

Three countries for kids

The Trinational Coalition comes to L.A. April 18 through 20.

By Rosemary Lee

False accountability, high-stakes testing, charter schools, erosion of teacher's rights—not just here but in Mexico and Canada too? Yes, these are the same issues that teachers throughout North America face and have organized to resist.

The year 2008 marks the 40th anniversary of the 1968 Mexican student protest and the Los Angeles student walkouts, which resulted in significant gains for public education. But today we see a concerted effort to roll back public education in North America in favor of the privatization and modification of education.

This will be the theme of the Trinational Conference in Defense of Public Education to take place at the UTLA building from April 18 to 20, 2008—the first time that a Trinational Conference has been held in the United States since 1993.

For the past year, newspapers have carried numerous articles about the brutal attacks on and murders of striking teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico. Those of you who went to the Leadership Conference had the opportunity to hear Jinny Sims, former president of the British Columbia Teachers Federation, speak about their historic strike in the fall of 2005 to defend teachers and public education. Both Oaxacan and British Columbian unions are active participants in the Trinational Coalition.

What is the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education?

Beginning in 1993, educators from Canada, the United States, and Mexico who were fighting NAFTA's efforts to defund and privatize public education in their countries organized a conference in Olympia, Washington, called "The Future of Public Education in North America." It was funded by educational unions from all three countries and attended by more than 200 union delegates representing every level of public education.

In October 1994 delegates from Canada and Mexico met in Mexico and agreed to create a TriNational Coalition to coordinate activities among unions in the three countries to defend public education and educators' union rights from the impact of privatization and trade liberalization that came along with NAFTA. While the majority of participating groups are unions, the base of the Trinational Coalition has broadened more recently to include student and community organizations. The Trinational Coalition has affiliated with the IDEA (Initiative to Defend Public Education in the Americas) Network, which is a hemispheric coalition of educators, students, parents, and community organizations.

The Trinational has no formal organizational membership, only a commitment by different unions at differ-



UTLA members Dan Barnhart and Rosemary Lee join representatives from Mexico, Canada, and the United States at the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education January 28. The meeting, held in Vancouver, focused on strategies to defend the striking teachers of Oaxaca and to begin planning the 2008 conference, which will take place in Los Angeles for the first time.

ent times to work and to help fund various projects, conferences, forums, or research projects organized by the coalition. The coalition's funding has been solely from educational unions on a project-by-project basis. There is no Trinational bank account.

For most of its existence, three coordinators have coordinated the coalition work: Dan Leahy, a professor at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington; Larry Kuehn, research director for the British Columbia Teachers Federation in Vancouver, British Columbia; and Maria de la Luz Arriaga, professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. More recently, a Collegial Commission has coordinated the Mexican section's work.

Trinational Coalition Conferences

The coalition has organized seven trinational conferences during the last 14 years: in Olympia (1993), Morelia (1995), Vancouver (1997), Queretaro (1998), Zacatecas (2000), Toronto (2003), and Oaxaca (2006). While there has been strong participation by Canadian and Mexican unions over the years, U.S. participation has lagged until recently. During the last few years the Professional Staff Congress, which represents community college teachers in New York City; teachers' unions SEA and WEA from Seattle and Washington respectively; parent and student representatives from New Orleans; representatives from Cal State L.A.; and members of UTLA have become involved with the Trinational.

The AFT and NEA and many of their affiliates, such as the CFT, have been supportive of the Section 22 teachers' struggle in Oaxaca, Mexico. Larry Kuehn and Jinny Sims from the British Columbia Teachers Federation have spoken at both CFT and UTLA conferences and conventions. Given this interest and the organizing of the coalition's Oaxaca

Strategy Conference in Vancouver in January 2007 attended by UTLA members Rosemary Lee and Dan Barnhart, the coalition hopes to bring more U.S. teachers' unions into its work.

At the seventh Trinational Conference in Oaxaca, Mexico, a resolution was passed to hold the next conference in Los Angeles. The Mexican and Canadian participants were very enthusiastic about this decision for a number of reasons:

- This will be the first time since 1993 that a coalition conference will be held in the United States.
- All look forward to working with UTLA, because we are one of the largest and most progressive teachers' unions in the U.S.—important because of its diverse immigrant population, especially from Mexico, and its dynamic labor movement.

- There will be greater participation by Mexican delegates, many of whom can be hosted by family members during the conference.

- Los Angeles will make a unique contribution to the conference because of our high level of involvement with student, parent, and community groups.

As in previous Trinational conferences, the Los Angeles conference will provide translation and have a speaker from each country at the workshops. The eighth conference is being planned as an action-oriented conference, which will develop concrete plans that we can implement in our schools, communities, and three countries. In particular, we will be relating the workshops to the concept of fake accountability, which is represented by high-stakes testing and imposed pacing plans versus real accountability to students, to teachers, and to our communities.

■ **Get involved:** For more information and to be part of the planning, please email Rosemary Lee at rosemarylee@earthlink.net.

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