

University students in Mexico and Chile protest attacks on education

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Students have been on strike for a month at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the country's largest university where 267,000 students take instruction. The strike was provoked when the administration imposed a \$63 fee per semester on students. Until now, except for a symbolic fee of about 2 US cents, UNAM students were not required to pay tuition.

Even though UNAM authorities imposed a means test on the new fee, exempting all those from families that earn less than four minimum wages, or about \$450 dollars, the measure sparked an explosion of protest from the students. The student strike defends the principle, written in the Mexican Constitution, that guarantees a free university education. The UNAM directors, for their part, point out that many of the public universities in Mexico already charge minimal fees. Many students see the fee as the first step in the siphoning off of funds away from public education toward the private sector, eventually resulting in the privatization of university education. Private universities in Mexico serve the upper middle classes and the rich. Typically they charge between \$2,000 and \$3,000 per semester.

Many sections of the working class—including electrical workers, teachers, academic and university workers—are supporting the student movement. The National Organizing Committee of Education Workers (CNTE), which represents Mexico City's teachers, initiated strike action in support of the students. The electrical workers, fighting the government's plan to privatize Mexico's electrical utilities (also in opposition to the language of the Constitution), have joined in student demonstrations.

The struggle has attracted the support of all those who oppose the free market policies of the ruling party

and its subordination of the Mexican economy to the dictates of the IMF.

Students from other universities are organizing in support of the UNAM protesters. The students have formed a General Strike Committee (CGH) and are occupying the gigantic campus in Mexico City. They have also organized protest marches involving tens of thousands of students and workers.

The UNAM administration has called for private negotiations on this issue "without winners or losers," in the words of UNAM President Francisco Barnes. He has suggested that outside interests are conspiring to prolong the strike and manipulate the students. At the same time, Barnes has been encouraging those students who oppose the strike to carry on classes and final exams at off-campus sites. This tactic has created confrontations between student groups. On May 21 Barnes gave the students a three-week ultimatum, threatening them with the loss of the semester.

Barnes is a supporter of Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). He supports Francisco Labastida, who is the front-running candidate for the presidential nomination for the year 2000. Labastida is using the UNAM strike to lambaste the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) because of its affiliation with the Student Left Block (BUI) and the more moderate Student Democratic Coalition (CEU). Presently BUI controls the coordinating body of the UNAM strike. Some BUI students are proposing tactics such as roadblocks and the occupation of municipal buildings. Such actions would lead to a collision with the Mexico City government of Cuahutemoc Cardenas (of the PRD), and is opposed by the CEU.

Barnes's complaints of "outside agitators" have coincided with violent attacks against politically active students, including the kidnapping and beating of

students by hooded individuals suspected to be PRI goons. So far about half a dozen students have reported being kidnapped in separate incidents and subjected to that treatment. They were later released with a warning from their assailants, who said "we know where your families live."

At the other end of Latin America, large student protests have shaken the Chilean government. Forty thousand students across Chile are protesting the cutbacks in education that threaten the ability of working class and middle class youth to study. The student protests are taking place at the same time dockworkers in Chile's ports are pressuring the government to grant severance and early retirement rights in anticipation of mass layoffs when the country's main ports are privatized on August 27. Chile's indian tribes are also agitating for land rights.

On May 20 massive student demonstrations took place across the nation. In Santiago, Chile's capital, 80 students were arrested when police attacked their protest with water cannon. Another 200 were arrested in the port city of Valparaiso, and two more were arrested in the southern city of Concepcion. In Arica, in the copper mining north, two students were shot by police, and one of them, 23-year-old accounting student Daniel Menco Prieto, died. He attended Taracapa University in Arica and worked delivering propane tanks to pay for his studies.

Last Saturday 4,000 people accompanied Menco Prieto's casket in a massive demonstration in support of the students. The enraged crowd forced the town's mayor to leave the church where the funeral was being held. The students accuse Mayor Ivan Paredes, a Socialist Party member, of having ordered the police to be heavy-handed against the students. The Socialist Party in Chile is part of a four-party ruling coalition that includes President Eduardo Frei's Christian Democratic Party.

The students are demanding increases in scholarships and food subsidies. Government officials have repeatedly declared that the international financial crisis—coupled with a drop in copper prices and the doubling in the student population (from 130,000 in 1990 to 270,000 today)—makes it hard to help all but the most needy students.

One of the largest drains on the national budget is the armed forces. During the Pinochet dictatorship

(1973-90) scores of secret decrees were imposed, granting the military unrestricted access to large amounts of money. One of these provisions grants the armed forces 10 percent of Chile's copper income. As part of the agreement for a return to civilian rule, 132 secret decrees were incorporated into Chile's laws. While Chile's economy was expanding the effect of the military "tax" of expenditures could be papered over and ignored. This is no longer the case. Any government attempts to increase social spending will provoke a sharp reaction from the military.

The students' struggles are taking place at a time when Chile is going through its biggest political crisis since the dictatorship. On May 21, Frei gave his State of the Union speech before a Congress sharply divided by the Pinochet extradition proceedings. Shortly before Frei's speech, fistfights broke out on the floor of the Congress between supporters and opponents of Pinochet.

Chile is also being hit by a severe economic recession. Official unemployment rates have increased from 7.5 to 8.2 percent in three months. Half a million workers are unemployed out of a labor force of 5.6 million. Economic forecasters predict an unemployment rate of 10 percent by year's end.



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