

## US-El Salvador: Threats to Privatize Education Meet International Resistance

Written by Allen Hines

Thursday, 29 November 2012 09:02

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When her son Jackson entered third grade, Diana Zevala noticed a change in his attitude toward school. He grew less interested in school and started to not want to go. Diana, a former English teacher at Progress High School in Brooklyn, New York, sensed he was under stress. Following last year's winter break, she discovered the cause.

Over the break, a local yoga studio had burned down. She went to Jackson's teachers to ask them to get other students involved in relief efforts. The teachers said they didn't have time and showed Diana a full calendar of testing days. With standardized tests slated for October, November, December, April and June, teachers had no time for activities beyond test preparation, she said.

"Kids are not being allowed to grow naturally and their natural instincts are not being nurtured. They are being drilled and trained to figure out multiple-choice questions. That is not real thinking and there is no self-expression" Zevala says.

In New York, schools are part of Race to the Top, a program put forward by Arnie Duncan, the former CEO of Chicago schools and currently President Obama's Secretary of Education. In return for evaluating teachers according to their students' performance on standardized tests, among other measures, Race to the Top schools can get more money from the government. Furthermore, underperformance on the tests can become a reason to close a school, which in turn may be replaced with a charter school. "It's the carrot and then the stick," Zevala says.

Frustrated by the increasing bureaucratization of her local public school system, Zevala was eager to see another model at work. So she signed up for a volunteer brigade to El Salvador. For two weeks, she and thirty other volunteers worked in conjunction with the Salvadoran Ministry of Education on its goal to teach everyone to read and write. "Because I was seeing what was happening here in New York, I felt that I wanted to see something that was inspiring and different," she says.

In communities across El Salvador, which is in many ways still recovering from a brutal twelve-year civil war (1980-1992), the Ministry of Education is organizing neighborhood literacy circles, small groups of adults who attend class every afternoon for a period of six to eight months. Over 135,000 Salvadorans, predominantly older women, have graduated from the program in just two years, thanks to the participation of over 7,000 high-school and college students who have volunteered as teachers.

Using a model based on the successes in Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela and elsewhere, the National Literacy Program aims to reduce the illiteracy rate from seventeen percent to less than

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four percent by 2015. According to Manuel Mira, Secretary General of the Union of Ministry of Education Workers (SITADMES) in El Salvador, "The literacy program seeks to correct the great inequalities that have existed in the education system of our country to improve the conditions of development in the communities."

"In El Salvador, the government has a plan for eradicating illiteracy and for education," Diana Zevala reflects on her time in El Salvador, visiting circles in many different municipalities across the country. "And it's completely opposite from the plan we have [in the United States]. There, with very little money and very little access and very little materials, they invest in their students. And here, we take away from the teachers."

Though El Salvador's national budget for education is dwarfed by that of United States, the investment in public education has been steadily increasing with the 2009 presidential victory of the leftist party, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which during the civil war fought against a repressive, US-backed government. With FMLN leaders at the helm of several key cabinets, including health and education, and a slight legislative advantage over the right-wing parties, social investment has increased significantly across the board.

The national education budget has risen from \$707 million in 2011 to nearly \$828 million in 2012, with a proposed increase to \$882 million for 2013. Union leaders like Manuel Mira emphasize the broader social and political impacts of this investment. "Education is a necessity for a country's growth and democracy. To be able to read and write gives a person the tools to be independent, to be able to be free," he says. "A person can analyze the reality to be able to be an actor and not just a subject in the processes of change."

As part of a national education reform, the government has raised teachers' salaries; in 2011-2012, over \$59 million was spent on raises, with bonuses for the over 40,000 public school teachers in the country. To increase access to free public education, which is guaranteed by the Salvadoran Constitution, the government now provides school uniforms, shoes, and school supplies to nearly 1.4 million children whose family cannot afford them.

"Before, the students went to school barefoot and in rags. Now, they stay in school. This isn't a populist idea. The school packets have generated 50,000 jobs, both directly and indirectly," reported Héctor Samour, El Salvador's Vice-Minister of Education, during a June 2012 press conference. The scholastic packets, as well as a daily meals at school for over 1.3 million kids, has likely helped El Salvador reach 93% coverage for basic education in the country, with enrollment and graduation rates expected to increase.

Rising investment in public services in El Salvador is a result of a decade of mounting struggle against privatization and other neoliberal economic policies implemented by the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party, which ruled El Salvador for 20 years before the election of President Mauricio Funes. Following their first presidential victory in 1989, ARENA loyally followed the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund and other international financial institutions, becoming a poster child for a grand experiment to enhance private wealth at the expense of the public sector.

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As the global push toward privatization-as-debt-solution for heavily-indebted countries across Latin America and elsewhere sped up in the 1990s, public budgets were slashed. Public sector workers were made to do more with less. Access to services was limited; by 2006, for example, over 47% of Salvadorans had no access to health care, despite a constitutional guarantee to receive care. Successive ARENA administrations pushed for complete privatization and got it in many sectors, including electrical distribution, telecommunications and banking. As a result, consumer costs skyrocketed - electrical rates rose 47.2% for most families after the distribution system was privatized in 1996 – alongside unemployment levels.



The privatization mandate from El Salvador's lenders and "development partners" continues today. Despite the concrete benefits of the literacy program and other social services in El Salvador - created by investing in public sector workers and programs – the US State Department is currently promoting private, foreign investment in El Salvador's remaining public industries and services. Under a bilateral development agreement, the Partnership for Growth, the US State Department is heavily pushing "Public-Private Partnerships" in El Salvador, [most recently threatening](#) to withhold the Millennium Challenge Corporation's second round of development aid funding for El Salvador unless the new Partnerships are permitted.

The Salvadoran Legislative Assembly is now considering a proposed Law of Public-Private Partnerships, which would create a mechanism to offer 40-year concessions to private investors for institutions and services currently administered by the government. The first sector at risk is airports and seaports; after that, labor union activists warn, municipal water systems and prisons could be put up for auction, as well as schools and healthcare.

"The Public-Private Partnership is nothing more than privatization by another name, and we have lived the experience of privatization in El Salvador," says Manuel Mira. "When they privatized the telecommunications sector and Social Security pensions, for example, what happened? The workers were left in worse conditions." Wages fell and work hours increased, he reports.

But concerns of Salvadoran teachers like Mira go beyond threats to their livelihoods. If the Law of Public-Private Partnerships passes, he fears the effects on education. "Education is a right. And it would be naive to think that the private company, whose interest is money not the welfare of the people, will defend this right."

Xian Barrett, the recording secretary of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) within the Chicago Teacher's Union, echoes Mira's concerns. "In many arenas, you see the ruling class of our country – the ruling class of the world by association – seeing opportunities to make lots of money while experimenting on the poor and minorities of our country," says Barrett.

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Pressure to privatize public services and goods – and concerns about who stands to gain in the process - has become increasingly familiar in the United States, where many communities now face the same policy prescriptions that have been offered to El Salvador and other countries in the Global South for decades. As Nancy Smith Nissley, the State Department's senior coordinator for economic policy and foreign diplomacy stated in September, "Over the past several decades, globalization has resulted in an increase in the power and influence of the private sector. The changing role of government has seen the private sector and NGOs become providers of many services previously offered by government."

Much like the State Department proposes for El Salvador, the Mayor of Chicago, former Obama Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, is proposing to re-build Chicago's infrastructure through public-private partnerships, in which private entities to invest in public infrastructure in exchange; their return on investment would come in the form of user fees and/or public subsidies. While multi-million dollar financing from private industry may seem like a boon to resource-strapped cities or countries, it ultimately results in the transfer of public tax dollars into private hands. And much like the proposed legislation in El Salvador, which would create a commission outside of the Legislative Assembly to grant the concessions, Emanuel's plan has been criticized for "[giving] a board dominated by [handpicked] corporate financiers the power to hammer out multimillion-dollar deals without many of the checks and balances meant to keep City Hall in line."

But the dangers go beyond issues of transparency and good governance. As Barrett explains, the global push to privatize is an experiment that negatively impacts poor communities of color for the benefit of a privileged class. The impact of school closures - 80 of which are projected for Chicago, according to the Chicago Tribune - teacher layoffs and budget cuts are predominantly in areas where families are struggling with unemployment, inadequate housing and other challenges. In Chicago, over eighty percent of students qualify for free meals at school based on low family incomes. "When you take students who have very unstable home lives and unstable community lives and then you take away the most consistent adults in their lives, which in many cases are teachers, it really hurts them deeply," says Barrett. "As a result of this, we felt the need to fight back very hard."

In September, the CTU, under the new leadership of Barrett's rank-and-file caucus went out on strike, for the first time in twenty-five years. Moving beyond concerns about teacher pay, the union took a strong stand against evaluating teachers by their students' performance on standardized tests, school closures, and classroom conditions as they negotiated with the city. Barrett says the strike was a "beautiful show of a unified fight."

The successes of the Chicago strike, which include winning a pay increase, defeating Mayor Emanuel's proposal for merit-based teacher pay and bringing national attention to the education policy prescriptions being promoted from the highest level of the Obama administration, mirrors tactics that have been implemented successfully in El Salvador.. After several devastating sales of public industries to private corporations, including telecommunications, Salvadoran social movements, led strongly by public sector unions, was able to channel widespread consumer outrage at skyrocketing costs and unemployment levels into organized resistance. A massive, eleven-month strike by nurses, doctors, janitors, lab

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technicians, residents and others ultimately defeated an attempt to privatize the social security medical system in 2003. Mass protest – with communities and public sector unions joining together - similarly defeated ARENA's attempt to privatize the public water system in 2007, despite privatization being a condition of an earlier IMF loan.

Examples of successful, organized resistance to privatization inspire not only teachers and union members in the US like Barrett, but also parents like Diana Zavala, who has seen for herself in El Salvador that the momentum built can even reverse the trend of slashing education budgets.

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