

Education is not a commodity fighting the privatization of higher education worldwide

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While recent corporate scandals may have sent shock waves through the American public and media, there's another serious scandal that has not yet made the news. This scandal-the hijacking of public education by corporate interests and governments seeking to globalize trade-has not yet come about, and may still be avoidable.

Privatization and deregulation are the declared public policy goals now pursued by many governments across the globe, seeking to erode and eliminate government services such as health care, education, and social services, with the goal of giving over as much as possible of these public services to private companies. This includes the integration of schooling into the rules governing trade that were negotiated within the framework of the World Trade Organization.

To date more than 38 member countries of the WTO have already agreed to reduce or even completely eliminate barriers to the supply of educational services from abroad. The leaders in educational trade include the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Britain.

Many in the U.S.-legislators, students, voters and teachers alike-aren't all that worried about the corporatization of education. (Then again, many of them weren't worried about the activities and accounting practices of the Fortune 500.) But there is increasing interest in-and opposition to-the commodification of education all around the globe, and teachers and their unions are leading the way.

Two gatherings of educators and unionists over the last year may help set the stage for a solid critique of the inclusion of higher education in the GATS negotiations. The Third World Congress of Education International, the international body representing 309 national teachers' unions from 150 countries, including the American Federation of Teachers, took place in the summer of 2001, in Jomtien, Thailand. At the congress, the organization passed "Educating In a Global Economy," a strong resolution on GATS, criticizing the increasing pressures to use new technologies in education which, it said, will eventually lead to privatization.

EI further detailed its developing analysis of these issues in a report on "Education and New Technology." After noting that "many enterprises have also realised that education and training might constitute an extensive market from which profits could be made," the document suggests that such concerns represent a fundamental challenge to the continued existence of quality public education in society.

"[The] deregulation of education phenomenon still needs to be examined very closely," the report said. "Education must continue to be a responsibility of the State, and at a time of major changes, national and international governments must take on new responsibilities."

The organization's stance did not go unnoted: just a few days after its congress concluded, WTO Director General Michael Moore called EI leadership to explain that there had been a misunderstanding. The WTO, he said, had no intention of including higher education in the ongoing GATS negotiations.

More recently, at the International Conference Against Deregulation and Privatization in Berlin last February, more than 400 participants-representing trade union, political, and popular organizations-came from 51 different countries to indict the deregulation and privatization policies now being promoted and implemented around the world. The conference represented an appeal to pursue and develop efforts in all countries to stop these devastating policies.

As a long-time activist and unionist, I was asked to sit on a "University and Youth" issues panel with others from Peru, England, Burundi, and Germany. At the three-hour workshop with 125 academics and students from around the world in attendance, participants agreed that the policy of eliminating the right to education and training is being widely implemented.

Under the auspices of the WTO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the European Union, plans are leading to the dissolution of traditional institutional forms of schooling through privatization in all forms of public education. These plans are of course accompanied by a threat to the statutes and conditions of employment for teachers, and thus to educational unions.

Many workshop participants also noted that teachers everywhere are resisting, and they are being joined by students and workers. A recent strike by 4000 primary school teachers in the Loire-Atlantique region of France and a general strike in Algeria in defense of public education were only two of the examples participants provided.

Workshop participants concluded they would work to develop initiatives on the international scale and an International Conference in Defense of Education and Teaching was proposed for June, 2003.

In the meantime, we must all remain active in support of universal access to public education from pre-school through the university. Such serious attacks on public education warrant AFT's active involvement in-and leadership of-the discussion of these issues, including the convening of both national and international conferences to discuss issues related to the current drive toward the privatization of public education worldwide.

By Dan Kaplan, executive secretary of the San Mateo Federation of Teachers, Local 1493

Education's commodification and its discontents: A brief timeline

January, 1995 General Agreement on Trade in Services established as a legal framework for countries engaged in trade negotiations in a broad range of service sectors, including higher education. GATS negotiations are ongoing under the auspices of the World Trade Organization.

September, 1999 The AFT Higher Education Department's Perry Robinson tells an Education International Higher Education Conference in Budapest: "Those that regard higher education as simply one industry among others that must face the discipline of the market are hostile to university traditions, the professorial authority and control of instruction and curriculum, and increasingly view universities as institutions that must yield to the demands of the market that views education as worker training."

December, 2000 U.S. officials submit a broad proposal to reduce international barriers to trade in higher education, causing deep concern among many in the education community who say that federal policy is being unfairly set by for-profit education providers, and distance-education institutions in particular. Major representatives of the higher education community are caught off-guard; they had not seen or discussed the plan before it was presented to the WTO.

July, 2001 EI Third World Congress in Jomtien, Thailand, where the organization passes a resolution and releases a new report critical of higher education's inclusion in trade discussions.

August, 2001 The WTO backtracks, explaining that there had been a misunderstanding, and that the WTO had no intention of including higher education in the ongoing GATS negotiations.

January, 2002 Burundi announces plans to close down its entire public education system in three years, claiming that the private sector will be able to provide for the country's educational needs. In May, teachers strike.

February, 2002 International Conference Against Deregulation and Privatization in Berlin. The conference appeal states: "The fact is that nowadays

big international corporations want their share of the world 'market' in education, which in 1999 was estimated to be worth 2, 200 billion dollars.... Their aim is to transform education into just another commodity, into some kind of industry selling its products (courses) to 'customers' (pupils and students) in a market ruled by the law of supply and demand."

June, 2002 GATS deadline: Countries file requests asking trading partners to open their markets in service areas, including higher education. The U.S. requests "increased access for higher education, training services and testing services provided in traditional institutional settings, such as universities or schools, or outside of traditional settings, including workplaces, or elsewhere," but says it "does not seek to displace public education systems" (www.ustr.gov/releases/2002/07/02-63.htm).

July, 2002 The World Bank announces a list of developing countries eligible to join its "Education For All Fast Track Programme," which will make funding available to support primary education programs. Criteria may include "a ceiling on the average teacher salary of 3.5 times the GDP per capita," EI reports. EI also announces it "will continue its lobbying to make sure that WTO and GATS are not used to impose limits on the right of governments to allocate subsidies to education and social service providers."

March, 2003 GATS deadline: Countries will indicate which service areas, including higher education, they are prepared to liberalize. Trading partners will then hold discussions.

June, 2003 Proposed International Conference in Defense of Education and Teaching

January, 2005 GATS negotiations on educational services and other agreements scheduled to be completed.