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CONDITIONS FOR THE RETURN TO SCHOOLS UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL LATIN AMERICA REGIONAL COMMITTEE.

The COVID 19 pandemic erupted in a Latin America impacted by forty years of the implementation of neoliberal policies. This model has favored corporate businesses, particularly those linked to financial speculation. That explains why our continent is the most unequal on the planet and why the gap between rich and poor has not ceased to grow. The pandemic with its consequences of forced economic paralysis came to install itself on top of this pre-existing crisis.

The governments of the region, with few exceptions, have sought to prioritize economic activity over social isolation, which remains the only effective measure to prevent the uncontrolled spread of contagion until a vaccine becomes available. Consequently, educational authorities, under pressure from business groups, are trying to force the reopening of schools. Pressure is made for the reactivation of educational processes without responsibly addressing the conditions required for all populations involved to safely return to educational centers.

With the exception of the Government of Argentina, the other governments of the region have not initiated dialogs with trade unions from the sector to decide upon safe times to return to the classroom. Education workers are the main defenders of the right to public education in our communities and they would never place obstacles to the exercising of this right.

For these reasons, the Regional Committee of Education International Latin America (IEAL for the initials in Spanish) calls on all its affiliated organizations to demand conditions that allow for the safe return to schools. Therefore, as a common minimum basis for the region, the following conditions are proposed:

1. That governments and authorities establish processes of dialog with trade unions from the education sector to define the different stages of the return to classrooms.
2. That mechanisms be created to listen to the proposals of organized student sectors, so that they can participate in the definition of these stages.
3. That guarantee be made of the necessary infrastructural conditions ensuring safe and adequate environments to prevent the spread of the virus in educational establishments including access to water, soap, and ventilation, among others. It is unacceptable that the authorities of countries such as Chile and Colombia, deeply impacted by the pandemic, continue to allocate scarce state resources to subsidizing private companies linked to the business of performing standardized assessments.
4. That the public sector be guaranteed the conditions of protection for all persons in educational establishments. This should include the provision of health kits, access to tests, protocols for maintaining prudential distancing in classrooms, along with other measures with protective instruments.
5. That protocols be promoted for application in public and school transport.



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6. That school canteens be strengthened, taking into account the new contexts of hunger and malnutrition that are affecting the region.
7. That for the duration of the pandemic and isolation measures, promotion be made, as a transitory measure that does not replace face-to-face education, of coordination between the teaching sector, public universities and public research sectors to define actions that support virtual and distance education modes.
8. That the distribution of these resources be guaranteed for online modes and that limit be made of private profit from the promotion of virtual platforms.
9. That free and/or subsidized transportation for students be guaranteed, taking into account the new contexts of unemployment for thousands of households in Latin America.
10. That teaching material be provided for those students who do not have access to connectivity and virtual options due to poverty.
11. To protect the labor rights of workers in the education sector, who have once again proved to be key to generating responses for the comprehensive care of children, adolescents, and youth.

In public debate in our societies, pressures from sectors promoting public sector wage cuts, the dismantling of pension systems and other budget-shrinking measures are beginning to gain ground. In order to make investments aimed at financing the sectors affected by COVID-19, both in terms of health and social policies, our states must seek ways to increase their capacity to obtain genuine resources. For this purpose we propose:

1. Moving towards progressive tax reforms based on the principle that those possessing the most must pay the most, and, for this emergency, pushing for initiatives such as taxes on owners of large personal fortunes.
2. The promotion of the cancellation of the external debt of Latin American countries or their renegotiation for long periods until our nations regain the possibility of economic growth.
3. The promotion of the reactivation of public works and the strengthening of SMEs to generate jobs and reduce unemployment.
4. Calling on private sector employers to protect jobs and respect wage agreements.
5. Demanding that Latin American governments create a Universal Basic Income on a national basis in order to guarantee all households an income that will enable them to meet their basic needs.
6. Promoting campaigns through the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA), Education International (EI), and Education International Latin America (IEAL) for international financing organizations to agree to cancel the debt of Latin American countries to instead dedicate those resources to financing health, employment and public education policies.

The dominant sectors that have always challenged these proposals that we have formulated should submit to the evidence shown by the COVID-19 crisis: the unsustainable neoliberal model based on a minimum state has destroyed, among other things, public health systems and handed these over to private profit. These policies, in addition to destroying social protection systems, have also limited access to decent housing and safe drinking water. All of this today leaves millions of inhabitants of our region in conditions of absolute vulnerability to the pandemic.

For this reason, the poverty and stagnation resulting from the application of the neoliberal model in the world and in Latin America today leads to vulnerability and loss of human life in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak. It is clear that today the countries most affected have been those that have inflexibly applied neoliberal



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precepts. In the face of the pandemic, this commercial-centered vision led them to prioritize the economy and trade over the supreme value of the defense of life.

This social Darwinism implemented in countries such as Brazil, Chile, Peru and Ecuador has generated the largest amount of confirmed cases and deaths by COVID-19 in the region, followed by a second group of countries such as Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Panama.

Nevertheless, in the education sector, teachers have generated relevant pedagogical adaptations to continue teaching-learning processes, often at the expense of extended and exhausting working days undertaken with limited resources.

In our sector, almost 85% of which is female, the extension of work tasks is added to roles performed of care and domestic labor, intensifying the inequality and disparity in the distribution of labor in families in situations of confinement. It is also worth mentioning that isolation measures have further exposed women and girls to situations of domestic violence, abuse and aggression, as evidenced in most countries showing the growth of complaints for these reasons. Unfortunately, it must be recognized that femicides continue and are accentuated by the pandemic.

The truth is that the pandemic has exposed the inconsistency of neoliberal policies promising a free market paradise. Today reality places the evidence before us of a region that, because of its conditions of stagnation and poverty, is even more fragile and vulnerable to COVID-19.

Our countries' economic recovery strategies must not repeat the economic models that brought the states in the region to this condition of vulnerability. However, the private, corporate and anti-state sectors of Latin America—many of which are currently in government—are acting in predatory fashion to take advantage of the situation of quarantine and social distancing to enact regressive reform processes and make greater cuts to public investment and state action, reforms that trade unions and social movements have fought against in recent decades.

Faced with the impossibility of social mobilization due to the pandemic, private, corporate and anti-state sectors are pushing fast-track legislation to respond to the impacts of the health crisis, including regressive labor, social and social welfare reforms in several Latin American countries. They are also pushing for legislation to approve the unconditioned use of public resources to safeguard businesses.

The trade union movement in the region must try to prevent the progress of these policies aimed at weakening popular organizations and further reducing their rights. We currently are at the moment of redefinition of the model of development and the State. In this redefinition, the welfare of the population and the rights of the working class must be guaranteed. More democracy, more respect for human rights and increased distribution of wealth is the only way to leave behind so much poverty and inequality.

Attentively,



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President of the Regional Committee
Education International Latin America



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