

Education, digital capitalism and the new class struggle*

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Summary: For several decades, the world's education systems have been conditioned by managerial and accountability-based educational policies (Bonai, 2013). This has produced a field of struggle in which, in an attempt to preserve the public sphere, teachers have developed class politics. Faced with an unprecedented wave of technological incorporation due to the pandemic, it is important to think about what new disputes the siege of digital capitalism poses for education.

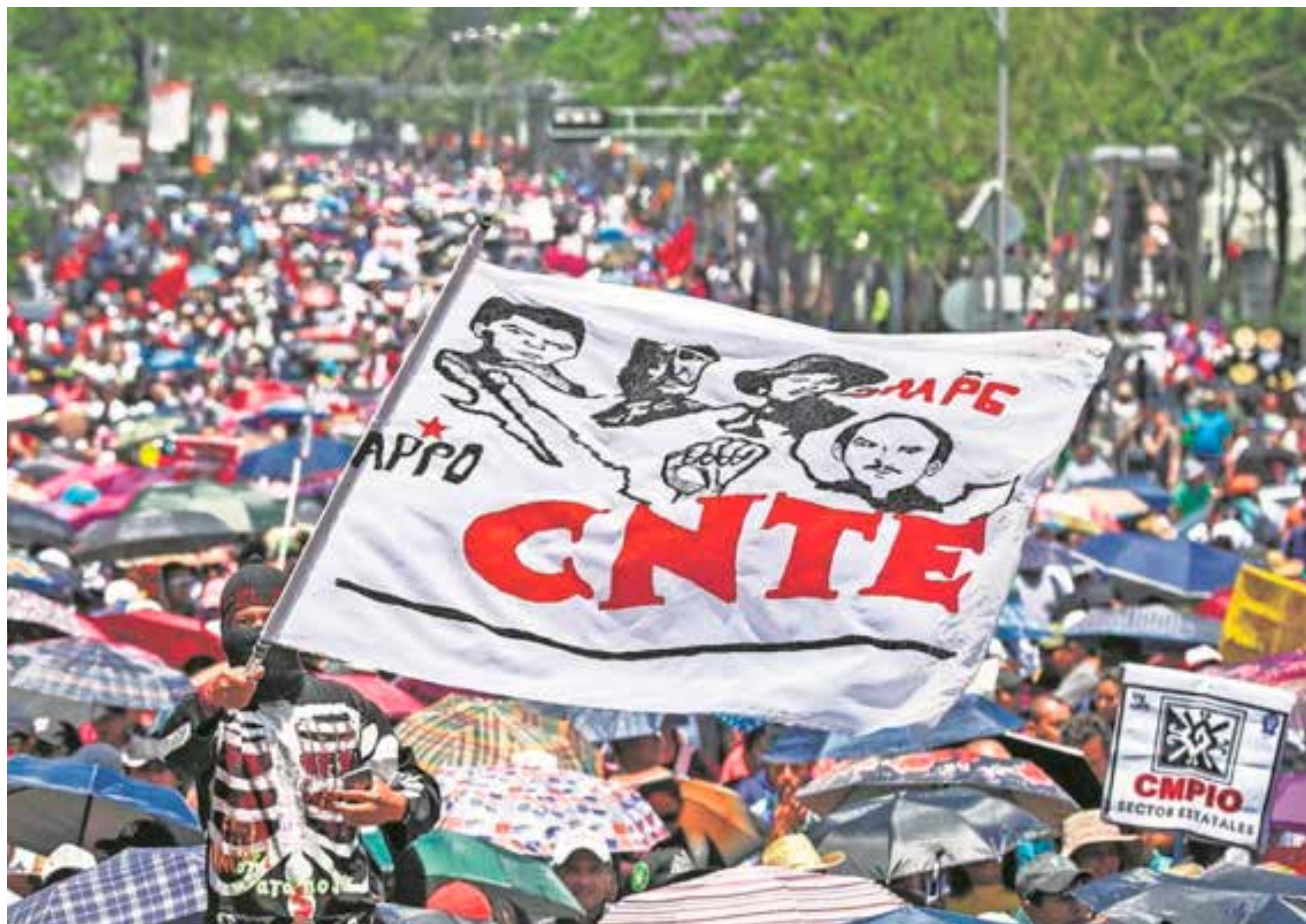
Digital capitalism and the EdTech "solutionist" siege

The concept of digital capitalism was introduced in the 1990s to emphasize the role of digital technologies in economic globalization (de Rivera, 2020). Its

development has enabled other forms of surplus value extraction, in addition to the classic forms of capital enrichment: a) the transformation of human beings into sources of data that are marketable and b) the precarization of labor through the deployment of a so-called "collaborative" economy (Rodríguez, 2020). The change in the relations of production and the commodification of life itself has allowed for a wider sphere of influence of capital over more spaces in society. The main characters in this process have been the digital infrastructures called platforms (Srnicsek, 2018) among which Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft (GAFAM) have emerged as the most important ones. With the COVID-19 pandemic, digital capitalism has landed on the global education sector on a large scale (Williamson and Hogan, 2020) as shown by the expansion of GAFAM's own commercial activities in schools around the world.

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In our sector, the actors behind digital capitalism have imposed a sort of global technological solutionism. Their aim is to sell digital learning as a generic solution to the different problems of education. Because it is technology-related, it is automatically assumed that such learning will provide greater autonomy in terms of the time and space of the educational process (Teräs; Suoranta; Teräs & Churcher, 2020). The products offered by GAFAM, and a global army of start-ups, to solve educational problems include an interesting range of hardware, productivity tools, learning management systems (LMS), professional development content, real-time video communication tools, etc. In addition to "underpinning autonomy" in the learning process, it is assumed that these will contribute to overcoming the standardized learning typical of education systems of previous centuries, to give way to a personalized learning that responds to the specific needs of each student, thanks to AI and data analysis.

EdTech has promoted a new type of common sense around the imperative of incorporating technology into schools for different purposes: a) "modernizing" them by assimilating technological change into the productive sector; b) educating students with the "21st century skills" necessary for succeeding in today's world; and c) improving the productivity and control of teachers' work.

Teachers and class struggle

In his magnum opus, Marx explained that capitalist production is essentially a surplus value creation. Thus, a worker is productive when he produces a surplus for the capitalist or serves for the self-valorization of capital. Thus, a schoolteacher is considered a productive worker when, "besides cultivating children's brains," he works to enrich the owner of the school, who "has invested his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory." The teacher is a productive worker

because he is part of a "specifically social" relation of production that gives him a direct means of valuing the capital (Marx, 2009).

Marx's very brief theoretical approach to the teaching profession was developed in a context in which nineteenth-century factory capitalism was gradually permeating school processes. However, the *mutatis mutandis* is extremely useful for thinking about our times, considering certain trends. Not without considerable resistance, teaching work has been linked to multiple gears of the extended process of capital reproduction, such as educational policies aimed at producing human capital in schools, the adoption of market values in public education, the commodification of education and the privatization of supply. Furthermore, there is the current wave of private technology being incorporated into the schools due to the pandemic.

The first two trends relate to the pedagogical interaction of teachers with students through a return to the formal curriculum, as well as the preservation of summative evaluative logics to measure the skills required by the labor market. The next two benefit private capital through its intervention in the educational sector, either through the circulation of educational goods or through investing in "teaching factories". But the last one responds to both dimensions; while digital technology affects the teaching-learning process directly (often through individualistic and consumerist logics), it also creates a potential market made up of teachers, students and families. All of them imply that teaching practice can be carried out under private control, influence or conditioning of the work process, which has implications for the politics of teachers. Although teachers' organizations have responded to this affront with mobilizations and progressive pedagogical proposals, effects such as the atomization of work, competition within the union and the adoption of managerial ideas in some sectors have been felt. In this context, the explosion of EdTech in schools presents an even more complex scenario regarding its impact on the formation of a teaching class.

E.P. Thompson (2012) proposes some elements for analyzing how the relations of production enable class formations. Among other things, he makes an important critique of the mechanistic approach that a class is determined by the distribution and control of the means of production. For him, a class is not a given, historical structure, but a relationship. The conformation of such a class stems from a given state of the relations of production that enables specific experiences. It generates antagonisms and shapes conditions of struggle. In the very development of such a struggle, class formations will end up being shaped, which will give rise to new processes of class struggles. An interesting perspective for approaching problems in teaching.

The gradual arrival of technological solutions in schools has certain objective conditions: the structural imperative of training in the use of technologies, the reorganization of class time, the institutional promotion of an EdTech language and rethinking of the role of teachers. All is presented under a powerful branding that seeks to deepen the commodification of public education.

Since this incursion impacts the individual experience of teachers with a collective history, established practices and a historically consolidated social status, it has produced a contradictory relationship with political and cultural guidelines established both within the teaching profession and educational communities in general. Thus, there are new tensions and antagonisms. The new objective conditions originated by the digital leap of the public school have generated responses at different levels that constitute real expressions of class struggle. Teachers - often supported by families and students - are resisting the new forms of control over their labor. Examples include the discontent of families and unions regarding the arrival of Google in public schools in Spain and the protests carried out in different schools in the United States against the Summit Public Schools virtual platform developed by Facebook engineers, etc.

As digital capitalism continues shaping the conditions of teaching work, new processes of struggle will be sti-



red. They are expressed at the level of the curriculum, the organization of time and forms of labor, the pathway to professionalization, the defense of the public sphere and the defense of sexual diversity. All these are instances in which EdTech entails a narrative established a priori, often focused on the instrumentalization of education, the individualization of learning, the increasing control of teacher work and its de-professionalization, the denial of diverse identities in the digital learning plane and the expansion of market logics.

As teachers take an active position in the face of the new challenges brought by digital capitalism, they are constituting themselves as a class. In this way, we can affirm that a “new” class struggle is already here, among us. The future of technology and digital capitalism in education will depend on its development. And that is why the organization of teachers is imperative.

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