

Rights Action
April 12, 2011

Protesters Across Honduras Challenge IDB-Funded ‘Shock’ Program To Privatize Education In Honduras, And Are Met With Massive Violent Repression

By Karen Spring & Annie Bird, April 12, 2011

March 2011 was marked by the worst repression seen against the people of Honduras since the June 2009 military coup. The repression came in response to massive protests against an all-out final push by the Pepe Lobo regime to essentially privatize Honduras’ public education system while destroying teacher’s independence, politicizing schools, slashing salaries in half and ransacking retirement funds.



(Photo: Karen Spring, Honduras, April 2011)

On April 1, 2011 teachers stopped the protests, a gesture to demonstrate a willingness to dialogue. Pepe Lobo’s response was to

publish the names of 300 teachers being summarily fired. This forced parents and teachers back into the streets, and on Monday, April 11, protests began again. A national strike will take place on Tuesday April 12, challenging the shock changes to the nation's education system. Violent repression of the protests is feared.

Strong national and international interests lie behind the plans for the Honduran education system. Business interests and national political party power structures are teaming up with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank (WB), to capitalize on education in Honduras while neutralizing teachers as an important voice in Honduran public policy.

MILITARY COUP USHERS IN SHOCK SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLICY MEASURES

On March 17, thousands of teachers began protesting as the de facto Honduran Congress examined a new law that fundamentally restructures the Honduran education system on a scale not seen since 1895 enacting what Honduran teachers call the privatization of the national education system.

This comes on the coattails of the June 2009 military coup and is just one of a series of 'shock' measures being undertaken to profoundly change the way Honduras administers everything from education to water to land rights to electricity to national sovereignty to retirement funds. It also comes very shortly following the February 1, 2011 approval of a \$100,000 technical loan from the IDB, Project Number HO-T1149, for a project called "Support of a comprehensive educational model."

Over the past 16 months of the Pepe Lobo administration, a whirlwind of laws have rushed through congress to facilitate these shock measures, many facilitated by WB and IDB funding, and they are generating massive protests that build on the already widespread rejection of the legitimacy of the Pepe Lobo regime. Lobo assumed office in January 2010 following illegitimate elections which were carried out by the post-military coup regime, under extreme repression and were not recognized by most of the nations in the Americas.

As the population of Honduras witnessed the extreme repression unleashed against protesting teachers and grasped the gravity of the changes to be enacted in the educational system, Hondurans joined the teachers in protest.

Since March 30th, parents from communities throughout Honduras occupied schools and blocked roads. The Lobo regime's response was to order teachers back to school and send in the military.

VIOLENCE TO SILENCE PROTESTS & DESTROY FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Tear gas, live ammunition, tanks spraying a mix of water and pepper gas, illegal detentions, trumped up charges, violent beatings, disappearance attempts and murder are some of the tactics that the post-coup regime is deploying against the pro-democracy people's movement and public school teacher's movement that have taken to the streets to protest government education policies changes since July 2010.

Honduran teacher's professional associations have not only been targeted for destruction by the IDB, as is clearly described in a March 2010 IDB study of the educational labor market in Honduras, but also by the Lobo regime, as teachers have also been a pillar of support for the National Front of Popular Resistance (FNRP, acronym in Spanish) that formed in opposition to the June 28th, 2009 military coup. Strategically, destroying the teachers professional societies would mean a directly attack on the FNRP.

Since the coup, over 65 members of the pro-democracy people's movement have been killed, disappeared and directly targeted for their role in the movement, 14 of them being public school teachers. In addition, human rights organizations have identified over 300 "suspicious" killings, with indications of political motives and/or participation of state security forces.

On March 18, a 59-year-old teacher, Ilse Velasquez Rodriguez was shot in the head with a tear gas canister, fell to the ground and was run over by a news vehicle. Tear gas launchers are considered a

lethal weapon if fired directly on targets, an increasingly common practice by Honduran police. Police and military also shot many tear gas canisters inside the central offices of teacher's associations, COLPROSUMAH and COPEMH after protests had ended for the day, while teachers were meeting and resting. Dozens were arrested and charged with crimes including sedition, and dozens were injured.

The collective power of the teachers, both in the pro-democracy people's movement and in the struggle against privatizing education, impedes both national interests of the post-coup regime and international interests of the WB and IDB.

In an IDB document from March 2010 with recommendations and conclusions regarding 'needed' Honduran educational reform, the IDB wrote, "That [The National Teacher's Work Code] gives the teacher's union an enormous coercive power over the government."

PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION OR "DECENTRALIZATION"

Throughout Latin America a series of educational 'reform' or 'decentralization' programs have been enacted over the past decade, programs promoted by the WB and IDB. In the case of Honduras the program is called the Honduran Program for Community Education, PROHECO.

In this model, the responsibility for administering schools and their funding is given over to non-governmental organizations, and in some countries businesses, that administer schools in theory, though often not in practice, in collaboration with local communities.

The PROHECO program was created in Honduras during the presidency of Ricardo Maduro from the National Party. Administration of PROHECO schools was then charged to a Honduran NGO, the Ricardo Ernesto Maduro Andreu Foundation for Education, FEREMA.

The new education law passed on March 31, 2011 amidst massive repression of protests, follows the same model as PROHECO, but rather than just being a handful of schools in each municipality, the new law shifts all public schools from elementary to high school, over

to the “decentralized” model.

The March 31 education law creates Municipal Educational Development Councils (COMDE) in each municipality, which coordinates administration of schools. Though not explicit in the language of the law, Honduras’ experience with PROHECO and other experiences in the region make it clear to teachers that the COMDE schools would be administered in coordination with an NGO that administers the schools budgets.

WB and IDB technical grants, like the February 1, 2011 IDB grant, are usually extended to help governments prepare the groundwork to receive the multimillion dollar loans to promote new programs. Teachers expect the IDB to provide a \$50 million loan to support the shift to the COMDE model in the near future, and they are also expect that FEREMA would also assume management of COMDE schools.

POLITICAL PARTY INFLUENCE IN ALL THE NATION’S SCHOOL

FEREMA, created by former National Party president Ricardo Maduro, is closely tied in to National Party structures. The potential for political manipulation through the nation’s schools when managed by a private foundation closely tied to political party structures is tremendous.

Political manipulation has already occurred in some PROHECO schools, such as occurred in Santa Rositas, San Francisco de Lempira, where a conflict between National Party municipal and school authorities and the families of the students of the school culminated in the burning of the school in early March.

The on-going two year dispute in Santa Rosita centered around municipal and school authorities attempts to fire and replace teachers that were not loyal to the National Party. Local authorities and PROHECO administrators, along with the police and military, entered the school to attempt to physically remove the teachers despite strong resistance from the parents.

Many of the PROHECO and municipal officials involved in the

attempted illegal firings also have outstanding legal complaints for other abuses, particularly the school director, accused of raping young students and making death threats against the parents denouncing the abuses.

In early March the Special Prosecutor for Indigenous Peoples Rights conducted an investigation of the charges and was herself threatened. When charges were formalized, according to the Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organization of Honduras), COPINH, the abusive authorities responded by burning the school. COPINH was blamed publicly by the media and authorities for the burning while an investigation has still not been carried out.

DESTROYING TEACHERS PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

In Honduras, it is considered that certain professions like public prosecutors and teachers, should have a certain guarantees to ensure their ability to carry out their profession with independence. Destroying the professional associations not only destroys labor conditions but destroys their ability to act with independence.

Teachers' professional associations have played a key role in the structure of the Honduran educational system for over on hundred years. Teachers associations are more than unions, though they fulfill some of the important functions of unions, such as collective bargaining on teachers working conditions and administration of important benefits like retirement pensions. But professional associations also accredit teachers, have an important voice in educational policy, and protect the teachers from arbitrary firing / hiring.

The creation of the PROHECO program for the first time allowed the government to hire teachers to practice without belonging to professional associations. PROHECO starting teachers earn salaries of approximately L4500 per month, less than the minimum wage, and are only paid the 10 months of the year classes are in session. The Secretary of Education teachers affiliated with the professional associations earn salaries of about L9800 over the 12 month calendar year, with two additional bonus salaries per year.

PROHECO teachers are hired on ten month contracts, which must be renewed yearly. Since they are hired year to year they have no right to unemployment compensation or retirement benefits. It also makes their job security contingent on absolute compliance with whatever the school's administrating NGO demands of them.

In short, the experience of PROHECO has confirmed to teachers that the measures being undertaken to dismantle the professional associations and "decentralize" education open up the possibility of politically motivated firing of teachers, while ravaging teachers working conditions.

ROB THE TEACHER'S PENSION FUNDS; BUY TEAR GAS & AMMUNITION

Ilse Velasquez, the teacher killed in protests on March 18, had hoped to retire this year, but had been told she could not since the teachers' pension funds were gone. The de facto Roberto Micheletti regime that took power for 5 months after the military coup until the 'election' of Pepe Lobo, illegally took four billion lempiras (\$40 million USD) from IMPREMA, the institution that manages pension funds for 68,000 teachers.

The stolen funds are believed to have been used by the de facto government to fund the military machine run by the oligarchy, illegal "President" Micheletti and head of the armed forces, Romeo Vasquez Velasquez to repress and terrorize the pro-democracy movement critical of the coup and it's perpetrators.

The Lobo regime has not complied with an agreement reached with teachers in August 2010 to return a portion of the stolen funds to IMPREMA. Instead, the government and Congress have been attacking IMPREMA; attempting to create the impression of corruption and mis-management to convince the population of needed reform.

Teachers claim the de facto government, backed by the IDB, intends to consolidate IMPREMA into the IPM (military retirement fund) and that the age for retirement will be raised from 60 to 70.

PEOPLE RESIST

Attempts to consolidate the privatization process that began under the Maduro administration were largely unsuccessful in the privatization effort during the overthrown President Zelaya's term in office from 2006-2009, the IDB and WB seem to be successfully pushing this agenda with the Pepe Lobo's regime comprised of Honduran oligarchy and business elite, who have many reasons to follow suit.

Strong and growing national resistance against the new education law continues. Including departmental assemblies and protests organized by the teacher's movement and pro-democracy people's movement. This is despite Lobo's threat that all teachers that do not present themselves to work will be suspended for one year without pay. Taking democracy into their own hands, municipal consultations are also now occurring throughout the country in an effort to reject the Congress's recent decision and the new education law.

In a last final effort to defend public education to avoid the system to be handed over to the same people that planned and supported the military coup, the teachers, the National Front of Popular Resistance, students, indigenous organizations, churches and parents of public school students continue to resist by occupying schools, holding assemblies, consultations and protesting in the street.

+ + + + + + + + + +

WHAT TO DO – MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for HONDURAS' PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

To make a tax-deductible donation for community based organizations in Honduras' pro-democracy movement working to defend human rights and the environment and to eradicate poverty and re-found their nation-state, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
CANADA: 552 - 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS:

<http://rightsaction.org/contributions.htm>; or go to:
www.rightsaction.org. (Credit card donations can be done
anonymously)

FOR DONATION OF STOCK: contact info@rightsaction.org. (Stock
donations can be done anonymously – have your stockbroker contact
info@rightsaction.org)

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, MORE INFORMATION???

Annie Bird, annie@rightsaction.org

Karen Spring, in Tegucigalpa, spring.kj@gmail.com, 011 [504] 9507-
3835

Grahame Russell, info@rightsaction.org

Thank-you.

- Please re-distribute this article all around, citing author and source
- To get on/off Rights Action's listserv: www.rightsaction.org