

Facing Teacher's Strikes: Two Proposed Solutions

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Although the evidence from many years shows that the fact that children are in the classroom does not guarantee their access to education of excellence, if they do not even have classes there is no chance at all. But the leaders of the teachers' unions are not interested in the well-being of the students, this is clear; otherwise they would use other measures to make their claims, valid or not, instead of indiscriminately depriving of classes the children who have become their virtual hostages.

How to face them? Luckily it is not necessary to appeal to new ideas. Let's look at two successful experiences, the first one gradualist, the second probably the shock that would wake up Argentine society from its lethargy.

In Mendoza, the so-called "classroom item" became an effective antidote to the teacher strikes that are blocking the beginning of the school year in several provinces.

What does it consist of? The measure was implemented by Governor Alfredo Cornejo (UCR-Cambiamos) in early 2016 when he granted a 32 percent increase to teachers. Part of this increase consisted of an additional sum that would be perceived only by those teachers who were not absent more than three times a month, or 10 times a year, and that represented 10 percent of their salary.

From then on, the "classroom item" was incorporated into the salary, reducing absenteeism and becoming an efficient strategy against the adherence of teachers to union strikes.

Buenos Aires Governor María Eugenia Vidal raised a proposal imbued with this logic during the negotiations with the teachers' unions. Would it not be time already to stop negotiating and prevent our children from becoming hostages of trade union leaders forever? Let us see the evidence provided by Ecuador.

Rafael Correa has been a president with whom I cannot feel more distant, but in education he is worthy of the greater of compliments as he has carried out a reform that must be emphasized. Correa, found strong resistance from the teachers' unions. What did he do to confront them?

In 2008, President Correa led a constitutional reform incorporating education as a public service, prohibiting, therefore, its paralyzation. The new Constitution stated that: "The right of workers to strike and that of employers to lock out is recognized and guaranteed, in accordance with the law. The paralyzation is prohibited, on any grounds, of public services, in particular those of health, education, justice and social security; electric power, drinking water and sewerage; processing, transportation and distribution of fuels; public transportation and telecommunications".

Let us return to our reality. A few days ago, Guillermo Castello, provincial Representative of Cambiamos in the province of Buenos Aires, proposed to define education as an essential public service: "There is the possibility of declaring, by means of a law, education as an essential public service, such that it cannot be interrupted by strikes and the teachers have to remain in front of the classroom".

Castello highlighted "this is a project that needs to reach a consensus both within the Representatives of my party and with the rest of the Representatives" Although an election year does not seem to be the right time to reach this type of agreement, to achieve such a law would be a first step of relevance in order to turn education into a State policy, instead of the policy of a specific government.

It is for that reason that it is of fundamental importance to remember that in 2014, when the administration of the then governor Daniel Scioli faced a sequence of similar strikes, lieutenant-Governor Gabriel Mariotto raised the same proposal. In his own words: “Education, and especially public education, is an essential service in democratic societies because it allows the equality of opportunities [...]. For this reason education must be declared an essential public service and the exercise of strikes in this sector should be regulated”. Moreover, he explicitly based his proposal on the policy of the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa.

We are facing a historical possibility: to reach an agreement between the ruling party and the opposition for a law that defends the right to educate our children. A law whose sanction would not represent a triumph either for the government or for the opposition, but that would transform education into a policy of State. A law that would wake up our society from its lethargy and would mark the beginning of a new and better Argentina. Don't you think that it is worth doing?