

THE PATHS OF CASUALIZATION AND COMMODIFICATION



THE SCENARIO IN LATIN AMERICA

The paths of casualization and commodification

On occasion of a meeting hosted by IEC-CONADU in the province of Mendoza, union representatives from all over the continent reported on the scenario in their relevant countries and on how they tackle the challenges facing them.

Casualization of employment contracts, wage inequalities, more straining labor conditions, the State vision of higher education as a service and hindrance in the organization of trade unions stood as some of the difficulties which, though mitigated by certain minor achievements, were brought up by representatives of higher education trade unions from different Latinamerican countries during the course of the “Right to Higher Education in Latin America” seminar hosted on May 19th at the Cuyo National University in the province of Mendoza.

Cooperatively hosted by CONADU’s Education and Training Institute (IEC), SIDUNCU (Cuyo University’s teachers union) and Education International for Latin America (IEAL, which gathers education-related trade unions from all over the continent), the seminar was attended by members of Brazil’s (PROIFES), Chile’s (FAUECH), Peru’s (FENDUP) and Colombia’s (ASPU) federations. On the eve of the seminar, the X Meeting of IEAL’s Higher Education and Research Unions was held.

The seminar was the platform to provide an overview of the deepening observed in the privatization, commodification and employment casualization processes and of the ways to resist such trends in those countries whose States have proven more committed to the neoliberal program over the latest years.

The seminar opening ceremony was hosted by the Deputy Dean of the host institution, Mr. Luis Sarale, as well as by IEAL’s Main Coordinator, Combertty Rodriguez, IEAL’s Higher Education Coordinator and Secretary General of CONADU’s, Mr. Carlos de Feo, SIDUNCU’s representative, Ms. Maria Rosa Golcar and CEA’s Secretary General, Mr. Fabián Felman.

Following the opening ceremony, four debate tables were arranged for the discussion of the following topics: “Privatization Processes in Latinamerican Higher Education”, coordinated by Damián del Valle; “the casualization of academic employment as a barrier towards knowledge democratization”, coordinated by Belén Sotelo; “Advocating for public knowledge production in the current political context”, coordinated by Fernanda Saforcada and Diego Hurtado; and the meeting final discussion panel, under the coordination of Yamile Socolovsky, dealt with “A regional overview of the right to Higher Education” and was made up by Francisco Tamarit (former President of the University of Córdoba) who made an introduction to [CRES 2018](#) **[link:**

www.cres2018.org , and Francisco Montero, who presented IEC-CLACSO's book entitled "CLACSO "El Derecho a la Universidad en perspectiva regional" ["A regional overview of the right to higher education"] (link: <http://iec.conadu.org.ar/publicaciones>).

Following is a summary of the overview given by the representatives of Chile, Brazil, Peru and Colombia during the meeting.

The strains facing each of the region's systems

According to the attending union leaders, the root of most problems facing higher education lies in the commodification and excluding conception of higher education which, though somewhat different, prevails in the bulk of our countries. In the case of Chile, since the times of Pinochet's dictatorship and in particular well into the continental neoliberal wave of the 90s, the entire system, including the public one, has been regulated by the market. "At the time of the amendment of the act in 1980, institutions were informed that state funding would no longer be provided and that, therefore, they should go for self-funding. This became effective in the 90s to the extent that profitable programs are currently taught in the evening", pointed out **Miguel Ramos**, member of the Executive Board of Chile's State-run universities' Academicians Federation (FAUECH).

This process went into crisis in the mid and late 2000s. The State had to raise the level of higher education funding and higher education was rendered gratuitous for the students in the five lowest income deciles, as is currently the case. "Yet, gratuitous and rightful are two different concepts", warned Ramos because "State-run universities still stick to commercial criteria". In the extended private sector, on the other hand, the State's involvement was merely intended to "introduce some enhancements in terms of market regulation".

One of the most remarkable features of the Brazilian state-run system is restrictiveness, implemented by means of highly challenging admission tests, to the extent that the available quota fails to be covered by applicants. **Flavio Silva**, Vice-chairman of the Federal institutions' teachers federation (PROIFES), illustrated the case of the Federal University of Goiás, where he teaches: "In a 23000 student population, there are 5000 vacancies. There was once a bill from the Lula administration to expand the range of universities by opening new courses, but today many of those courses, even once teachers have been hired, have to close as result of the poor number of students. I myself was once assigned to a course with a quota for 50 students, which was eventually only attended by two or three". This scenario ultimately drifts students away into private universities, even when there might have been a place for them in the public system.

Pedro Hernández, chairman of the Higher Education Teachers' Union (ASPU) hailed the expansion of the Colombian public higher education system, which doubled its student population between 2000 and 2015 (from 306000 to 677000 students). Yet, he warned that this growth was at the expense of the

faculty, which recorded much lower growth rates and increasingly casualized employment modalities. In fact, “the budget allocated to universities has not even recorded a 15% growth in real terms”, pointed out Chairman Hernandez.

As far as Peru is concerned, it was as late as 2014 when, in light of a newly enacted act, the management of universities, formerly under the umbrella of the Ministry of Finance, was reallocated to the Ministry of Education. As of present date, out of the 142 existing institutions, 49 are national, 1 is municipal and the remaining 92 are “for profit and non-for-profit” private institutions, stated **Nelson Sifuentes**, secretary of National and International Relations of Peru’s Higher education teachers association (FENDUP). He adds that Peruvian universities’ quality standards are poor, as a result of a downgrading process which began back in the 90s. In light of that, the new act provided for an “accreditation” process, which consists in evaluating if universities comply with basic quality standards. In this context, during the course of this seminar, the closure of the private “Alas Peruanas” university was announced which, in the words of Sifuentes, was “well known for having truly commodified higher education”.

Casualized employment

In terms of labor, casualization is one of the features affecting most teachers throughout the continent. In Chile for instance, even though, as established by law, there should be in the public sector an 80% of tenured faculty members with only the remaining 20% allowed to be non-tenured, there is currently a 70% of non-tenured ones under temporary contracts of employments renewable every six months or annually. “State-run universities’ presidents have reduced the number of tenures and even when they are entitled to call for teaching positions applications, they fail to do so and expect to keep managing this aspect under a business-like model”, argues Miguel Ramos.

A similar number of casualized teachers is recorded in Colombia: out of the 43000 teachers in the system, only 12000 are tenured faculty members, explains Hernández. In that country, there are two types of professorships in addition to tenures: “ocasionales” (or substitutes, those temporarily replacing tenured faculty members who may be serving in management positions) and “catedráticos” (similar to adjunct professors, that is, non-university professionals hired on an hourly basis to teach specific classes). These professorships have been used to somehow “legitimize” casualization, with cases of “ocasionales” (substitute professors) serving in such a condition for over 20 years and “catedráticos” (adjunct professors) with no income other than the one derived from their professorship. Their contracts of employment are only effective during academic terms and therefore professors under these schemes are left with no social security benefits during breaks and, in the long run, they are faced with major difficulties when it comes to “accumulating the required level of contribution for a minimum pension”, for which Hernández regards this scenario as a “humanitarian crisis”.

Although in Peru, the number of casualized professors is lower (“around 28% stand as adjunct professors and 72% are tenured professors”, according to

Sifuentes), these are still faced with the uncertainty of term-based contracts of employment, with no stability guarantee. Another complexity of the Peruvian case is promotion to upper professorship categories. Even though professors may have achieved the merits for a promotion to top categories, tenured or associate professor, “the problem is that sometimes there are no vacant positions and they need to wait until another professor retires or dies for a position to become vacant and to therefore access top categories”. One reason for this lies in the fact that professors do not have a decent retirement scheme that facilitates renewal.

Casualization brings about substantial wage gaps of casualized workers compared to tenured faculty members as well as the need on the side of the former to work overtime in order to make a decent income. “We have sometimes had cases of adjunct professors with contracts in several regional subsidiaries or schools of the same University. They may teach up to 40 or even 60 hours a week in order to make a salary equivalent to USD 2000. The question is: can a professor teaching 60 hours a week prepare a class or correct exams? They do not even have time for adequate sleeping”, pointed out the Peruvian representative. Many a time, they also teach at private Universities or schools where wage levels are substantially lower (around 5 to 10 US dollars per hour, compared to 18 to 30 paid by state-run universities).

In Brazil the conditions in the profit-oriented private system are even worse: “for a professor to make a decent salary in private institutions, they need to teach at least 40 effective hours a week and on top of that is the out-of-class time required for class preparation. The class hour fee is extremely low. Of course, there are also more serious institutions, but most are inclined to hiring less qualified or less experienced professors rather than expert professors, because the hourly fee in the latter case would be much higher”, claimed Silva, who added that “such a situation is highly detrimental to teaching quality”.

Chile is also faced with a downgrading quality because of the imposition of casualization forms: “those colleagues who do not contribute to the education business are quickly removed. I myself had an experience teaching at a private institution where I only served one term because if you do not approve the number of students they require to make their business profitable, you are out”, pointed out Ramos.

Overworking conditions

In turn, both those in stable situations and those under casualized employment schemes have witnessed growing demands on the side of their employing institutions. Many a time, this is particularly apparent in the field of research, given that professors are presented with certain requirements (whether in the number of annual publications or working hours) which are detrimental to the quality of their production.

As an illustration, in some Colombian universities, professors are required (or sometimes allowed, given that those tasks are performed ad honorem) to do research, but -according to Pedro Hernández-, given the number of hours they

are forced to teach, they are left with very little chances of becoming engaged in somewhat complex tasks. "They might be awarded four or eight hours within their Schedule for laboratory work, which is laughable when it comes to research work, because doing research on a specific subject takes at least 20 hours a week". In other cases, they are required to do research on an unpaid basis: "Professors are asked to do research for free, otherwise it might be a ground for future dismissal".

The other negative aspect is the type of research undertaken. "Due to the rankings, publishing an array of articles not adhering to the expected rigorousness seems to be the trend. There is an increase in the amount of research, which still fails to be impactful on the organization of society or on its productive system or on job creation. On top of that, there come dwindling research budgets".

"There is very little research activity in Peruvian universities" adds Sifuentes. This is because, according to him, the appointments to tenured professor are very few and because, amongst adjunct professors, even though they are required to perform this type of tasks, they often need to allocate their time outside the classroom to other activities in order to supplement their monthly income.

The Chilean case is more peculiar. On the one side, as is the case of other countries, there are also efficiency-based overworking situations which undermine the process quality: "If researchers fail to comply with certain requirements, their contracts of employment are terminated at the end of the year and they are out. The demand is to achieve three or four publications, depending on the field of research, and if such turnout is not achieved they might as well forget about maintaining their job with the institution. On top of that, there is teaching and other related tasks the university imposes on them".

Yet, on the other side, over the latest years private universities have been on a fierce hunting for researchers trained in the public system and for state funds to be allocated to such projects. "If you earn 10 in a state university, private ones offer you a salary of 30 and the possibility that you can also take all your research projects along with you", explains Ramos. This is achieved by means of a system merging Fondecyt's project-oriented state funds with private universities' own funds, which encourage their researchers' publications through monetary bonuses. This does not only enhance institutions' visibility on international rankings, but also allows a process of appropriation of the knowledge partially produced on the basis of state funds", claims Ramos.

The state-of-affairs of the struggle

Lastly, the leaders of the unions sitting on Education International listed some of the most pressing difficulties at union level facing their countries, as well as the achievements made over lately and the struggle and bargaining processes they are currently involved in.

In Chile, there is currently a debate over a higher education reform. FAUCECH took part in the pre-legislative discussions along with other stakeholders, such as students, academic officers and even university presidents. "From state universities we have strived to come up with a reform which may lead to the restoration of the right to higher education, which we were once violently and arbitrarily stripped of, maintains Ramos, in reference to the 1973 coup de-etat. Among other claims, there is the one requiring that the state should comply with the effective legislation whereby 80% of faculty members should be tenured.

In Brazil, PROIFES is coordinating actions with other union federations, such as the CNTE (which gathers public schools' teachers) and the CONTEE (gathering private education teachers) in the framework of the National Education Forum which, according to the effective law, is entrusted with the design of a National Education Program. However, warns Silva, making progress in the current political scenario is tough. In fact, last year they found themselves participating in a National Forum for the Defense of Public Education. In June, along with workers from the elementary education federations CONTEE and CNTE and with Education International Latin America, PROIFES hosted a seminar on the privatization and commodification of Education in Brazilia.

ASPU is engaged in the discussion of several issues with the Colombian government: first in line is the appointment of tenured professors. Back in 2015 a commission was set up in order to discuss, among other issues, the establishment of a unified criterion about the number of students required by public universities in relation to the their student populations: "we are struggling to achieve a 1/20 ratio, whereas the government's proposal is 1/50", outlines Hernández. On the basis of such ratio a process for the appointment to tenured professorships would be implemented. Yet, he is in the belief that for the struggle to succeed, the commitment of casualized workers themselves is key. "They demand from us, tenured professors, to struggle on their behalf, but when we founded the union we went out to struggle for our own appointments. Awareness-raising is paramount: people should be aware that they stand as right holders and that, as such, they should claim for their restoration."

On the other hand, following a decade of struggles, the Colombian union succeeded in having adjunct professors included in contracts of employment (that is, including social benefits proportional to the length of employment) rather than in civil contracts, as was the case up to then. In the private sector, they managed to move the professors' standing only into a step below: a contract of employment is now acknowledged though not under a professorship scheme, but under a civil scheme, which entails fewer benefits. Today, ASPU is seeking to equate both systems and additionally claims for the removal of profit-oriented private universities.

In 2016 FENDUP was engaged in a long-standing conflict focused on Peruvian universities' wage, labor, budget and quality issues. The list of claims included the compliance with regulations establishing that tenured professors should have wage levels similar to those of judges, which remains non-complied. Yet, the establishment of a wage scale, a work schedule and the one-year length of

contracts involving postgraduate courses professors was yet indeed achieved. They have sought for the support of professors and administrative staff to push for a higher budget for the sector. "In theory, 3% of the budget should be allocated to public universities, but in practice many a time not even 2% is met".

(IEC, 2017)