

Abstract:

*Because of NAFTA's possible effects on employment, wages and social rights, it was viewed with great concern by education experts, teachers, students and teachers unions. Within this context, the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education was organized by unions in the educational sector in Mexico, Canada and the US. **De la Luz Arriaga Lemus** describes the process by which this trinational effort was organized and the obstacles it faces.*

1. Introduction

THE SIGNING OF THE NORTH AMERICAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT (NAFTA) BY Mexico, Canada, and the United States in 1993 reinforced the accelerated process, underway since the mid- 1980s, by which Mexico's economy was becoming integrated into the world economy, and especially into the U.S. economy. Because of NAFTA's possible effects on employment, wages, and social rights, it was viewed with great concern by education experts, teachers, students, and teachers unions. Their concern was based on what they foresaw as NAFTA's impact beyond trade issues. Indeed, the agreement represented the culmination of a process in which public policy was clearly, and increasingly, being defined by supranational institutions, a situation that restricted the possibilities for union action to defend social rights or to influence public policy at the national level.

Within this context, the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education was organized by unions in the educational sector in Mexico, Canada, and the United States. This article describes the process by which this trinational effort was organized and the obstacles it faces.¹

II. NAFTA and Education²

NAFTA is a trinational agreement among the governments of three nations and it is the first trade agreement that also includes services

and education. NAFFA contains a set of regulations that substantially change the direction and administration of education, especially higher education. NAFTA signifies a radical expansion of private education at the expense of public education, because: (1) it allows for the commercialization of services and products related to education, which is defined as an area open to investment by transnational capital, and (2) it imposes restrictions on the ability of the governments to maintain and expand the spaces of public education.

Six chapters of NAFTA have a direct impact on the public education system in the three countries: Chapter 10 regarding public sector purchases, Chapter 11 regarding investments, Chapter 12 regarding cross-border commerce of services, Chapter 13 regarding telecommunications, Chapter 15 regarding policies on competition, monopolies, and state enterprises, and Chapter 17 regarding intellectual property. Of these, Chapters 11 and 12 currently have the greatest impact on changes underway in the educational sector in all three countries, but especially in Canada and Mexico.

Chapter 11 of NAFTA establishes the principle that foreign investors should be granted the same facilities as national investors, without any restrictions. This chapter also establishes education as an area of investment, which in the case of Mexico means that education is formally opened for the first time to foreign investment. In negotiating the treaty, the Mexican government won an agreement permitting some restrictions on foreign investments in education. However, after the signing of NAFTA, Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution, which guaranteed the right to education, was substantially modified to make it conform to the logic of free trade. Following the same logic, Mexico's foreign investment and general education laws were also changed.

Chapter 12 of NAFTA (cross-border commerce of services) also has had great impact on Mexico, because it provoked the

accelerated homogenization of the educational systems, above all of higher education. Great pressure has been brought to bear on Mexico's public universities to conform to the trend of commercialization and to understand the internationalization of education in such terms. Also, in Mexico the new rules have accelerated the imposition of new evaluation methods developed by private institutions and based on standardized tests. Such tests are an effective means to restrict access to higher education and to assign young people coercively to technological schools that are not their vocational choice.

Another important implication of Chapter 12 concerns the trilateral regulation of professional services. The establishment of a trilateral professional market implies the adoption of common criteria to define professional skills. As a result, the history and needs of each country's professional practices are no longer the key elements defining the content of the profession; instead, professions are defined by a process of homogenization with the other two countries, and especially with the United States. As a result of this tendency, Mexico is modifying its Law of Professions. Already, a private institution, the National Center for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CENEVAL), has had a significant impact on higher education. It is in charge of developing, administering, and processing the high school admissions examination in the Mexico City metropolitan area, as well as national undergraduate admissions exams (in 100 universities throughout the country) and exit exams for professional degrees such as civil engineering, veterinary medicine, nursing, and psychology. Currently there is an effort underway to impose a nationwide exit exam for all college graduates (Examen General de Egreso de las Licenciaturas, EGEL). The original intent of the exam was to serve as the measure of professional quality; however, its goals were modified in response to criticisms by evaluation experts. The decision to impose this exam was taken by the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (Asociación

Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior), and CENEVAL will be in charge of the development, administration, and evaluation of the exam.

The application of NAFTA's rules has accentuated tendencies already underway in the educational sector, particularly in four areas: (1) decreases in funding for education and the transfer of public funds to the private sector, (2) a reduction of social programs that influence the quality of children's living conditions, (3) limitations on teachers' rights and demands in their collective contracts, and (4) the deliberate opening of educational services to the private sector. These tendencies can be seen to different degrees in all three countries, but the Canadian and Mexican governments have pursued these policies most aggressively, in part because public education in these nations is more widespread and has been regarded traditionally a social right.

For unions of teachers and educational workers, the policies that accompany NAFTA pose new problems. For example, policies on education and its funding are strongly influenced by supranational institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and NAFTA rules themselves. Another problem is the ideological offensive being carried out to eliminate social rights and to undermine the strength of collective action and social cohesion; the emphasis is on competition, individualism, and individual and family responsibility for failure to achieve higher levels of education. Thus, standardized tests are imposed to determine access to education, completion of educational programs, and the distribution of resources.

Moreover, the offensive against public education includes an attack on teachers and teachers' unions, who are blamed for the low quality of education. The initial responses to this situation tend to be limited to efforts by faculty at a particular university or, at the most, by national professional associations. However, it is increasingly clear that such a limited approach is completely insufficient given the powerful forces that confront teachers'

unions, teachers, children, youth, and their families as they attempt to defend their labor and social rights.

III. A Trinational Coalition to Resist NAFTA's Impact on Education

Resistance to the enormous power of transnational corporations to impose their financial, industrial, trade, and social policies requires the organization of cross-border social subjects. Not only do such cross-border actors need to demonstrate their solidarity, they also need to develop their capacity for transnational negotiation, and this is where international unions fit into the picture. Some international unions operate in the United States and Canada, and the formation of coalitions among unions can help advance their ability to negotiate transnationally. In the 1990s, in the face of an ever more integrated global capitalism, there have been numerous efforts at international union activity, such as organizing solidarity to support a strike or protesting the repression of a union or social movement. Some efforts have been made to establish a more permanent relationship with unions across borders.³ An example of the latter is the effort by teachers and academic unions in Canada, Mexico, and the United States to form the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education.

The Trinational Coalition has antecedents in a conference on "The Future of Public Education in North America," held in Olympia, Washington, in January 1993, and organized by the Labor Center of Evergreen College. That the conference was convened by a university center opened the possibility for the Coalition to be very broad and inclusive and to avoid rigid political definitions. The Coalition was born as a project committed to defending a fundamental social right - the right to an education - which meant defining itself as a democratic project, outside the control of the state or a political group. The efforts begun in Olympia were continued in Mexico City in February 1995, with NAFTA then in full force. Educational and academic unions from the three countries decided to initiate a process by which they could draw

closer together, understand one another better, and move forward with the construction of the Coalition.⁴

The organizations defined three goals: (1) to defend and strengthen public education so as to assure the principles of democracy, social justice, and human rights in North America, (2) to develop an alternative educational project, and (3) to defend the labor rights and gains made by unions of educational workers in the three countries. To achieve these goals, the Coalition defined the following priorities: (1) to promote common knowledge, which would involve an exchange of information about the educational systems and unions in each country and exchanges of teachers, (2) to promote cooperation and communication among the unions and other organizations committed to maintaining and improving public education in each of the countries, (3) to monitor and exchange information about the impact of NAFTA on education and other social and labor rights, (4) to develop a network of researchers among the participating organizations to exchange information and data and to participate in trilateral research projects, and (5) to organize trilateral actions in defense of public education. Throughout the four years of its existence, the Coalition has met some of its proposed goals, demonstrated its strengths, and identified some of the obstacles that must be overcome to consolidate itself.

The progress made in building a coalition in the educational sector of the three countries has been significant. The Coalition provides an organizational framework to establish relations among colleagues. More important, it allows a large number of teachers to participate and develop their understanding of the necessary connection that exists between their concrete situation and the transnational forces that are imposing economic and social policies contrary to the history and wellbeing of the peoples of North America. Because they work in the same sector, educational workers from the three countries have a common basis for understanding the problems they face, even though they develop

their activities under very different circumstances. Having common points of reference because of the similarity of their work makes it more feasible to build relations and lasting forms of organization. The experience of the Canadian teachers and their unions (whose government signed a trade agreement with the U.S. a few years before NAFTA) has helped speed the Coalition's process of understanding NAFTA's effects and the general lines of educational policy being generated by trade blocs worldwide.

A strength of the Coalition has been that, especially in Canada and Mexico, it has approached unions at different levels of the education system (from elementary schools to universities), something that has rarely, if ever, been done. For the educational unions in Mexico, this has been very positive: a working group representative of unions from all levels of the educational system has been stabilized. The Coalition has generated a space in which it is possible to exchange information, organize solidarity with unions, and elaborate proposals for educational policy more generally, which goes beyond the traditional framework of labor unions. Moreover, the Coalition was able to broaden the horizons of the participating unions' affiliates and their leaders through discussions of the current educational crisis, NAFTA's impacts, and possible options for confronting the situation. Important forums for such discussions were provided in two national conferences in defense of public education, held in 1995 and 1996, the publication of three bulletins, and four trilateral conferences organized by the Coalition.

Finally, solidarity actions have been coordinated around various union conflicts, and joint campaigns with the students' families have been organized to defend the right to education and to oppose standardized tests. The Coalition has enabled the educational unions to spearhead and sustain a social movement and to arm it with strong arguments.

IV. The Importance of Trilateral Actions

Since the beginning of the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education, three conflicts have tested the ability of the participating unions to coordinate solidarity and take initiatives that encouraged the respective governments to resolve the conflicts. The first was the movement of four thousand parents, students, and teachers for the right to education and against the imposition of a standardized high school admissions test in Mexico City between August and October of 1996. The second conflict was the attempt to impose Law 160 on teachers in the province of Ontario, Canada, in October to November 1997, which gave rise to one of the biggest and longest strikes of teachers in Canada. The third conflict involved the unjust imprisonment between January 1 and February 4, 1999, of five leaders of Section 9 of the National Union of Educational Workers (el Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación), which represents 58,000 preschool and primary teachers in Mexico City.

As we will see, these three conflicts involved diverse arenas of struggle to defend education. The first conflict involved the defense of education as a social right; the second centered on an attack on the working conditions and collective bargaining rights of Canadian teachers and their unions; and the third conflict involved the repression of a movement for union democracy. In each conflict, the Coalition explored various forms of solidarity and each time was more effective. Thanks to the progress made by the Coalition, the response during the last conflict was faster, broader, and more forceful and concerted. Each conflict is analyzed below.

Against Standardized Exams and for the Right to Higher Education

In Mexico there is very little tradition of standardized testing. However, in 1996 standardized tests began to be introduced extensively through consortiums of various post-secondary educational institutions, which, sanctioned by the government, define policies of admission and distribution of demand for the whole region. The government has encouraged the use of

standardized testing by promoting and financing a private agency, CENEVAL, which, as mentioned above, is in charge of organizing the testing. In Mexico City in 1996, CENEVAL organized the administration of a multiple choice examination to more than four million students who had completed their basic education (primary and middle school) (Aboites et al., 1997). The result was disastrous: 100,000 students were forced to enter technical schools that were not their choice, and even students who had passed the exam and had high grade point averages were denied access to the better high schools on the basis of test scores.

In an explosive response, 4,000 parents and students took to the streets in protest, supported by the teachers' unions in the metropolitan area that are part of the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education. They demanded that the Secretariat of Public Education respect the vocational choices of the youth and assign them to the schools they had requested. To make this possible, they demanded that the National Autonomous University (UNAM) restore 7,000 slots that had been eliminated in its affiliated preparatory high schools and that the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM) create a preparatory high school. They also demanded the cancellation of the single, standardized admissions test. Marches, rallies, sit-ins, road blocks, and a blockade of the stock market building were among the actions carried out over a period of two months by parents, students, and teachers in an effort to force the authorities to provide restitution, at least in part, for the damage caused by the new admissions exam.

This was the first social movement in which the Trinational Coalition as such had participated. The Coalition provided analysis, supported the organization of the parents and students, provided cover for the movement, and projected the conflict trinationally. The solidarity of the Canadian unions was limited but important in showing the government that Mexican unions were prepared to seek the support of other North American unions in the

defense of the right to education. On this occasion, solidarity was expressed through letters to the President of Mexico, letters of support to the movement, and participation in a trinational forum held to analyze the effects of standardized tests in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Because of the legitimacy of their struggle, the students and parents gained broad support from the city's population and the movement's outcome was positive. The movement was important in that it was able to slow down efforts to convert the exam into a national assessment instrument, expose the private nature of CENEVAL, and force the educational authorities to set aside their own rules for the exam and to negotiate a solution to each complaint with movement representatives. However, the movement was not strong enough to stop the use of standardized testing or to force the Mexican government to change its policies and implement a program to rescue the high school education system. In their flyers, movement participants made clear that their core goal was "to challenge state policy."

The First Strike by Canadian Teachers in the NAFTA Era

The strike by 160,000 teachers represented by the Ontario Teachers' Federation of Canada between October 27 and November 9, 1997, is the second recent example of a conflict that was directly linked to NAFTA's impact on the educational sector, in this case on educational workers and their unions. Ontario's teachers opposed Law 160, which was imposed by the provincial government, because it directly affected their working conditions and gave provincial authorities decision-making powers over issues that were previously negotiated bilaterally between unions and local school councils (e.g., the amount of time for class preparation, class size, and the number of work days). The law also opened the door for the hiring of people lacking professional training to teach materials such as physical education, fine arts, and technological activities, which could have caused 10,000 teachers to lose their jobs. Although the Ontario government tried to justify

Law 160 with arguments that it would improve the quality of teaching, three days before the strike began, Ontario's Prime Minister, Mike Harris, admitted that the law would allow the government to save \$700 million (Canadian dollars) annually (Vancouver Sun, 1997).

The teachers' strike received broad support from unions in Canada's educational sector, from civic organizations, and above all from parents, who understood that the strike was in defense of their children's education. Because of the work carried out by the Trinational Coalition, Mexican unions responded immediately with support for the teachers in Ontario, pleading with the Canadian government to resolve the conflict. The Mexican section of the Coalition sent letters, went to the Canadian Embassy in Mexico to ask for an immediate resolution to the strike, and even traveled to Ontario during the strike to express solidarity with the Canadian teachers.

As in the case of the movement against the standardized exam in Mexico, the strength shown by the striking teachers in Canada was not sufficient to overturn Law 160, but the teachers did manage to diminish the effects of the laws. In both cases people struggled hard and legitimately against the changes in educational policy that have accompanied NAFTA, but they were not able to reverse the measures.

Multiple Actions Against Unjust Repression

On the first day of 1999, four leaders of Section 9 of Mexico's National Union of Educational Workers (SNTE) were arrested: the general secretary, Blanca Luna Becerril, and three members of the political commission, Elio Bejarano, Néstor Trujano, and Alonso Vargas. The next day the union's press secretary, Marfa Refugio Jimenez, was also jailed. All five are teachers. Their crime was to defend the right of 58,000 primary and preschool teachers of the Federal District to freely and democratically elect their representatives. Because of their involvement in a protest at the

Mexican Senate on November 11, 1998, in which they were accused of having committed the crimes of riot, theft, and kidnapping, they were treated like hardened criminals, without the right to bail, and faced charges of up to 50 years in jail. The conflict began when the SNTE national leadership attempted to impose its own loyalist candidates as leaders of the local union even though a majority of teachers had legally and legitimately elected different leaders in a congress held in July 1998. The arrests in January were met with an immediate response from teachers in the local and from those affiliated with the National Coordinating Body of Educational Workers (CNTE).⁵ Thousands took to the street to demand the immediate release of the teachers; very quickly, they gained the support of parents, social activists, and opposition legislators.

The Trinational Coalition also responded immediately, this time with a much more concerted and clearly defined strategy. The Coalition organized a broad campaign in Canada and the United States for the teachers' freedom. In Canada, participants in the solidarity campaign included union leaders at the national, provincial, and local levels, as well as groups of schoolteachers and individual teachers. In the United States, action was taken by nongovernmental organizations, NEA union locals, networks of solidarity with Mexico, and individual teachers. Nearly 100 letters demanding the teachers' release were sent to the President of Mexico, the Interior Ministry, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. In a coordinated action, Canadian Coalition representatives visited the Mexican Consulate in Vancouver and the Mexican Embassy in Ottawa on the same day that Mexican Coalition representatives appealed to United Nations officials in Mexico City. Canadian members of the Coalition arranged for a pronouncement by the Education International (an international association of teachers unions) demanding that the Mexican government free the imprisoned teachers. Similar calls came from Canada's Congress of Labor and from other unions in the United States.

After 34 days of protest, the teachers were released on bail, and two weeks later a judge dropped all charges against the teachers. The campaign's outcome was very favorable, not only because it won the teachers' release, but also because it forged even closer ties between Mexican and Canadian unions participating in the Coalition and demonstrated the importance of international action in stopping the offensive against workers.

Two factors helped to secure the rapid, energetic, and broad response of the Canadian unions. One is that the Trinational Coalition has become a point of reference; it is known among broad sectors of the Canadian union movement, which has adopted it as its own. The second is that, in November 1998, the Fourth Trinational Conference on education was held in Mexico, and as part of the conference Section 9 had organized visits to schools in the Federal District. As a result, there had been direct contact between Section 9 and 15 union representatives from six Canadian provinces, which meant that the Canadian teachers viewed the repression in Mexico as something very close to home.

V. The Challenges

In four years, the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education has strengthened itself, incorporating more Canadian and Mexican unions into its project. Currently, the Canadian unions participating in the Coalition include the Teachers Federation of British Columbia, the Federation of High School Teachers of Ontario, the Federation of Catholic Schools of Ontario, the Teachers Federation of Alberta, the Teachers Association of Winnipeg, and the Canadian National Association of Teachers in Higher Education. In 1996, the Canadian Confederation of Teachers, which includes all the educational unions in English-speaking Canada, agreed to support the Coalition and to participate in its work, which it has done actively ever since. Together these organizations represent 240,000 primary and secondary school teachers in Canada. Mexican unions participating in the Coalition now include democratic Sections IX, XVIII, and XXII of the SNTE, as well as

representatives from the democratic current within Sections X and XI of the SNTE, and democratic delegations of the National Polytechnic Institute (all of these being members of the CNTE). The largest and most important of Mexico's university unions (STUNAM, SITUAM, STUACH, and SINTCB) also participate in the Coalition, and SUPAUAQ and SUTCIEA recently joined. Altogether, these Mexican unions represent nearly 250,000 educational workers at all levels of education.

The incorporation of more unions from the United States has been one of the most difficult tasks for the Coalition. Currently, only the Washington State section of the National Education Association and some teachers from California and Illinois participate in the Coalition. One explanation for the lack of U.S. participation is that even though NAFTA also negatively affects the educational sector in the U.S., its educational model has already experienced a high degree of privatization, and thus teachers feel less immediately threatened. Another explanation could be the lack of knowledge among the national union leadership in the U.S. about the situation facing Mexican and Canadian unions, as well as the lack of ties with those unions.

The construction and consolidation of a trinational coalition present certain problems, which range from language differences to the very diverse daily conditions facing educational workers throughout the region to the different political relations established among unions of the three countries. Nevertheless, over the course of four years the Coalition has acquired an identity and a reality. It is not simply a name used now and then by its leaders. The Coalition now represents a concrete space in which real, flesh-and-blood teachers coexist and struggle together for common objectives, in which fraternal unions are willing to join forces to defend their existence and their jobs, to preserve education as a social right, and to construct more democratic societies. The Coalition has shown itself able, in moments of conflict, to pressure the governments of the three countries to avoid further

impoverishment of the educational sector and further social harm, particularly that associated with NAFTA. Through its various actions, including four Trilateral Conferences, the exchange of information via the Internet, electronic communication, joint participation in events in the three countries, and solidarity actions, the Coalition has been very effective in advancing mutual understanding, and that is the guarantee of its permanence.

However, the level of coordination achieved is insufficient for the challenge represented by the changes underway in the educational sector. The Coalition needs a clearer political agenda, and, even though there is a stable team to guarantee continuity in the work, it needs to overcome the inconstancy that comes with changes in union leadership. In spite of these limitations, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Coalition represents an example of cross-border social alliances that is successful and has great potential for developing initiatives and alternatives in the educational sector. Its success and potential rests on the fact that its common work is defined around the defense of a social right, rather than merely the occupational interests of educational workers and their unions. Moreover, the participating unions are located in a strategic sector, and their base is composed of skilled workers who are able to carry out research and analysis and who have an important social presence in terms of prestige and influence among those committed to building democratic societies.

The Trilateral Coalition to Defend Public Education represents a viable means for advancing the construction of institutional structures that allow unions to work together. The challenge is not only to overcome the distance represented by national borders and to establish lasting relations, but also to make a qualitative leap forward in the formation of cross-border organizations with the capacity to negotiate and formulate alternatives to the devastating social policies that accompany the economic project of transnational capital.

[Footnote]

NOTES

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1. A preliminary version of this essay was presented to the International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 24-26, 1998. The author is grateful to Edward McCaughan, Barry Carr, and Andre Drainville for their helpful comments.
2. This section of the article is based on two excellent books on NAFTA's impact on the educational sector in Canada (Calvert and Kuehn, 1993) and Mexico (Aboites, 1997).
3. For more on this question, see Moody (1997) and Cook (1997).

[Footnote]

4. The unions involved were: from Canada, the British Columbia Teachers Federation and the Ontario Secondary Schools Teachers' Federation; from the United States, the Washington State Section of the National Educational Association; from Mexico, Sections of the National Union of Educational Workers (SNTE) - Sections IX (primary teachers of the Federal District) and XVIII (educational workers from Michoacan), the democratic delegations of the Politecnico Nacional, as well as democratic delegations of technical, administrative, and manual workers of the Federal District, and Section XI-all of which are members of the National Coordinating Body of Educational Workers (CNTE). Also involved were two university unions, the SITUAM of the Metropolitan Autonomous University and the STAUACH of the Autonomous University of Chapingo.

5. The CNTE is a union faction of 200,000 educational workers from different regions of Mexico, which since 1979 has fought to improve the living and working conditions of teachers and to democratize the largest union in Latin America, the SNTE.

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