

Student upheavals expose anti-working class agenda of Chile's Bachelet

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Months of school occupations, student strikes and demonstrations have presented Chile's President Michelle Bachelet with the first major test of her administration. Elected on promises to pay heed to social concerns, Bachelet's vicious reaction to the student movement has exposed her government's anti-working class character and the unstable base upon which it rests.

Student protests began barely a month after the center-left Concertacion coalition's fifth consecutive government was inaugurated last March, developing into the biggest mobilizations in 30 years. A central student demand was that the government spend more on education. While increasing since the return to civilian rule in 1990, budget allocations for education have remained at half 1972 levels.

More importantly, students, backed by wider layers, called on the government to rescind education laws introduced by the 17-year military regime, which, in line with other deeply regressive free-market policies, transferred funding responsibilities to local municipalities, introduced a voucher system that advanced private education to the detriment of public education, and increasingly forced schools to woo local businesses for basic funding requirements.

The extent of the students' participation and militancy, the radical character of their well-warranted demands and the fact that they rested on the support of more than 80 percent of the population are indications of a shift to the left among broad masses of people. Recent polls have shown that the overwhelming majority of the population want this year's \$11 billion surplus revenue from soaring copper profits, Chile's main export and source of foreign exchange, to be used on social spending and on the poor.

"Almost three-quarters of Chileans want to use the (windfall copper profit) bonanza now," lamented Britain's influential mouthpiece, the *Economist* in its June 15 edition.

The electoral victory of Bachelet, a member of the Socialist Party, was itself a contradictory expression of this growing radicalization. Her selection as the governing coalition's candidate was a deliberate attempt to channel growing opposition to neo-liberal and free-market policies. Bachelet was heavily promoted in Chile and abroad as both an opponent and a victim of the military dictatorship, which in 1973 overthrew the left-wing government of Salvador Allende and bloodily repressed the working class.

Much was made in the media of Bachelet's personal involvement with a member of the Stalinist Communist Party's guerrilla front and the fact that she was arrested and tortured at the Villa Grimaldi detention center after the coup and that her father, Air Force General Alberto Bachelet, died while in the hands of Pinochet's secret police.

While these personal experiences were undoubtedly horrific, her coalition cynically attempted to use them to garner sympathy. In fact, Bachelet long ago made her peace with these assassins and was groomed in the early 1990s to become a spokesperson for the Chilean military brass: training in the elite military schools of the United States, serving as

defense minister in the previous administration and revamping Chile's military arsenal to unprecedented levels.

The main focus of her campaign and the media attention was Bachelet's status as a single mother, running on a ticket promising more social programs, equal opportunity, and a government that would listen to and act in accordance to the needs of the population.

And in the end, she was elected last January precisely because of the expectations raised by her promise of "combating inequality," an electoral ruse used by Bachelet's Concertacion coalition since the return to civilian rule in 1990. Chile is infamous for its extreme disparities of wealth—60 percent of the population live on less than \$400 a month, and the richest 20 percent receive incomes 14 times those received by the poorest quintile. But these conditions are part and parcel of the free-market policies the coalition itself has refined and perfected.

A brief review of Bachelet's reaction to the student movement over the last three months serves to illuminate the true nature of the latest Concertacion government.

Sporadic student strikes in the nation's capital were precipitated in late April by the Education Ministry's announced increase in fees for university entrance examinations and rumored restrictions on student transport passes.

Six days later, on May Day, tens of thousands of students participated in a demonstration in Santiago that ended in over a thousand arrests and dozens wounded. The student mobilizations spread rapidly to the northern and southern regional centers, and in some cases daily protests were reported over the next three weeks.

A qualitative shift transpired on May 19, when students from the Instituto Nacional and the Liceo de Aplicación occupied their campuses and an amalgam of student and youth groups called on Bachelet to improve the quality and accessibility of education, end privatization and commit her government to these demands in her State of the Nation address scheduled for May 21.

Bachelet's reaction was both a measure of her indifference to what is a basic fundamental right, and of the paralysis and fragility of her government when confronted with opposition. For a whole month, the administration made virtually no public statement other than to condemn the students for "acts of violence." Her May 21 speech was no exception.

"Let me be crystal clear," she told the Congress on May 21. "What we have witnessed over recent weeks is unacceptable. I will not tolerate acts of vandalism or intimidation. I will apply the full force of the law!"

The government was seeking to stampede public opinion to justify its use of ruthless repression. Truncheon-wielding police had repeatedly been marshaled against the students, brutally and indiscriminately attacking the demonstrators with tear gas and water cannon. Bachelet also ruled out discussions with the students, claiming that the government would not be "pressured" into negotiations.

But the government's attempt to generate anti-student sentiment backfired. It miscalculated the depth of popular alienation from the

government and sympathy for the youth. The student movement, which had been initiated by working class teenagers from the dilapidated public school system, brought into the fold private school and university students, and later teachers, workers and even employees from the Education Ministry.

In the following week, amidst daily strikes involving more than 100,000 youth and in the face of a mounting anti-government public, the administration was forced to backtrack. On May 29, when as many as 320 public and private schools and universities had been occupied and a national strike was scheduled for the following day, 11th-hour discussions were reinstituted and then again collapsed. Students broke off discussions primarily because the education minister, Martin Zilic, did not even bother to show up and because they suspected the government of sowing divisions among sections of the student representatives.

An estimated 1 million youth participated in the national strike the next day, May 30. That single event sparked a succession of frantic maneuvers by the government. First, Bachelet summoned key cabinet ministers—interior, finance, secretary general of the government, secretary general of the presidency, education—to a crisis meeting in La Moneda, the presidential palace.

Bachelet also unleashed an army of Special Forces riot police, only to publicly condemn as “excessive and unjustified” the violence she had mandated. She then ordered the dismissal of the Special Forces Prefect only to continue the brutal and indiscriminate repression.

Finally, the government resumed negotiations (Zilic was instructed that afternoon to meet with 23 student leaders in person) to offer what amounted to negligible concessions and a repackaged version of its original budget proposals. Discussions broke down again, and the students threatened another national strike for June 5.

Bachelet made her first and only public address dealing specifically with the student demands on June 1, a full two months after the mobilizations had begun.

Besides making vague promises to “reform” the Pinochet-era LOCE—the law enforcing the privatization and decentralization of public education—her most significant proposal was to co-opt a fraction of the student leadership to the newly formed presidential “Education Advisory Council.”

In reality, no concessions were extracted from the government. However, sections of the student leadership, particularly those closely aligned to the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, have sought to present this as a victory.

“On Monday (June 12) we return to classes,” 16-year-old Maria Jesus Sanhueza told reporters on June 9. “This isn’t the end of our movement, just a change in the way our demands are articulated. We go back incredibly happy with what we have achieved. We know full well that our victory is historic and hard earned.”

Sanhueza is a member of the Young Communists, which, alongside the entire coterie of lefts and radicals, called this a “resounding victory” and proclaimed that the “government offer was generous.” They played a major role in the moves to disband the occupations and strike movement. Quite clearly, they are opposed to harming the stability and future of the Socialist-led government.

“Bachelet’s latest offer to the students...is a trick,” Rodrigo Olivares, president of the Federation of Students in Solidarity said on June 16. “She gives free University Entry Exam and transportation passes to the poorest four-fifths of students, but privatizes the administration of both services” and the new education commission gives “10 percent student participation, but it’s only advisory. The Congress can just ignore whatever it says.”

“The Young Communists (JC) and Young Socialist (JS) leaders are ready to accept [the government’s] offer if Bachelet” gives students majority representation in the commission, he said. “I know the JC and JS

want to negotiate and demobilize, but it’s going to be hard to quiet all the students who thought they were fighting to eliminate the LOCE.”

Bachelet assured in her June 1 national address that her trumpeted educational reforms would come from the US\$11 billion in surplus revenue anticipated in large part from copper revenues.

The price of copper soared to US\$4 a pound over the past year as a result of increased demand from the US, China and India. This is more than six times its value in 2001. Chile’s copper exports will reach US\$27 billion by the end of the year, up from US\$7.3 billion in 2000.

However, a comment on *Bloomberg’s* June 28 newswire headlined “Bachelet Resists Calls to Spend Chile’s Copper Profits on Poor” illustrates just how illusory the spending spree is.

Having earlier assured financial markets that she would spend only the interest on Chile’s copper bonus this year—US\$138 million—Bachelet “agreed to negotiate with student leaders in the wake of the protests. After days of talks, the government agreed to spend about 103 billion pesos (\$200 million), most of it in 2007...using money that the government says will come out of its regular budget.” That is, there will be no change in her original stance.

And the incoming president also pledged to abide by the spending rules that former president, fellow Socialist Ricardo Lagos adopted in 2000. Under his strictures, spending is capped for each coming year to an estimate of long-term copper prices, Chile’s main source of foreign exchange, as well as an approximation of the rate of growth for the overall economy.

“The government is determined not to overspend, and thereby threaten Chile’s much vaunted economic stability,” commented the June 15 *Economist*. “The government’s stated priority is to maintain economic stability, and it would not jeopardize the country’s hard-won price stability by injecting excessive amounts of money into the economy. Ms. Bachelet has reiterated the government’s commitment to this policy and to overall fiscal discipline.”

Though increasingly discredited, the Concertacion coalition has effectively kept office because the right-wing opposition continues to be identified with General Pinochet’s 17-year rule and because in the eyes of global capitalism, the Concertacion has perfected the economic “shock therapy” that the right-wing coalition began.

Chile’s ruling elite, weak and reactionary, hostile to any form of social equality and democratic governance, and forever cowering to the demands of international capital, was forced to tactically retreat. Whatever scraps it concedes today, it is certain to take away twice over tomorrow. To this end it will call on the Socialist and Communist parties, which have historically served as props and the last line of defense for Chilean capitalism.



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