

5th October 2017

EI Deputy General Secretary David Edwards's speech on the occasion of World Teachers' Day, delivered at UNESCO's Headquarters in Paris, France

World Teachers' Day this year gives us an opportunity to stress and celebrate teaching in freedom - across categories and levels, regions and borders.

Fittingly, we are also marking the 20th Anniversary of the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation on the status of higher education personnel, so a particular type of freedom - academic freedom, should occupy a central place in our minds.

But today we must also consider that 'other' type of freedom which in far too many countries teachers at all levels are literally not allowed to teach freely. Some have been intimidated, others exploited, jailed, and some disappeared and silenced permanently.

In response to the changes affecting academia, Education International will be releasing a report on the 31st of this month here in Paris during an event and reception we are holding with the Sorbonne to commemorate the 20th anniversary. In that report we analyze what the last 20 years have meant for higher education faculty, how the Recommendation has been used and how the process could still be improved. We would be delighted to see you all there.

For those familiar with trends in higher education you may not be surprised to learn about the ways teaching in freedom has been interpreted by employers and investors in higher education who have 'freed teaching' from the bounds of professionalism, academic rigor, accountability and democratically governed institutions.

Just this week in the Guardian newspaper an investigative report uncovered growing homelessness among US adjunct faculty. A quarter of these professors receive government assistance. Many are living out of their cars. This precarious casualization -- in the US, about 75% of the teaching done in higher education is done by teachers off the tenure track and please note that without tenure, academic freedom is fragile; in Latin America that number is approaching (80%), in Australia (40%), and in Canada (30%).

As universities expand around the world and open branch campuses, poorly paid local faculty become the model for cashing in. These corporate campuses particularly like autocratic

regimes where an absence of labor protections and rights can ensure that professors are indentured servants - sometimes rooming six people in campus dormitories to curb costs.

University professors, academic personnel and researchers are not however the only victims of these trends towards greater precariousness and exploitation. Students themselves suffer. Research by the Canadian Association of University Teachers shows that adjunct professors are unable to support and guide students as they pursue studies and research. As they work long hours, often at multiple sites, they are less accessible to their students and their perpetual low status means they cannot even write a recommendation letter or serve on a dissertation defense.

According to the 1966 Recommendations, at the K-12 level, teaching with professional freedom and autonomy means that teachers should have a say in setting professional standards for entry; yet in a growing number of countries governments are continuing to lower qualifications in an attempt to fix teaching shortages as if bringing in unqualified, less expensive "personnel" improves quality. Imagine the heart patient who is going into surgery being told that the hospital is providing her with the services of an unexperienced, untrained and unqualified surgeon who's young and passionate. You can't.

These trends are especially problematic for developing countries that are trying to expand their coverage beyond primary without expanding their tax base or have been told by donors who are increasingly not meeting their ODA targets to "innovate."

One innovation suggests that governments should be free to outsource the teaching and learning process to private companies who will script out and control cheaper "teacher computers." Their CEO suggests that the scripts free up teachers to deliver instruction. "Rub the board. Walk around the room. Draw a house on the board with a square and triangle..." Free from professionalism. Free from tailoring instruction to individual needs. Free from intellectual engagement. Free from collaborating with colleagues.

Yet, academic and professional freedom cannot be separated from political freedoms and labor rights.

This year we have seen the mass firing of academics who were critical of governments around the world and EI has campaigned for the release of multiple academics.

One was arrested for "dabbling in feminism," another was arrested for researching paramilitary groups and a third was threatened by a pharmaceutical company after she found side effects of a new drug. Just recently we learned of teachers who were fired in a country for teaching evolution – on the grounds of blasphemy.

It's no secret that we are experiencing a tectonic shift of political norms around the world, and education is at the heart of how we adapt and interpret what is true and what is false. Education is the lynch pin of our collective understanding of reality. In an age when lies are deliberately confused with the truth and when opinion is confounded with fact...



At a time that healthy skepticism is being replaced by dangerous cynicism.

And when citizens are systematically manipulated in the comfort of their social media bubbles... the future of democracy depends on education.

The free press is under attack and does not have the resources to contain the over-flowing cup of deception. People have to have the capacity to filter an enormous volume of data. This is the worst, most dangerous moment to turn teachers into robots. As never before, a free teaching profession must inculcate students with the values of democracy and the competencies of healthy scepticism, critical thinking, scientific methods, understanding of history, and media and internet literacy. Only education faithful to its mission can inoculate students for a lifetime against new delivery systems of hate and disinformation.

Teaching has always been a risky profession for people in many parts of the world. Like journalists teachers are on the front lines of preparing the next generations of informed citizens to solve complex problems....speaking truth to power, facing history to face ourselves, obtaining, analyzing and synthesizing information about our current events.

This organization, UNESCO, has created an instrument and acted to protect the freedom and safety of journalists. That, as well as the work of other UN bodies, recognizes that journalists are persecuted and attacked because of their profession, but also because they are organized and because of their unique role in defending freedom, human rights and democracy. Teachers are also, through a combination of circumstances and forces in a similar situation. It is their best work as trade unionists and professionals that places them in peril.

We should, on this occasion, begin to reflect and discuss how that solidarity, that protection, can best and most effectively be provided.

