

Education wars are heating up - and lives are at stake

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You wouldn't know it from the US media, but the education wars are heating up globally. Three of the hottest spots are Chicago, Chile, and Colombia. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has revved up its struggle to protect public education in that city, with a vote to issue a 10-day strike notice (no strike date set). The teachers in Chile have voted to strike on August 28 in solidarity with students protesting educational reforms that deprive them of access to public education. The Chilean government has vowed to prosecute youth who are involved in the protests - just as the UK did with the students who protested last autumn in London. I've just learned the Colombian teachers will strike on September 4 and 5, with their primary demand being that the government protect teachers from threats and assassinations from paramilitary groups that the military clandestinely (and not so clandestinely) supports. As a well-documented (and terrifying) report issued by the Education International (EI) explains. Colombia's teachers union, FECODE, is experiencing the lion's share of the violence against labor union activists in Colombia. FECODE needs international support, especially from the US, which should be putting pressure on the Colombian government to halt these human rights violations. While the EI has issued this excellent report, it needs to do much more, but probably won't, (for reasons I explain elsewhere.) In speaking to people in human rights organizations in Colombia, I've learned that international visibility is an important defense against the violence. The government is quite sensitive to negative publicity about its human rights record. As is explained in the new World Bank report, "Making Schools Work," what's planned to make teachers more "accountable" is to reduce their working conditions and status to that of "contract labor." Understanding that this is a global project illuminates that the struggle in Chicago to give Chicago's kids the schools they deserve, is exactly the same one that is being waged in Colombia, where the union wants to protect public education. While we are pushing the EI (and AFT and NEA) to do what they should, we need to form alliances from below. The IDEA network, an alliance of teachers unions in the Americas, is doing good work but needs help. The simultaneous struggles of the Chicago and Colombian teachers provides us with a chance to develop the mutual support teachers internationally really need. US schools are suffering the effects of school "deform" because we did not stop the neoliberal project in education in its first iteration, when it was imposed in Latin America, under dictatorships supported by the US government in the 1970s. Colombia seems remote from the Windy City, I know, but this is a global project that requires a global resistance. Let's find a way to have FECODE support the CTU in its struggle, as the CTU supports FECODE. This is for Colombia's teacher unionists truly a life-and-death struggle. Finding a way to develop a connection and mutual support is a "win/win." And we can be sure that if we fail to make these connections, we'll all be suffering a "lose/lose" and sooner rather than later.