

Paritarias¹ as a Tool of Struggle for Education and Working Conditions: The Argentine experience with collective bargaining

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Summary:

With the onset of the pandemic, teachers reorganized their work and adapted their conditions to guarantee

1. “Paritaria” refers to collective work agreements reached in meetings of workers with management to discuss working conditions. It is fixed by law for teachers who work in public schools. They meet with representatives of the Ministry of Labour. The word “paritaria” means that salaries or wages are negotiated in a forum with parity of membership: an equal number of members from each side. The word has more than one meaning in Argentina. It also refers to the body which negotiates salaries and working conditions, the negotiation round (nearly always annual), and the salary or wage agreement itself. (Translator’s note.)

2. Secretary of Labour Health, CTERA Argentina. Confederación de Trabajadores de la Educación de la República Argentina (Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic). (Translator’s note.)

the right to public education by means of distance or online work. This situation immediately resulted in many problems associated with workload, limitation of rights such as time off for illness and consequent physical or mental deterioration. Nevertheless, the Argentine experience of collective bargaining through the national paritaria achieved important gains and agreements with the force of federal law which led to the regulation of teaching work in the virtual context, guaranteeing respect for rights gained and the assurance of conditions and minimal rights for teaching work during the pandemic.

As a way of thanking the IDEA Network and teachers and professors in Latin America and all over the world



for the efforts they are making in these exceptional times for humanity in the midst of the pandemic, I would like to share an experience which makes us proud of the value of union organizing, of the paritarias for the teaching profession and of collective bargaining for the workers of our countries.

These are moments of uncertainty but there are also some certainties which have to do with what today more than ever, and against the grain of neoliberal policies, is being revalued all over the world: the importance of the centrality of the state and the need for public policies. In the face of the Covid 19 pandemic this refers to public health but also relates to public education.

State regulation of the use and management of technology has become indispensable because virtually overnight the pandemic meant teachers all over the world began to teach and educate by distance learning. They have made use of precisely those new technologies which are seen as “the possibility” to continue guaranteeing what we call in Argentina “pedagogical continuity” and assure the social right to education of children and youth throughout the country and in every country of the world.

In this context, we have had to reorganize our work and teaching tasks for online education, which meant rapidly taking on major modifications of our working conditions. Because of this, the Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic (CTERA) expressed the need and urgency for a paritaria agreement which establishes that, in the first place, our teaching work cannot be framed within the strict

conditions of “telecommuting,” but as work carried out in a virtual and not in-person context which allows in part for it to be sustained by the use of technology, and, secondly, that these technologies must be guaranteed by the state and placed at the disposal of teachers and students.

This virtual work soon generated an increase in workload. Motivated by this situation, we in CTERA undertook a survey to discover the reality of educational labour in this new context. Fifteen thousand teachers throughout the country took part in this survey. Among the main results, it was observed that 80% of respondents denounced the increase in work time in this virtual mode and also the deregulation, flexibilization and precarization of working conditions. Likewise, there has been a self-imposed limitation on claiming one’s rights. For example, we observe that teachers do not take time off even when they are sick, and that in turn this heavy workload results in various kinds of illness such as vision problems, eyestrain and muscular and joint ailments. Furthermore, there is the demand for an almost one-to-one connection with students, which not only requires a greater amount of time, but also entails other demands such as preparation of work material for virtual classes and also specific communication with students, a practically individual form of communication.

In this regard, we have also observed that the line between the workday and family and personal life has been blurred since in most cases teachers have transformed their homes into classrooms. An aggravating

factor in this situation is gender since in our teaching sector approximately 80% of teachers are women who as such are mainly in charge of school aged children. All this has made teaching work and the life of education workers more complicated and complex.

For these reasons, we began to work to achieve a regulatory framework which guarantees better conditions, and on June 4, 2020 we reached an agreement between the union and the federal government in the framework of collective bargaining of the National Teaching Paritaria.

When the pandemic took us by surprise, we had already recovered this tool for struggle and improvement of working conditions from a collective perspective. This option had previously been repealed by the last neoconservative government which repressed the rights of workers until the end of their mandate in 2019.

We now have a new national government which enables dialogue and debate, and which makes it possible to reach certain agreements which have the force of law and which serve as a basis for other agreements in the provinces and jurisdictions. The provinces, for their part, can reach agreements to gain better working conditions than established on the national level, but the base level is the national one. Because of this, these eleven points of paritaria agreement reached on June 4, 2020, are very important.:

1) Defining teaching work in an online rather than in-person context, related to the basic agreement of Collective Bargaining Agreement 177. We insist that this is in a context of virtuality and only during the pandemic emergency and that in-person teaching work can never be replaced. By “in-person” we mean the task of education and interaction with others, and collective work not just with our brothers and sisters but also with students. In the meantime, we must regulate online work, and because of this we define it as teaching work which is not in-person and not telecommuting.

2) The work will be carried out by means of communication and information technologies suitable for virtual application.

3) The integrity of the teaching salary for virtual work must be maintained, and all the arrangements for time off, which have been gained through struggle and expressed in statutes and paritaria agreements, must also be respected. Substitute teachers must be replaced, just as when teachers get sick there are replacements.

4) In relation to work schedules. Shifting boundaries and flexibilization have meant that at times work schedules are not respected, either because instructions have been given to school principals or to teachers in each subject area, and the work schedule is not respected. We propose that the work schedule be respected in accordance with what has been established for workload and reiterate the right to rest. The government of each jurisdiction should establish limits on when a principal or teacher must communicate with students and their families, so that they are not connected at all hours of the day or on the weekend. And we invoke the right to disconnect so that each worker has the right to disconnect at times of rest such as holidays or the end of the work day.

5) Work safety: coverage of work accidents during the pandemic for teaching work in virtual and distance learning contexts.

6) The complete recognition of teaching work in the virtual context in the framework of established union rights.

7) Commitment of the federal government to progressively provide technological resources to carry out virtual work, but also even when work is not done online, to have an equal distribution of technological resources. We spoke about universal access so that students as well as teachers can have access to new technologies. We have asked them to bring back the program “Connecting Equality”³ which not only provided laptops to teachers and students, but also

3. “Conectar Igualdad” was an initiative of April 2010 of the government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina to give laptops to secondary students and teachers in public schools, special education, and teacher training institutions. (Translator’s note.)



established the basis for a sovereignty of knowledge in relation to the use of platforms. The current government is working to resume this program, not to the same extent as before, but nevertheless considering access to state-of-the-art computers or devices as well as the federal and provincial governments creating their own virtual platforms, which provides an alternative to depending on other platforms and multinational groups.

8) All workers engaged in education must have free training provided by the government. Today the handling of new technologies requires training. The lack of preparation in this regard contributes to other problems such as work stress, due to the enormous effort made to learn to handle new technologies in a short time while, at the same time, attending to the student body through the same platforms.

9) For the return to classrooms and the revival of in-person educational activities in schools, we need adequate infrastructure, equipment, health, security and hygiene conditions in order to avoid transmission of the virus. To this end, a paritaria agreement established in 2011, known as the “the 12 basic points,” was revived. These points proposed the need to fulfil certain minimal requirements before sending teachers and students to school premises.

10) The establishment of regulations and protocols to enable a return to work in the physical spaces of schools must include the participation of workers and their demands in order to generate formal agreements on the number of students and the protective equipment and measures which the government must provide.

11) The provinces must ensure compliance. Employers must also comply with the agreements. The commission of the paritaria must reconvene within thirty days to evaluate the application of this agreement, given that it has a national scope, but in each jurisdiction there must be control of compliance with these points.

I want to close by giving thanks and pointing out that as teachers and professors we can make this experience available to other workers as an example. I am sure that there will be more to do. Public schools teach, resist and dream, and we have shown that in this contingency we have made the greatest effort to guarantee the social right to education. However, it is also clear that we must continue guaranteeing the best working conditions and emerge from the pandemic having learned and with greater and better rights to guarantee better public education in our countries.