

Education International? Never heard of it? More important than you may realize

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The Education International (EI), the international confederation of teachers unions, held its seventh World Congress in Ottawa over the summer. Though most teachers don't know this organization exists, and few people write about its activity, what it does affects students, parents, and teachers around the world very directly. The EI speaks for teachers unions in meetings with international finance organizations, the World Bank and the OECD especially, that have established what Susan Robertson terms the "global governance agenda" for schools. As Robertson explains, this agenda is shaping how teachers are evaluated, what students need to know, how schools will be funded and who will control them. It is a

decidedly undemocratic process pushing an agenda that marginalizes non-Western cultures, disempowers communities, and deprofessionalizes teaching.

In reading materials on EI's website, including its own reports — or rather, the absence of them about the implications of its actions — one can see the lack of both transparency and democracy in its operations, from its abnegation of policies voted on by its quadrennial policy-making conferences, to control of the conference and apparatus by the AFT and the NEA, the two U.S. affiliates. This democratic deficit at the heart of the global federation has got to be tackled if it is to become a vehicle of authentic global teacher solidarity. The contradiction between the desires of the U.S. unions and needs of teachers in the global South is probably most apparent in foreign policy issues that might create tension between the U.S. unions and our government. The AFT and NEA carefully orchestrate EI policy to be sure it hews to U.S. government foreign policy desires, as I explain elsewhere.

Informal reports I've received about the Ottawa conference indicate that it has become even more undemocratic, with passage of changes in the way the conference agenda is set. The planning committee was previously elected. That seems to have posed too many risks to AFT and NEA control so the elected committee has been replaced by one the leadership selects.

EI has adopted the reasoning that "sitting at the table" when governments make plans to destroy the union and teaching profession is better than not being there. Yet the conference showed increased resistance to this strategy, led by European affiliates being hammered by austerity and the "global governance agenda." They are undercut by the EI's cozy relationship with international finance organizations, primarily the OECD and the World Bank. The conference passed a measure to delete the World Bank from the list of international organizations with which EI collaborates. An interesting note here is that the motion passed in part because AFT and NEA split their votes, with AFT voting for and NEA against. Why? My hunch is that the NEA did not want to lose its "seat at the table" while AFT can jettison this formal collaboration with international finance organizations dominated by the U.S. because the AFT accomplishes its goal of supporting U.S. capitalism and the US State Department through the Shanker Institute.

Delegates voted to have the EI go on record opposing "Performance Related Pay" (so-called

“merit” pay, tied to students’ standardized test scores). They pushed the international confederation to go on record opposing the system of evaluation and pay that few teachers, anywhere in the world, would say is fair or an accurate measure of their work.

Does any of this really make a political difference? Am I being too critical? Recently I was told by an activist who does work with U.S. teacher unions that the EI is mostly irrelevant and that AFT’s collaboration with foreign governments does little or no harm.

Tell that to Mexican teachers fighting, literally, for their lives as well as their livelihoods and the continued existence of public education in their country. At the Ottawa conference, Randi Weingarten, AFT President and the individual who probably more than any other individual sets the direction of the EI, called the leader of SNTE, Mexico’s notoriously corrupt, undemocratic teachers union, to the microphone to embrace him, warmly. During the conference, the Mexican government sent 7000 troops into Oaxaca to force through its education policies. This brutal repression was acknowledged neither by those on the platform nor by the SNTE delegates from the floor. AFT and SNTE had previously issued a joint press release about their shared values.

On a hopeful note, AFT joined the UK's National Union of Teachers and the unions representing Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in running an “anti-privatization” booth outside the conference hall’s formal proceedings. It drew enthusiastic crowds and indicates resolve among many unions that this struggle is not going to be won by trying to make peace with people who aim to destroy what teachers and teachers unions must defend, in their own interest as well as the well-being of children throughout the world.

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