



Internacional de la Educación
para América Latina
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Colleagues, to say that we are living in peculiar times would be a great understatement.

Those of you who took part in our World Congress two years ago in Ottawa may remember that we identified four global challenges, affecting all our affiliates worldwide.

Let me recall them. One: The further integration of the world economy moving the balance of power from democratic institutions to unelected corporations. Two: The declining respect for our democratic freedoms and civic rights. Three: Geo-political shifts threatening national sovereignty and long-standing global standards for peace. And four: the surge of extremism by groups claiming to act in the name of religion.

All these developments are posing political, educational and professional challenges, that will place additional strain on our members, on our unions, on our profession, and on Education International itself.

And since then there is a fifth challenge, which few of us anticipated.



The election one year ago of Mr Trump as president of the US. Given the historic role of American leadership in the world, Mr Trump's America First approach is shaking the international order we have known in the past 70 years.

The other day, I had an interesting conversation with the head of one of the UN agencies.

The person confided in me that the situation within the UN system was "politically rudderless". Our American colleagues speak of a crisis of democracy in their country. The public-school system is under threat while union rights are being revoked. Well, here in Latin America, we have some expertise when it comes to right wing populism when it comes to attacks on our public education systems and when it comes to violations of trade union rights.

Colleagues, when the world gathered in September 2015 in New York to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals and when it came together a couple of months later to adopt the Paris Agreement on climate change, I sensed a renewed optimism.

It was not only a commitment toward building a sustainable future, but a future grounded in the vision of shared democratic values.

That was two years ago. Today we are in the middle of a crisis; a crisis challenging the resilience of our public and democratic institutions a crisis undermining our public schools and our education unions a crisis also, if you will, of half-truths and outright lies.

Mark Twain said, "a lie travels half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes". It only takes seconds today with ICT.



For example, through social networks, children and adults can create their own realities in bubbles where everybody agrees.

They may agree on hate and bigotry or become a launching pad for bullying. Even when it does not take a hostile form, one can proliferate groupings of people with near identical views.

This also has the effect of diluting or marginalizing the role of representative trade unions.

Social dialogue is confused with civil dialogue and opinions of “non-governmental” individuals. The “debate” is distracted and muddled by noise which, of course, lets those in authority do whatever they want.

A study based on the “World Values Survey” shows that in several “consolidated democracies” in Europe and North America, support for democracy has declined.

Particularly alarming was the fact that the authoritarian temptation was felt most by those born in or after 1980. In my country, the Netherlands, only a third of young people attach “maximal importance” to living in a democracy. In the United States, the figure is also around 30 per cent, and there is no reason to believe that these figures are different in Latin America.

So, shouldn't all alarm bells be ringing? Another disturbing development is the fading belief among politicians that a free press, a robust public-school system, a vibrant civil society and an independent trade union movement are as essential to democracy as free elections are.

Yet, we see public authorities confuse isolated voices with representative institutions and, in some cases, deliberately undermine their country's representative institutions, especially trade unions.

The Minister of Education of a Latin American country told me some time ago that he had 50,000 teachers as “followers” on Twitter so why did he need to talk to the education trade unions? One conversation would not concern me, but several member organizations have informed us that their representative role is not being respected and that they are being



Internacional de la Educación
para América Latina
IEAL

“replaced” by people who represent nobody or worse, act on behalf of private companies and vendors.

And in some countries education unions are not “just” ignored, but are in fact targeted by right wing groups and being attacked by conservative governments which mistakenly believe that international human and trade union rights standards do not apply to them. Well they do.

Let there be no misunderstanding: Education International stands by our colleagues in Peru, in Honduras, in Argentina, in Brasil helping them to confront serious infringements of their human and trade union rights.

Colleagues, we believe that quality public education is also a democratic right. But in too many places portions of our public-school systems are being carved out and outsourced to private businesses. In too many places market principles determine what happens in our classes and schools.

When an education system is weak, its schools underfunded, and its teachers robbed of their professional standing the market and privatization vultures begin to circle, waiting for the right moment to strike. We cannot let them.

Mind you, we do not oppose businesses to build schools and produce learning materials. They have done this throughout the ages.

We draw the line where corporations start running our schools on a for profit basis causing social inequity or where they would invade teachers’ professional space and tell us what and how to teach.

And there is another very important reason why our public-school systems must be defended. They are a corner stone of democratic, inclusive societies.

Education International is mobilizing education unions around the world to stop governments from allowing market forces seizing control over our sector. We have undertaken several



studies on for profit schooling in Africa and Asia, clearly showing that these companies, who often employ unqualified teachers, fall short of meeting educational standards.

This year we have expanded our program to Latin America. Last month we put out a study on the situation in Uruguay where the business community and some civil society organizations are exerting pressure on the government to privatize education services

A couple of weeks ago we met with the Education Commission of the Uruguayan parliament warning them of the consequences of allowing private entrepreneurs to enter the public education domain.

Actually, in many Latin American countries governments seem to be tempted to open their national school systems to the market whether pushed by conservative, free-choice ideologues, or blinded by the empty promise of private education entrepreneurs. We must stop them.

Let us be clear: as long as in the global economy the rights of investors prevail over our rights, prevail over the rights of our students and prevail over human and trade union rights in general, we cannot allow private corporations to conquer the public domain.

We must put this misguided vision on trial. We must resist being downgraded to a commodity. We must make our vision of quality education to be a basic right protected by governments the only viable option. The argument that we cannot afford flourishing public school systems is false.

There is enough money, but it's stowed away in the wrong places.

The ongoing fiscal engineering by global corporations – once again exposed two weeks ago by the so-called “Paradise Papers” – prove what we have long known: that too many are skirting their tax responsibilities. The question is how to get the trillions of dollars circulating in the private sector working for the public good.



Education is both an individual right and a collective right. It is one of the few instruments we have to build social cohesion and to achieve equity. Also, quality education is no longer a domestic issue. It is a global challenge.

The future of education is not only determined by how we organize and finance our school systems it is also about the educational objectives and targets we set, about what we teach and what not.

It is about helping ensure that young people are able to support themselves, to contribute to society as a whole whether as employees, entrepreneurs, professionals, artists, yes even politicians.

The transfer of basic and advanced knowledge and skills is at the core of our mission.

And there is another, perhaps even more essential task: Imparting shared values, human rights values, democratic values.

An American President – (from the time the Americans still elected sensible leaders) Franklin D. Roosevelt' said – and I quote: "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education."

Some wonder whether today education and the teaching profession are still Roosevelt's safeguard of democracy or are we gradually becoming the safeguard of markets, shaping future consumers, rather than citizens of the future active and critical citizens able to assert ones' own rights while respecting the rights of others.

Being a teacher is about moral purpose; about a commitment to making a positive difference in people's lives. And that commitment is on full display every day around the world. But too often



teachers are boxed into situations that reduce them to content delivery agents and test score attendants rather than educators.

What is too commonly referred to as 'personalized learning' is often no more than scripted learning. Not personal at all. And, the "whole child" is, in effect, sliced into pieces. De-professionalization of teaching and the decline of terms and employment conditions are among the most important challenges confronting our member unions and our profession.

There is a social, human dynamic at the core of quality teaching and learning. Teachers are part of the glue that holds society together. They create bonds within groups and create the bridges across groups and communities. Nation building, the defense of democracy and human rights, but also social justice and peace, are essential mandates and functions for education.

This makes teachers vulnerable. Sometimes they are squeezed between political groupings, caught between ethnic, linguistic and religious rivalries, or targeted by public authorities.

I am quite concerned about the civil society organizations (Con mis hijos no te metas) that have recently emerged in Peru, Ecuador, Paraguay, Colombia and Mexico demanding that (what mistakenly call) "gender ideology" should be banned from curriculum, claiming that gender equity and LGBT rights undermine traditional family values.

In some countries conservative groups, often inspired by religion, want our schools to teach creationism and throw out Darwin's evolution theory.

Colleagues, I am equally concerned about governments making changes to the national curriculum to serve their political needs or simply trying to prevent teachers from addressing controversial issues. Like in our host country, where the professional freedom of the Brazilian teacher is under threat. The *Escolas sem partido* Bill which is currently debated in Parliament prohibits teachers to raise certain political and moral questions with their students.



A foolish bill, colleagues, and an unjustifiable vote of no confidence in the Brazilian teaching profession. My message to the Brazilian government is: Please, stay out of the classroom!

Let me emphasize that in Education International we see our tasks in line with the American philosopher John Dewey's seminal text on Education for Democracy and with Paulo Freire, who has inspired the teaching profession to educate for democracy, freedom and social justice.

Therefore, we must make it perfectly clear that we have the right to use our professional discretion to interrogate and to reject curricular directives that defy facts, falsify history, or lead to xenophobia and hate.

Whether that means rejecting curricula written by the non-renewable fuel industry about clean coal, history written by misguided nationalists there is a professional and ethical responsibility that may outweigh the authority of education employers, or even of governments that have abdicated democracy and human rights.

This is what society expects of us and what we expect of each other.

Beyond left and right there is true and false and it is our responsibility to prepare future generations to know the difference.

Two years ago, the international community agreed on a path to create a better, just world. The Sustainable Development Goals reflect the world we want. When I look through all of the 17 Goals, from gender equality, to clean water and the eradication of poverty, I see the education Goal as a central component in all of them.

From the earliest age to advanced university and tertiary studies, education is an equalizer, it lifts people out of poverty, and it fuels innovation.



Internacional de la Educación
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We know that the pathway to a sustainable future travel through the classroom. We face in so many countries, more than ever, I believe, a crossing of the roads. One path leads towards the weakening of our democratic systems, our public schools, towards privatization, commercialization and continuing inequity in society.

The other road leads to more democracy, to strong inclusive public school systems, to quality education for all, equity, justice and sustainable growth.

My key message is this: We are not, must not, be mere bystanders watching to see which road our governments will take. We are a movement of proposition. Through the union movement, through a united profession, through our impact on public opinion we can muster the strength to have our elected representatives make the right choices.

So, this is the time for us to work together and go on the offensive – nationally, regionally and globally. Together, through our education unions and in solidarity with others, we can make a difference.

That conviction must drive us forward. Quality public education and solidarity are powerful weapons.

Solidarity between nations, solidarity between trade unions, solidarity between people. And quality education for everybody.

Para concluir con las palabras del gran poeta chileno, Pablo Neruda. Podrán cortar todas las flores, pero no podrán detener la primavera

Obrigado