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Europe

European Union: the threat to education

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Education faces multiple threats as attempts continue to reduce it to a commodity. From the French republican school to the mass university of the post World War II period, educational systems have reproduced and continue to reproduce class inequalities. On the other hand, new resistances appear that defend public services and search for alternatives to the neoliberal educational model.

[https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/12_agd.jpg]

Education, like other public services, is in the line of fire of UNICE (the European employers' organization), the OECD, the ERT (European Round Table of Industrialists), the European Commission, the WTO, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and of the reforms of each individual state aiming to liberalize this public service and open it up to the voracity of capital.

Education at the crossroads

Over and above these conjunctural tendencies, formal educational systems have contributed and still contribute to the structural and ideological reproduction of class society. However, education has increasingly a more economic and less ideological function, because this latter has been replaced by the press, the radio, the television or advertising.

In the 20th century, the advances of industrial technology, the growth of public administration and the development of commercial employment created a demand for qualified labour. The educational system began to develop modern, technical or professional sections, and education began to assume an economic function. After World War II the economic role of the school prevailed.

The emergence of the so-called welfare state, based on high and stable economic growth and heavy long-term technological innovation, demanded a bigger work force and a general rise in the educational level of workers and consumers. Education budgets rose from 3% of GDP in the 1950s to 6-7% of GDP by the late 1970s. The qualitative aspects of the education-economy relationship (objective, contents, methods, structures) became questions of lesser importance.

As secondary (and to a lesser extent higher) education became a mass phenomenon between 1950 and 1980, it did not change fundamentally in nature. This increasing mass nature also contributed to the role of the educational system as a reproductive instrument of social stratification. The demand for manual labour in the service and administrative sectors seemed to offer certain expectations of social promotion, but the extension of education at a mass level (together with the non-democratization of structures) also led to an increase in scholastic failure.

After the new economic context defined by the structural crisis of the 1970s, the growth of public expenditure, within which education occupied a preponderant situation, was brutally reined in. The leaders of the capitalist countries became fully conscious of the new turn and the new goals it imposed on education.

This new environment has been characterized by:

- constant technological innovation; industries and services use these innovations to obtain greater productivity or conquer new markets. Communication technologies have been introduced into production and mass markets. Economic predictability is continuously reduced.
- reforms in the labour market; ever greater job insecurity. Workers are forced to regularly change tasks, employment, even professions. The growth of the number of highly qualified jobs (computer science, engineering, specialists in computer science systems and management of networks) increases in percentage but not in volume. On the other hand, growth is still more explosive in the jobs with low levels of qualification (or short term training in one's own workplace).
- abandonment of state commitment to public services.

Crisis of public expenditure

[https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/13_me.jpg]

The duality that exists in the labour market is accompanied by a parallel duality in education. Thus, labour flexibility demands the recycling of the work force, by means of continuous lifelong training. This process requires a qualitative adaptation of education and a docile workforce used to its own adaptation to the labour market.

In line with this, we see the deregulation of qualifications, with flexible formulas that reduce the capacity for collective bargaining with employers and introduce the "spirit" of private enterprise (professional competition, personal aptitude, discipline) into educational systems.

Another tendency in education is the promotion of informal modes of training: non-school education is promoted by suppliers of private education, a "lifelong education" profitable for its providers. The idea of distributing responsibilities between the public sector and private suppliers is extended.

The strategy of the employers can be summarized as follows: to lower the price of training costs (the state socializes costs which are reduced for the company, increasing the margin of profit), to remould qualifications so as to accommodate them to increasingly precarious work, deskilling society in a generalized manner.

Education as a commodity: the General Agreement on Trade in Services and the European Space of Higher Education

Education like other public services has entered into international trade through the WTO and GATS. The objective of GATS is the 'complete liberalization of the services market'. Education was introduced at the origin of the WTO (Uruguay Round, 1995) at the proposal of the US which is the world's leading exporter of education services.

The limits to GATS occur in those services offered by a governmental authority which are provided totally free and which do not occur in competitive or commercial circumstances (articles 1.3b and 1.3c).

However, there are in the public services numerous forms of "externalization" to diverse suppliers, even though the main provider is a governmental authority. There are then, no public services in a pure state that are beyond the

reach of GATS and the rules of the market. The market in education (as the WTO calls it) is divided into five categories: primary, secondary, higher, adult and other services. The public sector has continued to be the main source of financing.

Art.15 of GATS directly threatens an end to the public financing of education. It describes subsidies as having "distorting effects on the services trade" and affirms that "each member that considers that a subsidy accorded by a member state harms them will be able to start up the process and to ask for a hearing in the body for resolving differences" - the tribunal of the WTO, which will apply sanctions to countries that establish obstacles to free competition. Thus, the norms of internal regulation of the member states of the WTO cannot, according to art.4, involve "unnecessary obstacles" to the free circulation of commodities.

These articles of GATS go hand in hand with the fundamental principles of the WTO relating to "most favoured nation" or that of "national treatment". In the first case, favourable treatment accorded to one country that is a signatory in the import and export of services implies the same treatment should be extended to all the countries that are signatories. In the second case, the foreign companies present in the market of a given country should benefit from treatment that is at least equally favourable to that which national companies receive in this same market.

As we can see, the objective of GATS is the pure and simple dismantling of public education as a competitor with advantages (thanks to public financing) over the education provided by private companies.

Education was excluded from the proposals presented on March 31, 2003 by the European Commission for the WTO summit in Cancun. But the pressure of the free-market vanguard in the field of education (the US, Australia and New Zealand) and the importance of exporting education services for some EU countries (France, Germany and Britain), combined with the pressure of the ERT and the UNICE, mean that although this public service was excluded from the recent round of negotiations, the objective of both the WTO and GATS is to advance towards complete liberalization.

In the EU, the European Space of Higher Education (ESHE) is being developed in evident relation both to with GATS (as a form of gradual application of this agreement to be completed by 2010) and with the objectives set by the European Council in Lisbon in 2000. These were to promote a "knowledge economy, the most competitive and dynamic in the world, capable of creating durable economic growth" where education "should adapt itself to the new technological demands, those for qualified personnel and flexibility" formulated by the European employers.

The development of the ESHE is being openly coordinated and it is reflected in what is known as the Bologna "process" which, from 1998 to 2003 has involved a series of meetings of ministers in charge of higher education (the Sorbonne 1998, Bologna 1999, Prague 2001 and the most recent one this year in Berlin). The origins of the ESHE can be traced to the famous White Paper on Education of the European Commission (1990) whose role in education, thanks to the institutionalized pressure of the ERT and the UNICE, is increasing significantly.

From the point of view of the legislation regulating education and training, articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty of European Union contain general criteria and good intentions; but this situation will change in the draft European Constitution, presented by the Convention, which constitutes a threat to all public services it characterizes as "services of general economic interest", a concept that also appears in the Green Paper of the Commission.

The principles informing the ESHE and the approach of the European Commission are: to promote distance learning and e-learning as methods of informal training provided by private suppliers, lifelong learning strategies to adapt to the changing demands of the labour market, individual responsibility of students for their own training and adaptation to the market, employability, renovation of pedagogical methods by means of the massive introduction of new

information technologies and communication in schools, the introduction of marketing in schools that promotes the spirit of private enterprise. In themselves they do not say much but it is necessary to understand them within the new changing economic context explained earlier.

The measures adopted in the development of the ESHE can be summarized in a few key themes: a change in the structure of university studies, a system of equivalent degrees (the European credit transfer system) and mobility of teachers and students. The fundamental measure is the reform in the structure of studies, establishing two cycles (undergraduate and graduate), diminishing the length of the first cycle to three years devoted to generalist lessons oriented to a deregulated labour market and a second degree confined to an elite.

The Declaration of Prague in 2001, signed by 33 countries, clarifies the influence of the Commission, the ERT and UNICE, as well as the objectives of the European Council of Lisbon. In this declaration objective of 'increasing the competitiveness of the ESHE to attract students from all the parts of the world (trans-national education)' is set.

The ESIB (National Union of Students in Europe) participated in the Prague meeting as well as follow up meetings. Its position is that of a critical 'yes' towards the Bologna process, similar to the position of many of the unions of the ETUC in relation to the European Constitution. The result has been to fundamentally legitimate the process without managing to modify any aspect of it.

Education not profit!

[https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/14_gats.jpg]

But resistance is being organized through the movement for global justice, the counter summits, forums and demonstrations that are producing a convergence of actors in education who share a similar critical analysis of its commodification and look for alternatives to it.

Forums are being developed in opposition to neoliberalism. Among them are the World Forum on Education (2002-3) in the World Social Forum, made up of trade unionists and NGOs whose work has been one of analysis and formulation of alternatives but without proposals of action. Another forum has been the Berlin Forum of European Education (2003), a European space of convergence for student groups and rank and file unions opposed to the Bologna process and GATS.

Also in the European Social Forum diverse initiatives have been carried out (seminars, lectures, assemblies of students) that have not managed to crystallize in proposals of action of a European dimension but are developing an incipient European sectoral network in the area of education.

The political importance of these networks is obvious since if the neoliberal offensive takes place at a world-wide (GATS) and continental (European Commission and Bologna process) level, resistance still remain anchored within the strictly national framework against the measures of each government that respond to a set logic.

Through these meetings and the development of common proposals and actions on a European level we can prevent the triumph of the employers' project for education and lay the basis not only to defend public services but to transform them so that they are universal, free and controlled by those who use them and work in them.