



The erosion of social rights in Mexico and the student movement

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Summary

This article explores how the social rights of the Mexican youth are being eroded — specifically the right to education — due to the Mexican government’s efforts to privatize public education. Furthermore, this article reveals the solidarity of students and youth with social movements, and proposes the need for an international agenda to support the fight of all social movements.

Keywords

Student movement, youth rights, criminalization of young, right to education

Neoliberal policies against the young

Mexico is embroiled in a deep political, social and humanitarian crisis, and young people are the ones who are suffering most in terms of their rights and standards of living. Youth are facing unemployment, labor exploitation, institutional violence, exclusion from education, and criminalization. In many cases they are forced to find a way out by migrating, or engaging in informal trade and crime.

Neoliberal reforms are stripping the population of social rights such as education, healthcare, social security, and decent jobs; and the new generations are the ones most severely affected. According to figures from 2013, there are 21.5 million young people in Mexico, of whom 9.2% are unemployed, in comparison to the 5% unemployment rate for the rest of the workforce. There are 3.3 million youth who are dedicated to housework¹, since they are not employed, looking for a job, or enrolled at a school.

But young people are also facing violence due to poverty, marginalization, and the "war against drugs", a fact that is reflected by the country's mortality rate. There are three main causes of death amongst young males: violence (24.4%), car accidents (17.9%) and self-inflicted wounds (8.1%). Together, they represent 50.4% of all deaths among young men, while 9.7% of young women are dying due to violence inflicted on them. For both men and women, violence is one of the main causes of death among young people.

Educational exclusion: an effect of privatization

In the case of education as a social right, the outlook is no better. Even though a great number of young students have been historically denied access to the educational

¹ The chores include looking after children, siblings or ill family members, since the health system does not guarantee their care. This is another factor limiting access to employment or educational opportunities for many young people.

system, particularly at the upper-middle (senior high) and higher education (college) levels,² since the beginning of the current administration (December 2012), the perspective has been one of even greater exclusion. The Education Reform supported by the business class, is advancing privatization policies for the use of public resources to benefit private companies.

It is estimated that 48.9% of all teenagers have been denied access to a senior high level of education, even though they successfully ended their junior high studies (Unicef, 2016). The estimated dropout rate in 2014 was of 13.4%, but gets worse at higher levels due to problems such as desertion and a lack of coverage. Only 1 out of every 3 people receives a higher education.

In Mexico, there are different factors that contribute to educational exclusion, but two are paramount: precarious living standards and the lack of guaranteed access to students' right to education, one with which the Government is obliged to comply. By way of example we have the state of Oaxaca, one of the poorest in the country, where there are 539 municipalities without senior high school.

There are elements that make it difficult for the young to stay in school. Many times parents themselves force their children to get a job soon as possible, so they can contribute to the family income. Most upper-middle (senior high) and higher education (college) schools do not offer flexible hours for working students, or campuses for those who live in the suburbs or outskirts — mainly rural, migrant, peasant or indigenous youth.

Thus, the most economically, socially and culturally vulnerable populations are the ones left outside of the public education system: 30% for upper-middle education and 68.5% for higher education. This has to be added to the hundreds of thousands of youth who are

² In Mexico, "upper-middle" education is the equivalent to senior high or pre-university studies. Higher education means college education (bachelor's in science or arts).

excluded from college education every year. For the most part, these cases tend to accumulate in the central part of the country (González, 2015).

The promises of the government and educational authorities to improve coverage and drop-out rates are limited to extending “open” and online education, creating a gap between the first rate and second rate education offered by the system itself.

In addition to exclusion, students — and Mexican society as a whole — are subjected to a business-oriented education, which has changed the scientific and humanistic character of public education. Thus, we are stripped of a social right and a fundamental tool to fight for a fair and democratic society.

Social criminalization and youth activism

Due to the multiple struggles in the country, the Mexican state has opted to criminalize social protest, especially by youth who are organizing to demand their rights. A prime example is the forced disappearance of 43 students from the rural Teachers Institute *Isidro Burgos* in Ayotzinapa. That reflects the extent to which the government is willing to use violence against anyone is mobilizing against its neoliberal policies.

Throughout our history, there have been important student and youth movements, such as in 1968 and 1999 at UNAM, which defended public education as we know it: free, with a scientific and humanistic content. They have also fought to increase access to education, opposed standardized testing, and defended real professional training over a mere competence-based technical approach. They have also fought to preserve our democratic freedoms and put an end to repression, like the students movements of 1986, 1971 and, to a lesser extent, the #YoSoy132 in 2012.

Furthermore, different collectives and youth organizations are acting in solidarity with social movements — like the teacher resistance — and are demanding that the 43 students be brought back alive. They are supporting the defense of native peoples and of the environment; they are opposing the rise of gasoline prices and are seeking to end neoliberal policies that steal the wealth of our country and our social rights. They are acting in solidarity with the student movements of the Americas, and they fight to defend Mexican migrants, while standing up against the authoritarian



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and ultra-conservative policies of the US government.

Acting nationally, with an international outlook

The different attacks against public education and the rights of Mexican youth have made it difficult for people to join forces and articulate their demands in order to move in the same direction. Sometimes they manage to do so, but this is not common.

Coordinating student fights beyond the crisis, with union demands at a national level, is a task that is still to come for the youth and student movements. Likewise, it is necessary to understand that these problems are

not exclusive to Mexico, they are present throughout the continent. We are witnessing similar attacks against youth and education in different parts of the Americas, a situation made clear during the first Tri-National Student Meeting held by the Tri-National Coalition for the Defense of Public Education with the goal of shoring and coordinating the struggles of youth and students in Mexico, the United States and Canada.

During the event, the impact of neoliberal education in North America — and the havoc wreak amongst students — was discussed. Participants concluded that to confront international capitalistic strategies, it's necessary to have a unified international strategy for social and student movements, one that must be built throughout the continent, considering local realities with an eye to global action.³ This agenda must consider fighting against austerity policies, privatization, the overrunning of the public debt, and state repression and authoritarianism.

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³ The political declaration is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/tiempos-modernos-polak-as/declaraci%C3%B3n-pol%C3%ADtica-1er-encuentro-trinacional-estudiantil-m%C3%A9xico-estados-unidos/122311237706835>

POSTER OF THE FORUM "DEFENDING EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN"

The poster features a central white map of Latin America and the Caribbean on a red background. The text is in white and blue. On the left, it says 'FORO DEFENDER LA EDUCACIÓN EN AMÉRICA Y EL CARIBE' and '¡TODOS LOS PUEBLOS, UNA MISMA LUCHA!'. On the right, it says 'FFYL-UNAM SALÓN 007 | NOVIEMBRE 13 HORAS | 17'. Below the map, there are logos for OCLAE and other organizations. A list of participants is on the right side.

FORO
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FFYL-UNAM
SALÓN 007 | NOVIEMBRE
13 HORAS | 17

Participan:

- > María Moreno, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), Miembro de la Coalición Trinacional en Defensa de la Educación Pública, Sección Estadunidense/ EE.UU.
- > Heidy Villuendas Ortega, Presidenta de la Organización Continental Caribeña y Latinoamericana de Estudiantes (OCLAE)/Cuba.
- > Verónica Tonería, Estudiante FCPyS, UNAM, Tiempos Modernos, núcleo estudiantil de la Coalición Trinacional en Defensa de la Educación Pública/ México.

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