Neoliberalism, Teachers, and Teaching: Understanding the Assault

written by Mary Compton, Lois Weiner | March 9, 2009

TEACHERS IN EVERY PART OF THE WORLD are in the forefront of the struggle to ensure that children receive an education — whether in U.S. cities, the mountains of Chavez's Venezuela, in civil war-torn Nepal, in Europe's towns and countryside, or in the refugee camps of Sudan. In prosperous nations, identified by global justice activists as the global north, teachers' wages, their voice in policy, and the quality of their working conditions have been reduced. In the South, societies that lack power and wealth in the new global economy, teachers are working for a pittance, sometimes unpaid, too often poorly trained or with no training at all. In many parts of Africa they teach children in classes of over 100, sometimes under trees or squatting in churches. Textbooks are nonexistent, libraries and computers a distant dream, and basic materials in short supply. When wars occur, declared or not, schools are taken over and the children evicted, as has been done in Congo and by the Israeli army in the Palestinian West Bank. In Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean islands, schools were wiped out by the tsunami, and while luxury resorts are being built, school construction lags. In impoverished city neighborhoods in the "developed" world, from Paris and London to Berlin and New York, teachers are struggling against reduced school funding, racism, and social and economic dislocation to try to ensure that all children get quality schooling. As a classroom teacher elected President of the British National Union of Teachers (NUT), Mary had the unique opportunity to visit teachers' conferences all around the world. The almost overwhelming social and political crises that so many teachers face were debated at all of these events. Activists at the 2002 South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) Congress in Durban debated the merits of various funeral plans for members and their families who would be killed by HIV and AIDS, the lack of water and electricity in their communities, school fees for the poor, and delays in payment of salaries. SADTU members were often working in appalling conditions, all too often sick and dying and teaching children in similar straits. In addition to dealing with these social crises, which are exacerbated by policies of world financial institutions, teachers must simultaneously contend with the deterioration in public education, itself an outcome of reforms promoted and imposed by those very same institutions. Though the titles and acronyms of policies differ from one country to another, the basics of the assault are the same: undercut the publicly- supported, publicly-controlled system of education, teachers' professionalism, and teacher unions as organizations. The very nature of education is being contested: the Fourth World Congress of the international organization of teacher unions, Education International (EI), held in Brazil, explored the theme "Education: Public Service or Commodity?" Over the last couple of decades a new global consensus about reshaping economies and schools has emerged among the politicians and the powerful of the world. Whereas in the past governments — preferably democratically elected — have assumed the responsibility to ensure that all children are educated, schools and universities are now regarded as a potential market. In these educational markets, entrepreneurs set up schools and determine what is taught and how it is taught in order to make a profit. The assumption that schooling is a "public good" is under the most severe attack it has ever endured. Teacher trade unionists are grappling with the increasing privatization of education services, the introduction of business "quality control" measures into education, and the requirement that education produce the kind of minimally-trained and flexible workforce that corporations require to maximize their profits. Among scholars and global justice activists, these reforms being made to the economy and education are often called "neoliberal." They are experienced almost universally by teachers, children, and parents. While rich northern nations spend billions of dollars prosecuting wars and have bottomless resources for the exploiting of new gas and oil reserves, the most precious reserves of all — the world's children — stand at the back of

the line. Nor is there an opportunity to develop education systems so that they can fulfill their true purpose — to enable people to live a full and creative life, or as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it, to ensure that education is directed "toward the full development of the human personality." There is an old saying that "a lie gets halfway round the world before the truth gets on its running shoes." The lie making the running in schooling is that private corporations and entrepreneurs are much more able to make education work for the poor than teachers, communities, and their elected representatives in government. And when one listens to politicians and reads in the media about the benefits of bringing the private market and business methodologies into education, one can often feel as if teachers have hardly begun to tie the laces on their running shoes. The voices for privatization and neoliberalism have virtually the whole of the world's media at their disposal to speed them on their way. Rebutting the "private good, public bad" propaganda is complicated by neoliberalism's hijacking of ideals and terms borrowed from those who have spent their lives campaigning for education for all and opportunities for the poor and oppressed. Hearing news reports and politicians' statements of lofty goals, one might think there is nothing closer to the hearts of the international financiers, accountants, and politicians than the needs of the poor. It is only when you look at the actual effects of the policies of world financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank on "developing" countries and their education systems that you realize that nothing could be further from the truth. The World Bank's structural adjustment programs have destroyed perfectly adequate education systems in countries like Zambia and are threatening to do the same in many others. Neoliberal reports, websites, and corporate financial bulletins with titles like "Why school fees are good for the poor," show that when it serves their purpose, neoliberal gurus are quite willing to ditch the rhetoric of social justice and equality and lay bare the true face of their education policy. Teachers are in a war being fought over the future of education, and though at times it might seem as though we are losing the war without firing a shot, we have a potentially powerful weapon in our hands — our solidarity and organization into powerful teachers unions. Education International (EI), which brings the teaching unions of the world together, has over 29 million members. There is a lively global discourse about the need to wrest education back from the private entrepreneurs and corporations who want to turn it into a cash cow and a source of flexible labor. But there is very little discussion — from nongovernmental organizations that do advocacy work (NGOs), from academics, and even from teaching unions themselves — of the role that teacher unions can and must play in reversing these policies. Public service unions, and in particular education unions, do have power. And yet it often feels as though the tremendous potential force that is contained in those 29 million teachers organized into trade unions is not being used. Capitalism has become global — its strategy and propaganda have a global reach and logic. Yet we in the trade union movement, despite some traditions of international solidarity, are a long way from achieving an equivalent global coherence. And even on a national level trade union leaders are often too ready to accept the rhetoric of politicians as the reality and adapt accordingly, instead of standing up boldly and opposing them — if necessary through job action. Ironically, the potential power of teachers and our unions to derail neoliberal reforms like privatization is often more apparent to our opponents than it is to teachers and union leadership. Teacher unions are identified in one World Bank report as the key threat to global prosperity. In the face of this kind of rhetoric and in the context of the global assault by private capital on state education services, how are the unions responding, and how should they work to defend services for the poor? Is there any indication that teacher unions and their leaderships have the will to face up to this situation and reverse it? In our respective careers we have seen evidence that a more assertive and democratic teacher union movement is possible and can turn back the neoliberal agenda. In her travels, Mary has seen many straws in the wind. In Durban, the end of the SADTU conference signaled the beginning of a mass strike and demonstration for a maximum class size of fifty in the KwaZulu Natal province. The leaders of the union marched from the conference podium to the steps of the town hall to demand more money for education. The Egitem Sen teachers' conference in Ankara, Turkey, was also followed by a mass demonstration — this time against the threatened

closing down of the union by a government that was refusing to recognize the rights of its Kurdish minority to be taught in its own language. The conference of a French teacher union, SNES, was interrupted by a strike and mass demonstrations all over France for the restoration of teachers' pension rights. In Wales, the combined effect of a boycott of standardized compulsory tests for young children and league tables (comparison charts) of schools, along with the concerted lobbying of parents and teacher unions, brought about their abandonment. And at EI, a motion condemning the invasion of Iraq was passed overwhelmingly despite opposition from the U.S. teacher unions. Teaching at the university, Lois sees in prospective teachers an idealism about making a difference in children's lives, like the commitment that animated teachers like herself in the United States to create teacher unions in the 1960s and 70s. Now a researcher, Lois participates in the Special Interest Group on teachers' work and teacher unions of the American Educational Research Association. Several authors in our book belong to this international network of scholars, which has raised the visibility of teacher unions in educational reform and begun to clarify how teachers unions can be revitalized. Our book intersperses scholarly analysis with personal, firsthand accounts of the impact that neoliberal policies are having on teachers around the world. Contributors explain what neoliberal education policy is and why it is so important that teachers in general and union activists in particular understand its rationale and implications. Teachers, union activists, union officials, and researchers from around the globe write about a range of pressing problems that have no simple solutions. We have undertaken this ambitious project in the hope that it will be a useful tool for activists in education and labor who, as we do, want teaching trade unions to use their power to fight for and bring to fruition the ideal of a quality education for every child in the globe. Adapted from the introduction, *The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers and Their Unions: Stories for Resistance*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 272 pp., $28.95

Footnotes