



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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Transforming education in Bolivia: BC and Ontario teachers in solidarity

Bolivia is one of the most interesting and uplifting countries in South America because of the many changes brought about by the continent's first Indigenous president. Since being elected in 2006, Evo Morales and his MAS movement have been transforming the country from former military dictatorship into a pluri-national democracy that serves the 62% Indigenous majority equally with all Bolivians. The new constitution has brought significant changes to many sectors, not the least public education.

The BCTF's International Solidarity Program is contributing to the positive changes for Bolivian teachers and students through a partnership with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation and the Bolivian Rural Teachers' Union. The BCTF and OSSTF each contribute \$25,000 a year while the Bolivians provide \$8,000. Union skills training and professional development programs are delivered by the Foundation for Education and Development in the city of Cochabamba, and Salesiana University in the capital La Paz evaluates and certifies the graduates.

A Canadian delegation was planned to visit the partners and schools, evaluate the programs, and make recommendations for future support. It was to include BCTF President Jim Iker, OSSTF President Paul Elliott, and one staffer from each union. Unfortunately, both presidents were prevented from participating: Iker by the Court of Appeal ruling, and Elliott by the strike.



Tito Delgado and Igor Ampuero, teacher and mentor

Igor Ampuero runs the programs, assisted by two exceedingly capable staff members who contribute volunteer time in addition to their paid time. They provided extensive reporting on the programs offered in the past three years. Many of the teachers travel long distances by bus to attend the weekend classes, and complete assignments online. Success rates are high and graduates have gone on to positions of leadership in their schools, local, or regional unions, and municipal councils.

We visited two schools—one urban and one rural—where we saw firsthand the challenges in terms of overcrowded facilities and scant resources. At the same time, we witnessed the teachers' deep commitment to improving the quality of their public education system and reclaiming the richness of their Indigenous languages, Aymara and Quechua.



At Bella Vista Elementary School in Cochabamba

Teachers repeatedly thanked the Canadian visitors for the learning opportunities provided by the solidarity project. They were tremendously encouraged by the collegial support they found through the programs and returned to their classrooms feeling more confident and capable, both in coping with the issues in their large classes—35 to 45 students is typical—and in dealing with technology.

In 2009 the Ministry of Education gave every teacher a laptop with the new national curriculum pre-installed. Then, because Internet connectivity was so poor in remote areas, Bolivia launched its own satellite, which is called Tupac Katari 1 after an Indigenous hero who resisted the Spanish. The lack of access to computer technology and training is an ongoing concern.

A great sense of professional pride was palpable at the graduation ceremony, where more than 100 teachers crossed the stage to receive their certificates.

Tito Delgado, a secondary math teacher in a small rural school, has taken all of the programs offered through the project and now is part of a small cohort of eight teachers working on their Masters. “The students in our communities are very, very poor. Sometimes it’s even difficult for them to get a pencil,” he said. “If you could help in any way we would be infinitely grateful.”