Cuba and Africa.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for Peruvian teachers not only to learn teaching methodology, but also to practice their skills and develop closer relationships with both Canadian and Peruvian colleagues," Shamash says.

In my workshops, I recommended award-winning Vancouver instructor Joan Acosta's materials, available online (at no cost) at www.bestofthereader.ca. Included are tongue twisters, word puzzles and amazing true stories. I also highlighted positive social struggles around the world — from Ghandi's salt march to the sea to Colombia's children's peace movement. A Peruvian teacher commented later, on a feedback form: "I learned you can teach a language and have students think, too."

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"In our country, with its diversity, multicultural makeup, and isolated regions, our work is very complicated," said Gladys Pajuelo Oncoy, who speaks to me about the role of women in Peru. As head of SUTEP's national women's committee, she has a job that requires moving mountains — and challenging *machismo*.

"I don't have the exact numbers of women teachers who are separated or have been deserted by their spouse and have children," Oncoy said, "but I can tell you that it is a high percentage. This is partly due to the moral and economic crisis which exists for women teachers, many of whom have been abandoned by their husband or are victims of family violence. They are also victims in schools because of the hierarchies which exist there."

Oncoy says a big challenge for teachers in Peru, of which 70 per cent are female, is keeping a permanent job because of the constant threat by the government to privatize public schools. "As well, there is a threat of employer evaluations," she says, "leading to job loss. Teachers also have economic worries because the majority are in debt and their salaries have been greatly reduced. This instability has led many women teachers to hold two jobs and not take enough time to properly fulfill their role as mothers."

"In school, discrimination against women can be found at all levels, from the classrooms to the ministry. Promotions are difficult and there is a high level of harassment involved in obtaining important positions — even in obtaining a teaching position."

"It is important to point out that we have achieved the goal of including women in our union," she adds. "All our regions now have women directors and this motivates us to continue our work with increased efforts."

The BCTF plans to train more Peruvian teachers

to lead English-language workshops next summer, according to Ryeburn, and to run workshops in more than two locations. "The ideal goal is for the teachers of Peru to feel confident to develop strategies on their own," Ryeburn says. "This is so enriching for Canadian teachers, too. We are very inspired by our colleagues, who have so much working against them but are still motivated to teach."

Three years ago Peruvian teachers went on a 15-day national strike to protest the government's draconian measures, with bitter results. Three people were killed, several others injured and many leaders were detained by police, released and then placed under surveillance. And, in the end, the government, led by President Alan Garcia, had its way.

"The new law takes away previous rights for teachers, including job security," says Heli Alejo Ocaña, Secretary of International Relations for SUTEP. "Evaluations of teachers are now conducted every three years and it has become easier to lay off teachers." Ocaña also says teachers' salary upgrading

You can teach a language and have students think, too



The 2010 BCTF Peru brigade, seen here in the main square in Lima, consisted of (from left to right): Barbara Ryeburn, Carol Jkanovich, Janet Nicol, Yom Shamash and Paula Naylor.

has been eroded and the transfer of teachers from one school to another is no longer permitted.

SUTEP's members are mostly from the public sector, which employs about 140,000 teachers, each making on average \$450 a month, according to Ocaña. About the same number of teachers work in private schools, earning anywhere from \$100 to \$1,500 a month — and the government is pushing to privatize education further.

Class sizes vary and can range from 15 students in a class in the countryside to more than 45

Many teachers work two part-time jobs and have long and chaotic commutes by bus

students in a class in the larger cities. Many teachers work two part-time jobs, and, in Lima, have long and chaotic commutes, usually by bus. Teachers receive modest pensions and can be protected with disability benefits if they have health issues. The occupation of substitute teachers does not exist.

"We have great faith and hope," Ocaña says. "We see ourselves as working harder to make changes. Fortunately, many people are becoming aware, but we do not have [government] leaders to unite us. When we do have the type of leader we need, he is vilified or disappears."

The English-language workshops help to improve the image of the union, Ocaña believes. (Despite democratic elections of SUTEP leaders, Peruvian teachers, we were told, have not always felt well-served by their union over its 48-year history.) "Now, only a small number of teachers in Peru receive professional help," Ocaña says, "so the workshops are a vehicle for us to reach teachers. This program is open to everyone. We also develop our friendship with teachers in Canada and Peru. This is solidarity in action."

Larry Kuehn, director of research and technology at the BCTF, has been responsible for the federation's International Solidarity Program since 1988. "For the past decade, we have worked with unions in South and Central America on issues related to globalization and neo-liberal practices in education," Kuehn says. The federation's projects are made possible by an on-going reserve built up over time, of 1.86 per cent of teachers' dues.

"The BCTF has worked with SUTEP since 1986, starting with supporting gender-equality training programs," he says. "SUTEP wanted to expand the work with the BCTF and had heard about the project with Cuba. The program of pedagogical workshops helps to expand the view of the role of the union both with the public and with teachers."

The necessity of the BCTF's international solidarity programs was re-enforced by events that occurred while we were teaching in Peru. "In the course of one week, three SUTEP-approved candidates running for municipal or regional elections were killed," Ryeburn says. "Two of these appeared to be assassinations disguised as criminal acts. The third was a car accident. We also learned that teacher protestors who take to the streets are often assaulted with tear gas, beaten and put in jail. The importance of BCTF solidarity with SUTEP was made very clear to us."

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B.C. teachers were given pro-union t-shirts during the opening ceremonies at the school in Lima.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY SUTEP

I have re-lived my remarkable summer back in a Vancouver high school classroom this fall, showing students my Peru photos, accompanied by panpipes and guitar music. I think about Emilia Bobadilla teaching in Lima and encouraging her students to care about the world and their future within it, too. And I think of the brave and committed teacher activists I have met, committed to fighting for public education and teachers' rights. Ryeburn truly speaks for our brigade when she says: "We want teachers in Peru to know they are not alone. We are in solidarity with you." So how do you say "solidarity" in Spanish? *La solidaridad*.

Janet Nicol is a Vancouver-based freelance writer, high school teacher, and a member of the BCTF. The author would like to thank Yom Shamash and Barbara Ryeburn of the 2010 BCTF Peru brigade for their translation assistance with interviews of SUTEP officials.

For more information (in Spanish) about SUTEP visit sutep.org.pe. For more information about the BCTF's International Solidarity Committee visit www.bctf.ca and click on "Social Justice."

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