

Education, Work and Globalization in Brazil

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“Technological progress frequently results in more unemployment rather than easing the burden of work for all... Unlimited competition leads to a huge waste of labor, and to that crippling of the social consciousness of individuals...this crippling of individuals I consider the worst evil of capitalism. Our whole educational system suffers from this evil..”

Albert Einstein, in “Why Socialism”

A major conflict that peoples in Latin America, (as in other parts of the world), face is the growing imposition of an educational structure modeled by the interests of neo-liberal market forces. The intersection of this process - the relation between education, technology and the world of work has become a critical juncture for socioeconomic and political development of individual countries and regions. At the center of this debate neo-liberal theorists argue that the road to economic development and social equality in Latin America implies in “closing the skills and education gap” (World Bank, 2003), that is, the reduction between the acquired knowledge of workers and the demands of the global economy between developing and developed economies. In this market driven model, the educational system acts as the crossroads for the transformation of the world of work; the changes imposed on the educational system are similar and directly impact on the lives of workers, and vice a versa. I would argue, however, that the neo-liberal model is based on a false equilibrium between education, productivity and economic inequality. That is, in the market system, the increase in productivity does not necessarily lead to greater economic equity. Moreover, that the underlying implications behind the process to “close the gap” are in fact the consolidation of the neo-liberal political, economic and social structure. In this way not only does the free market model not guarantee social and economic equality, but in fact represents the ideological juncture for the consolidation of elite political, social and economic interests, which in multiple ways, excludes and restricts access to among other basic human rights, the right to an education. This situation places countries, such as Brazil, in an ambiguous and complex position. The universal nature of social services and favorable federal administration, aligned with a strong and highly politicized labor movement can organize society to take back control of the educational system before market forces resolve this question on their own terms.

The term “globalization” is used to define different forms of international interaction, from the internationalization of the market and transference of capital to the development of technology and information. (Suarez-Orosco-Qin-Hilliard, 2004: 9) While all these distinct understandings are useful none reflect the complex way in which education, technology and the world of work have converged into a singular hegemonic

process of corporate socioeconomic supremacy. The impact of globalization on the educational systems of countries in developing nations, such as Brazil, reflect an expansive process that affects concomitantly the accumulation of capital, the utilization of natural resources, technological development, the transnational immigration of populations and cultures. (Suarez-Orosco-Qin-Hilliard, 2004: 7)

The critical juncture of education, the neo-liberal globalization political project and the productive process is shaped by the broader struggle for hegemony of Brazilian society. In the context of the global neo-liberal assault on the educational systems of developing nations the intersection of education and the world of work stand as the backdrop for the transformation of social relations and the prevailing political structure. Robert Cox correctly pointed out: “International hegemony is not merely an order among states. It is an order within the world economy with a dominant mode of production which perpetuates into all countries...It is also a complex of international social relations which connect the social classes of the different countries.” (Cox, 1983: 172) In Brazil, the crux of this process is reflected by the growing conflict between the social and political rights of citizenship and the domination of the political structure by economic elites, resulting in increasingly higher levels of social, economic and political inequality.

The Neo-Liberal Model

Global neo-liberal transformations of the Brazilian economy set in place at the onset of the 1990's introduced rapid technological changes in the workplace along with large scale poverty. This process led to the marginalization of significant sectors of the working class from the political and socioeconomic process. The World Bank, in its 2003 study, “Closing the Gap in Education and Technology” outlined the basic structure for neo-liberal political and economic policies that are leading to the transformation of education in Latin America and the Caribbean. Beyond the basic premises of privatizing the public good, already well known to all, the study points to the intersection of education and technology as the axiom for socioeconomic development; the deep transformation of the current educational system in Latin America to a structure driven by the necessities of the market place, organized by market forces and a curricula defined by the market necessities of the world economy. This process links in multiple ways educational success to the rates of productivity and the structure of the workplace. The World Bank's study proposes an “integrated system” that “societies transit from technological stagnation through a process which individuals and firms engage increasingly in knowledge absorption (through skills up-grading, as well as adoption and adaptation of technologies) to one in which a significant number of nations engage in knowledge creation (the development of new technologies and basic science). (World Bank, 2003: 7)

One of the primary fallacies behind this argument is the notion that there is an inherent asymmetry between private industry and the public university system which in turn reflects weak outcomes in research and development. They argue that only by expanding the role of private enterprise in deciding the destinies of higher education, (with the growth of private universities) will technology and research develop and subsequently lead to increasing levels of productivity. (World Bank, 2003: 7) By diminishing the role of the public university they in fact attack the primary point of access to higher education by workers and low-income sectors of the population. In doing

so the neo-liberal pundits transform the fundamental role of higher education in developing nations, it is an assault on the democratic control of research and the development of new technologies that provide subsidies and develop policies in the economy, politics and culture. Behind their claim of asymmetrical relations between the information generated by research in the public university and the demands of private enterprise is their desire to control intellectual property rights. The result of this assault on the public university system in developing nation will ultimately lead to the corporate control of scientific and economic development, as occurs largely in public universities in the United States today. For example, the pharmaceutical company Novartis paid 25 million dollars to the University of California – Berkeley in exchange for the rights to license and commercialize the result of research developed in university laboratories. With this Novartis gained the right to use university facilities to develop commercial research and indicate two representatives to the university’s counsel for research and development, which decides the future budgets for academic research. (Wasburn, 2005: 3) In this case, private corporations not only appropriated research developed with public money but also gained a seat in the bodies that define the future of scientific development. The neo-liberal model of education has led to a global crisis in many areas that are of fundamental interest to the public welfare of developing nations. For example at the height of the HIV crisis pharmaceutical companies held much of the developing world hostage by withholding the patent of Aids medication in the name of profit.

The neo-liberal political strategy has as its primary goal the elimination of universal social welfare policies, existent in Brazil, and in particular, the educational systems of developing nations by claiming that the few institutions that continue to provide a public service are responsible for the perpetuation of long-standing economic inequality. There are important indicators that illustrate that this process is well underway. In Brazil, for example, student enrollments in private institutions of higher education are significantly greater than the enrollments in public universities.¹ (Draibe, 2004: 327) Private universities in Brazil, over the past ten years have expanded their role to such an extent that if the neo liberal theorists were correct Brazil should be a major center for the development of new technology. In spite of the large-scale expansion of for profit-education, most of the countries major developments in technology continue to be developed the institutions of public higher education; if anything the “gap” between skills and education is a failure of the “free enterprise” educational structure. Global neo-liberal educational policies are tantamount to blaming the mugging victim for being robbed.

The logic of the “free market” educational structure proposes that students, workers and firms are participants in a process of technological development where the university is simply a transfer point of information.² The World Bank’s proposal minimizes the role of the public sphere in the destinies of learning while simultaneously emphasizing the role of corporations. In this way they want to de-politicize the educational process, distancing the decision making process from those directly affected by its outcomes, however, as

¹ Draibe points out that while enrollments in the Brazilian educational system are predominantly public at the pre-school, primary and secondary levels, at the level of higher education enrollment at private institutions accounts for approximately 62% of all enrollments in universities.

² The World Bank report argues: “The major actors in the educational and technological process; students, workers and firms. They are the ones that accumulate and use knowledge to spur productivity and growth. Families, schools, universities, research centers, government institutions (and policies) are just facilitators.”

Michael Apple points out: “Markets are marketed, are made legitimate by a de-politicizing strategy.” (7) In this way they want to present the relationship between schools and business as impartial, however the “school / business relationship is not impartial, nor does it operate independently of the society in which it functions. (Apple, 2003: 7) In the market driven educational structure the relationship between schools and businesses occur on an unequal socio-economic playing field where corporate interests hold the right to veto programs define curriculum and limit the power of educators. (Kincheloe, 2000: 7)

If the educational process were left to the control of the global neo-liberal advocates, the current public university system in place in many countries throughout Latin America would be entirely replaced with a private, for-profit educational structure. Indicators demonstrate this process is already underway in a number of public institutions of higher education. Increasingly, public universities and academic departments are forging partnerships with private foundations that finance scholarly research. The main source of financing the privatization of educational structures in developing nations, however, will draw on public funds. The neo-liberal for-profit higher education system depends largely on public policy and financing to support the expansion of the privatized higher education system. The global neo-liberal model will demand students pay unregulated tuition rates through a system of bank credits and private scholarships. Similar to the system currently in place in the United States, this would condemn future students to a life-time of bank debt to pay off their student loans with no guarantee that the future job market will sustain wage levels that allow for their subsequent repayment. The elevated and ever increasing cost of tuition also will act as a deterrent to preclude workers from attending college thus reinforcing the longstanding dominant class structures existent in developing societies. Ultimately, this process places an economic strangle hold over the political aspirations of future workers who venture into the privatized educational system. Burdened by tuition debt they will be in a less advantageous position to make demands on their employers, organize and participate in unions.

The global market driven model introduces the notion of market competition in education. In this model, competition is synonymous with the educational structure based on the false notion of meritocracy, that is, that rather than a human, i.e. universal right, access to education is based on a measure of success, financial and other wise. This model, however, fails to recognize the very structural class inequalities systemic to the market economy which perpetuates class inequalities in the educational system. Bowles and Gintis correctly point out that: “The failure of the technocratic-meritocratic view point, we have argued, lies in stressing the technical rather than the social relationships of production and in presenting the economic role of education largely as the production of job skills.” (68) The global neo-liberal educational model reduces learning to forming a workforce to fulfill the needs of corporations.

The central concept underlying the neo-liberal educational model is the competition between entrepreneurs, who demand a workforce capable of attending the growing technological transformations structured by a “flexible labor market”. Implicit in the notion of a flexible labor market, is a workplace without unions, workers without rights, low wages and a society where corporate interest are placed above those of its

population. The neo-liberal strategy is to develop a global workforce willing or forced to subjugate their interest to those of capital. Furthermore, for unions and workers the flexible workplace, shaped by the growing transnational movement of work and workers without spatial or occupational boundaries has far reaching implications for the working class of developing nations. Ursula Huws argues: “A world without occupational boundaries could very easily become a world in which social solidarity is well-nigh impossible because you no longer have any clear way of defining who your co-workers are or your neighbors, and one where it is hard to tell friend or ally from threat or enemy.” (Huws, 2006:44)

The neo-liberal pundits argue that for education to be a viable resource toward socio-economic development both the national economy and the workplace must undergo deep transformations. The World Bank report states: “First, governments must create the *right environment* through stimulating openness to foreign trade... facilitating the development of deep financial markets and flexible labor markets and applying effective competitive policies.” (10) The neo-liberal educational system not only requires the de-regulation of the global labor market but the development and introduction of market relations into the educational system as well. The cornerstone of this model is a deceptive notion that there is a symmetrical relation between higher rates of productivity and the need to develop a workforce with increasingly higher levels of education; that the existence of both are essential for the reduction of economic inequality. They fail to recognize, however, that in a democratic society, economic equality and productivity are not distinct facets of socioeconomic, political and cultural development. The need to expand the production of knowledge responsive to technological demands of the global economic market is not unrelated to the demand for economic equity and citizenship. As Ann Canen and Nigel Grant argue: “Technical progress and productivity would represent a ‘synthesis’ between citizenship and competency, (sic) with equity a precondition of development, not the reverse.”(325)

Technology alone, however, is not the solution to achieve greater socioeconomic development and neither is technologic development politically unbiased as the World Bank proposals wish to allude. The common place notion that greater access to technology will resolve the long-term history of economic dependency is a falsity. Technology and education within the context of a broader process of socioeconomic development of all nations, and particularly in Latin America, are intricately related to structured social relations and hierarchies. “Technology” Bowles and Gintis argue, “itself is not the result of a socially unbiased advance of knowledge. Rather, it reflects the monopolization of control over technical information by captains of industry. Techniques might be rejected simply because they “threaten” authority in the workplace. The history of technology represents an accumulation of past choices made in most part by the interests of the employer.” (74) In this way, the process of technological development, without the watchful eye of the public sphere, and the prevalence of the public university system in the production of knowledge will lead to expanding the power of capital at the point of production as well as in society in detriment to workers and their organizations.

In this sense simply achieving higher rates of productivity is no guarantee of greater economic equity as the neo-liberal pundits propose. The economy of the United States, which stands as the paradigm of neo-liberal economics is a primary example of this

fallacy. In spite of annual and steady increases in productivity, the real wages of workers have been on a steady decline since the early 1970s and income inequality is on the rise; as one analyst put it: “By the beginning of the 1990s the distribution of wealth in the United States significantly exceeded the level of inequality that existed in the mid 1800s when Marx was making his observations.” (Kincheloe, 2000: 9) By creating a false symmetry between productivity, wage equity and the demand for an increasingly higher educational capacity they obfuscate that fact that the market cannot and does not provide for what is essential to any democratic nation, the universal right to an education. Joe Kincheloe correctly argues that market remedies as a solution to economic inequality are: “nothing more than a disguised, undemocratic method for justifying the interests of a particular group.” (18)

Education and Social Equality

Given the increasing and concomitant introduction of neo-liberal market ideals into the educational system in Latin America, the fundamental question that emerges is not simply how to assure the right to education, but rather, how to assure that the right to an education is considered a human right and not just a service. How do we guarantee the universal right to an education in an increasingly global socioeconomic structure? Some argue that the universal right to education in developing nations must be linked to broader political rights of citizenship. Katarina Tomasevski argued that: “The point of departure is international human rights law, which defines human rights-including the right to education- as universal. Its translation into reality would entail a minimum entitlement to education throughout the world, to be secured through international cooperation. Thereby governments would collectively comply with their human rights obligations. Consequently, the globalization of education would be guided by a universal human rights obligation to ensure that education is free and compulsory for all school aged children of the world.” (3) The basis for her argument implies that the political aspects of human rights laws as well as their social, cultural, and economic aspects must be co-joined re-conceptualizing the role public education as a fundamental aspect of the consolidation of a democratic society. In this sense education is viewed as an intricate part of a broader struggle for freedom. (Tomaevski, 2005: 3) I would argue, however, that the universal right to an education is directly related to the achievement of economic and social equality. For the developing nations such as Brazil, the success of any educational system is a direct result of the broader egalitarian structure prevailing in society and public policy decision-making. Good examples are the results of UNESCO’s 1997 Laboratory, which tested language and math skills in 13 Latin American countries. The results of the survey were no surprise. While in the countries with market economies students in private schools exceeded those in public schools, Cuban students excelled far above the all nations participating in the survey. (Mizala and Romaguera, 2002: 222)

The fundamental aspect of this process is the contradiction between human rights laws and the global market system, as Tomaesvki admits: “While human rights laws recognize every child’s entitlement to a free education, international trade laws makes access to education dependent on the ability to pay. Free trade does not have safeguards for the rights of the poor, least of all for poor children.” (4) In Brazil the mounting introduction of global neo-liberal educational policies have placed the fundamental right to an education in limbo. Increasingly access to education stands between its recognition

as a universal right and a service which only the wealthy will have access to, and “the World Bank does not recognize education as a human right.” (Tomaevski, 2005: 4)

Work and Education

The fate of education and the world of work in Brazil are intrinsically linked in complex ways. The globalization of economies and educational systems has joined the destinies of both and their transformation occurs as part of a singular process. A significant characteristic of the critical juncture between education and the world of work is the increasingly complex world in which workers have to interact. Brazilian sociologist Ricardo Antunes argues: “Just as capital is a global system the world of work and its challenges are increasingly transnational.” (115) The expansion of transnational capital and the interconnectedness of educational structures with the productive process, shaped by global economic interests, not only limits the access of workers to education but the purpose and content of the curriculum as well. That means, that transformations currently underway at the point of production are directly related to the transformations currently being imposed on educational system throughout Latin America, particularly but not exclusively, in the structures of higher education.

In Brazil, as well as many countries in Latin America that continue historically divided by deep class divisions, the struggle for the universal right to an education and the basic rights of workers have been joined at the hip. How educational systems are organized and the transformations of the educational process cannot be implemented without understanding the current changes in the workplace. This means that the struggle of workers at General Motors in Brazil against the imposition of a “flexible work structure” has direct and immediate implications for the future and structure of the educational system. Both school and factory are par and parcel of the same process and victims the same outcome. This is a dialectical relationship between the world of work and educational institutions, where as Kincheloe noted; “Schools and workplaces must be considered as two features of the same problem.” (2)

Any alternative to the neo-liberal reform of the educational system must focus on the way in which capitalist socioeconomic relations and the expansive concentration of wealth shape the relationship between the school and the factory. At the center of the neo-liberal argument is the false premise of a symmetrical relationship between economic growth and technological development. “The concentration of capital” Bowles and Gintis note, “leads to the uneven development in several related ways. Its superiority of resources allows the privileged minority to drive out small scale opposition through superior market power, more coordinated organization and planning, ability to employ advanced and large-scale technology, and correspondingly higher rate of capital accumulation.”(65) In this process, economic growth translates in to a highly unequal political structure where the concentration of political power continues in the hands of a small group of economic elites, in spite of labors 2002 electoral victories of the union- based Workers Party.

No less important, at the intersection of the world of work and education is labors alternative which represents the struggle for the hearts and minds of working people. Who will educate workers and for what purpose will directly define the future of Brazilian society. Ultimately, global economic market solutions that reinforce the concentration of wealth are incapable of furthering economic and political equality. To

the contrary, they serve as constraints for the social, political, cultural and economic development of developing nations. (Bowles/Gintis, 1976: 276) In Brazil, labors response draws on developing a strong, organized civil society, expanding the forums of participatory democracy and social inclusion in the process of economic development. It reflects the realization that only with strong public policies that expand investment in public education at all levels and the democratic control of the educational system will contain corporate influence of education. Ultimately the struggle to block the imposition of the free market educational model will demand a deeper understanding of activism across class lines with expansive mutual support and solidarity that encompasses both the school and the factory concomitantly.

Labors Response

In Brazil, an important response to the growing imposition of global corporate interests in education has come from labor unions, primarily those aligned with the Central Workers Council (CUT) and the Workers Party. Through educational and literacy initiatives such as “*Programa Integrar*” and “*Todas as Letras*” the Brazilian National Confederation of Metalworkers (CNM/CUT) and the CUT are implementing radical educational programs that seek to advance working class political influence in society. In many ways the programs are a response to the effects of neo-liberal policies introduced into the educational system. These programs contest prevailing notions of how and why workers are educated in Brazil. In a broad sense, the programs are a response to elite ideological domination and an increasingly privatized educational structure, simultaneously expanding labor’s participation in public policy decision-making for education. Labors move to expand its role in the future of education is part of a larger counter-hegemonic movement, and as such, the larger struggle for the social and political consciousness of the Brazilian working class. The class based educational programs add to labors power in deciding a broad spectrum of issues from the environment to programs for sustainable economic development, housing, employment and workers rights.

Organized labors response reframes the role of education from the simple debate of programmatic variations to the fundamental dispute for working class power. For these unions, the education of the working-class in its multiple formats is a strategic issue present in the most crucial of labors political battles and vital for the future for organized labor in Brazil. Education is a process through which workers and their organizations expand their role as citizens and activists, organize, mobilize and subsequently strengthen their ability to influence the political decision-making process. Programs such as “*Integrar*” and “*Todas as Letras*” expand the foundation of organized labor’s constituency to broad sectors of the working-class, developing class consciousness and the critical mass necessary to advance labors’ political and economic claims in Brazilian society.

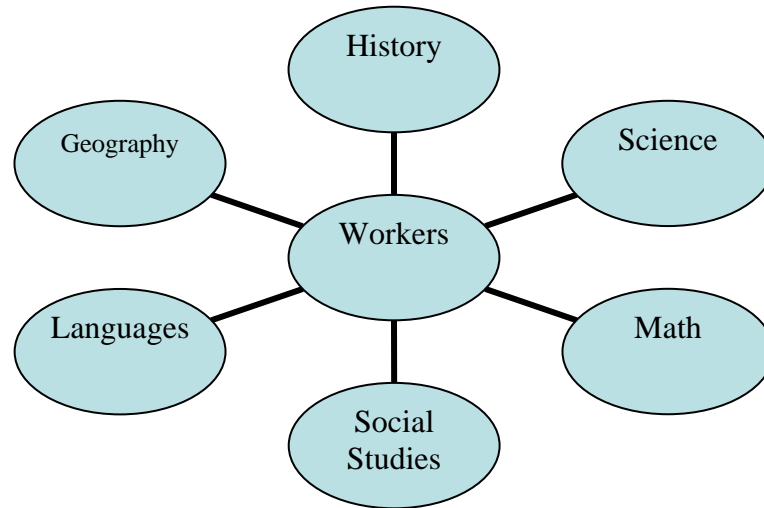
Labor’s educational initiatives draw on the pedagogical theories of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who viewed education as a transformative process essential for social change. Freire, much like the programs organizers argue that the primary task of educators was to develop political and social capacities that allowed people to alter society. Education, in this sense, is an intricate part of a broader political process that influences the way in which people view themselves and their role in society. The process of learning is viewed as a cultural action essential for developing working class

social consciousness. The notion of culture reflects the acknowledgement that the contradictions of social forces in society and their competing political projects are an essential aspect of human existence. As Freire argued: "...Cultural action for freedom is characterized by dialogue, and its preeminent purpose is to conscientize (sic) the people, cultural action for domination is opposed to dialogue and serves to domesticate people." (Freire, 1985:85) As a result education becomes a process for liberation rather than a domesticating process of conformity; critical thinking cannot exist devoid of action.

The programs provide primary, secondary and professional education for workers young and old, independently of union membership or employment status. A fundamental aspect of the program re-conceptualizes the curriculum content of basic and secondary education, restructuring the way in which workers learn. The core curriculum questions what is knowledge and how critical thinking is developed, reinforcing the correlation between learning and broader social, economic and political transformations under way in the country. The primary objectives of the programs are not simply the transference of information but the development of a participatory citizenry. Labors educational initiatives provide the necessary structure and knowledge through which workers can effectively challenge elite power in society, both locally and nationally. In this way the programs are "pedagogical-political" projects that occur in conjunction with the political objectives of the labor movement, with a strong interrelationship between political activism and educational instruction. This underlying strategic relationship between education and labor's long-term and immediate political objectives are present in all of the programs aspects. In this process building the educational capacity of the working class is synonymous with building working class organization and political power. Learning is a dialectical process where the education of the working-class is a transformative action for current and future labor militants.

The programs organizers defend the concept that working class education is an inclusive and comprehensive body of knowledge. Learning draws on the participants acquired knowledge incorporated into a curriculum that reflects the daily life experiences of the working class. Basic subjects of math, science, languages, geography are introduced and studied as they relate to the participants life experience in an interdisciplinary structure. In this sense, the disciplines are not distinct subjects that are examined individually; instead students complete modules which draw intermittently on the various disciplines. The concept of an integrated education is not just the method through which knowledge is delivered. The curriculum draws on the major questions that define working class life, such as unemployment, the cost of living, political rights and organization as well as the workers particular life experiences. In this process students are active participants in building a body of knowledge and not just passive recipients of information. Learners quickly realize a clear and useful purpose to the study of math, science, economics, social studies and history and its relation to their demands on society.

Learning Module



Students use textbooks specifically prepared to attend the methodological, pedagogical and political concerns of the program, so that all modules have a defined yet continuous flow of content. Some of the textbooks used in the modules are, "The Economy and Social Exclusion," "Transformations of the World of Work and Modern Civilization," "Social Relations and Work in Brazil," and "Work, Race and Inequality." Pedagogical method is a political exercise of building social consciousness where the production of knowledge must have useful purpose.

The union's political analysis views the fundamental conflict in Brazilian society as a contradiction between two competing political projects. On one side the political agenda of "capital and large corporations" and in the opposite camp working class political interests, allied with small and mid-sized entrepreneurs. (Maia, 2005: 31) Marco Aurelio Spall Maia, coordinator for *Programa Integrar* pointed out:

"[their analysis acknowledges] a dispute for the hegemony of society and as a result of this dispute the need for unions to expand working class political interests. To achieve these goals the union's activity should focus on two major courses of action, both of which are distinct and complimentary components of the larger struggle to transform society. First, expand the unions' effective involvement in the general political struggles of public policy issues, such as agrarian reform, employment, industrial policies, economic reform, social security, and education, healthcare, housing, professional training among others should be placed at the forefront of the unions concerns." (31)

The strategic objectives of labors educational programs reflect a broader transformation in the day-to-day work developed by unions expanding their participation in a wide array of political battles throughout the country. Unions support popular social movements furthering the practice of mutual solidarity among different sectors of the working class. For example, in some regions local metalworker unions help sustain popular movements such as peasant land occupations and community housing cooperatives. In this sense the daily activities of

the union combine their specific daily shop floor activism with the struggles of other sectors of the working class as part of a larger process that seeks to build an alternative working class political project.

Unions view the control of the educational process as an intricate part of the struggle for hegemony and axiomatic to their broader political project. On one hand education is the means of building socio-political consciousness necessary for organization and mobilization. All aspects of learning are an intricate part of an alternative political project that contests the neo-liberal political alternatives being imposed on the working class. On the other hand, working class interests in education is a comprehensive part of labors demands for greater political power. The defense of working class interests in defining the structure of public education structure has immediate as well as long-term strategic goal.

The program's organizers argue that the process of building working class political power is developed by consolidating a symmetrical relationship between education, union organization and political action; they are all components of a singular process with multiple focal points.

Labors alternative for education is not viewed as a substitute to the public education system but rather an alternative model to the current market driven neo-liberal educational model that is rapidly being introduced. It is a means through which organized labor can intervene in defining the public policy for education while simultaneously advancing broader class political interests.

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