

Current context of education in Latin America¹

Heidy Villuendas Ortega



In the past meeting of the General Secretariat of the Continental Latin American and Caribbean Student Organization (OCLAE), held August 2016, in Havana, Cuba, we conducted an analysis of the region's current context, in particular as it relates to education.

Here, we present a summary.

The hemisphere's student organizations have always advocated for the teaching system to become an essential tool for the construction of a prosperous, just society that acts in solidarity and within a model of holistic development of the human being.

During the first 15 years of the current century, the political scenario of advances in Latin American integration, with the ascension to the presidency of progressive governments, made it possible to implement measures of a social character that benefitted the poorest sectors of our Americas.

¹ Report presented by Heidy Villuendas, OCLAE President in the 18th Meeting of the Coordinating Committee of the IDEA Network, held on November 14 and 15 2016, in Mexico City.

We have seen an increase in investment in education in many of our continent's countries; which allowed for an increase school admissions, access was democratized, programs for student well-being, research, continuing education, etc. have been created. As well, there are advances in the process of integration with alternatives such as the Latin American Space for Higher Education (ENLACES).

However, these measures were not enough to end the profound inequalities inherent to the prevailing capitalist system. Our continent continues to be the most unequal in the world and the commercialization of education continues to advance in gigantic steps. In fact, our hemisphere is where the largest education monopoly is located.

Today in Latin America and the Caribbean, we are living in a unique moment, marked by a strong conservative offensive from the right abetted by imperialism. The cases of Brazil and Argentina are a clear example of the setbacks that we are facing, above all in the neoliberal policies that directly affect education.

The recent approval of Law PEC 241 or the attempt to apply the Law Schools with Party in Brazil de-

monstrate that in many of the region's countries, education is still not seen as a human right, public good and fundamental duty of the State. We are concerned that private education, individualized anti-democratic learning is prioritized, governed by regulations and institutions directed according to the logic of the market, in which the teacher's, student's and community's roles as a whole are negated. Education models oriented to create cheap manual labour, decrease education budgets, and the exclusion of the most vulnerable sectors from university learning, are some of the difficulties that today we face as movements in defense of education in all of the continent and the whole world.

In the same manner, we are opposed to the application of "Plan Bologna" as a goal of Latin American universities that are copying neoliberal higher education models in place in Europe, negating the Latin America's social reality.

The current context, increases the cases of violations of university autonomy and co-government. It is important to highlight the serious situation of criminalization of social movements and the political persecution that student leaders and organizations in some countries.

Privatizing tendencies are a common denominator in many countries in the Americas. The economic, political and social crisis expose government's lack of interest in guaranteeing the basic social rights like education, which have historically been gained by the people's struggles. Because of this the student movement plays a strategic role in resistance against neoliberal measures and in forwarding alternative proposals.

OCLAE, in the context of celebrations for the organization's half century, ratifies its foundational principles; among them, education reform at the

continental level and the struggle against illiteracy - which causes so much harm in the poorest sectors and which governments do not want to eliminate because it keeps our peoples submissive. We also advance our demand for free education and the struggle against the commercialization of higher education, among others.

We will continue to promote the campaign, "Education is not a commodity: For an emancipatory, public, free and quality education, at the service of people." And to mark the centennial of the Cordoba Reform (which established the tradition of autonomy for Latin American universities), we launch the Latin American Education Caravan that will travel throughout the continent, debating with students from all over about the role of education in society, bringing together society's local and regional needs and realities as regards education.