

## Critical Education and Insurgent Pedagogies: An Interview with E. Wayne Ross

Carlo Fanelli

**Carlo Fanelli<sup>1</sup> (CF):** Before working in the post-secondary education sector, you also taught as a pre-school and high-school instructor. Could you explain the impact that neoliberalism has had philosophically and as a political economic project on the institutional aspects of education. Have there been noticeable cultural shifts, differences in pedagogical emphases or allocation of funding priorities?

**E. Wayne Ross<sup>2</sup> (EWR):** For more than three decades now there has been a steady intensification of education reforms worldwide aimed at making public schools and universities more responsive to the interests of capital than ever before. And, neoliberal ideology is at the heart of what's been labelled the global education reform movement or GERM. Key neoliberal principles such as reducing government spending for education (and other social services) and privatizing public enterprises has led to targeting the very existence of public education or more precisely education in the public interest. Indeed, a key aim of neoliberalism is the destruction of the commons, the very idea of the common

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good, instead substituting individualism and individual responsibility. This idea is reflected in Stephen Harper's calls to avoid "committing sociology" or Margaret Thatcher's declaration that there is "no such thing as society." Denying the existence of the commons and public interests transforms long held notions about what democracy is and the role of public education in democratic societies.

Neoliberal education reform aims for a large-scale transformation of public education that opens it up to private investment, enabling extraction of private profits. In 2005, the global education market was valued at \$2.5 trillion; and the latest estimates are \$4.4 trillion, with projections for rapid growth over the next five years. So, the opportunity for profit extraction is huge. Corporations and the governments that serve their interests, along with neoliberal think tanks like the Fraser Institute and Frontier Centre and philanthrocapitalist entities like the Gates, Broad, and Walton Foundations have been systematically reconstructing the discourse about public education as well as education funding and the nature of teaching and learning that goes in classrooms so that public education better serves the interests of capital. As a result, education aimed at helping students develop personally meaningful understandings of the world and contributing to a flourishing civil society is stifled.

There are three key strategies of neoliberal education reform: (1) School choice and privatization; (2) human capital policies for teachers; and (3) standardized curriculum coupled with the increased use of standardized testing. Charter schools are publicly funded independent schools that are attended by choice. Neoliberal education reformers promote policies that would close public schools deemed "low performing" and replace them with publicly funded, but privately run charters and/or expanded use of vouchers and tax credit subsidies for private school tuition. Human capital policies for teachers aim to alter the working conditions of teachers, which makes eliminating or limiting the power of teacher unions a primary objective of neoliberal education reform. Human capital education policies include increasing class size (often tied to firing teaching staff); eliminating or weakening of tenure and seniority rights; using unqualified or "alternatively certified" teachers; increasing the hours that teachers work and reducing sick leave; and replacing governance by locally elected school boards, with various forms of mayoral and state takeover or private management; and using the results of student standardized tests to make teacher personnel decisions in hiring, firing, and pay.

Key parts of the education reform discourse in the USA, which can be traced directly through every Republican and Democratic presidential administration from Reagan to Obama, include a focus on standardization of the curriculum and de-professionalization of teachers as teaching is increasingly reduced to test preparation. From Reagan's *A National At Risk*, to George H. W. Bush's National Education Summits, Clinton's Goals 2000, to George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act, and Obama's *Race To the Top*, there has been an ever tightening grip on what students learn and what teachers teach. The primary instruments used in the surveillance of teachers and students and enforcement of official knowledge has been the creation of state level curriculum standards paired with standardized tests, creating bureaucratic accountability systems that undermine the freedom to teach and learn.

In parallel to the rise of standards-based, test-driven education there is been an ever growing resistance at the grassroots levels in the USA. What started has a small movement in the education community in the 1990s – led by groups such as the Rouge Forum, Chicago public schools teachers and other educators who produce the newspaper *Substance*, including teacher and writer Susan Ohanian, The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) and the Rethinking Schools collective – has blossomed into a wide-spread resistance movement.<sup>3</sup> For example, teachers in Chicago and Seattle have recently won important victories for the resistance to corporate education reforms.

While community-based groups across the USA continue to gain traction in efforts to derail test-driven education, the education de-formers led by Obama's education secretary Arne Duncan and corporate/philanthropic backers including the Gates, Broad and Walton Family foundations still have the upper hand, demanding use of student standardized tests results to make teacher personnel decisions in hiring, firing, and pay. And, the next big thing in standardized curriculum is known as the Common Core State Standards, which were created by Gates Foundation consultants for the National Governors Association. The Common Core is, in effect, a national curriculum that will be enforced via tests that are currently being developed by publishing behemoth Pearson.

The political and educational landscape in Canada differs in important ways from the USA, but it is certainly not immune from the deleterious effects of neoliberal education reform. The Canadian education

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: FairTest's "Testing and Resistance Reform News" (<http://fairtest.org/news/other/>); Substance News (<http://www.substancenews.net/>); Susan Ohanian's website (<http://www.susanohanian.org/>); Rethinking Schools (<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/>); and The Rouge Forum website (<http://www.rougeforum.org/>).

system is a collection of regional systems in which governments have advanced neoliberal agendas for public education, including “increasing choice” by fostering private schools, introducing a number of market mechanisms into the public education, imposing standardized tests that used to create ranking or “league tables” to enhance competition between schools as well as allowing private companies to advertise in schools.

The province of British Columbia, in particular, is an important battleground over neoliberal education reform. BC is home to one of the most politically successful neoliberal governments in the world and schoolteachers have been waging a pitched battle against the BC Liberals since the party swept into power in 2001. I’ll say more on that later. School governance in the province is also entirely top-down, with the appearance of local influence via local school planning councils. While BC does not have the proliferation of standardized tests that exist in the USA, standardized tests scores are used by the Fraser Institute, an influential neoliberal think tank, to rank schools in BC. Fraser Institute rankings are used to promote the notion “choice” in education and generally serve as a means for categorizing poorer, more diverse public schools as “failing,” while wealthy private schools dominate the top spots.

In BC, government retains its authority over public education, but no longer undertakes the responsibility of assuring the educational well-being of the public. Instead, this responsibility is devolved to individual school boards. The funding model for public education in BC, which I’ll mention again in a moment, reflects the neoliberal principle that more of the public’s collective wealth should be devoted to maximizing private profits rather than serving public needs. Canada, like the USA, has also seen a dramatic pushback against neoliberal education reform. Perhaps the most widely known recent action was the 2012 Quebec student protests, also known as the Maple Spring, in response to government efforts to raise university tuition. Significant examples of resistance to the common-nonsense of neoliberalism in the past decade are the British Columbia teachers’ 2005 and 2014 strikes, which united student, parent, and educator interests in resisting the neoliberal onslaught on education in the public interest.

The first step in resisting neoliberalism is realizing that we are not “all in this together,” that is, neoliberalism benefits the few at the expense of the many. The corporate mass media would have us adopt the mantra that what is good for the corporate capitalist class is good for the rest of us, thus we have the logic of efficiency, cost containment

and (deceptive claims about) affordability in education prized over the educational well-being of the public.

The central narrative about education (and other social goods) has been framed in ways that serve the interests of capital. For example, in North America, free market neoliberals in think tanks and foundations and in the dominant media outlets have been successful in framing discussions on education in terms of accountability, efficiency, market competition, and affordability. The assumptions underlying these narratives are typically unquestioned or at least under-analyzed. Indeed, neoliberal education reforms are not only flawed in their assumptions, but also even when judged on their own terms these reforms are empirical failures and have worsened the most pressing problems of public education, including funding inequalities, racial segregation, and anti-intellectualism. It is imperative that educators challenge the dominant neoliberal frames that would define education as just another commodity from which profits are to be extracted.

**CF:** You are currently involved in the Rouge Forum and the Institute for Critical Education Studies, which also happens to publish the academic journals *Critical Education* and *Workplace*. Could you explain what initiatives the Rouge Forum is involved in? In what ways does the Institute for Critical Education Studies and its companion journals support critical social research, intellectual freedom and democratic political engagement?

**EWR:** The origins of the Rouge Forum can be traced back to anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-chauvinist actions carried out by social studies, literacy, and special educators in the mid-1990s. The Rouge Forum emerged from a series of political controversies within the National Council for the Social Studies (the largest professional organization for social studies teachers and teacher educators in North America) during the 1990s. Specifically, two events at the 1994 annual meeting of NCSS in Phoenix galvanized a small group of activists who later founded the Rouge Forum. First, a staff person from the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (who was also a certified social studies teacher) was arrested for anti-ROTC leafleting at a NCSS conference event; and secondly, the governing body of NCSS rejected a resolution condemning California's Proposition 187 (which established a state-run citizenship screening system and prohibited undocumented US persons from using health care, public education, and other social services) and calling for a boycott of the state as a site for future meetings of the NCSS. These events fuelled a level of political activism the NCSS

had rarely experienced and emphasized the need for organized action in support of free speech and anti-racist pedagogy in the field of social studies education in general and within NCSS in particular

In 1998, Rich Gibson, Michael Peterson (both then on the faculty at Wayne State University), and myself organized what became the first meeting of the Rouge Forum in Detroit. The meeting of around 300 education activists was described by one participant as a “72 hour conversation without end.” People came and went and the agenda flowed with the ideas of attendees. Most found it a refreshing change from the routine of reading papers to each other. One important advantage was having access to a venue that was open 24 hours a day, offering a large room for plenaries and small breakout rooms at no cost; testimony to the working class roots of Wayne State University.

Toward the close of the meeting, we chose the name, Rouge Forum, after the nearby Ford River Rouge Complex, and all of its implications, and our dedication to open investigations of the world. We have never been troubled with the relationship to the French, “red,” but that was not on the minds of the locals to whom The Rouge means a river, and a huge factory in death throes, and the possibility to overcome. Since, we have been accused of being nothing but reds (hardly true, liberal democrats, libertarians, US troops, socialists, anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, and many others belong to the Rouge Forum.) We’ve stuck with the name since and the reds inside the Rouge Forum seem comfortable with the action-oriented liberals, and vice versa. Friendship, sacrifice for the common good (solidarity), all remain ethics of the Rouge Forum.

The Rouge Forum is perhaps the only school-based group in North America that has connected imperialism, war, and the regulation of schooling. The Rouge Forum has been active in efforts to resist curriculum standardization and high-stakes testing in schools, particularly as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act and Obama’s Race To The Top scheme in the USA. The Rouge Forum produced the first petition against high-stakes testing in schools in the USA and has been a key player in the testing resistance movement from its beginning, working strategically with groups like FairTest (The National Center for Fair and Open Testing) and locally organized groups in Michigan, New York, Illinois and many other states in a variety of campaigns, protests, and direct actions.

Rouge Forum members have also joined, and assumed leadership in, community coalitions organized against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, usually coalitions involving labour, leftists, grassroots collectives,

and religious groups aimed at ending the war, and they are frequently involved in school-based organizing, and counter-military recruitment as well. The Rouge Forum holds an annual, theme-based, meeting and members also participate within various professional organizations and union conferences as well organizing local events. The 2015 meeting is in the planning stages and will be San Diego State University (Rouge-Forum.org and RougeForumConference.org).

The operative principle for the actions of the Rouge Forum is the idea that schools hold a key position in North American society and educators play a critical role in the creation of a more democratic egalitarian society, or one that increases inequality and authoritarianism. At issue for the Rouge Forum, as Rich Gibson and I wrote in a 2007 *CounterPunch* article, “school workers do not need to be missionaries for capitalism, and schools its missions...” The metaphor is nearly perfect.

Schools hold centripetal and centrifugal positions in North American society. One in four people are directly connected to schools: school workers, students, or parents. Many others are linked in indirect ways. Schools are the pivotal organizing point for most people’s lives, in part, because of de-industrialization and, in part, the absence of serious struggle emanating from the industrial working class despite its historical civilizing influence.

School is not merely school, but the point of origin for health care, food, and daytime shelter and safety for many people. Schools are also huge markets (consider the bus purchases, architectural and building costs, salaries), as well as bases for technological instruction and skill training. Schools warehouse children, serving as an important tax supported day care system for companies whose increasingly poorly paid workers come from dual income family who see their children an average of 20 hours less a week than they did in 1979. The beginning point in understanding the role teachers play as major actors in a centripetally positioned organization is to understand the value teachers create within capitalist societies. This is what Marx had to say:

“The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes to the self-valorization of capital. If we may take an example from outside the sphere of material production, a schoolmaster is a productive worker when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his pupils, he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sau-

sage factory, makes no difference to the relation. The concept of a productive worker therefore implies, not merely a relation between the activity of work and its useful effect, between the worker and the product of the work, but also a specific social relation of production, a relation with a means of valorization. To be a productive worker is therefore not a piece of luck, but a misfortune.” (Marx, 1976, 644)

The Institute for Critical Education Studies is a relatively new entity, which I co-founded with two of my colleagues in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, Sandra Mathison and Stephen Petrina. As Paul Simon sings “that’s astute...why don’t we get together and call ourselves an institute.” On the lighter side, that’s what we’ve done. We had been informally networked since 2004. The Institute for Critical Education Studies was formally established in October 2010 to support studies within a critical education or critical pedagogy tradition. ICES maintains a network that conducts and circulates cultural, educational, or social research and discourse that are critical in method, scope, tone, and content.

ICES, *Critical Education* and *Workplace: A Journal For Academic Labor* defend the freedom, without restriction or censorship, to disseminate and publish reports of research, teaching, and service, and to express critical opinions about institutions or systems and their management. Co-Directors of ICES, co-Hosts of ICES and *Workplace* blogs, and co-Editors of these journals resist all efforts to limit the exercise of academic freedom and intellectual freedom, recognizing the right of criticism by authors or contributors.

ICES, *Critical Education*, and *Workplace* all function with an independent and free press ethic, as a publisher and as media for its academic and citizen journalists. *Critical Education* and *Workplace* publish academic research along with a range of critical opinion while the ICES and *Workplace* blogs, Twitter stream, and Facebook walls support academic and citizen journalism. The co-Directors of ICES function in various capacities as editors, researchers, teachers, cultural critics or intellectuals, and academic and citizen journalists. ICES, *Critical Education* and *Workplace* promote and defend open access and the principle that making information or research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. *Critical Education* is one of a small handful of journals in the field of education that exclusively publishes articles in the critical social science tradition. *Workplace* was one of the very first online, open access scholarly journals ever, and was founded by a collective of

scholars in higher education, with close ties to the Modern Language Association, particularly the MLA Graduate Student Caucus.

In its short history ICES has been involved with advocacy on public education issues in BC through its own media outlets as well as contributing to mainstream and independent print and broadcast media in BC and nationally on a variety of topics including school curriculum, teaching, education funding, teacher education, academic labour, and education policy. The Institute's major new project is a cohort-based Masters of Education program in Critical Pedagogy and Education Activism (CPEA) through the Faculty of Education at UBC (<http://pdce.educ.ubc.ca/cpea/>). Labour action, appeals to environmentalism, equity and social justice, and private versus public education funding debates challenge teachers to negotiate the fluid boundaries between everyday curriculum and evaluation within the schools and critical analysis and activism in communities and the media. This new program is built on the rationale that teachers, teacher educators, and researchers must realize that intellectual (and political) activism is essential to teaching, learning and evaluation that is transformative.

Based on principles of solidarity, engagement, and critical analysis and research, the CPEA masters program frames education activism as an intentional action with the goal of bringing about positive change in schools and education. An education activist works for positive change at the school level in how teaching and learning are conceptualized and the nature of relationships in education, and also at the workplace and community level in how educational policy, working conditions, and community relations are conceptualized, developed and maintained.

**CF:** What critical theories and radical pedagogies have had the greatest impact on your thinking? How do you integrate these insights in the classroom and in your research?

**EWR:** A colleague once described my thinking as heterodox and that's fair. I have been influenced by a wide spectrum of thought and has evolved over time in dramatic ways. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in South and North Carolina I lived in the racially segregated world of Jim Crow and as a high school student experienced the tumultuous events of desegregation of schools in Charlotte, NC. My father was a Pentecostal minister and my family life revolved around the church and Christian fundamentalist beliefs, which rejects theological liberalism and cultural modernism. These contexts have had huge impact on my thinking as I struggled with and against authority and hierarchy.

My early career as a social studies teacher and teacher educator was marked by interests in critical sociology of teaching, social psychology, and questions about the relations of individuals and community, particularly as explored in the philosophy of John Dewey. I would say the roots of my thought can be traced to John Dewey's radical reconceptualization of democracy, though Dewey is not a critical theorist. Dewey's notion of democracy cannot be found in the electoral democracies of capitalism. For Dewey, the primary responsibility of democratic citizens is concern with the development of shared interests that lead to sensitivity about repercussions of their actions on others. Dewey characterized democracy as a force that breaks down the barriers that separate people and creates community. The more porous the boundaries of social groups, the more they welcome participation from all individuals, and as the varied groupings enjoy multiple and flexible relations, society moves closer to fulfilling the democratic ideal.

From a Deweyan perspective, democracy is not merely a form of government nor is it an end in itself; it is the means by which people discover, extend, and manifest human nature and human rights. For Dewey, democracy has three roots: free individual existence; solidarity with others; and choice of work and other forms of participation in society. The aim of democratic education and thus a democratic society is the production of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality. While Dewey's democratically informed education philosophy is quite familiar to folks in education, it has largely been influential only conceptually, it's radical potential remains, in almost every respect, unrealized in schools and society.

As part of my doctoral studies in the 1980s, I was immersed in the Frankfurt School critical theory, an interdisciplinary approach to emancipatory social theory. I was particularly influenced by Jürgen Habermas's work on communicative action and communicative rationality. The latter, has been described as free and open discussion of an issue by all relevant persons, with a final decision being dependent upon the strength of better argument, and never upon any form of coercion. In my view, this admittedly idealized construction still has tremendous pedagogical power. Marx, Foucault, and Guy Debord have also loomed large for me, as well as Chomsky's political thought and critique of capitalist media. I've learned much from Bertell Ollman's work on dialectics, alienation, class-consciousness, and ideology (not to mention radical humour). My colleague and collaborator, Rich Gibson, who is an emeritus professor at San Diego State University, has been a tremendous Marx mentor for

me. Gibson has also extended and deepened my understanding of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy.

Kevin D. Vinson and I have worked together for many years and our collaborative work is deeply indebted to the thought of Foucault and Debord, the Marxist theorist and filmmaker who was a founder of the Situationist International. Through Debord, I began to explore anarchist thought and its vast potential for critical educational work. And, I will be teaching a course in 2015 that draws heavily from the deschooling and free school traditions in education. The oppressive and inequitable consequences of authority and hierarchical organizations in social relations – the church, the state, and capitalism – continue to motivate me in my journey that has taken me from a liberal Christian to Deweyan democrat and onward to a concern for creating a society characterized by positive liberty as I continue to struggle with and against authority and hierarchy.

The radical pedagogical principles that emerge from my study of these scholars include: Educators should seek to create conditions in which students can develop personally meaningful understandings of the world and recognize they have agency to act on the world, to make change; Education is not about showing life to people, but bringing them to life. The aim is not getting students to listen to convincing lectures by experts, but getting them to speak for themselves in order to achieve, or at least strive toward an equal degree of participation and better future.

**CF:** You have written extensively about the challenges of standardized testing. Could you present a snapshot of the debate and briefly explain the promises and perils of “high-stakes accountability” (as you and your colleague Sandra Mathison refer to it)?

**EWR:** Accountability strategies of neoliberal education reform rely heavily on measuring outcomes, especially student achievement, and attaching consequences, either positive or negative, to various levels of performance (e.g., the stakes involved might be advancement in grade level, assignment to a particular curricular stream, or graduation). These accountability strategies affect everyone and every aspect of schools and schooling at local, regional, national, and international levels.

In most places, outcome-based bureaucratic accountability prevails. This form of accountability holds teachers and schools accountable to government education authorities for producing improvements in student learning outcomes (e.g., test scores). This accountability strategy focuses teachers, administrators, schools, parents, and students on specific forms of limited knowledge and skills. Government agencies

create guides for common content and standards that are manifest in performance on mandated student tests. Accountability, as a concept, is fundamentally an economic interaction in hierarchical, bureaucratic systems, between those who have power and those who do not. It is a state of being in which persons are obligated to answer to others. But complex hierarchical systems, like schools, do not permit those in power to be everywhere and do everything at the same time to achieve what they consider to be desirable outcomes. Consequently, authority is delegated to others, which disperses power to lower levels of the hierarchical system.

When power is delegated and dispersed to those within a hierarchical system, there is an expected return from the investment of that power in others. Those to whom power has been delegated are obligated to answer, or render an account of, the degree of success in accomplishing the outcomes desired by those in power. Because of the diffuse nature of many hierarchical systems, accountability depends on both surveillance and self-regulation. The power of surveillance is born out in part by the spectacle that may result from accounting by those to whom power has been delegated. In other words, the powerful in small numbers are surveilling the performance of many (through means such as standardized tests), which in turn become spectacles observed by the many (as in when schools test scores are reported on the front page of the newspaper). Self-regulation, that is the faithful exercise of delegated authority (teachers, principals, etc.), is in part based on surveillance and the possibility of spectacle, but also on the perception of the legitimacy of those delegating power.

This perceived legitimacy is key to the hegemony of accountability. Hegemony is based on a projection by a dominant group (such as governments and corporate leaders) of their own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it (such as school administrators, teachers, students, parents) accept it as “common sense” or “natural.” These groups subordinated in the hegemony of accountability thus live their subordination, and this subordination is sustained through everyday discourse and practice, as well as in the popular media.

**CF:** From pre-school to post-secondary education, public funding has often failed to keep pace with inflation. In many ways, this has led to the development of new user-fees, so-called public-private-partnerships and corporate philanthropy. Could you discuss what challenges this ‘privatization by stealth’, as some have called it, poses for publically

funded, universally accessible education? Does corporate sector penetration threaten academic independence?

**EWR:** Earlier I briefly mentioned that in BC, the government retains its authority over public education, but no longer undertakes the responsibility of assuring the educational well-being of the public. Instead, this responsibility is devolved to individual school boards. This is a fundamental principle of neoliberal government: devolution of responsibility, without authority. Again, as mentioned before, the funding model for public education in BC is based upon the principle that more of our collective wealth should be devoted to maximizing private profits rather than serving public needs and you can see how this plays out in the privatization through the backdoor, or stealth privatization.

For example, the privatization and marketization of public schools in BC is being pursued through multiple strategies: Private schools now receive over \$200 million per year in public funding, with some schools receiving 35-50% of their funding from taxpayers and private schools for low-incidence, severely disabled students receiving 100% public funding; School districts are encouraged to sell seats in public schools to international students. International students pay about \$12,000/year tuition to attend BC public schools, which is about twice as much as the provincial grant for Canadian students in public schools; Public school districts are now allowed to create private, for-profit business companies to set up overseas schools staffed by BC certified teachers teaching the BC provincial curriculum as a way to make up for inadequate government funding; Inadequate funding from the province has pushed local parent groups into more and more fundraising and made schools more vulnerable to corporate incursions, which include advertising and corporate-branded private grants to support core curricular as well as extra-curricular school activities.

A prime example of corporate incursion into public schools is Chevron's "Fuel Your Schools" program, in which the Vancouver School Board recently refused to participate, prompting something of a backlash in corporate-owned media. The basic logic is underfund public education to create opportunities for supposedly altruistic corporations to fill the funding gap. Then you have public schools in the position of relying on the largesse of corporations. In Chevron's case, you have a multinational corporation that runs irresponsible and unsafe operations around the world and in Ecuador, for example, despoiling the lands of indigenous peoples and then running away from \$9.5 billion court judgement for their illegal actions. The "Fuel Your Schools" program is one way

Chevron whitewashes its corporate image, with a pittance of money that does little in terms of closing the serious funding deficits public schools are grappling with in the province. Then when Patti Bacchus, chair of the VSB, rejects the dirty Chevron money, the journalists who do the bidding for the corporate capitalism, like Gary Mason at *The Globe and Mail*, attack Bacchus for being “ideological.” Of course, Chevron is not ideological...

This strategy – underfunding public education to create openings for corporate incursion into schools – is employed globally. In Mexico, Ford and Coca-Cola have undermined academic independence by offering poorly funded public schools money then requiring them to illustrate their effectiveness in the form of improved test scores. Schools become reliant on corporations for basic infrastructure then become obligated to transform teaching and learning into test prep, drill and kill pedagogy aimed at creating a compliant workforce to continue to receive corporate funding.

Here in BC, the Liberals waltzed into the legislature in 2001 and started an unprecedented program of inequitable tax cuts. As a result, BC now has a regressive tax system. A Broadbent Institute report released earlier this year points out that in BC the poor are now paying more in all taxes as a percentage of income than the rich. BC Liberals’ tax cuts over the past 10 years have benefited the richest 1 percent of British Columbians to the tune of \$41,000 per year, while the bottom 40 percent have benefited by an average of \$200 per year. Both the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Conference Board of Canada agree that despite the elimination of the provincial deficit and the recently announced \$353 million surplus, overall spending as a share of the provincial GDP in BC is shrinking and will reach a record low in 2017.

With BC near the bottom in provincial per student education funding and BC teachers near the bottom in average salary, government budgeted only 0.6 per cent increases for K-12 education the next three years. While the provincial budget conservatively projects revenue increases at 8 percent annually, it has budgeted less than a one per cent annual increase in the budget for B.C. schools. It is within this frame that the government’s public relations machine shaped discourse around what was affordable or not in negotiations with teachers and discussions about remedies for illegally stripping the teachers’ contracts of language around class size and composition.

**CF:** Based on your understanding of events, could you summarize the significance of the 2014 British Columbia teachers’ strike? What

was the position of the Liberal government and why did teachers go on strike? How was the strike received by the broader community and characterized in the press?

**EWR:** BC has been ruled for over a decade by arguably one of the most successful neoliberal political parties in the world. And the British Columbia Teachers Federation has not shied away from battling against the BC Liberals efforts to make the province into a haven for corporations and wealthy individuals at the expense of working people and the environment. The BC Liberals have closely followed the neoliberal blueprint by cutting taxes for the wealthy, slashing social programs, privatizing state-owned enterprises, goods, and services, and attacking unions, particularly the BCTF. In 2002 the BC Liberal government imposed draconian legislation on public sector workers that overrode provisions in existing collective bargaining agreements – a neoliberal human capital strategy, as I previously mentioned. Bills 27 and 28, which applied to teachers, unilaterally deleted contract provisions that applied to class-size maximum; class composition; staffing levels; support for inclusion of students with special needs; length of the school day; and hours of instruction in the school year.

Over the past decade BCTF has challenged and won legal decisions against the government's actions, yet the government has not complied with the court decisions. These were the key issues in the strike, and the BCTF was able to secure a deal that did not undo their courts wins and provided improvements on class size and composition for BC schools. But their success in protecting these court wins was tempered by failure to get the kind of gains on wages and benefits that would lift teachers to within shouting distance of the Canadian averages. I think there are a few big take away messages from the strike and the settlement. First, neoliberal governments are ruthless in their policies aiming to slash social services budgets so that taxes can be cut for the wealthy and mega tax breaks can be given to corporations. The BC Liberals illustrated they were ready and willing to make teachers hurt financially (and they did) by refusing to negotiate in good faith, until they started to feel the pressure from parents and businesses affected by the strike. Then a few weeks after squeezing the teachers, BC Liberals announced sweetheart tax breaks for the Liquid Nitrogen Gas industry that equal hundreds of millions of dollars.

The second takeaway is that BC teachers continue to put teaching and learning conditions in schools at the top of their priority list. It's not that they don't need, want, or deserve increases in benefits and wages,

but in this settlement individual self-interest took a backseat to issues of learning conditions for students. And, as in the illegal strike in 2005, teachers found that more of the public backed their position compared to the government's. When teachers' unions fight hard for improved teaching and learning conditions they are much more likely to receive broad public support because it illustrates teachers solidarity with the needs and interests of their students. This principle has been proven in other contexts as well, notably the Detroit teachers wildcat strikes, such the one in 1999, which used the slogan "Books, supplies, and lower class size."

Lastly, public dialogue about the strike was dominated by the government's news frame. For example, the deceptive "affordability" narrative that advertising man/education minister Peter Fassbender hammered on for months was accepted at face value by corporate media. This is not surprising given who owns the mainstream media and it highlights the importance of unions and other social movements constructing counter-narratives to one's that serve elite interests. Part of what we have tried to do with the Institute for Critical Education Studies is provide platforms that support progressive policy initiatives and that insert alternative perspectives, drawing from critical research and analysis into the public discussion on teaching, learning, schooling, and academic labour.

**CF:** Are there parallels to be found here in the university sector? I'm thinking also of the tendency to move away from secure, tenure-track employment to increasingly contractual and precarious arrangements, along with larger classroom sizes for example.

**EWR:** Absolutely. Despite steady growth in post-secondary enrolments over the past thirty years there has been a parallel decline in the number of full time, tenure track jobs. In the US, over seventy percent of the instruction in post-secondary education is delivered by contingent and part-time professors, with Canadian universities not far behind. The corporate university is now the norm. For example, University of British Columbia's land trust (the provincial endowment to the university) operates completely independently of the academic side of the university. As a result, we have the anomaly of reduced instructional budgets, loss of faculty lines, increases in part-time sessional faculty, and demands that graduate students and faculty bring money into the university to finance their own programs of research and to justify their continued existence. My own department no longer supplies me with toner for my printer; "get a grant for that or use your professional development benefits to buy one," I'm told. For technology and research needs faculty are largely

self-funded. These conditions exist on the academic side, while the university's real estate development program runs in high gear, building and selling on-campus condos for multi-million dollar price tags neither students or faculty can afford.

And, like schools in BC, universities are now selling more and more of their seats to international students who pay about five times more for their education at UBC than Canadian students. Indeed, UBC is currently building an exclusive new stand alone college for international student that will cost nearly \$130 million, which will exclusively enrol international students who will be paying over \$50,000 per year to live and study at UBC. While the university pours money into this venture, there is a waiting list of over 5,000 current students seeking housing on campus. And, of course, there is a crisis of student debt across North America.

**CF:** In addition to your formal academic writing you also publish extensively in newspapers and magazines, appear on radio and television, and maintain an active social media presence. How does this work complement your scholarly publishing? Do you think critical scholars have a responsibility to engage as public intellectuals?

**EWR:** Too often the work of academics stays within a small scholarly community, available and often only fully comprehended by a few researchers who are pursuing similar interests. Of course, this circumstance is justifiable as part of the work of academics, but I do believe that as Chomsky asserted in the late 1960s intellectuals also have a responsibility to "speak the truth and expose lies." As Chomsky has pointed out, academics, particularly in the west, are something of a privileged minority (although this is less true now than in the 1960s, with reconstruction of academic work from primarily full time, tenurable positions to contingent labour) who have power that comes from political liberty, access to information, and freedom of expression. Chomsky argued that the responsibilities of intellectuals are thus deeper than the responsibilities of the people.

As a scholar whose work embraces critical social theory I feel a particular obligation to participate in the public discourse on issues relevant to my scholarly work. And my scholarly interests have always been driven, in large part, by social issues. So, for me there is a reciprocal or dialectical relationship between by public engagement and my scholarly work. There are two philosophical statements that I frequently invoke that are relevant to the question.

In *Normative Discourse*, Paul Taylor (1961) says "We must decide what ought to be the case. We cannot discover what ought to be the

case by investigating what is the case.” We – educators and citizens – must decide what ought to be the purpose of schools, education, etc. That requires asking and answering questions like what kind of society (and world) we want to live in. And, Michel Foucault wrote that critique is not merely a matter of saying that things aren’t good the way they are, but that critique is seeing what types of assumptions, of familiar notions, and unexamined ways of thinking that accepted practices are based on. To do criticism, he says, is to make facile gestures difficult. And that is what I try to do in my scholarship and my engagement with the public issues.

## REFERENCES

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