

Teachers' union fights to preserve its rights through labour reform

The case of COLPEDAGOGOSH in Honduras

A Case Study by Fanny Erazo

Honduras has seen a sharp deterioration in its political and social situation in the aftermath of the 2009 coup d'état. Several basic rights such as the freedom of association, the freedom of unionization or collective bargaining have come under attack as the government appears to seek out ways to undermine representative democracy.

COLPEDAGOGOSH, one of the five trade unions representing teachers in the country, has been fighting to preserve minimum standards in its sector and support other social movements defending the rule of law and democracy. To do this, it has been widening its power resources and reforming its internal structure. In spite of constant attempts by political powers to undermine unions, COLPEDAGOGOSH remains one of the most solid trade unions in the country.

High politics and low blows

The low education budget in Honduras is a major cause of the country's poverty rates, one of the highest in Latin America, with around 40% of its almost 9 million inhabitants living in extreme poverty.

The Colegio de Pedagogos de Honduras (Pedagogues Association of Honduras, or COLPEDAGOGOSH in the Spanish acronym) was founded in 1982, when a fledgling democracy was restored in the country. There were five teachers' unions in total, also known as "associations" or "colleges", and grouped under the umbrella organization Federación de Organizaciones Magisteriales de Honduras (Federation of Teachers' Organizations of Honduras, or FOMH). Until the 2009 coup, the teachers' unions enjoyed substantial institutional power, were autonomous and belligerent, and had generous resources to defend state education and teachers' labour rights.

This institutional power was undermined by the two right-wing governments that followed the coup, which weakened public institutions by privatizing services, particularly health and education. The state secretary under the current presidency has further embarked on a campaign against teachers' unions, suspending all cooperation with them and excluding them from negotiations and decisions on education issues.

The government has even brought lawsuits against these unions, accusing them of corruption, although judges have dismissed all the cases so far. The government's animosity may have a political motivation, as a response to the open support by COLPEDAGOGOSH of the opposition movement the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (National Front of

People's Resistance), an organization with strong popular support which emerged as a reaction against the 2009 coup.

Perhaps the most effective low blow against the unions has been government's – illegal - move to suspend the union fees deducted from workers' pay. Mid 2012, a legislative decree reallocated the workers' union fees collected at source to the Instituto Nacional de Previsión del Magisterio (National Institute for Teachers' Welfare, or INPREMA) and created the Cuentas de Ahorro Provisional (Accounts of Provisional Savings, or CAP). This led to a substantial decrease in the union's budget and to a new obstacle for the acquisition of resources, as well as impacting membership levels.

A necessary and timely reform

The 2009 coup d'état took place as the union was undergoing an internal appraisal to identify its main organizational weaknesses. In 2010 it was decided to reform its charter. A year later, the relevant legislation was introduced to the National Congress, which passed it in 2012. The most pressing need was to strengthen the union's internal structures, to allow it to better participate in the social struggle and revive the democratic order.

The reform brought more transparency, internal democracy and participation to the union. Term limits for the governing board were reduced to two consecutive periods of two years each. In the same vein, residential voting was introduced for all governing boards at all levels, meaning such elections no longer excluded members who were unable to attend the union's congresses, and increasing voter participation. This inclusive democratic process strengthened the union's structural and associative power.

The reform also created the position of Women's Secretary, with the aim of guaranteeing women's leadership and gender equality. Moreover, the Secretaría de Asuntos Pedagógicos (Secretary of Pedagogical Issues) was also created to disseminate basic information about unionism, especially the union reform. Eligibility for the teachers' union was expanded to include those enrolled in a pedagogy baccalaureate, and every university student in the last 10% of their studies. Lastly, the reforms provided legal counsel for workers victimized by government repression, as well as an on-going radio news bulletin.

The intention behind this internal strengthening was also to align the union's efforts with those of other social movements in Honduras. An important element in this regard was the maintenance of fluid communications, both among the five teachers' unions and with other organizations. This allowed the unions to incorporate wider social demands, such as the struggle of indigenous peoples and the peasants for access to the land, the fight for control over food access, issues faced by students at high school and university, and the rights of people with diverse sexual orientations.

In spite of the government's strategies to destabilize teachers' unions, COLPEDAGOGOSH has managed to keep its position as one of the strongest in any sector, economically and in terms of membership. Against the persistent financial and juridical repression by the government, it has carried out substantial reforms and increased its power resources.

Even in such adversity, the union has retained around 60% of the membership it had before the government co-opted the union fees and suspended automatic membership. And it is taking measures to attract more members. As a consequence of its reform and cooperation with other unions and social organizations, COLPEDAGOGOSH is still a legitimate and active role model as well as a force to be reckoned with when it comes to union strategies, education policies and labour rights.