

# TEACHERS' UNIONS, THE CAPITALIST STATE AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This essay reports analytically some of the conclusions of a larger research project. It discusses the connections between teachers unions, their presence in civil societies, and their confrontation with State policies particularly under neoliberal regimes. It explores how teacher unions accumulate - through conflict and collaboration - political and social capital in the process of educational reform. Data from this paper resulted from five years of empirical research comparing case studies in the United States, Canada, Japan, Korea, Mexico and Argentina.

**Keywords:** Teachers' Unions. Educational Reform. States Policies. Neoliberal Regimes.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes the new role of teacher unions in educational policy, and their ability to confront State policies creating political capital and social capital in contemporary societies. Through an extensive comparative project this study examines the impact of current educational reforms on teachers' work, focusing on issues of autonomy, professionalism and values, and how these reforms are affecting the relationship between the state and teachers' organizations. While this analysis is theoretically driven, data has been drawn from a four-year comparative research in the United States, Canada, Korea, Japan, Mexico and Argentina.<sup>2</sup> The countries studied include two of the largest and most economically powerful countries in the capitalist world system, the United States and Japan, three highly relevant industrial democracies, Korea, Canada, and Mexico, and a country that was considered the best model of the implementation of neoliberal policies in the last

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<sup>2</sup> Research was conducted from 1997 to 2000. The analysis in this article presents some of the preliminary findings of the research. We are deeply grateful to Daniel Schugurensky then at OISE and presently at Arizona State

decade of the twentieth century, Argentina. With the exception of Argentina, all other countries are Pacific Rim Countries. The conclusion offers our preliminary findings. These are presented in the form of theses on the new role of teacher unions in policy making.

## **2 THE ROLE OF TEACHER UNIONS**

The role of teacher unions in the world is shaped by their confrontation to the dominant research agenda for educational reform. This hegemonic agenda for reform is basically orchestrated around two premises, a model of privatization of public education addressing what is perceived as the crisis of public education, and the competing dynamics of centralization-decentralization in the articulation of educational reforms worldwide.

Unions react to these policy changes in diverse ways. These tensions are translated into the responses of teachers and teachers' unions to the centralization/decentralization and public/privatization tensions, and by another important dichotomy in teachers' union, the conflict between unionism and professionalism. Centralization and decentralization dynamics affect the relationship between teachers and the state in several ways, including the state's provision of educational services, the setting of national goals and curricula, bargaining processes, and professional autonomy. The unionism versus professionalism debate relates to the conflicting role of teachers as laborers and as professionals, and includes issues of skilling and deskilling of teachers, working conditions, and participation in educational reform processes. Two key tensions are identified in the interaction between teachers unions and the state: Centralization versus decentralization, and unionism versus professionalism in the life of teachers' unions.

Centralization versus decentralization tensions relates to whether teachers' unions should support or resist the decentralization processes pushed by governments. This is not an easy task for two reasons: a) because decentralization policies are usually complemented with the reinforcement of centralized structures, and b) because, in principle, decentralization may empower teachers as professionals, but may also hinder them as workers. This leads to the second dilemma faced by unions: to what extent can

they advance an agenda that defends both the rights of teachers as workers and as professionals without incurring contradictions?

### **3 THE CONTRADICTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND THE ROLE OF TEACHER UNIONS**

#### **3.1 CENTRALIZATION VERSUS DECENTRALIZATION**

For the past two decades ago, teacher unions have been caught in the middle of decentralization and centralization dynamics without a clear map indicating how these policies affect their work or what stance the unions should take. According to the confusing logic of decentralization, education should be a decentralized market in a centrally controlled system. The decentralization of funding and contractual arrangements, for instance, should be complemented by stricter regulations and monitoring of teachers' performance.

Thus, centralization and decentralization constitute two contradictory developments, and both affect teachers' work. On the one hand, countries are centralizing certain educational services, setting national goals, agendas, curricula, standards and evaluations. This leads to a loss of professional autonomy and opens the possibility of governments exercising more control over democratic unions. On the other hand, administrative decentralization, together with the privatization and quasi-privatization of supply, are fragmenting constituencies and thus inhibit the possibilities of building large and powerful organizations. Unions are in a situation of uncertainty, not sure of whether to resist the waves of reforms, or to accept them and adapt their structures to better serve teachers in decentralized schools.

Decentralization also erodes the bargaining power of teachers' unions by transferring negotiations from the national to the provincial or local level, which can lead to different pay scales. New government acts are eliminating the power of national unions to negotiate on behalf of their membership, and transferring the bargaining process to direct negotiations between individual employers and employees, without mediation by state agencies. Most unions oppose this on the grounds that it strikes at the

heart of professional equity, under which teachers having similar qualifications can expect the same pay and conditions at any school of the same level across the country. These changes also undermine the role of collective organizations, such as national unions. It is expected that, in the absence of strong unions, the pay and working conditions of average teachers will further deteriorate, although a few 'outstanding' teachers will receive 'merit rewards.' Furthermore, in decentralized systems with site-based decision-making, the bargaining unit becomes so small that old-style unionism becomes less important. Changes in the industrial sector, from large units to smaller, more autonomous ones, are paralleled in the educational system. In the highly entrepreneurial, small business-oriented environments of post-Fordist societies, the size and activities of teacher unions seem likely to decrease.

Decentralization is supposed to reduce rigid national bureaucracies, and to provide schools with greater autonomy and authority over teaching, administration, and organization. Autonomy, in turn, grants teachers with self-governing structures, power to adapt curricula to local needs, reorganize working time, or experiment with new courses. But at the same time that decentralization increases the professional power of teachers as educators working in individual schools, it reduces their bargaining power as workers affiliated to national unions. Limiting the power of unions, however, may also erode their ability to influence policies that affect the professional lives of teachers, from issues regarding the management of public education to the training, employment, and promotion of teachers.

If unions are still ambivalent about what position to take regarding decentralization, the situation is not necessarily clearer regarding centralization. In some cases, contrary to expectations, unions have supported centralization efforts. This happened recently in the United States, in relation to the attempts to establish a national test for occupational entrance into the teaching profession. Interestingly enough, the use of standardized entrance examinations received support not only from union leaders, but also from state governors and deans of schools of education. Union leaders' support was based on the hopes that competency tests would improve the status of the professional organizations through control of entrance.

As it has been discussed in many forums, scholarly publications and intellectual debates, the creation of standards in education are seen mostly as a proof of professionalism rather than political maneuvering. Yet if one analyzes critically the dominant premises defining curriculum standards and the overall process of high stake testing, one should realize that they are not devoid of the competition of differential interests. Therefore, the movement for standards and quality of education, teachers testing and evaluation, including measuring teachers effectiveness, implementing peer review, identifying the indicators for best teaching, or linking teacher evaluation to student achievements, are all part of the broader conflict for the definition of educational reform, with a multitude of interests at play, including struggle for the constitution of hegemonic regimes of dominance. Not surprisingly, in the context of neoliberal regimes, it could be argued that national teacher unions have become part of the structural relations that define the organization of teaching and pronouncements about national purposes and goals. In a context in which the systems of teacher education, school output measures, and curriculum are tied more directly to national institutional practices, the teacher test will further centralize a system in which national teacher organizations can demand greater membership affiliation and control.

### 3.2 WORKERS OR PROFESSIONALS? UNIONISM VERSUS PROFESSIONALISM

One of the dimensions of the centralization-decentralization dilemma is the existing tension between teachers as workers and teachers as professionals. As workers, teachers realize that a centralized unit is more effective in protecting their employment and working conditions, and that, conversely, a decentralized system would fragment their power. As professionals, they realize that in decentralized structures of decision-making, they may be able to regain autonomy and hence be in a better position to control their own work and influence the school organization. Likewise, as professionals, teachers may endorse policies that favor competition and differential incomes according to performance, but as workers they understand that those policies are detrimental to labor solidarity and sooner or later would create unnecessary hierarchies. Hence, some

unions are in favor of career ladders and merit pay, while others attack them on the grounds that will contribute to internal inequities and will undermine solidarity.

However, in many countries, recent developments affect teachers both as workers and as professionals. Overall declines in teacher salaries, for example, are not only detrimental to the living conditions of teachers, but in the long term create difficulties in recruiting high quality teachers, which in turn lowers the status of the profession. The increasing concern regarding professionalism is partly related to two main attacks on teacher unionism. First, it has been argued that teachers are civil servants with the moral responsibility of forming the next generations, a fact that is considered incompatible with collective actions that include strikes, bargaining, grievances, or political pressure. Second, it has been contended that teachers are professionals who require autonomy and freedom to do their jobs, which is incompatible with submission to the hierarchical discipline and control typical of unions. Teachers' unions are also blamed for being conservative, as they often oppose educational reforms aimed at changing schools and redefining teachers' roles.

Teachers suffer from contradictory expectations of being the professional shapers of the next generations, and being a 'trade' associated with minimal training requirements, ease of entry, low pay and benefits, and located at the bottom of the civil service ladder, in what is often cynically referred to as 'women's work'. While many argue that teachers are professionals and thus should not form unions, in practice they are seldom treated or paid as professionals. The dual identity of teachers (as workers and professionals) has also undermined the relation between teacher unions and the labor movement. Historically, the relationship between teachers and unions has not been a harmonious one. Within the more traditional sectors of organized labor, unionized blue-collar workers have usually not considered teachers as true partners in the labor movement because they are white-collar workers. At the same time, teachers in many countries have an aversion to organized labor unions because unions are not perceived to be for professionals.

#### **4 TEACHERS' UNIONS DILEMMAS**

Clearly, the above stated tensions constitute serious challenges for teacher unions, particularly in two dimensions that have seldom been addressed in studies of teachers' unions: values and social capital. With regards to values, we examine their meaning for different stakeholders or actors. Special attention is paid to those values which have an impact on educational policy and practice (e.g. accountability, autonomy, competition, public education, privatization, gender equality, excellence, etc.). We will discuss our perspective on social capital later in this paper.

Unions are special associations that operate in a legal context to improve the lives of their members and to protect the rights of workers through unified goals and actions. Unions are allowed to bargain for their members, and to withdraw services (i.e., to strike) when negotiations fail. Teachers' unions refer to the formal organizations representing teachers at local, regional, and national levels. Most teacher unions emerged in the late 19th century and early 20th century, at the same time as the creation of massive, universal, and compulsory public education systems. Today, teachers constitute the largest and best educated union group in the world. There are approximately 50 million teachers worldwide, and they are the most powerful unionized group in the public sector. However, although membership in most countries is usually high, member activity has been traditionally low.

The characteristics of teacher unions vary from country to country. For instance, governance and control of collective bargaining does not follow a universal pattern. In some countries, the right to form unions is protected by national legislation, and occasionally by the national constitution. In other countries, labor relations are regulated by state or provincial laws, and therefore there is greater diversity (i.e. some states, districts, or provinces may allow the right to strike, while others may prohibit it). Finally, some countries do not have legal provisions at any level protecting the rights of teachers to engage in collective negotiations. Likewise, in some nations, educational service is nationalized to the point that there is a single salary structure for the entire country. At the other extreme, there are countries in which salaries are negotiated at each individual school. In general terms, however, union structure usually follows the structure of the educational system. National bargaining is more likely to be found in national education systems, and obviously much less in provincial or state systems.

Some countries have essentially one national union of teachers. In this case, teachers bargain with the government through that union, which determines the national pay scale, benefits, work rules, and hiring procedures. Other countries have more than one national union, provincial unions, or hundreds of local bargaining units, and others, like the United States, have all three situations combined. In some cases one single union includes elementary and secondary teachers, while in others there is a union representing each level of education, or each gender. In some cases, union activities may be controlled by conflicting pieces of legislation. In some states of the United States, local education authorities (boards of education) are prohibited by law from engaging in collective negotiations with teachers, but at the same time the First Amendment of the U. S. Constitution gives teachers the right to form unions under the right of assembly.

Sometimes the existence of different unions or sections in a given country or state is due to irreconcilable differences in political affiliations and ideological inclinations. For instance, in some countries where corporatist practices are well developed, union leaders may become part of the political establishment, giving birth to an internal opposition, which is in turn connected to opposition political parties or social movements. Indeed, in many countries, teacher movements are not only inspired by economic or professional motivations, but also by regional and national political movements. Teachers involved in progressive unions or branches also tend to be active critics of the establishment, rather than supporters of the status quo. They realize that they are part of the white-collar movement in the public sector, of the labor movement in general, and even of broader political and social movements, including feminist, pro-democracy, or social organizations.

In spite of their national, ideological or political differences, or the legal environments in which they operate, teachers' unions all around the world pursue similar goals and activities. Historically, teachers' unions have been active (either proactive or reactive) participants in redefining, among other things,: a) the way schools work; b) decision-making processes; c) hiring, evaluation, and firing criteria, including grievance procedures; d) resource allocation (pay, benefits, promotion, increases, and supplements); e) teaching methods; f) career ladders and on-the-job training programs; and g) setting educational goals and standards and ways to evaluate them. In addition, unions are active

in shaping the political discourse, and taking stands on key local and national issues. Teacher unions also provide special benefits for teachers, including trips, discounts for cultural events, insurance coverage, professional development, newsletters and other publications, and sometimes banks or credit unions with low interest loans.

Furthermore, teacher unions often build alliances with other unions in the public sector, with industrial unions, and with political parties. Indeed, being part of a labor association or a political party provides teacher organizations with class and ideological identities, and with greater power to influence educational policies.

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## **OS SINDICATOS DE PROFESSORES, O ESTADO CAPITALISTA E AS CONTRADIÇÕES DA REFORMA DO ENSINO**

### **RESUMO**

Este ensaio relata analiticamente algumas das conclusões de um projeto de pesquisa maior. Ele discute as conexões entre os sindicatos de professores, a sua presença na sociedade civil e seu confronto com as políticas estaduais, particularmente sob regimes neoliberais. Ele explora como os sindicatos de professores acumulam – através do conflito e colaboração – capital político e social no processo de reforma educacional. Os dados deste trabalho resultaram de cinco anos de pesquisa empírica, comparando estudos de caso nos Estados Unidos, Canadá, Japão, Coreia, México e Argentina.

**Palavras-chave:** Sindicatos de professores. Reforma Educacional. Educação - Políticas governamentais. Regimes políticos neoliberais.