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The sound of exploding tear gas was unmistakable—pah! pah! pah! It rose above the din of traffic and punctuated the quotidian noises of midmorning social life in El Alto. White smoke curled upward, wafting around buildings in the distance and dissipating in the blue sky overhead. "Be careful if you go outside," warned my landlady, Felicidad Choque, as we stood in the courtyard of her home. "It's the police and the teachers again." I did not need to be reminded.

It was late March 1995, and several days earlier thousands of striking public school teachers from the surrounding countryside had arrived in El Alto. They had marched for days along the dusty roads of the Bolivian high plateau to join their urban colleagues to protest a law that mandated sweeping reforms to the system of public education. Soldiers and police sprayed the teachers with rubber bullets and tear gas to preempt their attempt to enter La Paz and hold a demonstration. In the days that followed, small bands of angry teachers, frustrated by continued police repression, staged "lightning blockades" that barricaded roads and interrupted traffic until police moved in to disperse the protesters. What Choque and I heard was the teargasing of one such blockade.

Bolivia was not the only place where public education came under fire in the early months of 1995. George Pataki, the Republican governor of New York, had pushed through the legislature deep cuts in his state's education budget, prompting protests by students and faculty in New York City. Nicaraguan teachers staged a forty-two-day strike to secure wage increases, and their counterparts in Haiti and Colombia mounted similar

protests. These were just the latest in a growing number of demonstrations that expressed the discontent of public school teachers, and public sector employees generally, throughout the hemisphere. By limiting financial support for public education, governments can more easily balance their budgets, and, in the case of Third World countries, proceed with the spending cuts that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund demand.

Bolivian teachers have been vigorous opponents of neoliberal attempts to transform the ways that ordinary people relate to and participate in institutionalized political orders. They have steadfastly challenged the 1994 Educational Reform Law, which emphasizes primary schooling and conceptualizes public education as less the responsibility of the federal government than of local authorities, parents, and the teachers that they select. Although it demonstrates the power of government elites to impose their vision of education, many alteños have not fully accepted this vision because of the teachers' strong resistance to it. Nevertheless, the law now provides the framework within which alteños—especially teachers and parents—are addressing their considerable differences about the future of public education in the city. As it closes opportunities for some, it appears to create possibilities for others.

This chapter explores the eight-week national teachers' strike against the 1994 Educational Reform Law and the tensions from which it emerged. The teachers in El Alto and La Paz were at the center of the protest, because opposition to the reform was strongest in these cities. At stake for the teachers were job security, wages, and the right to continue practicing their profession amid an eroding public education system. The government, for its part, was concerned about whose vision of education would prevail at a time when international pressure made "reform" virtually mandatory. The ferment put enormous pressure on teachers. On the one hand, they had to contend with a concerted effort by the state to undermine their job security. On the other hand, they had to confront parents for whom they are contradictory figures. Parents frequently believe that teachers do not care about children and improving the quality of education but simply look out for their own selfish interests. Disgruntled parents were heartened by a provision in the Educational Reform Law that transfers more power over what happens in school to them and to local municipalities. But most parents also understand that teachers—like most parents—earn paltry salaries that are inadequate for supporting a family.

These cleavages, as well as bonds of solidarity, emerged during the strike. To fully understand them, we must first briefly consider the nature

of public education and explore the plight in which public school teachers have found themselves.

Public Education in El Alto

After the 1952 Bolivian national revolution, the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) supported the development of a public education system that aspired to reach thousands of Quechua- and Aymara-speaking peasants. Free public education, MNR leaders believed, was not only a way to consolidate power and respond to the demands of newly enfranchised indigenous peoples but was also an instrument for forging a national identity and overcoming deep ethnic and regional differences. At the same time, a number of state-sponsored teacher-training schools emerged to prepare women and men for positions in the new schools. These training institutes, called normal schools, opened new channels of upward mobility for peasants and members of the lower class who aspired to professional careers and wanted to continue their education beyond high school. The state guaranteed jobs to graduates in a system that expanded during the 1950s. But, beginning in the 1970s, government neglect, economic crisis, and the free-market reforms that began in 1985 combined to undermine public education, which had always been underfunded.

According to the 1990 census, 35 percent of Bolivia's six million inhabitants are functionally illiterate. In El Alto the situation is worse: 71 percent of the men and 77 percent of the women aged fifteen and older have never completed elementary school (INE 1992), and many high school graduates still have great difficulty reading and writing. The reasons for this situation are rooted in the city's dire poverty and the failure of the state to support public education more systematically. Rapidly expanding immigrant neighborhoods lack schools, and students from these areas are forced to travel to other districts, where underfunded schools, inadequate and outdated instructional materials, and overcrowded classrooms of fifty to seventy students make learning nearly impossible. To make matters worse, school instruction takes place in Spanish, yet Aymara and to a lesser extent Quechua are the first languages of many children, who speak Spanish imperfectly, if at all. The exigencies of life in an impoverished city also contribute to high dropout rates. The demands of the agricultural cycle oblige children to leave school and assist rural kinfolk or parents who continue to hold small plots in the countryside. Many children also work as

shoe shiners, domestic servants, and fare collectors on city buses to provide an income to their cash-strapped families.

Under these circumstances El Alto's 18,196 public school teachers are hard pressed to deliver a quality education. I discovered some of the problems that teachers and students face when, late in the morning on a chilly, sunny day, I visited an elementary school in El Alto's northern zone. The one-story white-washed building reflected the glare of the sun and surrounded a dusty, sun-baked courtyard. The principal, whom I met on an earlier visit, was a stocky man in his forties. He greeted me and escorted me to a fourth-grade classroom, where I took a seat on a back bench. No posters, class projects, or student artwork decorated the walls, only peeling paint and a cracked blackboard. About sixty students sat in pairs behind old wooden desks. A few giggled and cast curious glances at me as they waited for the class to begin. The teacher was a young woman in her twenties. She wore a pink sweater, a skirt, and black pumps and tied her hair in a long ponytail. Quieting the boisterous children was not easy for her, but she eventually began a lesson on health and nutrition that was part of a pilot program sponsored by the government and an NGO. After reviewing the basic food groups and giving examples from each, she elicited students' participation in constructing a balanced diet for their families. As I listened to the responses, I wondered how many children actually came from families with the means to provide them with balanced nutritious diets. Two little boys seated near me had tuned out entirely. They squirmed in their seats as they pinched and poked each other. The teacher told them to pay attention. In an attempt to maintain discipline and keep the other students focused, she walked up and down the rows of desks, posing questions more directly to the children as she proceeded. From time to time, she added emphasis to certain points by writing on the blackboard at the front of the class. Yet by misspelling certain words by confusing "c" and "s," the teacher undermined this pedagogical technique.

Of course, the teachers too are products of this deficient system and impoverished environment, and their salaries, which range from $98 to $170 a month, make satisfying the economic necessities of their own households a constant struggle.[1] Transportation to and from work can easily cost $10 a month; considering expenses for food, rent, clothing, and electricity, it is not hard to understand the economic difficulties that teachers face. During a discussion of the problems of Bolivian education and the learning problems of malnourished children, Ruben Zambrano, a young teacher with a beginning salary, pointed out that teachers are also poorly

nourished. "It's also a question of food," he said. "If we are not well fed, it's hard [to think about] the lessons. One falls asleep."

Because of the low salaries, teaching is widely viewed as a second-rate profession; it is not the career of choice for those with the means and the opportunities to study law, medicine, engineering, and other, more lucrative professions.[2] Fifty-four percent (2,224) of El Alto teachers are women, although in the countryside, where women rarely study beyond the third grade, men dominate teaching. Nearly a quarter (24.4 percent) of all El Alto teachers do not have a degree from a teaching institute and are congregated at the bottom of the pay scale, where they are classified as "interim teachers" [*maestros interinos*] (UNAS 1994). Because of low salaries women cannot support their households on the income from their jobs. Those who are single parents often live with relatives who help defray some of their expenses. It is also common for teachers—men and women—to hold down two teaching jobs or to engage in other activities, such as petty commerce, to support themselves. But attrition from burnout is routine; almost half of El Alto's teachers have held their jobs for nine years or less (UNAS 1994).

Clearly, the public education system is in dire need of reform, and El Alto residents, other Bolivians, and many teachers have long recognized this. To understand the controversy surrounding educational reform, however, and especially the 1994 Educational Reform Law, we must place public education and the reform legislation within the broader context of global economic restructuring.

Reform and Resistance

The impetus to reform Bolivia's educational system came during the 1992 National Congress of Education, which brought together delegates from a number of popular, church, and state organizations to discuss the problems of Bolivian education. The Consejo Nacional de Educación (CONED) emerged from this meeting and drew up a series of recommendations for a far-reaching education reform program. CONED produced a document backed by a broad consensus of labor and popular organizations that became known as the Ley Marco de la Reforma Educativa. Although a number of its suggestions—such as bilingual education, updated teaching methodologies, and a greater sensitivity to gender—appeared in the Educational Reform Law of 1994, the law itself lacked the popular support of the Ley Marco. The Bolivian Congress—which took a dim view of the so-

cial groups aligned behind the Ley Marco and under pressure from the World Bank to approve the law—enacted it hurriedly. Indeed, the Educational Reform Law, passed on July 7, 1994, bore the heavy imprint of the Equipo Técnico de Apoya a la Reforma Educativa (ETARE), a World Bank–sponsored technical advisory group that submitted to the government its own recommendations for transforming public education (Codina 1994).

The Bolivian Educational Reform Law is designed to extend the free-market policies that Víctor Paz Estenssoro initiated in 1985. Like the Popular Participation Law to which it is closely linked, the new education law advocates multiculturalism by acknowledging the importance of bilingual education, but it aggravates the growing class differences that are reshaping Bolivian society. Under the new law the state no longer guarantees jobs to the graduates of teacher-training institutes, and it redefines teachers, once considered professionals, as "superior technicians" [*técnicos superiores*]. Then, under the pretext of improving the quality of instruction, the original version of the law required teachers to pass a competency examination within five years to retain their positions and to be considered for promotion.

In principle, teachers are not opposed to higher professional standards, and those whom I met wanted to further their development by taking university courses. Yet, they argued, the state was not committed to helping them meet new goals, and the exams would become a tool for thinning their ranks, because they would be unable to preform well. In 1995 some teachers saw the reform as a cynical attempt to reduce the public payroll—97 percent of the educational budget was earmarked for salaries. Sonia Vidaurre began her career as a teacher in the mining complex of Catavi-Siglo XX but was "relocated" to El Alto in 1986 after the mining cutbacks began. According to Vidaurre, whom I interviewed during the strike:

> When we have to start taking the exams, the government will start firing teachers little by little. What will happen to our retirement [benefits]? They will automatically disappear. This is a relocation where [the state] wants to rid itself [of the responsibility] for its citizens. The miners were the first group, and they were the largest and the strongest. Now they want to do the same thing to the teachers. Soon we will have to do exactly as they say.

In contrast, Noel Aguirre fully supported the idea of an educational reform but could not afford the time off to take the university courses that he needed to pass the competency exam. Aguirre, thirty-three, was an ele-

mentary school teacher who had taught in an El Alto primary school for eleven years. To supplement his salary and support his three children, he also worked afternoons in a private school where his wife taught. His exhausting schedule left him little time to study. Aguirre's day began at 8:30 A.M. and ended late in the afternoon. His classes typically contained fifty to seventy-five children. "I leave school totally exhausted," he said. "I don't have energy for anything. And my wife feels the same way. So she's tired; I'm tired; and both of us have little interest in the children. The kids make noise, and we get mad because we have absolutely no more energy. After a little dinner and some coffee we fall into bed so we can get up the next day and start the same routine all over again."

In addition, Aguirre lived in a new settlement on the outer perimeter of El Alto, and traveling to the university in central La Paz for evening classes took an hour to an hour and a half in each direction. "Give me time," he said emphatically, "but the government will not do this for us."

Although the threatened exams placed new pressures on already overworked and underpaid teachers, the most ominous aspect of the new law was the decentralization of the entire educational system. The Educational Reform Law permits the state to pass off responsibility for public education to cash-strapped municipalities, and it gives local bodies greater power in the hiring, retention, and promotion of teachers. According to Article No. 47, municipal treasuries "will finance the construction, maintenance and replacement of [school buildings], equipment and didactic material." Yet the state does not provide municipalities with enough money to maintain schools, much less build new ones to accommodate the needs of a rapidly expanding population. The shifting financial responsibility means that educational costs are passed along to parents in the form of maintenance expenses, exam fees, and charges for supplies, and this makes public education less accessible to many poor children.

Another effect of decentralization, claim teachers, is the de facto privatization of public education. As one man explained to me: "Teachers are necessarily going to be obliged to seek work in private institutions and that will seal the death of public education in Bolivia. Education will be converted into a luxury."

The government is indeed forcing alteños to live off a previous generation's educational investment, which will make the potential effects of greater local control over education much harder to recognize. A two-tiered educational system is already emerging in the city. New private schools have sprung up, overwhelmingly staffed by moonlighting teachers from the public system. In these institutions, however, teachers are not

paid better than in the public system, and they receive no benefits and are not unionized.[3] Yet the schools attract parents who can afford them, because the strikes that plague the public system do not disrupt classes.

The law's attempt to undermine the union only deepened teachers' suspicions of the intentions of the government. The original version of the law made it more difficult for the union to raise money—it eliminated a 1 percent payroll deduction that supported union activities. This represented an effort by neoliberal reformers to make union membership voluntary and not mandatory, as had long been the case.[4] Teacher Alex Morales—the director of education and culture for El Alto's Central Obrera Regional—believed that the government wanted to bust the union, which was a constant thorn in its side. The government's behavior "is not gratuitous," he said. "The fewer unions that [the government] has before it, the easier it will be to implement neoliberal policy. A union without financial support cannot survive, because nothing is free." El Alto teacher Antonio Sánchez concurred. "The government wants to disappear the union," he asserted. Indeed, the decentralization of public education dilutes the power of the union, because it no longer negotiates with a central authority. Victor Prado, executive secretary of the Urban Teachers' Confederation, summarized the changes as "an administrative reform and not [a reform] of education in general" ("Ruidosa marcha de cacerolas" 1995:4).

National opposition to the reform law began to build immediately after its passage in July 1994. A one-day strike on February 10, 1995, only ten days after the initiation of the school year, was a harbinger of deeper strife. Many Bolivians saw this conflict as the opening gambit in what they thought was the regular annual series of protests, strikes, and negotiations between teachers and the state. But 1995 was not like past years. In addition to the usual demands for wage increases, teachers insisted that the government repeal the Educational Reform Law and thereby challenged a key element of the government's neoliberal doctrine.

Teachers' resolve to resist the law mounted throughout February and March. After two additional one-day strikes in February, the union declared on March 13 an indefinite national strike to force the government to repeal the reform and attend to their wage demands. They were supported by the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), which on March 22 announced an indefinite general strike; the COB's negotiations with the government over a series of issues, including the educational reform, minimum wage increases, and coca cultivation in the Chapare region, had deadlocked. Although support for the general strike was weak, teachers in La Paz and El Alto, as well as those in the surrounding countryside, were

Teachers in La Paz demonstrate against the Educational Reform Law in 1995.

generally supportive of it, and all three hundred public schools in El Alto remained closed.

Over the next weeks the government used various tactics to pressure teachers back to work. It threatened to hire replacement workers, refused to pay wages, and disseminated disinformation about the strength of the strike, exaggerating the extent to which teachers were working and ignoring the call to strike. And whenever they had a chance, government functionaries tried to isolate and discredit union leaders by branding them "Trotskyist extremists" and "dictatorial." When none of these tactics worked, the government reverted to overt repression.

On March 22 rural teachers converged on El Alto. The city awoke that morning to police and military occupation. Soldiers wielding batons and shooting tear gas and rubber bullets broke up the march and arrested leaders. A week later eighty thousand residents of El Alto, responding to a call by the COB, marched through the city, demanding that the government attend to the COB's demands for wage increases, as well as peasants' demands to be permitted to grow coca leaf, and repeal of the Educational Reform Law.[5] Unwilling to negotiate, but threatened by the teachers' challenge and its ongoing conflicts with the coca growers, which multiplied in 1995 after the U.S. government intensified pressure on the Bolivian gov-

ernment to eradicate coca fields, the national government declared a state of siege on April 18. Police rounded up more than three hundred peasant and labor leaders and shipped them off to isolated prisons in the lowland jungles and frontier regions. The government prohibited meetings of more than three people, required citizens to request formal permission to travel—as well as to hold social gatherings such as weddings, birthdays, and so forth—and suspended civil rights. It also imposed a curfew from midnight to 6 A.M.

Unlike previous states of siege declared by military dictators, however, the draconian measures of 1995 barely disrupted the lives of many residents of La Paz, because they were selectively enforced. City streets did not become deserted after dark. Newspapers continued to publish, and radio stations remained on the air. Well-heeled paceños whose children attended private schools experienced very little change in their daily schedule. Indeed, for many people, social life did not deviate from its normal course. Teachers, however, confronted considerable difficulty coordinating the strike under martial law. The government had outlawed union meetings, and all the major leaders were either in prison or in hiding.[6] Rank-and-file teachers were also uncertain about how far the government would carry its campaign against them, and many were feeling the financial crunch of a strike that had already lasted five weeks. On the morning after the imposition of the state of siege, however, teachers began meeting clandestinely in their schools with local union delegates to assess the situation and plot a strategy for the days ahead. One such meeting occurred at a primary school, the Colegio San Salvador.

Forging Solidarity in the Colegio San Salvador

The Colegio San Salvador is located in La Paz's northern zone, below the rim of the canyon that separates El Alto from La Paz. It is an area of steep cobblestoned streets that until recently housed light manufacturing industries and an urban working class. Much of the industry is now gone and residents must make their living in the ubiquitous informal sector. About 540 children attend the school, which is not far from the headquarters of an elite army battalion. In 1995 the school had a faculty of twenty-nine, only three of whom were men. Most of these female teachers were urban-born, longtime residents of La Paz. Teaching was less an avenue of social mobility for them—as it is for rural men and new immigrants—than a vocation, and it was the most accessible profession for working-class women in the city.

Eleven of these women gathered nervously in the school's courtyard on the morning of April 19. The day was chilly and overcast. As they awaited the arrival of others, the teachers huddled together, clenching shawls and sweaters tightly around their bodies and speculating about who would and would not appear. Their representative was to have attended a citywide meeting of union delegates that morning to vote on continuing the strike, but the declaration of the state of siege and the police occupation of the union hall precluded any major assembly. Although the San Salvador staff had met regularly in the school since the beginning of the strike, this time was clearly different. Individuals cast uneasy glances every time someone knocked on the school's heavy wooden door; they were afraid the police would break in and arrest them. One woman counseled others to tell the police, if they should appear, that the teachers were simply waiting for students to arrive. Indeed, on imposing the state of siege the night before, the government had ordered the teachers back to work and threatened to fire them and hire replacement workers if they did not obey.

Because of the uncertainty created by the state of siege, some teachers did not risk coming to school that day, but others were simply treating the strike "like a vacation," according to several of the teachers present. The absentees, who supplemented their paltry wages with petty commerce, were using the strike to dedicate themselves to their commercial activities. Those present, however, did not have other jobs and were borrowing money and relying on the support of spouses and relatives to see them through the strike. They wanted to discuss the implications of the state of siege, allay each other's fears, and, more than anything, decide whether to continue the strike in light of the latest government actions.

Berta Choque, an articulate heavy-set woman who wore blue jeans and dangly earrings, directed the meeting. In recent days Choque, a single mother in her late twenties, had been raising money to feed her child by selling a powdered milk allotment that the state provided to needy mothers. She was also the school's de facto union delegate. She had been the official representative for eight years but resigned after the birth of her child. The faculty subsequently delegated union responsibility to Etna Romero, an unlikely candidate because, as one teacher complained, "she is too influenced by the officialist views of her husband." Romero also had a reputation for acting against group decisions in the past. By imposing the job on her, teachers had hoped to develop Romero's sense of responsibility and involvement and limit her disruptive behavior. The success of this tactic, however, was not evident on April 19. Romero did not attend the meeting,

and Berta Choque assumed her old responsibilities, which she had never entirely abandoned.

The first person to speak was Maria del Carmen Moscoso, a diminutive forty-year-old woman with twenty-two years of teaching experience. Like other teachers in her position, Moscoso resented being forced to take a competency examination after years on the job, but she expressed doubts about continuing the strike. "We have to analyze how far we are willing to go," she said. "After all, we depend on our work and don't want to go to such extremes as to get fired en masse and replaced by high school graduates." Other women expressed similar reservations, but Inés Velasco, a fifty-year-old widow, counseled caution and a wait-and-see attitude. Given the peripheral location of the Colegio San Salvador, she did not think that its teachers would be the first fired if the government actually carried through with its threat. She urged those present to continue evaluating the situation every day and not to be intimidated. After more discussion the women agreed to continue the strike but resolved to meet again in three days to reassess their position. Choque and Vilma Peralta, the school's director, stressed the importance of frequent meetings, despite the restrictions imposed by the state of siege, so that teachers would not feel isolated and become susceptible to government propaganda.

On Friday, April 21, the teachers met again. This time a majority was present, and anxieties ran high. Although the government had not fired anyone, a government minister continued to make threats. He announced that pay vouchers would be distributed the following Monday only to those teachers who showed up for work and that salaries would be discounted for every day of the strike. At the same time radio stations sympathetic to the strikers broadcast statements from union leaders in jail or in hiding that urged teachers to maintain the strike. The Colegio San Salvador teachers once again found themselves at a crossroad, where they had to make a decision that could affect their jobs and their futures. And again they were divided over the best course of action.

One young woman pointed out that other schools were slowly returning to work and that the Colegio San Salvador should do the same. Another woman, Nancí, the school secretary and a widow from El Alto, declared that she would show up at 8:30 A.M. on Monday morning so that nobody could fire her, and a woman seated next to her quickly asserted that she would do the same. Etna Romero, present for the first time since the state of siege began, also felt that teachers should return to work.

Nevertheless, the more radical teachers again counseled patience and

caution. As she had done before, Inés Velasco advised people to come on Monday to evaluate the situation and make a decision based on developments in the rest of the city. By being present, she argued, they would be able to defend their jobs, but that did not mean that they had to teach, which she felt should not happen until the entire rank-and-file voted to end the strike and jailed leaders were released. Berta Choque and Vilma Peralta supported this position. In a subtle rebuke to those threatening to act on their own, Choque suggested that everyone arrive together on Monday at 8:30 to maintain unity. Solidarity, she stressed, was crucial. Why, she asked, should they return to work if the government discounted their paychecks? Given the length of the strike to date, they still would be left with virtually nothing. She further argued that nobody would be fired on the first day of a supposed return to work; only after a majority of schools had gone back, she claimed, would this really happen. Choque concluded by urging people to take government claims about schools' ending the strike with a grain of salt. The Colegio San Salvador, she pointed out, was on a list of schools that a TV station had reported as having started classes.

As teachers argued back and forth, several women present remained silent. Elia Ormachea was deeply conflicted about the strike and her participation in it. As the mother of three, Ormachea was having difficulty keeping food on the table. She was already in debt, and supplies that she had stockpiled after the last strike were running out. Ormachea was also a devout Seventh-day Adventist and was acting against her religious beliefs by participating in a strike. "We [the Adventists] are supposed to support God and the authorities," she had told me earlier. "Therefore when I participate in a demonstration, I can't shout insults because we respect the authorities. More than anything, I go to avoid the fine that the union levies against those who do not participate." Yet why, I wanted to know, would she risk imprisonment by attending an illegal meeting? "I have to support my compañeros," she said. "I obey whatever they decide so as not to divide us. It's a little conflictive for me." Given these contradictions in her own position, Ormachea did not venture any opinions, one way or the other, during the meeting. Other women, less torn by their religious beliefs but insecure about expressing themselves in the debate, also remained on the sidelines.

Once again the teachers decided to continue the strike, persuaded in large measure by the arguments of Choque and Velasco. And again they resolved to continue meeting periodically. But their next meeting never occurred. As the teachers assembled a week later, an anonymous phone caller tipped them off about an imminent police raid. Alarmed by the call, peo-

ple quickly dispersed, except Choque and director Peralta, who eventually determined that the call was a hoax, perpetrated by an irate parent angered by the teachers' continued refusal to end the strike.

Parents and Teachers

Parents in the poor and working-class neighborhoods of El Alto and La Paz are deeply committed to the education of their children. Education, they believe, is a road out of poverty and a way to ensure a more secure future. Parents therefore frequently make great sacrifices for education. Those who can afford the expense send their children to private schools, although parents say the quality of education is often no better, and sometimes worse, than in the public schools. But the constant strikes that plague the public system never disrupt classes at the private schools, which subject teachers to rigid administrative discipline. The vast majority of parents, however, cannot furnish their children with the luxury of a private school education. They must make do with the public system, where labor unrest disrupts the educational process and, according to many parents, teachers are poorly prepared to exercise their profession. Thus parents' feelings about the strike were decidedly mixed.

Those parents who backed the teachers appreciated that they earned low salaries, and some parents, who had experienced cutbacks in other areas of the public sector, supported teachers, because they feared that the reform would privatize public education and throw teachers out of work. For these reasons, they backed the teachers' demands and were highly critical of the reform and the government's heavy-handed tactics, such as the use of tear gas in residential neighborhoods to disperse demonstrators. Women like Francisca Mendoza, whose six children attended public school and whose eldest son taught in a public school, supported the strikers because her son's wages were important to the survival of her household. "He has to strike because his wages are not enough," she explained. Taxi driver Fermin Ortega, whose two children attended public school, also backed the strike. "The government isn't interested in solving anything," he said. "[Everything it does] is with bullets and gas."

Other parents in El Alto, however, deeply resented teachers and felt that their children were the primary victims of the strike. Like all parents, they wanted their children educated by well-trained professionals, but they were not satisfied with teachers' professional behavior or their qualifications. The irregular attendance record of teachers was a constant complaint of parents.

Teachers, they said, typically extended school vacations by failing to appear on the days preceding and following official holidays. Weekends also generated high Monday morning attrition, and when teachers did show up, they were invariably late. Male teachers often arrived drunk. This, said angry parents, was unprofessional conduct that the state should penalize.

A particularly low point in the strike came in early April, when rural teachers, who attempted to stage a march in central La Paz, clashed with parents from the Association of Household Heads of Bolivia, who carried out a parallel demonstration. Teachers, according to the official press, started the violence with taunts of "officialists" and "sellouts" and then burned a placard of the opposing group. But it was clear that the police supported the Association of Household Heads and may even have encouraged the violence. Police officers not only failed to disperse the parents' march, as they had the teachers', but allowed the groups to encounter each other.

Part of the animosity between parents and teachers springs from the ambivalent position that many teachers occupy, somewhere between white-collar professional and day laborer or peasant. Indeed, public education has long been linked to the civilizing mission of the Bolivian state, which views education as a vehicle for incorporating the Indian masses into a homogeneous national culture. Yet this process of incorporation is never complete, and teachers are both products and practitioners of public education. Many parents, who have experienced no social mobility, charge teachers with discrimination against their own people. They claim that teachers denigrate the Aymara culture and are abusive and authoritarian in the classroom. For these parents, teachers appear less as the exploited victims of an unjust state policy than as domineering social climbers.

For these parents the strike was not about improving education for their children; it reflected the intransigence and self-serving attitudes of teachers and their union. The elderly grandmother of five students at the Colegio San Salvador was disturbed by the teachers' refusal to return to work. "My grandchildren are tired of playing," she fumed. "They want to go back to school." This woman, who sold sweets in front of the school, was also distressed because business at her small stand had dropped off dramatically with the suspension of classes. Another angry mother complained: "A year never passes with normal classes. There are always strikes and that is why public education is viewed so poorly. The teachers never agree with anything that the government says. They're really not so badly paid given the number of hours that they work and they get two long vacations a year. Any other public employee has to work all day long." She further criticized

the low professional qualifications of public school teachers. "They call themselves professionals," she said, "but many have not gone to the normal school."

Teachers also alienated some parents with questionable protest tactics that did little to disrupt the state but upset many ordinary citizens. One Sunday evening, for example, my husband and I were returning to the city from a small town in the mountain valleys of La Paz department. We were traveling on a bus that was crowded with peasants and working people, most of whom were the parents and grandparents of school-aged children. As the bus approached the altiplano town of Batallas over a rough gravel highway, it overtook a group of perhaps fifty teachers who were walking along the side of the road. They had not thrown up barricades, a common protest technique, but it soon became evident that we had come upon a demonstration and that the teachers did not want the bus to pass. As the driver slowed to go around the group, a shower of stones and rocks fell on the bus. One rock broke a rear window and injured a female passenger. Some protesters then climbed onto the luggage rack and began hurling bags to the ground. The terrified driver veered off onto a side road, plunged the bus through a shallow river after discovering that the bridge over it was blocked by another group of protesters, and began a long circuitous detour to the city. When we finally arrived, many tired passengers were not feeling particularly sympathetic to the teachers and their demands.

Parents' divided opinions about the strike were reflected in the Federation of Parents of El Alto, an organization that represents a majority of the parents of public school children. The federation, which is dominated by members of CONDEPA and belongs to the COB, supported the teachers insofar as their demands for higher wages were concerned, but it refused to call for the repeal of the educational reform legislation. The federation backed the Educational Reform Law, because it believed that the law would compel teachers to improve. It was also sympathetic to the notion that parents should have more control over the education of their children. As one federation leader explained: "We must realize that there are teachers who are not even high school graduates. These people have encrusted themselves onto the current struggle as a way of blocking changes to the system. They are never going to agree with the reform, because they are the ones who will never pass the test. . . . They entered the profession through political favoritism, . . . or family connections." Moreover, desperate parents in several local affiliates of the federation raised money to pay teachers to work during the strike, but this usually did not work because of union vigilance.

What disgruntled parents could not accomplish, however, the government's intransigence and repression finally achieved. The COB called off the nationwide general strike on April 30, when three leaders, operating clandestinely and without consulting the rank-and-file, signed an agreement with the government. Without the COB's support the teachers had little choice but to follow suit. They could not hold out indefinitely without a strike fund, and the eight-week strike had already exacted a high price from teachers and their families. It was a crushing defeat: not only did the Educational Reform Law remain intact but teachers were not even sure that their lost wages would be paid. Teachers' union leaders—the most radical in the Bolivian labor movement—were irate and accused COB leaders of selling out the movement. Rank-and-file teachers also felt disillusioned that their long weeks of sacrifice had seemingly brought nothing.

The defeat of the strikers did not end the controversy surrounding public education, and more strikes and demonstrations followed in subsequent years. The teachers managed to force the government to modify the Educational Reform Law in some respects. A new clause states that no teacher in service before 1994 can be removed because of changes introduced by the law. And all teachers continued to be represented by the union and paid union dues.

The teachers' strike demonstrates that, despite the defeats and setbacks suffered by the Bolivian labor movement, class-based organizations continue to be a vital organizational form that is crucial to resisting the imposition of corrosive neoliberal policies. The teachers' strike galvanized a level of popular support in El Alto and the poor neighborhoods of La Paz that had not been seen in the recent past. Genaro Flores, former executive secretary of the COB and a peasant leader, found reason for hope in the popular response:

> [The strike] was not a total defeat. In the past, it was the miners who fought for the poor and the working class. Now it is the teachers, and the population supported them and understood that it is not just a wage problem. The strike was a way for people to reorganize themselves and become [more] conscious of the problems with education in Bolivia. The reform came very quickly without anyone really understanding what it was about, because it's a project of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Implicit in what Flores said is that class-based struggles and organizations in Bolivia have an enduring history, and they remain key to progressive social transformations.

Contrary to one sector of public opinion in La Paz, teachers did not op-

pose the law because they were against reforming education in Bolivia. Rather, they wanted to protect the few shreds of job security that remained after more than a decade of neoliberal reforms in Bolivia and to preserve their dignity as teachers. Yet this objective was jeopardized by the cleavages that divide parents and teachers and that were, at least in part, aggravated by the Educational Reform Law.

The law tantalized local people with the possibility of greater power over public education. It nurtured the hope that, after decades of inept central management, corruption, and discrimination against indigenous and poor urban children, schools could actually respond more effectively to their educational needs. Yet the power to effectively shape public education never really lay with local people, despite the rhetoric of the reform law. And to have any claim on the limited possibilities offered by the law, alteños were asked to accept the gradual erosion of teachers' limited job security. Thus many people found themselves in an impossible position, compelled to choose between teachers and children.

Parents see their children's futures increasingly frustrated by a crumbling public education system and teachers whom they perceive as lazy and incompetent. Teachers, for these parents, have benefited to a limited degree from the system but are unable, and sometimes unwilling, to educate children in ways that respect their cultural integrity and adequately prepare them. Yet teachers, despite their best efforts, cannot always deliver the instructional quality that parents expect from them. Their job security is rapidly disappearing, and they cannot support their own families on the wages that they earn. Moreover, El Alto's pervasive poverty affects public education in myriad ways: poverty, for example, forces children to leave school at an early age, and it leaves children hungry and malnourished and thus unable to learn well.

Perhaps the strike's most hopeful legacy is that it intensified the debate about racism and teacher accountability in the public school system, and, as Genaro Flores suggested, heightened public debate and awareness of neoliberalism. Building solidarity among alteños in the future will depend upon the ability of teachers, parents, and students to engage in discussions about educational quality, professional responsibility, and cultural integrity, as well as the broader issues of political and economic inequality that shape public education. Teachers need to convince skeptics that they are genuinely concerned about educating children, who also bear the brunt of the public education system's numerous inadequacies, and that teachers are indeed the champions of a public education system that is threatened by the reformist zeal of neoliberal planners in distant foreign capitals.