

# Mar del Plata, Argentina: The (People's) Summit of the Americas

February 27, 2010

ON NOVEMBER 2-5, as two dozen heads of state gathered in Mar del Plata, Argentina for a hemispheric summit to negotiate trade agreements, thousands of global justice activists, I among them, participated in a concurrent "People's Summit" ("cumbre de los pueblos") or "counter-summit" ("contracumbre"). The official summit meetings were moved to Mar del Plata, a seaside resort which is a five-hour bus or train trip from Buenos Aires, to deter mass protests. The ability of the global justice movement to bring thousands of contracumbre participants to Mar del Plata was testimony to the economic devastation neoliberal economic policies have produced in Latin America as well as to popular determination to resist further inroads in the quality of life. Most Argentinians watched their life savings and livelihoods vanish overnight with the devaluation of the peso, and Bush's presence at the summit was a bitter — and unwelcome — reminder of U.S. domination in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and the policies that led to the peso's devaluation.

I joined a Canadian contingent that traveled to the Educational Summit ("cumbre educativa"), held in conjunction with the People's Summit. My report is focused primarily on the Educational Summit because its sessions were concurrent with other workshops and meetings of the contracumbre. However, judging from the listing of sessions in the contracumbre program, as well as by the number of people at the contracumbre opening rally, the Educational Summit was the largest single gathering of the counter-summit. Organized by CTERA, the more left-wing of the two confederations of teachers unions in Argentina, and supported by the labor confederation representing public employees (CTA), the Educational Summit brought together hundreds of activists.

As I've explained elsewhere, (*New Politics*, Winter 2005), public education in Latin America and much of the world is the battleground of a fierce struggle between progressive forces trying to maintain public systems of schooling, and on the other side, international financial institutions and neoliberal governments supported by the U.S. with a program that uses the rhetoric of educational equity to dismantle public education. To neoliberal politicians and transnational corporations, education is a huge, untapped market for supplies and services: standardized tests and curricula to train and sort the new global workforce; and online degrees supplied by corporations located mostly in Australia and the U.S. The primary obstacle to neoliberalism's restructuring of education is teacher unions, which throughout Latin America and much of Africa have led popular struggles for free, universal public education as a social right. Teacher union leadership in the contracumbre and protests against Bush were quite visible. CTERA organized a work stoppage of teachers on Nov. 5 to protest Bush's presence in Argentina and the assault on public education. The public employee confederation, CTA, of which it is a member, endorsed and joined the effort.

The *New York Times* coverage of the summit and the global justice meetings highlighted photos of protestors holding aloft images of Che Guevara, fiery anti-U.S. rhetoric of Hugo Chavez, and the stalled "progress" by heads of state in reaching consensus on new trade agreements. Unsurprisingly, the *Time's* analysis is simultaneously accurate and politically misleading. U.S. media, as usual, did not explain the reasons for Bush's unpopularity, yet it would be difficult to overstate the harm done to the general standard of living in Latin America in the name of economic restructuring and free trade, promoted and enforced by the U.S. government. From the friendly hand waves and shouts of support given demonstrators in the massive protest on the streets of Buenos Aires the day Bush arrived, to the unsolicited encouragement I received from hotel clerks, taxi drivers, sales people, and

waiters when I mentioned my participation in the *contracumbre*, hostility to Bush and the expansion of free trade was deep and widely visible. Equally apparent from coverage of the summit by the Argentinean media was popular unease about the massive police and military presence in Mar del Plata. Police, often with machine guns, cordoned off the city into two sections. Only those with an official security clearance could travel into the section of Mar del Plata with the fancy hotels and official meetings. (With the exception of those ubiquitous machine guns, Mar del Plata's deployment of police was not that different from the police saturation around Madison Square Garden during the last Republican National Convention.) Argentinean discomfort with this show of armed force is more than understandable when one considers that the question of how to win justice for victims of the military's dirty war against the Left is still a passionate debate. The pages of "Pagina Doce," Argentina's left-leaning daily newspaper, regularly contain memorial announcements on the anniversary of the date on which people "disappeared." The photos of young students and statements from family and friends that they will not "forget or forgive" are a reminder of the democratically-elected government's tenuous ability to navigate the righteous calls for justice and the unbroken back of the political forces responsible for the terror.

A network of Canadian and Latin American unions, called the Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas (IDEA), used the occasion of the *contracumbre* and the Educational Summit to meet. The network has emerged slowly over the past decade, nurtured in North America mostly by progressives in the British Columbia Teachers Federation and Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ) and in Latin America by CTERA and a coalition of Mexican teachers unions that are independent of the corrupt government-controlled organizations. The Hemispheric Secretariat on Education ([www.secretaria.ca/eng/secretariat.htm](http://www.secretaria.ca/eng/secretariat.htm)), a broader umbrella group separate from the IDEA network, organized the Educational Summit along with CTERA, with support from the Latin American branch of the Education International (EI), the international confederation of teachers unions. Buses chartered by CTERA took its delegates and those of us in an international contingent for the five-hour bus ride from Buenos Aires to Mar del Plata. Activists, both working teachers who hold union office and full-time staff, came from Mexico, Ecuador (representing Chile and Bolivia), Nicaragua, Brazil, Uruguay, and the Caribbean. A Cuban delegate arrived independently. CTERA hosted the international visitors and its delegates at hotels it owned and operated, an arrangement dating back to Peronist days when unions held their conventions in Mar del Plata and rented the facilities out to union members when the hotel was not otherwise being used. Two other people from the U.S. traveled with the IDEA network, a film maker who recently completed a powerful new documentary about the struggles of Mexican teachers unions (*Grains of Sand* or *Granito de Arena*), and a faculty member from Evergreen State College in Washington who more than a decade ago helped forge hemispheric cooperation to oppose neoliberal trade agreements. I appeared to be the sole activist in a U.S. teachers union at the IDEA network meetings and at the Educational Summit.

Despite my rudimentary Spanish, it was clear to me that the IDEA network contains representatives of organizations with sharp political differences. Representatives all listened respectfully to one another and also gingerly avoided pointed debates. Still, striking political disagreements emerged in delegates' presentations about the conditions in their respective countries in regard to educational policy and teacher union responses. The Mexicans, representing a network of opposition locals, distributed hand-folded photocopies of their ten-point program, materials that illustrated well the grass-roots nature of their organization, which is battling the government and a party-controlled union. The Brazilian delegate described the "delicate" political situation of the teachers unions in working with the government it had helped bring to power based on promises that were being broken. Argentina's delegate discussed the school reform program of her teachers confederation CTERA but not that of the rival confederation, CEA, which like CTERA is an affiliate of the Education International. (CEA also participated in the Educational Summit but is not in the IDEA network.) Representatives from the Ecuador teachers union, distributed books

printed on heavy, glossy paper filled with color photos and sharp criticisms of capitalism. When they concluded their report with a call for revolution and the overthrow of capitalism, I surmised, correctly I learned later, that this union was affiliated with the Communist Party. Sitting in on the meeting, a U.S. professor gave a brief report about the (sorry) state of the Left in the U.S., explaining he lacked expertise to discuss U.S. teachers unions.

### **A Hemispheric Network - Without the U.S.?**

THE CONTRADICTION in this being a *hemispheric* network, with representation of teachers unions in much of Latin America and Canada but not the U.S., has been the topic of my conversations with Canadians. Latin American and Canadian teachers unions obviously should not and cannot delay organizing an alliance until U.S. unions are ready to join them. But to the extent possible, given meager human and financial resources, attempts to involve U.S. teachers' unions should be an organizing priority. One purely practical reason to try to involve more U.S. participants is that they can add resources and political contacts that can benefit the Latin American unions. Further, including U.S. teacher activists in the network would clarify that the attack on public education and the struggle of educational workers is not simply between the U.S. and the rest of the hemisphere. The absence of U.S. participation encourages a national rather than class configuration to network politics, providing a smokescreen for the often willing collaboration of local plutocrats in neoliberal policies. An experience I had at the opening rally illustrated what might occur with more involvement by U.S. teachers unions in the contracumbre. The exuberant CTERA activists sitting in front of me began chanting an equivalent of "Yankees go home!" Then they did a double-take when they realized I was behind them. They apologized for any offense they may have caused and I explained (I think) that I understood their chant as signaling political opposition to Bush, not to those of us in the U.S. who oppose him. Together we resumed waving CTERA banners, cheering and chanting slogans.

In calling for greater involvement of U.S. teachers unions, I should clarify that it must be based on the explicit, unequivocal rejection of the imperial appetite and policies of the U.S. government. This is the sine qua non of any principled international alliance among unions. As I pointed out in my article cited above, the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) generally identifies the greatest threat to education emanating from popular resistance to policies that shore up capitalism, and on many issues the AFT as a national organization is found on the *wrong* side of the literal and actual barricades that separate global justice activists from heads of state. One Canadian activist was incredulous when he learned that the AFT national leadership fully endorses standardized testing and helped draft many provisions of the Bush administration's omnibus education "reform," the No Child Left Behind Act. The absence of the other, larger U.S. teachers union, the National Education Association (NEA) was something of a disappointment to conference organizers. At the last minute the NEA decided it would not participate, officially or unofficially. The formal explanation was that the Education International segments its North American and Caribbean affiliates in one sector and its Latin American affiliates in another. The NEA argued that its participation in a hemispheric meeting was counter to EI's organizational structure. The speciousness of this argument was readily exposed by the presence of EI's newly-elected President and his prominent role in the Educational Summit. Plainly NEA's explanation masked other concerns, probably a sense of vulnerability to attack by the rival AFT. In domestic politics the NEA almost always takes positions that are more left-leaning than those advocated by the AFT. Participation in the Educational Summit and the IDEA network, especially given Cuba's prominence, would have made the NEA open to AFT charges that the NEA is "soft on communism," a criticism the NEA wants to avoid.

In the conference workshop on free trade, I decided to test political possibilities of developing a

hemispheric collaboration that included the expression of disagreements. Realizing that as the sole activist from a U.S. teachers union my remarks on any subject would be closely scrutinized for political implications, I commented on a subject I hoped would be less politically pointed, how teachers unions should regard online education. The World Bank and neoliberal governments internationally are pressing for teachers to be educated through online course work. Online education is an attractive option for neoliberal politicians as it can be provided cheaply by for-profits with use of contingent labor/faculty whose low wages insure hefty profits. Requiring online coursework ignores how often teachers do not have ready access to the technology they need to complete online courses, as well as the need for social contact with colleagues that a traditional classroom environment provides. While defending the right of teachers to choose the learning environment that they find most helpful and arguing for equity in access to the technology, I also suggested that we should imagine the progressive potential of online learning, to consider how the technology could be a powerful pedagogical tool if used for public good rather than for profit. I suggested we could create online classes in which teachers in the hemisphere share knowledge and analysis and that, as this example illustrated, the exploitation of technologies for profit should not blind us to how we might harness such tools for *our* purposes.

A hailstorm of criticism followed my remarks. From the dais a Cuban student who had presented one of the workshop addresses dismissed my idea, averring that Cuba permits nothing but face-to-face instruction for its foreign language teaching because personal interaction is the only way learning can occur. Her passionate repudiation of technology contradicted what I subsequently learned: Canadian teachers who collaborate with Cuban school officials in a project to improve the teaching of foreign languages have been frustrated by the Cubans' unwillingness to end the (ineffective) practice of using video instruction for foreign language teachers. Despite many topics far more urgent than distance learning, debate in the workshop remain riveted on my incendiary notion that technology is a tool that could be used for social progress. (Plainly, delegates did not share Lenin's thinking that Electrification plus Soviets equals communism.) Finally, a lone CTERA delegate observed that "political and economic situations" determine the use of any tool, and that technology is a tool. The moderator of the workshop, an experienced CTERA leader who had to formulate a consensus, ably constructed a platform statement that acknowledged my point as well as my critics' ideas.

Educational Summit meetings and documents were marked by a passionate romance with Cuba. The Cuban delegation, a racially diverse group of exuberant young people attired in red jogging suits, thrived in the spotlight. Cuba's representative to the IDEA network was warmly embraced when she walked into a planning meeting a bit after work had begun. In his opening remarks to the Educational Summit, Thulas Nxesi, the gregarious EI President from South Africa's teachers' union who follows in office Mary Futrell, former President of the NEA, gave his "special greeting to the Cuban people here today," noting their "very special place in our hearts." The "role they played in the liberation of Africa" has made them "a shining example of the left project and the new world order," he stated, to wild applause and cheers. In a pause after Nxesi's remarks, I turned to a genial delegate from the Canadian Teachers Federation seated next to me and asked what sense he made of these comments. The Canadian was plainly disconcerted by my question and responded that "we have to understand" that Cuba has given considerable support to Africa and "people are grateful." IDEA network publications also reflect the embrace of Cuba as a progressive alternative to neoliberalism. The IDEA network's report on democratic education in the Americas, written by the International Secretary of the Peruvian Education Workers Union, extols Cuba's educational system as a model for the rest of Latin America, arguing that "With the exception of Cuba... [Latin American] education systems tend to be anti-democratic and elitist."

The shameful failure of U.S. teachers unions to oppose unequivocally the U.S. menacing of Cuba

and U.S.- supported policies that are destroying public education in Latin America fuels the romance with Cuba. The embrace of Cuba similarly depresses prospects for organizing broad political support for the Hemispheric Secretariat and the IDEA network among teacher union activists in U.S. unions. To the extent that U.S. unions do not join with Latin American teachers' struggles against the devastation of public education enacted by governments in thrall to U.S.-controlled agencies like the World Bank, the U.S. unions reinforce Cuban claims that the only alternative to corrupt, capitalist plutocracies is Cuba's undemocratic social and political model. On the other hand, when Cuba's denials of elementary political rights, like the right to form an independent teachers union, are ignored, progressive activists in U.S. teachers unions unwittingly reinforce neoliberalism's contention that "there is no alternative" way of organizing the economy and political life that allows both economic and political democracy.

When the Cuban government greets political dissent with police action and progressives fail to support the Cuban people's right to freedoms that are exercised (though increasingly with restraints) in liberal capitalist democracies, we willy-nilly reinforce pro-capitalist and pro-U.S. political tendencies among Cuban dissidents. The Campaign for Peace and Democracy petition of June 2003, simultaneously condemning both U.S. threats to Cuba and Cuba's arrest of scores of people for nonviolent political activity, challenges the symbiosis between Cuba and neoliberalism that is reinforced by AFT and NEA unwillingness to support the IDEA network as well as the IDEA network's defense of Cuban society as a progressive model. As the exchanges about repression in Cuba in previous issues of *New Politics* (most recently in Vol. IX, no. 3 and no. 4) reveal, the consistent defense of political freedom exemplified by the Campaign for Peace and Democracy petition on Cuba is sometimes rejected as providing backhanded support for U.S. imperialism. I think the embrace of Cuba at the Educational Summit and the absence of participation by U.S. teacher union activists illustrates quite the opposite: Our ability to build an international struggle against policies that are destroying public education (as well as the quality of life generally, working conditions, the environment, etc.) depends on projecting a vision of another world that provides both political freedom *and* social control over economic resources.

A consistent commitment to full democracy raises other urgent issues for education activists and teacher unions. Attention to gender inequality in education, including its presence in the ranks of the teachers union leadership throughout the hemisphere is still a problem. Teaching young children is very much "women's work" throughout the world, and the vast majority of teachers in the hemisphere are women. Yet on the dais of the Educational Summit opening session sat seven men and one woman — and only the men spoke. Also, special concerns in the education of and for indigenous peoples and issues of racism were muffled when they were heard at all. As the upheaval in Bolivia indicates, racism is not exclusively a U.S. problem, yet the special issues that arise in education of the often rural communities of indigenous peoples in Latin America seemed to me not explored as fully as they ought to have been in the Educational Summit nor in IDEA network publications. For teachers unions to be "close to the people," as several union representatives advocated, they must support and lead struggles to allow indigenous peoples to enjoy the material benefits of industrial societies without being forced to assimilate. Unions throughout the world, not just those of teachers, face the problem of negotiating alliances with social movements that are not based in the workplace.

At Mar del Plata I saw a movement that has possibilities to make a just world a reality. The opening rally of the *contracumbre*, with its passion and verve, contrasted so sharply with tired speechifying that characterizes most labor protests in the U.S. Not since participating in the AFL-CIO's huge march on Washington, D.C. in defense of striking PATCO workers who had been fired by Ronald Reagan have I seen such an impressive illustration of the power of trade unions to use their institutional strength to lead a social movement. CTERA organized a conference that brought

together hundreds of teacher union activists from Latin America and Canada, aligning teacher union struggles with the demands of the contracumbre. Thulas Nxesi's participation in the Educational Summit and the People's Summit, rather than the official summit meetings, illustrated that U.S. control of the EI has been broken. In the IDEA network, Latin American and Canadian teachers unions have developed a fledgling hemispheric umbrella organization that has exciting potential. The support the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) received when BCTF teachers went out on strike shortly before the contracumbre shows the IDEA network's potential. Teachers unions in the IDEA network sent telegrams and messages of support of the strikers to the BC government and even staged demonstrations at Canadian consulates.

Union activists from several countries agreed that we face an international challenge in bringing into union activity the generation of teachers raised in the 1980s and 1990s, periods in which conservative ideology dominated. The generation that now leads teachers unions was frequently schooled in radical politics in the 1960s and 70s. Our ability to bring into activity and leadership younger teachers who can continue and expand our project of protecting public education depends on our willingness to scrutinize teacher unionism's successes and failures.

I suggest that many of the movement's errors can be encapsulated in the notion that democracy is a luxury that we can separate from economic struggles. A consistent struggle for democracy is, in fact, essential to win the battle to protect public education. Unions that are undemocratic in their internal life are handicapped in sustaining the kind and level of activity, what one BCTF delegate described as an "organizing culture," needed to defeat the onslaught of neoliberal politicians. Failing to insist on the right of teachers to have full political rights, including the right to organize unions that are independent of state control, reinforces the powerful ideological message of the U.S. and its client governments that only neoliberalism can provide political freedoms and economic stability.

A consistent defense of democracy is a supremely realistic strategy — if the other world we imagine is one of full human emancipation.

# Petition in Support fo the Hotel bauen Workers

To: The President of Argentina, Nestor Kirchner

The struggle of Argentinian workers to recover factories and companies abandoned by their owners has become an inspiring model worldwide, and an important symbol that another world is possible. The Bauen Hotel is a concrete example. Its future and significance were recently recognized by the government of Venezuela, with an agreement signed with the Ministry of Tourism and the National Ministry of Popular Economy to work together in the development of a cooperative tourism venture. At the Bauen Hotel there are 120 men and women who every day demonstrate how to build self-managed alternatives that create jobs, dignity and justice where neoliberalism has resulted in devastating failure.

Following a fraudulent bankruptcy and after exhausting all legal paths for a year and a half, they decided to take their futures into their own hands and they built what we can see today: a fully functioning hotel with a restaurant, bookstore and cultural galleries, along with spaces that they lend to social organizations for meetings, conferences and assemblies. If you want to demonstrate your pride in a symbol of the movement right in the centre of Buenos Aires, all you have to do is let the Bauen Hotel continue to operate the way its workers, with efficiency and solidarity, have planned it.

But if you want to attack everything that this movement of recovered factories and companies represents, Hotel Bauen is a target.

Over the last few months, Hotel Bauen has been through various attempts to close it down. Now, some legislators in the city of Buenos Aires want to introduce a regulation that will destroy what the workers' cooperative has achieved. We, the undersigned, call on the Argentinian government and its legislators to act immediately to carry out the following measures:

1. Withdraw all threats of eviction or closure from the Bauen Hotel both now and in the future.

2. 2. Pass a law of definitive expropriation in favour of the Workplace Cooperative B.A.U.E.N. (Buenos Aires a National Company, from the Spanish initials).

Social movements around the world are watching the struggle of the Bauen Hotel workers with great interest and passionate support. This highly successful alternative should not be destroyed or threatened: it should be celebrated, supported, and shared with others!

To sign the petition and see a list of signatories, [click here](#)

## Footnotes