

## Book Review

# In defense of teachers' struggles

Ávila Carrillo, E. (2019). Ediciones Quinto Sol. ISBN: 978-968-66620-44-2, 296 pages. Language: Spanish

**Juan Fernando Álvarez Gaytán<sup>1</sup>**

The teachers' movement in Mexico has been attacked by the media in a smear campaign that seeks to denigrate its social leadership. Additionally, educational policies of the last 30 years have tried to instill the idea that any person, of any profession and without pedagogical preparation, can be a teacher. Thus, under the apocryphal conception that teachers' organizations are a group of vested interests, their profession and struggle have been vilified.

In his book "En defensa de las luchas magisteriales" (In Defense of Teachers' Struggles), Enrique Avila Carrillo takes on the task of defending the legitimacy of the teachers' struggle. Although the author acknowledges that this is a quasi-narrative work, it has a historical-argumentative

value since it draws on valuable books, articles, journalistic notes and pamphlets.

Our author begins his journey in a newly independent Mexico (1821), a propitious time for teachers since there was academic freedom, and they could seek social transformation and fight against political control. Although the cases that are described correspond to urban teachers who commit themselves to the social cause -think perhaps of a Miguel Hidalgo or a José María Morelos, who developed their thinking in Valladolid<sup>2</sup>, for Avila Carrillo the traits of a teacher who is committed to the social cause are inherently those of a rural teacher. The hardships they suffer are connected to their humble, campesino origins, something he sees reflected in the twenty-first century communities

---

1. Independent Researcher. E-mail: mtro.fernando@outlook.com

---

2. Catholic priests, initiators of the Mexican Independence movement against Spanish colonization.

where he does his work. It is against this background that some of the first teacher conflicts referred to in the book begin to appear: teachers are watched over “in the fulfillment of their programs, (...) so that they would not teach anything against (...) good customs” (p. 19). This would mark the beginning of the disputes between teachers and those in power.

Once teachers began to question the social order, ideas of freedom and liberation would constantly appear in the various perspectives of the teaching profession. Thus, for example, professors such as Vidal Alcocer<sup>3</sup> put progressive projects into practice such as those of the utopian socialists. These counter-hegemonic proposals allowed teachers to denounce exploitation and demand greater social spending and job creation. At the same time, there were glimpses of the social value of a teacher, as when Benito Juárez<sup>4</sup> in 1861 ordered that small towns ought to have a teacher. With the rise of secularism, teachers began to demand social justice in their communities, in the light of the inequities experienced during the Porfirio era<sup>5</sup> and with their now secular perspective.

The development and expansion of the teacher training college system, or Escuelas Normalistas<sup>6</sup>, managed to combine the pedagogical aspirations of teachers, within an epistemological framework that distanced itself from religion, with a foundation that offered the first components of a job that was becoming professionalized. Thus, teachers added one more ingredient to their demands: the salary issue. Through teacher training, based on the principles of freedom, justice and democracy, the ideological battle provided a basis for economic demands. These demands subsequently encountered positivist education, through the utopian socialism

that Plotino Constantino Rhodakanaty<sup>7</sup> or Julio López Chávez<sup>8</sup> promoted, with the aim of improving material living conditions. However, teachers’ organizations at the end of the 19th century could only form as mutual or cooperative organizations and not as a union per se. The main difficulty was how to organize within a vast territory and, additionally, how to overcome the obstacle of trying to reconcile anarcho-sindicalist and Marxist perspectives, among others.

According to the book, at the beginning of the 20th century Mexican teachers had good pedagogical training. It was a golden age, both for its legacy of great teachers as well as their disciples who continued the work. However, salaries did not correspond to their theoretical, practical and methodological experience<sup>9</sup>. Wages were arbitrary and precarious. At the same time, the figure of the School Inspector appeared. This was a bureaucratic agent who worked close to teachers and who influenced organizational practices. The excellent pedagogical era was tarnished by the ideas of people who avoided horizontal teacher organizations<sup>10</sup>. Labor improvements could only be achieved through the program of the Mexican Liberal Party, since not even F. I. Madero considered them<sup>11</sup>. All in all, the role of the teacher at the dawn of the Mexican Revolution (1910) was characterized by values such as social justice, social commitment and democracy.

In this context, the role of normal schools in social demands became stronger, with their participation in proposals for a Modern School and with the teachers who debated Art. 3° of the Constitution in 1917. However, “the salary and benefit requirements that (...) they demanded were overlooked” (p. 65). The commitment to emancipatory ideals was not abandoned by teachers

---

3. Mexican educator (1801-1860).

4. President of Mexico from 1858 to 1872, whose origin was indigenous.

5. Period of dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz Mori (1877-1880; 1884-1911).

6. “The first Normal School, in the strict sense of its formative planning, was established in 1885 in the capital of Veracruz. Its director was Enrique C. Rébsamen” (p. 30).

---

7. (1828-1890) was a Greek socialist and anarchist, activist of the peasant movement in Mexico during the 19th century.

8. (?-1868) socialist peasant, disciple of P. C. Rhodakanaty.

9. Remember E. C. Rébsamen, C. A. Carrillo, E. Castañeda Núñez, A. Castellanos, L. Aguirre Espina, among others.

10. Think of G. Torres Quintero and J. Sierra Méndez.

11. President of Mexico from 1911 to 1913.

who, despite their lack of economic recognition, tried to create the Socialist Normal School or rationalist schools in an attempt to establish another social order<sup>12</sup>. The repression of demonstrations, such as the one dismantled in 1919 by V. Carranza, contrasted with the official discourse that saw the normal schools and rural education as the fundamental instrument for the new Mexican education system. The rural teacher who transformed his reality, including his own living conditions and those of his community, is the forerunner of the contemporary dissident teacher. Thus, by the time of Cardenas<sup>13</sup>, it was common for teachers to follow the causes of the people and to raise awareness and promote progress. Being a rural teacher was synonymous with practicing popular education. With the Cultural Missions<sup>14</sup>, the germination of teacher unionism began.

Teachers' organizations such as the Federación Nacional de Maestros in 1926 began to flourish throughout the country, but the sectarianism in all of them -generally constitutionalist, anarchist and Marxist- destroyed any attempts at unification. Organizations such as the Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Magisteriales (CNOM) pioneered the role of mere subordinates before the government. Even at the height of the Cardenas period, there were accusations of corporatism against teachers, who focused their demands solely on salary and job security. This persisted until the government of M. Avila Camacho<sup>15</sup>, before the complete corporatization of the profession with the creation of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) in 1943. Corporatist unionism in the SNTE was achieved through the collection of union dues and practices that discouraged activism, so that, in addition to the earlier demands, the demand

for democratic unions emerged with the creation of the SNTE. From then on, the so-called *charrismo* (yellow unionism), that is, "corrupt, pro-business leaders and (...) who apply a collaborationist policy with the go-vernment" (p. 106) spread within the SNTE, setting the stage for the teachers' struggles against the leadership of the official union.

In October 1948, Section 9 of Mexico City was the first to organize outside the SNTE, demanding salary increases and participation in the union. From then on, there would be ongoing denunciation of the obstacles that the SNTE would always put in the way to discourage teachers' resistance as well as of the tricks they played to place those teachers most loyal to the dictates of the state as heads of committees. Because of this, there were attempts to form covert organizations, such as the Frente Nacional de Unificación Magisterial (FNUM) in 1951 or Acción Revolucionaria Sindical (ARS) in 1954. But more important was the creation of a space that would be crucial for dissident teachers. These were the assemblies, which would bring democracy and communication among teachers, families and the communities. Through figures such as Othón Salazar<sup>16</sup> and his Union Executive Committee, later consolidated in the Teachers' Revolutionary Movement (MRM), these connections and common actions would serve as an incentive to nurture strikes in the Ministry of Public Education (SEP), with the support of parents. As a result, several leaders ended up in the Lecumberri<sup>17</sup> prison, while others received administrative punishments such as dismissals and changes of location.

Neither the governments of Presidents A. López Mateos<sup>18</sup> or G. Díaz Ordaz<sup>19</sup> listened to the demands of the teachers. Therefore, the followers of Othon Salazar had to create new forms of organization and protest,

---

12. President of Mexico from 1917 to 1920.

13. Presidential period (1934-1940) of L. Cárdenas del Río.

14. "This consisted of sending teachers to the countryside to teach Spanish (...), who also learned to add, subtract, multiply and divide (...) The teachers who responded to the ministry's call were known as 'missionaries' (...), organizing rural schools in each region, which had to be able to respond to the characteristics of the territory" (pp. 70-71).

15. President of Mexico from 1940 to 1946.

---

16. Mexican trade unionist (1924-2008), who actively fought against the lack of transparency of the SNTE leadership and collaborated in the MRM.

17. Space that served as a penitentiary from 1900 to 1976.

18. Period from 1958 to 1964.

19. Period from 1964 to 1970.

# En defensa de las **LUCHAS** Magisteriales

such as the Committees of Struggle, always following the ethics of an “educator who knows himself to be part of the people” (p. 136). Faced with the growing discontent of teachers who did not identify with the SNTE union leadership, a group of thugs called Vanguardia Revolucionaria was formed that, through privileges to teachers, tried to prevent the emergence of a union force that would go beyond corporativism, namely, the Coordinadora Nacional de los Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE). Its purpose was promoting unity, while expressing “the feelings of many excluded sectors of society” (p. 148). Under the banner of democratization and wage improvements, the CNTE started defining a radical strategy that had been repressed for years: mobilization and political action. As an organization close to the people, from the very beginning the CNTE sought to overcome pure unionism and include the most important social demands coming from the parents in their communities. The author of the book tries to show that, contrary to what had happened with the SNTE, the CNTE has become a mass movement that carries forward the diversity of social discontent.

With its particular tactic of “mobilization-negotiation-mobilization” (p. 164), the CNTE provided an alternative to usual teachers’ organizations, staying constantly connected to social fronts as an example of its social commitment. Even though from the start it has not been recognized by the National Executive Committee of the SNTE or the government, it has been

an alternative<sup>20</sup> in the fight against sold-out unions, or charrismo. The existing demands have emerged historically. They were: (1) professional recognition, (2) better working conditions and (3) union democracy. However, in the initial context of neoliberalism, considering Latin American philosophy and pedagogy, the CNTE included yet another element to its demands: (4) an alternative educational project. It should be added that, in the opinion of our author, a fundamental success in the strategy of the teachers’ struggle will be to declare themselves outside of any political party, as a way to avoid corporativism.

All these characteristics are seen throughout the history of the CNTE, from its founding in 1979, through the different stages of struggle, such as the teachers’ spring (strike in 1989), the struggle against the Alliance for Quality Education (ACE) (mobilizations and protests in 2008), to the resistance against the Education Reform of President E. Peña Nieto in 2013<sup>21</sup>. These teachers’ struggles have as common denominators: criticizing the SNTE’s verticalism, denouncing the precariousness of teaching work and promoting education that contributes to the achievement of a different way of life. Each of these experiences has come with successes and mistakes, which have guided the definition of the principles of the CNTE and its political programs, as well as the practice of self-criticism, in order to avoid traditional unionism.

The book presents the teachers’ struggle as the illumination of an ethic that seeks to be close to the people,

---

20. The National Executive Committee is the union leadership body of the SNTE, in many cases denounced for representing spaces of corporativism and corruption.


---

21. Period from 2012 to 2018.

# En defensa de las **LUCHAS** Magisteriales

Enrique Ávila Carrillo



 Ediciones Quinto Sol



based on democratic ideas and always in solidarity with other resistance fronts. It is a struggle that has more recently incorporated pedagogy, through a program that is rooted in the community and that generates transformative values, without ignoring the validity of normal schools. Although it is true that this book tells the story of how teachers have vindicated their rights, it does so within the framework of the broader social struggle.

Ávila Carrillo's work is perhaps of nostalgic interest for those veteran teachers, if the expression is allowed, who strongly identify with the teachers' struggles. However, it is also an excellent treasure chest for younger teachers who question their social and educational reality, and who will use their good eyes -the same that are required for the tiny print of the book- to strengthen

their forms of action (organizational, political, legal, pedagogical), as long as the defense of public education is "part of the common good" (p. 262). This book represents, in our opinion, the most complete history so far of the teachers' resistance in Mexico. It presents the political character of education, and it also shows the subaltern trait of those who fight against capitalism, in labor terms, and against its interference in the definition of the education Mexico needs. Whether for scholars of the social movement or for the militants themselves, reading this book will inform the future- a time that is open to change.

## **Bibliography:**

Ávila Carrillo, E. (2019). *In Defense of Teachers' Struggles*. Mexico City: Quinto Sol.