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## Guatemala Teacher's Strike

by LADB Staff

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[The following article by Jill Replogle is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the Feb. 26, 2003, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

While children's voices trickle out into the morning air from a private elementary school in Guatemala City, just a few blocks away, five-year-old Sergio Hernandez Jacinto restlessly zooms his toy car across the floor of the laundromat where his mother works. Sergio is just one of 1.2 million public school children on an unexpected extended vacation as a result of a national teachers' strike that has paralyzed the Guatemalan education system since the official start of the 2003 school year on Jan. 20. Meanwhile, the more than 80,000 teachers employed in public education are on the streets in protest or locked in their schools in "permanent assembly."

Moises Fuentes, leader of the national teachers association (Asociacion Nacional del Magisterio, ANM), said, "We will continue the strike and protests until we obtain concrete answers from the government." At the top of a list of 33 demands presented to the Ministry of Education are an increase in the education budget, a salary hike, and a "re-engineering" of the Educational Reform a key element in the 1996 Peace Accords that ended the country's 36-year civil war.

"It's difficult on the parents, but I think the teachers' demands are justified," said Maria, Sergio's mother. She said that most of the parents at her son's school feel the same, and in many parts of the country, parents have joined the teachers on the streets. Nevertheless, dialogue between the ANM and the government continues to flounder.

A government-sponsored media campaign highlighting advances in education quotes angry parents denouncing the teachers' irresponsibility in refusing to work. The strike has forced serious analysis of the government's advances on commitments laid out in the 1996 Peace Accords regarding educational coverage and quality and budget allocation for social programs. The agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples seeks to reverse the racism and ideological imposition that had previously characterized state education (see NotiCen, 2002-02-07). The Educational Reform also focuses on human rights, gender and environmental issues, and technical training, as well as modern teaching methods that include greater student participation and self-motivated learning.

The strike has dampened the Ministry's enthusiasm around the inauguration of the new primary school curriculum. After six years of discussion and planning, the new curriculum is supposed to finally bring the Educational Reform to the classroom. While teachers and education experts approve of the curriculum transformation and note advances in bilingual and multicultural materials and methods, statistics continue to paint a sad picture of Guatemala's educational record.

The Education Progress Report for 2002 of the Center for National Economic Investigations (CIEN) says the country's working-age population (between 25 and 65 years old) averages four years of

schooling. This figure is significantly lower for the majority rural population, with an average of 2.1 years compared to 6.4 years in urban areas. Women, indigenous, and poor people also fall below the national norm. Women have on average one less year of schooling than men.

Indigenous and poor people have on average 1.9 and 1.7 years of schooling respectively, nearly three times less than nonindigenous people and those living above the poverty line. Despite intense focus on the country's bilingual- multicultural education program in recent years, only 24.8% of the indigenous population within the national education system receives education in their native language, according to the UN Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA). There is concern too about the bilingual education program's overdependence on foreign funding.

Educational coverage remains insufficient, according to the government's own diagnostic of its third year in office, reaching less than half the school-age population in 2002. The number of children attending classes drops significantly with increasing age, with only 17.5% of young people age 16 to 19 in school. Almost one-third of all Guatemalans are illiterate, a figure which, according to the Peace Accords, should have been below 30% by 2000.

While local media and public attention was originally focused on the striking teachers' demand for a universal salary increase, an overall hike in the education budget has taken over as the primary demand. Fuentes calculated that the Ministry of Education needs at least US\$790 million to cover the country's education requirements twice this year's allocated budget. Fuentes also said the system needs an additional 30,000 teachers. The most common and recurring criticism of the education system in Guatemala is the lack of allocated public funds.

The MINUGUA report says that, order to carry out the education programs established in the Peace Accords, public spending on education should have been 2.5% of the GDP in 2002. Nevertheless, it barely reached 2.3% of GDP last year, and this only because of emergency budget transfers throughout the year to the Ministry of Education. In fact, the percentage of GDP spent on education in 2002 was down from 2001. Guatemala has one of the lowest education budgets in Latin America, and spends a smaller percentage of its GDP on education than any other Central American country. As students, campesinos, and other political groups join the teachers on the streets, the strike has become the symbol of general opposition to the governing Frente Republicana Guatemalteca (FRG) government.

In fact, some analysts worry that the true needs of the education system will be forgotten in the political turmoil of this election year. Meanwhile, students like Sergio have already missed a month of school, and without an easing of the tensions that have thus far inhibited productive negotiation between the teachers and the government, little advance can be hoped for this year on the Educational Reform.

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