

NEOLIBERALISM, PRECARIZATION OF TEACHING WORK AND EDUCATION REFORM IN MÉXICO



CNTE demonstration in Mexico City. Source: Radio Zapatista (<https://goo.gl/KwWUBO>)

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Summary: Teachers lives today are affected by a complex process of precarization. The purpose of this article is to identify the origins of this impoverishment, which is clouding their future, including neoliberalism, ideological proletarianization, and the deskilling that results from rapacious capitalism. The struggle for dignity is a valid one, but it should be accompanied by training opportunities.

Key words: *neoliberalism, precarization for teachers, educational reform, proletarianization.*

The current global economic and geopolitical configurations perpetuate a tension within the internal relationships of education and its goals. Neoliberalism, as the greedy ideology of capitalism, batters education with the pounding of the market's logic - profit rates must increase. Even though public school teachers have resisted the attacks of capitalism before, today's onslaught is particularly gory since the bolted horse of

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the bourgeoisie has gotten stronger thanks to its keeper, a corrupt state that denies all possibilities for a utopia. Neoliberalism barges in under the assumption that society is a collection of selfish individuals who seek to quench their needs as free beings. For this purpose, the market is the only mediation that would allow for perfect wellbeing (Gomez, 2014). How could educational alternatives be left up to the state or the autonomy of teachers if humanity is individually selfish? Valenzuela Feijoo (1997) explains that the neoliberal ideology attempts to establish a classist foundation for those at the ruling as well as the subordinate levels. Thus, the aspirations of the oligarchy to perpetuate itself in time and space lie in education, as well as the means to counteract the trend towards a lower profit rate.

Because of such assumptions, Laval (2004) suggests that schools are being robbed of the public goods society possesses through the corporate slogan of granting equal opportunities. In reality, opportunities are blocked for those who cannot afford the “quality”. This market terminology gives education an eminently economic value, while ignoring the value for promoting change that it possesses, according to Perez Rocha (2015).

To gain the preference of “consumers”, the neoliberal school has to offer something more than just public education. Thus the fetish of quality, the biggest nuisance for teachers, requires schools compete to avoid similar offers. Mercantile innovation lies in the profiles students will have when they graduate, what will make them different from their competitors. In Mexico, it is all about “gaining” a little bit more of the 300 billion pesos allocated for educational expenses. Thus, franchises are created to expand capitalist horizons through a brand and a flagship, with differentiated costs and the possibility of defining a social status based on its “quality” (Calderon Alzati, 2016). In other words, it is a privatization that does not look like the sale or purchase of public schools, which is unlikely, but that is transforming teachers into mediators of the acquisition of capital.

Rather than acquiring the actual property, such as



facilities, teachers and managerial staff as labor, the purpose is to take over knowledge, specialized or general, and to sell it and earn a profit. According to Rockwell (2015), this is the at heart of the privatization reforms of education: its commodification. Vega Cantor (2015) states that the plundering of wisdom is the stealthy way that Big Capital attempts to transform all workers into mere operators.

If we acknowledge work as the objectification of life, because “it can only exist as a *live subject* (...), as a faculty, as a possibility and thus as a *worker*” (Marx, 2007:213), teaching would then be one of the most worthy types of work, because it objectifies life in a living being, the student, and the work teachers carry out would be invaluable, because there would be no way to pay for the life it objectifies.

However, teachers today are experiencing with their own living bodies a precarization of their proletarian situation. Educators perform under worsening conditions and increasing degradation of their lives (Vega Cantor, 2015). In Latin America, and more specifically Mexico, the social condition of pauperization finds its origin in the co-determination of neoliberalism, the theory of dependency (Osorio, 2016), and ideological proletarianization. Since dependency (theory) has not been overcome, impoverishment takes place because of the transference of value from peripheral capital to the central ones, by means of capitalistic competition, and by elucidating that real wages will stay low as long as desired. In this way, peripheral capital and teaching as a public profession will not be able to make equal economic demands.

In addition, there is a double-proletarianization process going on: ideological change and deskilling. The former (Vega Cantor 2015) is when teachers are subsumed in their actions by alien ideologies that prevent them from acting in a meaningful way and glimpsing a possible utopia. In other words, we are losing the aim of education since the purpose of the pedagogical act is unknown, and it is dominated and reduced to the role of a reproducer who shapes cognitive commodities only for the innovation of the organic composition of capital (technology), so that the employers do not perish during competition.

As far as deskilling is concerned (Lavac, 2004), teachers are threatened by the international economic organizations with losing their teaching degrees and subjected to imposed efficiency mechanisms like the assessment and social participation councils in Mexico. Thus, competition is transformed into surveillance and teaching limited to the strict domain of work, according to neoliberal reasoning.

All of the previously mentioned aspects converged in the 2013 Mexican education reform. The expectations of teachers disappeared as well as their position in society, as a public service profession was transformed into a market career (Aboites, 2011), resulting in a loss of identity and a lack of social and political commitment. All efforts are devoted to passing the evaluation that leads to a permanent job. The teacher training schools, with their highly respected pedagogy, have abandoned the *ethos* of teachers and it is reconfigured to devote all the available time to the exams. Professional literature and academic promotions are solely based on an assessment of knowledge, its evidence and argumentative planning. This is fetishizing the assessment, since the only absolutely valid knowledge is the one on the test, evidence is only sought after according to the assessment with no true investigative intention, and planning is not based on the pedagogical wonder of learning, since it's better to focus only on the elaboration. It is no longer pedagogical, but rather rhetorical.



Surveillance of the teachers' assessment. Source: A Tiempo Noticias (<https://goo.gl/4CKbq5>)

And thus teachers suffer *burnout* as they grapple with heavy overloads and red-tape that are only heightened by the evaluation. From their first contract, the job uncertainty begins and early on turns into a health problem.

Precarization and its effects on the body are diverse, but as we have said, the origin lies in ideological proletarianization. The Mexican reform possesses the joint features of (Sotelo Valencia, 2017): a) promoting free trade; b) political and cultural control; c) exploitation and unpaid labor; d) pension fund deterioration; e) labor despotism; and f) preparing for privatization. Several chronicles have highlighted the madness and terror of the teacher evaluation, because of the ridiculous number of policemen who were called in (Imaz, 2015); the retaliation against the families of people who refused to take it (Hernandez Navarro, 2016); the physical and ideological aggravations (Rivera, 2016); and the unconstitutional treatment unionized teachers receive (Ramos, 2016).

The precarization of teachers' lives and its clinical expression are contributing to the dismantling of education. It starts with a disquiet that undoubtedly has to be identified as a loss of meaning, as the ideological proletarianization that stems from job uncertainty, since subjects are robbed of their aspirations in life. The fight to dignify the lives of educational workers is of the essence. It has to be accompanied by arduous training processes: study circles, assemblies, workshops or the courses organized by the popular educator of the National Education Workers Coordination (Cordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación); so that their proletarian precarization can be unmasked. The *other* teachers that Capital loathes are indispensable. Their contribution to liberating schools is hopeful. Another education and another world await us.

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