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Conference meets in Vancouver to defend public education

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The threats to public education are far and wide according to conclusions drawn from the 12th Tri-National Conference in Defense of Public Education that occurred last weekend, May 13–15, at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Teachers and students from North and South America came to continue their twenty-year discussion on threats to public education and its connection to free trade and the increasing privatization of what previously were public parts of our society. I was there as a representative of the Pajaro Valley Federation of Teachers.

It was obvious, through the three days of speeches and workshops, that as one goes from north to south, things get worse. In Mexico, 4,000 teachers have been fired, three have been murdered, six are in jail, and 43, from the teachers' college in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero have been missing since September 2014 while on their way to a march to demonstrate against discriminatory hiring and to raise money for future marches. Teachers are also upset because the new curriculum they are being mandated to teach is driven by businesspeople, according to the student group, 1st Tri-national Encounter of Students (TES). It is less humanistic and removes classes in art, music and philosophy. Parents have also joined with teachers because a proposal called Article 73, if passed by the legislature, will make them pay more for their children's schooling, according to Raciél Gutierrez, from the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación de Michoacán.

Last Sunday, May 15, which was Día de los Maestros in Mexico, as we were meeting in Vancouver, a national teachers' strike occurred all over Mexico. The strikers are demanding that the fired teachers be rehired, the six in jail be released, and the 43 missing student teachers be returned alive. Currently, according to Tuesday's *La Jornada* newspaper, teachers are currently camping out in Mexico City and refusing to work.

In the United States, the Chicago teachers' union, CTU, sent fifteen, mostly women, teachers to the conference and described their battle with neighborhood schools being closed and teachers losing their jobs. Conference speaker and CTU executive board member, Maria Moreno, described how, in 2010, when her school was going to lose nine teachers, 4,000 teachers came out to fight the layoffs. It led to teacher activism and new leadership in the union. According to Karen Lewis, president of CTU, teachers are heading towards their third strike since 2012. Education is underfunded, poor students aren't being served, teachers are being fired, and schools are being closed. Also present were teachers and professors from United Educators of Los Angeles and City College of San Francisco.



PHOTO caption: William I. Robinson describes the backlash from the business community after the emerging power of people in the 1960s and '70s that led to restructuring the social and economic system to work in the favor of business. From left Blair Redlin, Chair of the Trade Justice Network of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Alejandro Alvarez, Professor of Economics at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, William I. Robinson, Professor at University of California at Santa Barbara, and Teri Mooring, 2nd Vice President of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation.

Photo credit: Sarah Ringler

Canada has been aggressive in defending their schools and teachers. Mario Beauchemin, of Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ), said that when the neoliberal [sic] party was elected, austerity was the reason given to cut \$4 billion in two years from the public sector. People organized and teachers had rolling and rotating strikes around the province; teachers finally got a 15% raise over five years. They even had an illegal strike, but they paid the fines and never lost strong support from the parents and community. Harvey Bischof from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation described success by teachers who rallied against Bill 115 and

maintained their right to strike. In Canada, teachers' unions negotiate province wide. Although this has some disadvantages, it does give the unions significant political strength. Also, education in Canada falls under each province and there is no federal department of education.

Student groups that were present were concerned with student debt, which, according to William I. Robinson of University of California at Santa Barbara, has grown 400% since 2000. This increase partly reflects a 254% increase in the cost of education, as the state pays less and students and their families pay more. Students graduate and start their lives in debt. Peyton Veitch, treasurer-elect of CFS (Canadian Federation of Students) was concerned about the low percentage, 4%, of college degrees from Canadians with an Aboriginal background and their high percentage, 30%, in the prisons. Similar problems with African Americans and Latinos in the US were also cited.

Participants from Aboriginal groups from Canada and Mexico spoke about the disconnection between their communities and the official curricula and evaluations with which they are provided. Graduation rates are low and poverty rates are high. Julián Jiménez Ramírez, from Oaxaca, said that his people are marginalized by the Spanish and North American cultures, and that the official curriculum is a violation of the rights of his people. Aboriginal Canadian teachers talked about poor water supplies and trauma that still exists from the mostly-religious British Columbian Indian Residential Schools that took children away from their parents at five years old. Those school were closed as recently as 1984. Also, before each venue, an Aboriginal person welcomed us, identified whose land we were on, and noted that the place was unceded land. British Columbia is one of the few places in North America where treaties and land claims were not signed due to policies in the 1860s of Chief Commissioner of Land and Works, Sir Joseph William Trutch.

Technology was also discussed. Larry Kuehn, BCTF, noted that technology is, "inherently political; certain technologies are democratic and others are autocratic." One of the teachers from Mexico described having computers, but all the software was in English. Another teacher from the Mexican state of Veracruz said her school received computers, but didn't have electricity.

The conference closed with support for the striking teachers in Mexico and a demand to end the violence against Mexican teachers. The group will continue to meet to combat austerity programs, push for teacher autonomy and their right to make decisions about their students and be free of administrative work, and push for free public education for all from preschool thorough university.