

120,000 students, teachers march in Chile against attacks on public education

Luis Arce
8 July 2011

Some 120,000 students, teachers and members of other unions marched on Thursday, June 30, in Chile to defend public education and oppose the proliferation of private, for-profit schools and universities.

The principal demand of the students is the repeal of the Constitutional Organic Law on Education (known by its Spanish acronym LOCE), imposed under the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. The students charge that this law has created an enormous gap in terms of the quality of education between public and private schools.

The demonstrators charge that the poorest youth are concentrated in public schools, where they receive an inferior education. The students are demanding that all Chileans be given the right to a higher education and that the government provide the necessary scholarships.

According to estimates by the Santiago daily *La Tercera* the cost of meeting these demands would amount to approximately US\$2 billion.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Chile's investment in public education is below the world average. It has fallen behind as a result of the privatizations and free-market policies instituted under the Pinochet dictatorship.

In 1973, the year Pinochet seized power, the country's education budget amounted to 7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and the overwhelming majority of education was free. By the end of the dictatorship in 1990, the education budget had fallen to 2.4 percent of GDP, and by the 2010 budget, it amounted to just 0.84 percent.

Today, 40 percent of the country's 3.5 million secondary school students attend public schools. About 50 percent attend subsidized schools, in which the government and parents share costs. The other 10 percent are in private schools.

The privatization of education to make it a source of profit is most developed in higher education. Approximately 80 percent of the million university students attend private institutions created under the dictatorship beginning in 1981.

The June 30 marches were organized principally by the Confederation of Students of Chile (CONFech) and were among the largest mass demonstrations in recent years. The Chilean dailies estimated that 80,000 marched in Santiago and

40,000 in the rest of the country.

The students filled Santiago's central Bernardo O'Higgins avenue. The march passed by the rear of the La Moneda government palace, where the students were met by hundreds of *carabinero* paramilitary police guarding the building. The students chanted, "Education must return to the power of the state and not the municipalities" and "Put an end to profit."

In moments, the police confronted the students, attacking them with tear gas. The demonstrators responded by throwing rocks, sticks and metal objects. The police arrested 121 demonstrators nationwide, including 38 in Santiago, 24 of whom were minors.

While the protest until then had been largely peaceful, some of the students demonstrated their frustration and anger at the government by attacking the Bank of Chile, Santander, a branch of Claro, the telecommunications company, and other businesses.

The media also reported a failed attempt to occupy the Brazilian embassy, which is located across the street from the main headquarters of the Ministry of Education.

The June 30 march was the largest in a series of student mobilizations against the right-wing government of Chile's billionaire President Sebastian Piñera and his minister of education, Joaquín Lavín. A University of Chicago-trained economist and former supporter of Pinochet, Lavín ran twice as the presidential candidate of the right-wing Independent Democratic Union (UDI). Founded in 1983 under the dictatorship, the UDI is part of Piñera's ruling Coalition for Change, and a number of its leading figures have taken government posts.

At the end of last year, more than 20,000 people joined a march called by the Coordinating Assembly of Secondary Students (ACES) and the Metropolitan Federation of Secondary Students (FEMES). And in mid-May, a similar protest brought at least 70,000 people into the streets. Since then, various secondary schools in the Chilean capital have been occupied by their students.

Participation in the June 30 mobilization was not limited solely to the youth directly affected by the government's abandonment of public education. They received the support of large sections of university students as well as students from

private secondary schools who joined the march that began in the Plaza Italia.

A representative of the Assembly of Students for the private secondary schools, Benjamin Sotomayor, a student at the Sacred Heart of Alameda school, told *La Tercera*, “If we want a real change in the Chilean education system, it is necessary that we all participate, including the private schools.”

According to the student leader, students from all 23 private schools represented by the assembly joined the march.

In another statement reported by the press, the vice president of the Students’ Center, Sofia Duprié, said, “We came to support this movement because it isn’t true that the private school students are not interested in quality and equal education.”

The student march also won support from parents, many of whom had encouraged their school-age children to participate in the protest.

The president of the College of Professors, Jaime Gajardo, said that the march “demonstrates that this movement for public education is real. It is necessary that it be taken into account, because if not, we are going to keep reproducing education based on inequality; we do not want more market education.”

Last week, education minister Lavín, sent CONFEch a seven-point letter, proposing economic improvements.. The students rejected it and called for a new national strike. They insisted that their demands went beyond greater financial resources and were directed at a deep-going educational reform involving all elements of the educational system, including an end to privatization and equal education for all.

The demands put forward by the students include scholarships for the poorest 60 percent of students, the extension of the student transit pass to 365 days a year, taking the schools out of municipal control and the acceleration of the reconstruction and improvement of the technical-professional schools.

Faculty and students of the country’s 25 principal universities also called the government’s proposal “insufficient.”

The student struggles have broken out within the context of a marked deterioration of the Chilean economy. According to the National Institute of Statistics, the official unemployment rate rose to 7.2 percent in the last quarter, compared to 7 percent in the previous quarter.

These figures indicate an end to the tendency of the economy to increase the number of jobs that had prevailed over the previous 12 months, principally in manufacturing, trade and construction.

The sharpest fall was seen in agriculture, one of the most important sectors of the Chilean economy. The rate of growth of salaried employment fell by 5.1 percent, while growth rate for the category of self-employed increased by 12.9 percent.

The worsening economic and social conditions for Chilean workers has produced a drastic fall in the popularity of the

Piñera government. In the wake of the student protests, the president’s approval ratings fell to 36 percent, compared to the high of 63 percent after Piñera orchestrated a massive public relations campaign surrounding last year’s rescue of the 33 trapped Chilean miners.

After the mass march of June 30, the minister of education, Joaquín Lavín, declared, “The problems of education in Chile go beyond one person. They have been dragging on for many years, and the solution is not only a question of the minister, it is a matter of all of us together coming to an agreement.”

This statement is an indictment of all of the parties of the Chilean bourgeoisie, from Lavín’s UDI on the extreme right and the Piñera government, to the Socialist Party, which, with the support of the Stalinist Chilean Communist Party in the 1990s, continued the policies of the dictatorship, including privatization and turning both secondary schools and universities into profit-making businesses.

During the demonstrations on June 30, close to 150 students occupied the headquarters of Lavín’s UDI. Students also tried to take over the offices of the Socialist Party (PS), but were prevented from entering and demonstrated outside. The students recognize that the PS-led governments of the *Concertación* coalition, which ruled Chile from 1990 to 2010, were just as responsible as the UDI for the destruction of public education.

In May 2006, Chile saw its largest student mobilization since before the US-backed military coup that brought Pinochet to power in 1973. Some 600,000 public and private school students declared a strike against the government of Socialist Party President Michelle Bachelet and staged marches in all the main cities of the country, demanding the repeal of the education law passed under the dictatorship.

Then, as now, the Socialist Party government reacted by deploying the *carabineros* to attack the demonstrators. During the three days of protests, over 1,000 students were arrested and at least 20 wounded.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact