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Bill Ayers Speech to World Education Forum

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President Hugo Chavez, Vice-President Vicente Rangel, Ministers Moncada and Isturiz, invited guests, comrades. I'm honored and humbled to be here with you this morning. I bring greetings and support from your brothers and sisters throughout North America. Welcome to the World Education Forum! Amamos la revolucion Bolivariana!

This is my fourth visit to Venezuela, each time at the invitation of my comrade and friend Luis Bonilla, a brilliant educator and inspiring fighter for justice. Luis has taught me a great deal about the Bolivarian Revolution and about the profound educational reforms underway here in Venezuela under the leadership of President Chavez. We share the belief that education is the motor-force of revolution, and I've come to appreciate Luis as a major asset in both the Venezuelan and the international struggle! Look forward to seeing how he and all of you continue to overcome the failings of capitalist education as you seek to create something truly new and deeply humane. Thank you, Luis, for everything you've done.

I also thank my youngest son, Chesa Boudin, who is interpreting my talk this morning and whose book on the Bolivarian revolution has played an important part in countering the barrage of lies spread by the U.S. State Department and the corrupted North American media.

I began teaching when I was 20 years old in a small freedom school affiliated with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The year was 1965, and I'd been arrested in a demonstration. Jailed for ten days, I met several activists who were finding ways to link teaching and education with deep and fundamental social change. They were following Dewey and DuBois, King and Helen Keller who wrote: "We can't have education without revolution. We have tried peace education for 1,900 years and it has failed. Let us try revolution and see what it will do now."

-----Is that a slap at Christianity? "Peace education"?

I walked out of jail and into my first teaching position and from that day until this I've thought of myself as a teacher, but I've also understood teaching as a project intimately connected with social justice. After all, the fundamental message of the teacher is this: you can change your life whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done, another world is possible. As students and teachers begin to see themselves as linked to one another, as tied to history and capable of collective action, the fundamental message of teaching shifts slightly, and becomes broader, more generous: we must change ourselves as we come together to change the world. Teaching invites transformations, it urges revolutions small and large. La educacion es revolucion!

I taught at first in something like a Simoncito called Head Start and eventually taught at every level in barrios and prisons and insurgent projects across the United States. I learned then that education is never neutral. It always has a value, a position, a politics. Education either reinforces or challenges the existing social order, and school is always a contested space – what should be taught? In what way? Toward what end? By and for whom? At bottom, it involves a struggle over the essential questions: what does it mean to be a human being living in a human society?

Totalitarianism demands obedience and conformity, hierarchy, command and control. Royalty requires allegiance. Capitalism promotes racism and militarism – turning people into consumers, not citizens. Participatory democracy, by contrast, requires free people coming together voluntarily as equals who are capable of both self-realization and, at the same time, full participation in a shared political and economic life.

Education contributes to human liberation to the extent that people reflect on their lives, and, becoming more conscious, insert themselves as subjects in history. To be a good teacher means above all to have faith in the people, to believe in the possibility that people can create and change things. Education is not preparation for life, but rather education is life itself, an active process in which everyone – students and teachers – participates as co-learners.

Despite being under constant attack from within and from abroad, the Bolivarian revolution has made astonishing strides in a brief

period: from the Mission Simoncito to the Mission Robinson to the Mission Ribas to the Mission Sucre, to the Bolivarian schools and the UBV, Venezuelans have shown the world that with full participation, full inclusion, and popular empowerment, the failings of capitalist schooling can be resisted and overcome. Venezuela is a beacon to the world in its accomplishment of eliminating illiteracy in record time, and engaging virtually the entire population in the ongoing project of education.

The great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda wrote a poem to his fellow writers called "The Poet's Obligation" in which he instructed them in their core responsibility: you must, he said, become aware of your sisters and brothers who are trapped in subjugation and meaninglessness, imprisoned in ignorance and despair. You must move in and out of windows carrying a vision of the vast oceans just beyond the bars of the prison— a message of hope and possibility. Neruda ends with this: it is through me that freedom and the sea will call in answer to the shrouded heart.

Let those of us who are gathered here today read this poem as "The Teacher's Obligation." We, too, must move in and out of windows, we, too, must build a project of radical imagination and fundamental change. Venezuela is poised to offer the world a new model of education— a humanizing and revolutionary model whose twin missions are enlightenment and liberation. This World Education Forum provides us a unique opportunity to develop and share the lessons and challenges of this profound educational project that is the Bolivarian Revolution.

Viva Mission Sucre!
Viva Presidente Chavez!
Viva La Revolucion Bolivariana!
Hasta La Victoria Siempre!

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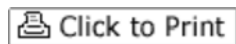
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