

# Privatization: Resistance Spreads Worldwide to Raids on Public Wealth

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Theme: [History](#)

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“How can you buy or sell the sky? The warmth of the land? We do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water.” These words are often attributed to Chief Seattle in 1854, when the expanding United States sought to buy land from the Duwamish Indians. The sentiment is authentic, if not the exact words; indigenous peoples know that the very idea of privatizing nature is absurd.

But the system of capitalism is based on the appropriation of communal property. The theft of land held in common made the rise of capitalism possible.

Fast forward to today: over the last 20 years or so, capitalist heavies have accomplished a gigantic transfer of public wealth into private pockets. The results? Profound damage to the planet, increasing misery for its people – and a determined fight-back around the world.

## **The neoliberal assault**

“Classical economic liberalism” is the term used to describe the profit system in its youthful heyday. Translated, this means that industrial robber barons and bankers did what they damn well pleased, without regulation. This model was reborn in the 1980s as neoliberalism.

The essence of neoliberalism is removing all limits on what big business can do to maximize profits; it’s more or less synonymous with so-called free trade. It’s the economic policy of U.S. imperialism across the globe, but especially in Uncle Sam’s “back yard” – Latin America and the Caribbean.

In order to get loans from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, economic bodies dominated by the U.S., countries were forced to slash government services, open their markets to foreign capital, and sell off state-owned enterprises in energy, transportation and water to private companies.

These measures have created massive unemployment, especially among women and young people. The economies of whole countries rely on what vendors can make or find to sell on the street. “Free markets” have generated recessions, vicious union-busting, pervasive government corruption, and desperate waves of emigration.

But neoliberalism has also cut a nasty swath through the wealthier countries to which economic refugees flee. “Let the market decide” serves as the justification for vanished social services, stagnant wages, and anti-union campaigns by employers.

## **Privatization is key**

The root strategies of neoliberalism are contracting out public-sector jobs and selling off government agencies that produce goods and provide services. Since Ronald Reagan's election as president in 1980, every U.S. administration has privatized as much as it could get away with.

Reagan attempted to privatize the U.S. Post Office, Amtrak railroad, the federal prison system, and more. Bush Sr. contracted out 9,000 jobs during the Persian Gulf war. Bill Clinton got rid of nearly 380,000 non-military federal jobs, in addition to gutting welfare.

Bush Jr. tried to privatize Social Security, and succeeded in taking away the collective bargaining rights of airport screeners and workers at the Justice Department and Department of Homeland Security. He and Barack Obama have broken all records with the number of mercenaries they have sent in place of soldiers to fight Washington's wars. Now corporate CEOs are salivating at the prospect of privatizing public schools, hospitals, and mental health clinics, energy utilities, additional prisons, and immigrant detention centers.

Public workers are naturally in the forefront of struggles against privatization. At stake are their jobs and the lives of their students, clients, and patients.

Public schools and universities are a special hotbed of organizing. Last fall, students, staff, and faculty from one University of California campus after another denounced tuition hikes, staff layoffs and mandatory unpaid time off. The economic crisis and need for budget cuts became a pretext for moving to privatize the state's public education system, once highly regarded. When 40 protesters occupied Wheeler Hall at Berkeley, hundreds of supporters kept the cops from violently overwhelming them.

Politicians in major U.S. cities are closing schools in poor neighborhoods and establishing private charter schools. Most are anti-union, unregulated by state law, and free to discriminate against poor and immigrant children, those with special education needs, and students of color. But rank-and-file union caucuses, teacher-community coalitions, and left groups are springing up from coast to coast to challenge meek or opportunist union leaders and take the offensive against the Obama administration's steamroller for charter schools.

### **Rising up internationally**

Last November, after President Felipe Calderón fired 45,000 members of the independent Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME) and abruptly privatized the electrical utility serving central Mexico, several hundred thousand people took to the streets of Mexico City. Mexican workers have deep respect for the SME's spirited leaders, and they recognize the combined power of a multitude of unions together with social justice groups, indigenous organizations, and left parties.

French postal workers showed similar intransigence by going on strike in September and November. President Nicolas Sarkozy is shrinking social services, laying off public workers, and edging France's postal service toward privatization. Sixty-two unions and political and social-change organizations have formed the National Committee Against the Privatization of the Post (CNPP).

Since December, 10,000 Turkish workers have resisted the government's sudden announcement of plans to lay them off at the end of January. Employees have mounted protests in Ankara in freezing weather and in defiance of brutal police repression.

A movement of well-organized indigenous people against the sale of natural resources is growing. In Ecuador, President Rafael Correa is driving to “liberalize” water and mining laws. In words reminiscent of Chief Seattle, thousands of indigenous people from the highlands have chanted in outrage, “Water is not for sale, it is to be defended.”

A broad coalition of Amazonian indigenous peoples in Peru are also blockading highways, calling general strikes, and engaging in civil disobedience to stop the sale of their lands and waters to multinational oil, mining, and energy companies.

The battle against privatization cuts to the heart of what capitalism is all about: the right of a puny few to help themselves to the wealth created by the many. Because of this, it’s a battle that can be won only when the profit system itself is defeated. But, from the forests of the Amazon to the mines of China, every lesson learned and victory won by workers resisting privatization is a giant stride toward shutting down capitalism once and for all.

*Readers can find information about actions in solidarity with some of the campaigns discussed above at [www.socialism.com](http://www.socialism.com) and [www.labourstart.org](http://www.labourstart.org).*

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