

End of one era, dawn of a new

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Part II

We continue where we left off last week, sharing Fred van Leeuwen's recount of his 25-year tenure as general secretary of Education International (EI). The closing quote from Part I of this series declared, "The way things will go in the world rests on what teachers do."

THAT IS quite a responsibility. Not reflected in our pay cheques, if I should add. Not yet. But I for one believe that as a profession, as representative, independent trade unions, we need to take leadership and confront the crisis of democracy, the very basis of our human and trade union rights, our freedoms, and of our very existence as representative organisations.

Colleagues, when the world gathered in September 2015 in New York to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals and when it came together a couple of months later to adopt the Paris Agreement on climate change, I sensed a renewed optimism. It was not only a commitment toward building a sustainable future, but a future grounded in the vision of shared democratic values. That was two and a half years ago.

Today we are in the middle of a crisis; a crisis challenging the resilience of our public and democratic institutions; a crisis undermining our public schools and our education unions; a crisis also, if you will, of half-truths and outright lies.

Mark Twain said, "A lie travels half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." It only takes seconds today with ICT. For example, through social networks, children and adults can create their own realities in bubbles where everybody agrees. They may agree on hate and bigotry or become a launching pad for bullying.

Even when it does not take a hostile form, one can cause to proliferate groupings of people with near identical views. “Debate” in society has been transformed into isolated mutual admiration societies where people can relish stewing in their own juices. The “debate” is distracted and muddled by noise which, of course, lets those in authority do whatever they want.

A study based on the World Values Survey shows that in several “consolidated democracies” in Europe and North America, support for democracy has declined. Particularly alarming was the fact that the authoritarian temptation was felt most by those born in or after 1980.

In my country, the Netherlands, only a third of young people attach “maximal importance” to living in a democracy. In the United States, the figure is also around 30 per cent, and there is no reason to believe that these figures are different in the Caribbean, Mexico or Canada. It is time to declare code red!

A disturbing development is the fading belief among some leading politicians, and not only conservative politicians, that a free press, a robust public-school system, a vibrant civil society and an independent trade union movement are as essential to democracy as free elections are.

We see public authorities in democratic nations increasingly confuse isolated voices expressed in the social media with representative organisations and, in some cases, deliberately undermine their country’s representative institutions, especially trade unions. The minister of education of a Latin American country told me some time ago that he had 50,000 teachers as “followers” on Twitter ... so why did he need to talk to the education trade unions? One conversation would not concern me, but several member organisations have informed us that their representative role is not being respected and that they are being “replaced” by people who represent nobody or, worse, act on behalf of private companies and vendors.

This brings me to another alarming development which is the growth of market obscurantism, where the market and its laws, and

the prerogatives of market actors are treated as articles of faith rather than areas of legitimate debate.

As we all know, some of the worst “reforms” in education are based on measurement and evaluation techniques developed by the private sector for widgets, not people.

More fundamentally, such “reforms” create a stifling intellectual environment, place low priority on the competencies of democracy while placing high priority on the supposed needs of the economy.

My point is that some of the market-style “innovations” are intrinsically and directly anti-democratic. For example, voucher and so-called school choice programmes, regardless of whether they involve private school operators, replace democratic, collective decisions with individual decisions by parents.

I tell you this: Not only is bad education bad for democracy, but bad democracy is bad for education.

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