

Teachers, Unions, Students Build Trinational Movement Against Neoliberal Education

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Resistance to the global corporate education reform movement gained momentum last month as nearly 200 educators, students, and community allies from Mexico, Canada, and the US gathered in Chicago for the 11th Trinational Conference in Defense of Public Education. The conference was primarily attended by delegates from some of the most militant teacher unions from each of the three countries – all of whom have been fighting similar battles to defend against attacks on public education – but conference organizers also invited student leaders from each country to participate in the conference, as well as teacher union leaders from Puerto Rico and Japan and local education supporters in Chicago.

Taking place over 3 days from May 9th – 11th, the purpose of the gathering was to bring together education activists from the three countries to share experiences, build solidarity, and develop strategies for resisting the neoliberal education policies that have been advancing the privatization of schools, standardized testing, and budget cuts to education across North America. And upon arriving in Chicago, the attendees quickly sprung into action.

After a conference-opening visit to meet with teachers and students at Social Justice High School – a Chicago public school in one of the largest Mexican immigrant neighborhoods in the US that was only built after the community finally won the struggle to force the school board to make good on years of broken promises to build a new school through a 19-day hunger strike – the education activists launched a mobile demonstration through downtown Chicago, moving by bus from the Canadian consulate to the US Department of Education to the Mexican consulate.

At each location, they rallied with pro-public education chants and speeches as delegations delivered a letter to officials at each institution demanding that the governments of the three nations cease their attacks on teachers, students, unions, and their communities and that all three governments adopt a joint plan that would tax the rich and use the revenues to fully fund North American education systems with, among other things, universal early childhood programs, free college access, and wrap-around social services in schools.

Officials at the Canadian consulate locked the doors and refused to meet with the delegation – despite the request to meet coming from Canadian citizens – while officials at the Mexican consulate allowed a small group of Mexican teachers into the building, but declined to offer a response to the letter's demands. Officials at the US Department of Education responded to the group's presence by calling the police and demanding that they leave the premises. Having made its point, the group left peacefully, defiantly chanting, "We'll be back!"

The urgency of the current moment

The lively demonstrations paled in comparison to last fall's city-wide strike by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), but the spirit and energy of the strike remained. Chicago was chosen as the host city for the 11th Trinational Conference in an effort to continue to build on momentum gained and the space that the CTU's strike created to push for alternatives.

The opening day's visits to the consulates and Dept. of Education did a great deal to unify the voices and the sentiment of conferences attendees early on, and after a communal dinner in one of the oldest labor union halls in Chicago, the official proceedings of the 11th Trinational Conference began with a public forum on the University of Illinois – Chicago campus.

The forum featured [addresses from leaders](#) of Canadian, Mexican, and Puerto Rican teacher union – including remarks from a Mexican student activist – on the state of the education fights and policies in their respective countries. Moderated by Nancy Serrano, a rank and file middle school teacher who helped found CTU's Latino Caucus, the forum was keynoted by Karen Lewis, president of the CTU, who highlighted the urgency of the current moment, both in Chicago and across the continent.

"We are all being terrorized by neoliberal politics," Lewis said. And in the wake of the CTU strike, she said, "we have a very small window of opportunity" before corporate-backed education reformers "legislate some new horror on our schools, our teachers, and our communities."

The speakers who followed Lewis shared stories of their victories and of challenges common to all three countries. All of the speakers remarked on the ways in which standardized testing, attacks on pensions, cloning of Teach for America programs, and lack of investment in public schools are profoundly harming children, teachers, and their communities. But especially urgent was the common theme that the global corporate education reform movement's austerity budgets and neoliberal policies have been accompanied across the continent by increasingly vicious forms of repression and intimidation against teacher unions and education activists.

"The public and our parents expect us to speak out in defense of our children's education," Jim Iker, president of the British Columbia Teachers Federation, told the assembled teachers. But across the continent, and especially in Latin America, those who speak out are increasingly being targeted for retaliation.

Maria Elena Fontañez, president of the Puerto Rican Teachers Federation, spoke of teachers who had their teaching licenses – and thus, their livelihoods – revoked for life by the government in retaliation for organizing against education reform. And in Mexico, death threats, targeted killings of union leaders, and violent police repression are a chilling reality of the country's political history and its current climate.

But despite the constant threat of violent retaliation, teachers have continued to organize. Just last Fall, tens of thousands have engaged in massive, militant [strikes and demonstrations across Mexico](#) to resist and teachers, all organized by the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (CNTE, in Spanish), the dissident rank and file caucus of the larger, status-quo supporting National Union of Mexican Teachers (SNTE). And this winter, in response to a deceptively-timed Christmas Eve vote that decimated teacher

pensions, [Puerto Rican teachers occupied their Senate](#) and shut down proceedings for two days.

It is this kind of coordinated resistance that the Trinational Coalition hopes its conferences and the relationships formed therein will help to spread across the continent. But as political director of the CNTE Juan Melchor put it, he sees the Coalition's struggle not only as part of what he called the "anti-imperialist" struggle against global corporate education reform, but it is also part of the global movement for democracy, and seeks to advance positive solutions for transforming education into an institution that truly serves all of society, not just the economy.

From creating regional "pedagogical circles" where teachers learn about social justice pedagogy and share strategies for bringing it to their classrooms, to the Coalition's participation in the international [Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas](#), to its support of the [Charter for Public Education](#), putting forward bottom-up solutions for creating a more just education system has been part of the Trinational's DNA since its inception.

History of the Trinational Coalition

The 11th Trinational Conference marked the 20th year since the formation of the Trinational Coalition for the Defense of Public Education, an informal organization that brings together people from the three NAFTA countries who value public education and its contributions to democratic society to defend it against privatization, commodification, and other attacks from the neoliberal corporate reform agenda.

[The Trinational Coalition's story](#) had its beginnings in a 1993 gathering at Evergreen State College's Labor Education Center in Olympia, Washington that was funded by teacher unions from Canada, Mexico, and the US in an effort to organize a formal, educator-driven commission that could counter the call for a privatized "educational common market" included in the recently signed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The conference was attended by over 200 union delegates and saw the passage of the Olympia Declaration, which advocated for education as a social right and promoted a vision of education that supported cultural self-determination, was based on social participation, and guided by democratic process.

But by the end of the 1994 follow-up conference in Zacatecas, Mexico, the idea of a formal commission was abandoned in favor of a Trinational Coalition that would seek to coordinate the actions that unions across North America would take in defense of a truly public education system in each country.

Since then, the Trinational Coalition has operated as a grassroots organization that is guided by a common set of principles but has no formal membership. Educational union organizations participate based on their willingness to be involved in organizing and financing various projects, forums, and conferences, though there is no cost to participate.

As of now, over two dozen unions participate in the Trinational Coalition. But notably, none of the national teachers unions from any country participate in the Coalition's fight against corporate education reform and its attacks on teachers. Instead, it is the dissident caucuses and reform-oriented union organizations like the CNTE, an opposition caucus inside of the larger National Mexican Teachers Union, and the CTU, which was taken over in recent years by the dissident Caucus Of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE), who are leading the fight to

defend public education.

Despite having no budget and an informal structure, the Trinational Coalition has been effective in growing the collective power of educator unions in North America. The international solidarity it has created has won victories for educators in each country that may have otherwise been lost, and continues to be an important coordinating infrastructure for education activists resisting corporate education reform and seeking to advance alternatives for a public education system that is just, benefits all of society, and serves the needs of democracy.

Students rising in the continental education struggle

As an organization that has its origins in teacher unions, student involvement is still relatively new for the Trinational Coalition. Students have attended the Trinational Conferences for only the most recent part of the last decade of its existence, but the Chicago conference was attended by over two dozen students from Mexico and the US (the two Canadian student delegates were prevented from attending by last-minute issues). It was the largest student contingent to ever attend a Trinational Conference.

A good deal of the students present attended the conference workshop on student organizing where they shared stories of the struggles they've been involved in, including a student group from Chicago, Chicago Students Organizing to Save Our Schools ([CSOSOS](#)), presenting on the work it has been doing to [fight standardized testing and school closures](#), as well as a Mexican student representing who has been involved in a student organization called [Tiempos Modernos](#) and formerly in [the youth-driven #YoSoy132 movement](#) who spoke about organization building in at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

The conversation then turned toward shared issues that are preventing students from creating broader, more sustainable students movements. A key issue that the students shared was the way that member turnover after graduation prevents all kinds of student movements from being able to shape long-lasting student organizations. Along with that, the average student body's lack of political identity or analysis was named as another key stumbling block for building momentum in student organizing.

Throughout the remainder of the conference, the student contingent's discussion about overcoming these challenges through supporting effective transitions in student movement leadership and broadening political education work continued, and was eventually joined by key members of CORE members and leaders of [the Network for Social Justice Unionism](#). A small group of students and teachers met during one of the conference breaks to discuss creating closer partnerships between teacher unions and student groups that could serve as infrastructure to support more powerful and longer-lasting student movements and develop deeper solidarity among students and their teachers from all three nations.

The discussion culminated in the student contingent making an official proposal during the Trinational Conference's final plenary to establish a "student section" of the Trinational Coalition that would seek to involve students more explicitly in the Trinational's work, which was received with enthusiastic applause from the teachers and community supporters present.

A small group of teachers and students committed to continuing the conversation as to how the student section should be formalized and incorporated into the Trinational Coalition over the coming year, and many of the students present agreed to continue the effort to grow the student section of the Trinational Coalition through attending the [Montreal Student Movement Convention](#) this June where students from across North America will gather to build international student solidarity. Mexican students also offered an opportunity to extend the collaboration by inviting US and Canadian students to send a delegation to the August gathering of the Latin American and Caribbean Continental Students Organization ([OCLAE](#), in Spanish) in Nicaragua.

“La lucha sigue”: the struggle continues

The formation of the new student section was only one of many resolutions for action coming out of the 11th Trinational. As the Trinational Conference occurs only once every two years, its tradition has been to set out goals and initiatives for work that is to be carried on in the interim. The final day of the conference saw various groups of attendees committing to, among other things, further developing international infrastructure to share best practices in social justice and democratic pedagogy, establishing efforts to provide legal support for Latin American colleagues fighting government repression of their work, and taking steps to elevate the visibility of adjunct professors in universities and other precarious education workers in the educational justice struggle.

In addition, Jim Iker of the BCTF signaled to the conference attendees that the Trinational would consider mounting efforts in the coming months to coordinate more joint actions to bring pressure for change upon common adversaries like Pearson, the world’s largest standardized testing corporation, or possibly the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is by far the largest single funder of national and international corporate reform initiatives.

Bolstered by the success of the conference’s opening joint actions at the consulates and Dept. of Education, CTU staff coordinator and Trinational Conference coordinator Jackson Potter said “I think it shows that there really is a common set of demands... we have these common threats but also alternatives that we believe in and that we share.”

Potter continued, noting that on top of the success of last year’s Chicago Teachers Union strike, “the British Columbian Teachers Federation and the Mexican CNTE have successfully restricted the use and abuse of standardized tests in significant and important ways through their efforts and advocacy.” The fact that leaders from all of these struggles are intentionally forming bonds of solidarity, he says, “signals that we’re stronger than just by ourselves when we link and connect the dots to figure out who’s behind all this and try and fight them together.”

Rebecca Martinez, another CTU staff organizer and member of the Latino Caucus, suggested the Latino Caucus is considering teacher exchange delegations between Mexico and the US. The purposed of such delegations would be to heighten the political understanding and analysis of neoliberal education reforms that teachers in Chicago and the US have, “because I think we’re a bit deficient in that way,” she remarked. “So hopefully talking to our sisters and brothers in Mexico and really knowing what they are going through every day and what they’re fighting would help folks come back and really feel more urgency in the work that needs to be done here.”

In terms of moving the North American struggle for democratic and socially just education

policies forward, Potter commented that “it’s not rocket science. Everybody’s facing austerity budget cuts and efforts to privatize and restrict access to [education], this public good that is essential for a democratic and vibrant society. We have to stop that, and we need to provide our alternatives and strengthen that sector.”

Teacher, student, and community-based attendees alike left the 11th Trinational Conference feeling energized and optimistic that the struggle for education justice is being and will be won. “I think it kind of jumpstarted us,” said Chicago middle school teacher Nancy Serrano. “I feel like we’re going to move faster now because of the success we had this weekend.”

The significance of winning the struggle for education was summed up in the remarks that CNTE’s Juan Melchor shared about the three goals that have guided the CNTE teachers’ fight in Mexico: first, democratize the teachers’ union. Second, democratize the schools. Third, democratize the country.

If the teachers, students, and education activists of the Trinational Coalition In Defense of Public Education are successful, it would mean much more than better schools. It would mean more critical and engaged citizens. It would mean a blow to corporate imperialism and control. It would mean a more just society where education is seen as a human right and a public good, not as a private commodity or an economic market.

With the 2016 Trinational Conference In Defense of Public Education tentatively slated to take place in Vancouver, the education activists of the Trinational Coalition have their work cut out for them. But they can count on a growing base of support as more and more people across the continent – and across the globe – start to realize the harm that corporate education reform is doing to our communities, our schools, and our future. So as the Mexican delegation’s favored chant from the weekend says, “La lucha sigue, sigue!”

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