

Dateline Mexico by Rubén Cota Meza

New Age education for Mexico

Would-be modernizers seek to pervert the remains of an education system already ravaged by IMF austerity.

A new curriculum is being designed for Mexico's school system which, under the name of "education reform," threatens to mire new generations in the "post-industrial" dogmas of malthusianism and ecologism. According to the reform planners themselves, the new curriculum represents "a radical change in the pedagogic model," directed more toward "forming" than "informing" the student, who will instead be encouraged to "seek his own knowledge."

The author of this plan is Education Secretary Manuel Bartlett Díaz. As government secretary to former President Miguel de la Madrid, Bartlett had orchestrated the most massive electoral fraud in Mexican history, in his capacity as president of the Federal Election Commission. It was through that fraud that bankers' choice Carlos Salinas de Gortari was imposed as President of Mexico. Now, Bartlett and Salinas would defraud Mexico's future.

The new education curriculum was launched on an experimental basis in 474 schools during the 1990-91 school term, and its application will be expanded over successive terms until it becomes obligatory throughout the entire national education system by 1992-93.

The core of the plan, dubbed "the modernization of education," is oriented toward reproducing among Mexican children the beliefs of Salinas de Gortari himself. These were best reflected by his recent assertion that "our idea of progress as dominion over nature today confronts one of its greatest and most dramatic chal-

lenges." This single concept, translated into a curriculum, will necessarily end up separating education from the teaching of those fundamental laws of the universe which make possible nature's transformation through science and technology. Instead, "education" becomes a series of contemplative dogmas about "conservation" and "equilibrium."

Natural and social sciences will now be transformed into an ecologist-oriented study of nature, with science, technology, and health somehow crammed into that category, and physical and human geography tacked on. The student's technological knowledge will now be oriented toward conserving the resources of his environment, while he will study "the structure and organic functioning of living beings, both as individuals and as species, as subjects vis-à-vis the environment." Teaching of mathematics will be reduced by 25%, from 12 to 9 hours a week, while other class materials will be similarly shrunk, to make way for more "practical" courses such as ecology and human sexuality.

Announcement of the new education plan has triggered a heated controversy—less over the contents of the curriculum, than over the disastrous shape the national education system is currently in, which was brought to light by the reform itself. The most dramatic aspect of this deterioration is the disappearance of entire sections of the educational system, for lack of students! Such is the case, for example, with evening classes offered to junior high school students in Mexico

City, which were eliminated in 33 schools, leaving 915 teachers classless. Registration of junior high school students in Mexico City overall has fallen from 130,000 to 117,000.

The same phenomenon exists at other grade levels. First grade registration rose by a pathetic 0.9% over the previous year, while for the first time in many years, high school and college applicants did not have to fear rejection for lack of available spaces. Perhaps most dramatic of all is the fact that nearly 50% of the children and youth who register for school, are dropping out. The National Farmers Federation has revealed that this percentage rises to 80% in the rural areas, where only 54 out of every 1,000 children finish the primary grades.

The question is why a country like Mexico, with a large and rapidly growing youth population, is seeing more and more of its children abandoning the school system? The answer lies with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has imposed such murderous austerity restraints on the country that its families simply cannot afford to leave their children in school. Student dropout levels are less a response to the cost of education per se, than they are a reflection of their families' desperate need for more income.

On World Literacy Day Sept. 6, Mexico's national director of literacy, Geraldine Novelo Openheim, reported that between 1984 and 1989 more than 800,000 children had dropped out of school, "obliged by family circumstances which make them responsible for supporting the household at an early age."

Mexico is indeed in need of "reform," but not in the classroom. Rather, it is needed in the corridors of power, where the country's leaders have mortgaged the country's future, and the future of its youth.