



“Memoirs of a struggle”

The student movement to defend the National Agricultural University (UNA) Catacamas, Olancho, Honduras

(Student strike, November 2016)

GIO*

Photo: Otras voces en educación

Summary

This article summarizes accounts of several protagonists in the recent strike by the National Agricultural University of Honduras' (UNA) student movement. It brings us closer to the problematic issues that led to the student strike which was a legitimate tool in the face of the constant violations of the human rights of students and teaching staff by university authorities and the repressive Honduran state.

The participants were three male students, two female students, a mother and one professor who was arbitrarily fired. Their names have been changed in order to protect their identity in the national context of institutional violence.

Key words: education, student strike, human rights, criminalization, violence.

The context

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In my country, the education sector is affected by a government which does not support education - a government internationally recognized for its high level of corruption, for preferring weapons over books and specialized police squads over improving education infrastructure, for imposing education authorities at their convenience and not in the people's interests. The student strike occurred in response to the constant and growing institutional and state attacks against the social interests of UNA:

"The situation that provoked the student's strike was a chain of corruption and violations of human rights... The university had turned into a platform for personal projects and even partisan purposes." (Professor¹)

In this context of struggle and general resistance by different sectors of our peoples, and in the face of the growing onslaught by the capitalist government, the secondary and post-secondary student movements gained momentum.

Teachers respond to the commercialization of higher education and resulting exclusion

Defending public education means defending students and education workers' rights:

"Fortunately, conscious teachers raised our voices... This provoked the unjust firing of 45 teachers due to our opposition to the academy being sacrificed in return for private projects. In this context, students also raised their voices..." (Professor)

Students organize against institutional violence

"Our strength is the university, at all times we identify as university students, wearing our blue shirts, in the face of

1 One of the 45 professors fired. To learn more about the teachers' situation, refer to article "La huelga de la UNA: contexto y enseñanzas" ("The UNA strike: context and lessons"), available in research- www.ideanetwork.ca.

personal and family persecution and the criminalization of our protest." (Ana)

We called this strike due to the university crisis and the imposition of regulations and pedagogical and administrative procedures that went against the right to public education and to defend autonomy and the right to freedom of student organization.

We suffered the abuse of power that went so far as to change student regulations with more strict and arbitrary sanctions, and reject student representation... While they continued making deals with university goods and funds, the student body was forced to keep quiet and live under these miserable and inhuman conditions.

What nourishes our movement?

"...what motivated us to continue with the struggle were the other student organizations, our classmates and every person who took part in the strike in one way or another. And the hope that our university could change and be better." (Antonio)

We grow individually and collectively

"I feel great. It has been an incredible new learning experience, and a process by which, thank God, through working together we became one big family. I learned to work with others without making distinctions and to trust our colleagues in struggle. The base of our success was unity, where we all changed because we learned to truly work as a team." (Antonio)

Human rights: a necessity

"Our university is focused on agriculture. In the beginning, our lack of knowledge of legal matters made it difficult to make decisions. That is why I focused on human rights. We made the legal aspect one of our priorities in order to know what to do next, how to keep the university going

in terms of production as well as in legal matters. I really enjoyed becoming involved... We took strength from standing next to representative organizations that have supported these social causes: COFADEH, CIPRODEH² and others". (Ana)

Military repression in response to peaceful student resistance

We had different confrontations with public officials and persons sent by the authorities, although the student body never carried out violent acts. The only weapons we had were our cellular phones to capture and document these acts of aggression.

It was a shameful and cowardly act when a university employee rammed a tractor into us. However, the Ministry of Education distorted the events in various media, only to protect their reputation.

"They constantly tried to evict us from the university. They cut electricity and water. We are talking about an area of 400 hectares which created much confusion. Given all the open spaces, we were not sure from which direction they would enter. The guards would come in and beat us... We were threatened with death, with losing our scholarships and being kicked out. I even witnessed interference by the Minister of Education, provincial directors and district directors who called our families. One of my teachers was threatened with losing her job if she was not able to convince me to abandon the struggle." (Ana)

Many students were charged before the courts.

Lessons for teachers and our families

"...the young people maintained all the courses and credits and developed a system to give the university stability.

2 Committee of the Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), Center for Research and Promotion of Human Rights (CIPRODEH).

The impact was such that it led to intervention by the National Congress, higher education and the presidential office who convened an Intervening Board." (Professor)

"My children taught me that struggle means to give your all, to not be afraid and to stand in solidarity. To always move forward with bravery and courage. They were very disciplined and tenacious. I learned this from my children and every student who was at the front of the strike. In the beginning I was afraid, but when I realized that there were other young people being mistreated, I said to them, "you are right, you can't stay here. This is your struggle, this is your moment, and you must stand with them." (Mother)

We women in this struggle

"My experience was difficult due to the system of internship and production in the university. I became involved in the strike because I identified with it, and I recognized that I had personal qualities that were useful for the student movement." (Ana)

"As women we are seen as the weak or sentimental sex. When we felt this common struggle as women, it meant that we must defend quality education as well as demand respect for our physical and emotional integrity. There are still many who believe that because we are women, we cannot perform in certain labour settings and that our place is at home or behind a desk. We cannot allow this to continue, especially when we are asked for sexual acts in exchange for passing a course... Our struggle as women goes hand in hand with the student movement because it unites us to achieve equality of student rights and integrity as people." (Didi)

We redefined the principles of unity

When we united our voices, we brought together an entire national congress, and were able to push for the approval of an Intervening Board. While the university authorities attacked and threatened, we were listened

to by the educational community and received their support. It is not easy to be away from our families for such a long time and sacrifice time with them during holidays.

“We demonstrated that the education received was not in vain; the values that we learned at home are deeply rooted in us. We are a generation of change that is worthwhile, one we can bet on in our country, and when we observe such movements we must take advantage of them.” (Didi)

In spite of the efforts to reach dialogue, there was no will on the part of the authorities. We continued to pressure for the resignation of the Minister of Education and the rector of the institution as one of the main people responsible for this situation, and for a constitutional decree for an Intervening Board, which up until now has had positive results and changes.

“And so our student struggle was absolutely justified. We were able to remove the incompetent and selfish authorities.” (Antonio)

What do we wish to say to young students?

“Never lose hope or give up, because then you will fail in your struggle. We spent more than two months without any response. But then we trusted the students’ voices; we are truly the majority and when we decide to embark on something we can achieve many things.” (Marco)

“As brothers and sisters in struggle we are the beginning of a long dreamt-for university reform. It is a historic moment, one which marks our generation and future generations whom we hope will continue to fight. We are doing well. The main objective remains - that our university becomes stable once more in every aspect, recognized in our country, in Latin America and the world.” (Antonio)

“When a student keeps silent, the future of a country disappears”

Sources: interviews carried out by the author and collaborator, students, professor and mother from the education community of Olancho.