

Kansas State University Libraries

## New Prairie Press

---

Adult Education Research Conference

2016 Conference Proceedings (Charlotte, NC)

---

# Beyond NGOization: Challenging Neoliberalism in a Chilean Trade Union School

John Holst

*University of St. Thomas*, [jdh91@psu.edu](mailto:jdh91@psu.edu)

Maria Alicia Vetter

*Indepedent Researcher*, [mavetter100@msn.com](mailto:mavetter100@msn.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Holst, John and Vetter, Maria Alicia (2016). "Beyond NGOization: Challenging Neoliberalism in a Chilean Trade Union School," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2016/papers/22>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

## Beyond NGOization: Challenging Neoliberalism in a Chilean Trade Union School

John D. Holst  
 University of St. Thomas  
 María Alicia Vetter  
 Independent Researcher

**Abstract:** We present the results of a descriptive case study of a NGO-based trade union school in Chile. The case is an example of working class popular education that challenges neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** popular education, Gramsci, working class education, Chile, neoliberalism

In this paper, we present the results of a descriptive case study of the Trade Union School of the Chilean non-governmental organization (NGO) Alejandro Lipschutz Institute of Science (ICAL-Spanish acronym). We began the fieldwork for this study in January of 2014 with the purpose of adding an international comparative case to previous (Holst, 2004) research on radical adult education. Our contacts directed us to ICAL and once there, we were introduced to the staff of ICAL's Labor Area which is responsible for the annual Trade Union School. We realized that case study research on the NGO-based Trade Union School would actually add additional unanticipated dimensions to our research on contemporary radical adult education. Specifically, by researching the work of ICAL, we could consider the potential for radical adult education within the context of an NGO. We had previously written on the political and ideological limitations of radical adult education within NGOs (Holst, 2007), and are aware of similar literature (e.g., Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Gürcan, 2015; McSweeney, 2014; INCITE!, 2007; Tepe, 2012) raising the concerns of what Roy (2004) called the "NGO-ization of resistance" (p. 41) in social movements. A case study of the ICAL Trade Union School allowed us to consider the radical potential of adult education work in a uniquely situated NGO. Specifically, since ICAL is based in the Chilean working class and organizations of the Chilean working class, it has a very different ideological, structural, and financial situation than most NGOs that we believe rightly come under criticism for professionalizing and muting the radical edge of social movement-based adult education. We believe the case shows the potential for radical education work within an NGO context and, therefore, adds nuances to the often-cited idea that the NGOization (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013) of social movement-based education limits its transformational potential.

### Historical Context and Description of the Case

Our case study is situated within debates over the relationship between radical adult education and neoliberalism and education within social movement organizations, but, as a Chilean case, it is also situated within the long history of adult and workers' education in Chile.

Between 1900 and 1927, there were two ongoing projects for the education of adults in Chile that functioned independently of each other. One was the so-called "popular education" proposed by the liberal sector<sup>1</sup> – of the bourgeoisie; and the other, the educational practices that took place inside the working-class movement, and which has been called "alternative popular education". (Núñez, 1982)

---

<sup>1</sup> Groups and individuals associated to the Liberal Party.

Examples of “popular education” efforts from the liberal sector were the Society of Night Schools for Workers, founded in 1901, as well as a Center for Popular Education, founded in 1903. Also in 1903, the University of Chile’s Student Federation (FECH) called for a Congress on Popular Education. There were also later efforts on the part of the Catholic Church and, in 1917, the nation’s main newspaper, *El Mercurio*, called different institutions together to participate in a series of conferences on the subject of “popular education.” (Núñez, 1982)

In spite of the urgency to implement programs of “popular education,” these efforts stemming from the dominant classes did not prosper in practice. In this context, the enlightened working class in Chile conducted an alternative adult education that took place in their mutual aid societies and in their resistance societies. They actively engaged in educational programs, such as the *filarmónicas*, which were cultural evenings dedicated to the cultivation of workers. Nevertheless, these forms of self-education generally contributed to, rather than opposed, the “popular education” promoted by the dominant groups. They were inserted in a “civilizing project” stemming from the working class itself, but which aimed to make the workers fit better into the existing structures (Núñez, 1982). It was not until Luis Emilio Recabarren’s leadership of the working class movement in the second and beginning of the third decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that these traditional educational activities took on the expressed purpose of promoting an education that would challenge the existing structures (Vetter, 2013).

In the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other adult education efforts that involved an alternative education of workers took place, this time with direct participation from the academy. According to ICAL staff (personal communication, January 15, 2014), two institutions of particular note up to the military coup of 1973 were the Catholic University of Chile’s Department of Worker and Peasant Studies (DUOC) and the Institute of National Training (INACAP). These institutions of adult education centered on alternative forms of workers’ education until they were privatized during the military dictatorship (1973-1989). Today, according to ICAL staff (personal communication, January 15, 2014), they lead in the field of adult higher education at the service of market forces, without any semblance of alternative workers’ education.

There have been sporadic efforts at alternative workers’ education since the return of electoral democracy (1989), such as INFOCAP, an institute conducted under the auspices of the Catholic Church, and today there are 14 to 15 union schools, which function inside the market system and which, generally speaking, do not provide a counter hegemonic approach to the education of workers. It is in this context that union schools with a more political approach have been struggling for space in the universities, such as the Clotario Blest School at the Alberto Hurtado University. The staff of ICAL’s Trade Union School see themselves as a part of this effort to rebuild a counter hegemonic alternative workers’ education (personal communication, January 15, 2014).

ICAL is a Chilean NGO founded in 1983 with the purpose of defending and developing critical thought and action. ICAL is affiliated with the Chilean Communist Party but operates autonomously (Molina Ponce, 2014). The Labor Area of ICAL is responsible for the Trade Union School, and has been running it since 2003. The School receives financing from the Latin American branch of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. In 2005, the School, with the staff we interviewed and with help from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, began to implement a popular education methodology. This has meant a move away from an expert-to-novice banking model to one in which the curricular content is co-created between the staff, who are academic professionals, the labor unions, which agree to send members to the School, and participants who

tend to be rank-and-file union leaders and members (Katia Molina Ponce and Felipe Valenzuela, personal communication, January 15, 2014).

The annual School spans about 10 months consisting of three intensive 2-day, 16-hour retreats with on-going fieldwork activities after each retreat. The 2014 School, for example, held its retreats in April, July, and October with the April and October retreats held in the capital Santiago and the July retreat held in the northern city of Coquimbo (Molina Ponce, 2014). Each School has around 20-30 participants and, since 2003, it has trained about 300 union and social movement leaders. The main objective of the school is to create popular education training and capacity building space for and with trade union and social movement leaders for the purposes of transforming neoliberalism in Chile (Molina Ponce, 2014).

As a part of the organizing and curriculum of the annual school, the ICAL staff engage in research projects related to the economic sector, region, or labor conditions of School participants. This research is published by ICAL for use in the School or for wider dissemination. Some of this research is industrial background studies the ICAL staff conducts in order to create curriculum materials (e.g., Muñoz, 2009, 2011; Molina 2010) and some of it is participatory action research studies conducted with participants on their working conditions and trade union work (Molina & Ruminot, 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In the conceptualization of the study and in our data analysis, we used a Gramscian theoretical framework (Holst, 2015). With a Gramscian standpoint, we were able to consider the ICAL Trade Union School as either an NGO-based and potentially civil societal (Welton, 2012) project, or a radical effort of developing working-class organic intellectuals among the trade union leader participants. Without a Gramscian framework, we would not have been able to understand the potential of NGO work when it is organically rooted in the working class through affiliation with working-class organizations. A Gramscian theoretical framework, helped us consider the Trade Union School in terms of Gramsci's goal of building working-class political independence. Moreover, a Gramscian framework was appropriate because ICAL itself uses Gramscian concepts of cultural hegemony and the necessity of building working-class hegemony as foundation to its Trade Union School work (Molina Ponce, 2014). For ICAL, a major negative impact of neoliberalism is the depoliticizing of economic struggle (Molina, 2011), and, therefore, the School is an effort to rebuild the labor movement in a way that it moves beyond localized economic struggles to become an autonomous political actor at the national level (Muñoz Flores, n.d.).

### **Research Design**

We specifically chose a descriptive case study (Merriam, 2009) methodology because our goal was to present a rich description of the educational work and theoretical outlook of the ICAL Trade Union School. We felt an interpretive or evaluative case study would have been inappropriate. Nevertheless, there is an interpretive element to our study in our effort to present as rich a description as possible and through the application of a Gramscian theoretical framework.

There were three main research questions in this study. First, what is the ICAL Trade Union School's analysis of globalization? Second, how does the Trade Union School's analysis of globalization shape the education work they do, or with whom they engage in educational work? Third, what is the methodological and curricular nature of the Trade Union School's educational work?

Data collection consisted of a series of four interviews in January of 2014 with the principal staff members of ICAL's Labor Area responsible for the organization of the Trade Union School. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and ranged from 45-120 minutes in duration. We were able to record some of the interviews, which were later transcribed by contacts of the ICAL staff. Due to technical difficulties, some interview data consisted only of extensive notes taken during and after interviews. Through our own research and with the help of ICAL staff, we collected approximately 1000 pages of primary documents. We considered interviews with the staff and documents directly related to the school's structure and content as primary sources and considered of secondary importance documents produced by ICAL's Labor Area but not directly used in the school. We should note that after leading the Trade Union School for several years, the staff we interviewed left ICAL in March 2014; therefore, our findings and conclusions are based on the work of the Trade Union School up to early 2014.

Following Merriam and Tisdell (2016), we analyzed interview and document data using the constant comparative method. Preliminary data analysis began in January of 2014 while in Chile. In preparation for interviews, we began initial open coding of documents and then of interview notes as we met for interview sessions throughout January of 2014. Once we had interview transcripts, and had completed the collection of documents, we engaged in more in-depth open coding across all data sources. Once we completed open coding, we began the stage of analytic coding using our Gramscian theoretical framework. A limitation of our data is that we were not able to collect any data through observation of the Trade Union School. As a part of interview sessions, ICAL shared photographs and video of School sessions, but we were not able to conduct live observation of the School during our fieldwork. Therefore, our findings on the nature of the pedagogical work of the Trade Union School are based on data from interviews and data from curriculum materials and ICAL's own descriptions of their pedagogy.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

There were four central and interrelated themes from this study related to our original research questions. First, ICAL's research, which informs and is informed by its Trade Union School work is an effort to seek out and develop new theory to understand the new socio-political economic realities facing the Chilean working class and its organizations in the era of neoliberal globalization. While drawing on Marx for political economic analysis (e.g., Valenzuela, 2012), Foucault for an analysis of the disciplinary nature of neoliberal labor restructuring (e.g., Molina Ponce, 2013; Muñoz, 2012b), and Gramsci for an analysis of neoliberalism as cultural hegemony (Molina Ponce, 2014), ICAL is particularly interested in drawing on Latin American theorists (e.g., Atunes, 2013) for an understanding of the specific neoliberal transformations occurring in Latin America.

Second, for ICAL, globalization is important only to the extent that it focuses attention on the specific neoliberal transformations of the Chilean economy, politics, culture, and working conditions. Central to ICAL's analysis of neoliberal globalization are the governmental and employer practices centering on labor flexibility and the creation of precarious working and living conditions for the Chilean working class. Labor flexibility has resulted in drastic increases in temporary, part-time, and out-sourced employment (Ruminot, n.d.). For ICAL, the "expanded concept of labor" (Muñoz, 2012) helps explain the continued centrality of work in people's lives, even in the face of increasing fragmentation of work and growing informal work arrangements.

Third, ICAL understands that the implementation of policies and practices of labor flexibility are not merely fundamental transformations of production and the labor market in

Chile, but have been part and parcel of a cultural transformation of Chileans and Chilean society as a whole. From ICAL's close contact through research and educational work with the Chilean working class, they conclude that labor flexibility makes work precarious but that it also creates a subjectivity and culture characterized by permanent competition, a radical individualism, a degrading of collective action, a fear of associating with union activity, and a banalization of the precarity of work (Muñoz, 2012b).

Fourth, since neoliberalism is as much an economic transformation as it is a cultural transformation, a focus of ICAL's education work through the Trade Union School is both an effort to rebuild the Chilean labor movement so it can challenge neoliberal labor and economic policies, and an effort to challenge the cultural hegemony which is both a cause and a support for neoliberalism. To understand the impact of neoliberalism on the Chilean working class and labor movement, and to develop effective training and capacity building to combat it, ICAL utilizes a participatory and popular education methodology. Neoliberalism has fragmented work in Chile, and has therefore, fragmented the working class and weakened its organizations. The pedagogical work of ICAL in bringing together union leaders from different regions of the country and different sectors of the economy is an effort to collectively identify and seek commonalities across the fragmentation. In this sense, they are challenging both the objective fragmentation and the individualizing subjective or cultural aspect stemming from the fragmentation that permeates the Chilean working class (Molina Ponce, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

Most broadly stated, this case contributes to the field of adult education because it presents the practical educational work and theoretical analysis of a Chilean NGO-based trade union school. The US-based scholarship in adult education has few Latin American popular education case studies. Moreover, there are currently no case studies of contemporary Latin American educational work conducted by or in conjunction with working-class organizations such as ICAL. Theoretically, this paper contributes new social movement-based analysis of neoliberalism and its impact on the nature of work for working-class people from a Latin American perspective. At the nexus of ICAL's analysis of neoliberalism and its actual educational work, this paper presents an example of educational praxis, or an example of the dialectical relationship between theory and educational practice which emerges from ICAL's efforts to advance the Chilean trade union movement's efforts to challenge neoliberalism through educational and leadership development work. Because this case study is based in a working-class organization involved in education of workers and trade union leaders, it contributes to our understanding of popular education, while also contributing to the broader adult education scholarship on the nature of work in the era of neoliberalism. In other words, the case should be of interest to popular educators and those involved in workplace learning. Given that ICAL works to develop a Latin American analysis of neoliberalism, a presentation of its work challenges US-based adult educators to critically consider the level of applicability of Global North perspectives on the nature of neoliberalism.

### **References**

- Atunes, R. (2013). El trabajo y los sentidos. *Revista Laboral*, 6(16), 151-199.
- Choudry, A., & Kapoor, K. (Eds.). (2013). *NGOization*. London: Zed.
- Gürçan, E. C. (2015). The nonprofit-corporate complex. *Monthly Review*, 66(11), 37-53.

- Holst, J. D. (2004). Globalization and education within two revolutionary organizations in the United States of America: A Gramscian analysis. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55(1), 23-40.
- Holst, J. D. (2007). The Politics and economics of globalization and social change in radical adult education: A critical review of recent literature. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 5(1). Available online at: <http://www.jceps.com/index.php?pageID=article&articleID=91>
- Holst, J. D. (2015). *The political independence of the working class: Antonio Gramsci's pedagogical leitmotif*. Paper presented at the 56th Annual Adult Education Research Conference, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS.
- INCITE! (2007). *The revolution will not be funded*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- McSweeney, J. (2014). The absence of class. *Progress in Development Studies*, 14(3), 275-285.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Molina, K. (2010). *Cartilla laboral. El modelo agroexportador*. Santiago de Chile: ICAL.
- Molina, K. (2011). Movimientos sociales y sindicalismo en el gobierno de Derecha. *Revista Laboral ICAL*, 4(13), 31-50.
- Molina Ponce, K. (2013). Violación a la libertad sindical en los call centers. *Revista Laboral*, 6(16), 81-101.
- Molina Ponce, K. (2014). *Proyecto 2014: Escuela Sindical Rosa Luxemburgo*. Santiago de Chile: ICAL.
- Molina, K., & Ruminot, N. (2010). *La investigación acción participativa como modelo de investigación en los trabajadores de call center de Chile*. Santiago de Chile: ICAL.
- Muñoz, M. (2009). *Cartilla laboral: Telefónica Chile*. Santiago de Chile: ICAL.
- Muñoz, M. (2011). *Cartilla laboral. El modelo: La minería del cobre en Chile*. Santiago de Chile: ICAL.
- Muñoz, M. (2012a). En busca del sujeto laboral ampliado. *Revista Laboral*, 4(13), 15-30.
- Muñoz, M. (2012b). *Flexibilidad laboral*. Santiago de Chile: ICAL.
- Muñoz Flores, M. E. (n.d.). *Breve reseña de la historia del movimiento sindical chileno*. Santiago de Chile: ICAL.
- Núñez, I. (1982). *Educación popular y movimiento obrero*. Santiago de Chile: PIIE.
- Roy, A. (2004). *Public power in the age of empire*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Ruminot, N. (n.d.). *Impacto del modelo neoliberal en los trabajadores*. Santiago de Chile: ICAL.
- Tepe, D. (2012). *The myth about global civil society*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Valenzuela, F. (2012). *Cartilla laboral: Modelos productivos*. Santiago de Chile: ICAL.
- Vetter, M. A. (2013). *Luis Emilio Recabarren: Educator of the Chilean working class* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois.
- Welton, M. (2012). *Unearthing Canada's hidden past*. Toronto: Thompson Publishing.