

3-9-2006

Guatemalan Teachers Resist Neoliberal Transformation Of Liberal Education

Mike Leffert

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Leffert, Mike. "Guatemalan Teachers Resist Neoliberal Transformation Of Liberal Education." (2006).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9392>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Guatemalan Teachers Resist Neoliberal Transformation Of Liberal Education

by Mike Leffert

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2006-03-09

The Guatemalan government has violated the universal right to education and the right to a free education. This is the assessment of a report from the country's Procuraduria de los Derechos Humanos (PDH), based on a countrywide study. PDH researchers found excessive charges, overpopulation, lack of teachers, deficiency of classrooms, lack of desks, and other problems, both in urban and rural schools. The nation's human rights office also found that the Ministry of Education was passing on state responsibilities and obligations, including the cost of paper and report cards, to local communities.

Poor people were being charged hefty fees to register their children, while at the same time not being required to present the paperwork necessary to register. Even when registration was completed, parents found, in almost 22% of cases throughout the country, that there was no classroom or no teacher. The high fees prevented substantial numbers of children from registering. In rural areas, this accounted for 12.23% of the school-age population. In the cities, the charges, along with the lack of facilities, confronted about 22%. The report drew approval from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and also from national educational organizations. It also evoked a defensive posture from the Ministry of Education.

Vice minister Myriam Castaneda said that the findings were not representative of the nation's 17,000 schools and that the parents must agree to any monetary charges. "When it is proven that they are without resources, they must be registered free," she said, denying having seen any report that any child had been denied entry for this reason. She invited the PDH to send her a copy of the report with the names of specific schools, so that corrective measures could be taken.

Congressional outrage and action

This response hardly served to quell outrage from many quarters regarding the state of education in Guatemala. The Congress convened an inquiry, the focus of which was a grueling marathon interrogation of Education Minister Maria del Carmen Acena that went on for weeks, beginning early in February. Outside the Congress, teachers protesting the ministry thronged, kept from the building by the requisite thin blue line of riot police.

Inside, the hearing kicked off with questioning by Deputy Raul Robles of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) and chief of the UNE delegation. He set the tone with the statement, prior to firing the first question, "Education is catastrophic as a consequence of the bad policies of the governments, including that of the [governing] Gran Alianza Nacional (GANAN)." As a first order of business, Robles asked that the Congress be declared in permanent session. The request was granted, and the stage was set for the marathon, interruptions and all.

Interruption came quickly when Minister Acena had not brought with her the documentation necessary to answer budgetary questions. She was given a week to come up with the data. UNE wanted to know where millions spent on publicity and consultants went, how much money high ministry officials were paid, and why there was a deficit of teachers.

Said UNE Deputy Nery Samayoa, "The truth is that the vice ministers, directors, consultants, and managers of the Ministry of Education have stratospheric salaries, while the teachers are earning impoverishment wages. This is immoral." The first day's hearing was suspended amid catcalls from unionists in the gallery and retorts from GANA members on the floor.

Teachers react to privatization

During the week that followed, organized teachers continued to demonstrate. High on their list of complaints was what they termed the privatization of education. By this they meant not the parochial and private schools but rather the evolution of what would be called in the US charter schools. Their objection was that these schools could be organized by a local board free to choose teachers without qualifications, who could be paid contractual salaries without benefits. They demanded, as an outcome of the hearings, a vote of no confidence that would force the minister's resignation.

Director of the Asociacion Nacional del Magisterio (ANM) Joviel Acevedo claimed Acena was forcing measures "that aim at the privatization of education to the detriment of the impoverished population...because they transfer to the private sector the obligation to educate children." During the hearing hiatus, the government marshaled its defenses. President Oscar Berger said he had confidence in his minister and charged that the opposition and "some" teachers were "not letting her work."

When the congressional proceedings restarted with long, grueling sessions, protesters began to be hopeful that their goal of ousting Acena was possible. They came close late in the afternoon on Feb. 15, after Frente Republicana Guatemalteca (FRG) Deputy Lucrecia de Palomo shattered the minister with a barrage of questions that she answered inadequately.

Eighteen hours into the hearing, Acena had been asked more than a hundred questions. Why were more teachers hired under a rule that allowed no benefits than under one that paid benefits? What had happened to the unspent portion of the education budget? How can a quality education be provided when in many schools the term started without teachers? How were the funds transferred to a nongovernmental organization (NGO) for support of local school boards handled? The minister exhausted, combined opposition leaders were confident they had the 80 votes in the Congress necessary to get the vote of no confidence. GANA put up a last-minute defense with a walkout that included some members of other parties, depriving the forum of a quorum and temporarily averting the outcome, but only temporarily.

Minister condemned, reprieved

In the end, the opposition got its vote of no confidence, but not the removal of the minister they were aiming for. According to law, the vote only requires the minister to tender her resignation; it does not require the president to accept it. So, he didn't. On Feb. 23, Berger told the nation, "Today, in the Council of Ministers, the unanimous decision was taken not to accept the resignation of Maria del Carmen Acena...so that she might have the opportunity to continue making the changes that the country needs." Berger said that the government needed dialogue with the teachers and other sectors to make structural changes.

In addition, the government would send the Congress three bills on educational reform, including decentralization of funds, salary increases, and school infrastructure. Berger called on teachers to enter into discussions rather than take to the streets. "Enough of this confrontation," he said, "let's see what this proposal is about and improve it, with the opinion of the teachers, parents, and civil society. Let it be discussed in the Congress, and let them decide if they approve it or not."

The government's response was not well taken on the other side. ANM's Acevedo called Berger's talk of change "one more lie from the executive." He said Acena had lost her legitimacy and no longer represented the interest of education. If the story ended there, it would be a political story, or an economic one, with education playing a focal but nonessential part. But the politicking masks some deeper questions at the heart of this dispute.

This is also about what kind of education Guatemala will promote and what kind of development will come of it. What is an education, anyway? The story is also about two conflicting views of education, two separate understandings of development. As such, this political confrontation is just the latest battle in a much-longer-running conflict. On one side is a vision of education as the foundation of citizenship and the development of the whole person as envisioned by the Constitution.

On the other side is the concept of education as a means of developing a productive and competitive society, creating within it economic actors capable of performing in a globalized world. The government and its beleaguered minister promote this second concept, the teachers and popular organizations, the first.

Speaking for educating the whole person, Raul Hernandez of the Comision Consultiva para la Reforma Educativa (CCRE) of the Conferencia Episcopal de Guatemala (CEG) said the other side represents an "educational policy of a managerial and mercantile character. What they profess is effectiveness and efficiency for the system, the more expertise and the less thinking, the better." This is the critique that the ANM supports, along with the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), the revolutionary insurgency-cum-political party, and others.

These forces are looking toward an educational reform derived from the 1996 Peace Accords, which have been struggling along for the past eight years (see NotiCen, 2003-03-20). "As teachers, we know that the principles that must be taught are those of cooperation and solidarity, more than competitiveness," said Rodrigo Hernandez of the ANM. That said, however, the organized

educational community he represents has done itself no favors in the postwar period and has opened the door wide to the technocratic vision of the government and private sector.

Going back as long as 50 years, according to an article in *Inforpress Centroamericana*, the sector has wallowed in corruption, impunity for teachers with influence, the creation of phantom jobs, a supervisory system steeped in cronyism, lack of professionalism, and a union that thrived on these vices. Now they find themselves discredited, no more trusted than the government, and, perhaps worst, obscuring the dedication and sacrifice of those teachers who truly do try to teach and create a competent citizenry. The Congress finds itself poised between the two not-quite-believable sides. Those in agreement with a liberal education view the government's recent call for dialogue with suspicion.

Alfredo de Leon Solano, a deputy of *Encuentro por Guatemala (EG)*, said, "They speak of dialogue, but it's not binding. It is wrong, because they are leaving the principal actors, like the teachers, the politicians, and the *CCRE*, out. If there is no trust, debate, and accord, this dialogue is going to be crippled. They are sending negative messages of confrontation."

Alba Estela Maldonado of the *URNG* agreed, "What has been produced until now is a dialogue among the deaf, just to say they talked, but participation has not been advanced."

Others doubt that the government's view is anything other than a neoliberal plan of privatization. Said Raul Hernandez, "The subject of education in our country is not a priority. If it were a priority, it would have a larger percentage of the budget, but we continue with 1.8% of GDP. That is to say, there is no real political will to give priority to education."

Critics point to organizations like the *Programa Nacional de Autogestion para el Desarrollo Educativo (PRONADE)* and the *Instituciones de Servicios Educativos (ISE)*. *PRONADE* was created in 1994 by Acena. Her ministry now says its objective is to improve educational services and expand them in rural areas. But *PRONADE* also shifts state educational prerogatives to private hands, weakens labor policy, and passes costs to parents, say its critics.

In Deputy de Leon's words, "It is a parallel program of education by contract. They employ teachers without labor rights [without paying them vacation time or benefits], they are not organized, and the parents can fire them if they want. They use it to decentralize, but they go to models that weaken the teachers." *ISE* is similarly decried. It assigns educational projects to NGOs to promote decentralization, which Raul Hernandez sees as a "very subtle technical privatizing strategy in which the ministry washes its hands [of responsibility]."

ANM wants it done differently. "The Ministry of Education is the only entity that should take charge of all the expenditures. And if you're really talking about decentralization, this project should be brought directly to the departmental authorities and shouldn't be contracted through *ISE*. The only thing they do is keep 60% of what they receive and only 40% is going to administration." The system is further criticized from a constitutional perspective. *ANM* says the Ministry of Education is violating the right to equality with these programs because they penalize areas that do not have *Juntas Escolares*, the parent organizations.

Those who cannot pay the costs that accrue to the parents through the schemes are also penalized. De Leon said of the juntas, "I don't oppose parent participation in the education of their children, I am opposed to them having responsibilities that the state is obligated to perform and to them performing functions, without pay, that they are not trained to exercise." From their point of view, the teachers have been left out of the discussion. They say they are accused of acting only to protect their privileges. But they are also underpaid and, as a group, mediocre in their performance, when they are performing at all.

Raul Hernandez lays that at the government's door, claiming lack of supervision as the problem. "I'm not going to deny that they are without fault," he said, "but they are not the only ones that cause the deficient and distorted system we're in." With the teachers effectively locked out of the debate, the issue is headed for the courts. The teachers have brought an action against the Ministry of Education to the labor court. If they do not get satisfaction there, the next stop, say analysts, is a strike.

In the Congress, the emphasis has shifted from questions on what kind of education young Guatemalans will get, and who will provide it, to party factionalism. Possibly, that is all it ever was. "Without doubt, this matter has been very much tinged with a political overtone against the government, as a part of the pre-electoral clashes and battles," said the URNG's Maldonado. General elections will take place in 2007.

-- End --