

# Chilean students demand a national referendum on education rights

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Striking university and high school students in Chile have rejected government proposals to resolve what has become a constitutional crisis over the current education law. Instead, the students, whose demands are supported by a large majority of Chilean citizens, are demanding a popular referendum to change the Constitution.

The student struggles began May 13, when thousands of students marched to demand increased government support for higher education. The mobilizations escalated, and on June 30, 120,000 students and teachers marched in Santiago and other cities. Following the June protest, striking secondary school students took over many of their institutions.

On August 4, 874 students were arrested when *carabineros*, a paramilitary police force, attacked high school students on their way to a rally at Santiago's Plaza Italia Square. The protest had been organized by two secondary school organizations, the Assembly of Secondary Students (ACES) and the Committee of Secondary Students (CONES.) The brutal attack included the use of tear gas projectiles in a subway station, where scores were overcome by gas.

One photograph, distributed via twitter, shows a 12-year-old protester being dragged by the police. In response to the brutality, the United Nations Children's Fund—UNICEF—issued a protest reminding the Chilean government of its treaty obligation to ensure the rights of adolescents to assemble and protest.

Five days later, as tens of thousands of high school and college students, teachers, copper miners and construction workers marched in response to the August 4 repression and in support of the students' demands, security forces used water cannons and tear gas against a group of 150 students that was attempting to march on Chile's government house, the La Moneda

Palace.

That evening, in response to a call by the students, pot-banging protesters took to the streets and set up barricades across Chile. Known in Chile as *cacerolazos*, this is a form of protest that became common during the military dictatorship of General Pinochet (1973-1990). In addition to Greater Santiago, demonstrators banged pots and set up barricades in several Chilean regional capitals, including Iquique, Rancagua, Viña del Mar, Valparaíso, and Chiloé Island. According to the Spanish daily *El País*, 80 percent of Chileans support the students' demands, while support for President Sebastián Piñera is at an all-time low.

The government denies charges that the security forces used excessive force, claiming that they were merely protecting public safety.

In addition to the protests, 31 students went on a hunger strike on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July. This week four more students went on a liquidless hunger strike to add urgency to their demands.

The students demand educational reforms that include an end to for-profit educational institutions. Private schools and universities would be required to reinvest whatever surpluses are generated back into education and audited to make sure that profits are not disguised as costs. The students have set up a Web site—“*La Mayoría Decide*”—to popularize their cause and collect signatures demanding a referendum.

In a statement posted on the *La Mayoría* Web site, the students link their struggle with the extension of democratic rights and equality:

“We reject that a small elite of right-wing and *Concertación* politicians decides our educational future and enrich themselves at the expense of the dreams of millions. Education and knowledge are essential for Chile's future, and its development cannot remain in

the hands of a few. It is time to create an alternate educational structure to the model imposed by big business. It is time that the majority of the population chooses. It is time to build a new education and a new democracy.”

While there have been many changes to the Pinochet Constitution since the dictator stepped down, the succession of governments that followed the military dictatorship, those of the so-called center-left *Concertación* Coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, as well as Piñera’s conservative UDI movement, have left intact Pinochet’s educational laws that subordinate primary, secondary and university education to the “logic” of the “free market” and corporate interests.

Under Pinochet, the government’s role in education was modified in favor of privately run, decentralized and government-subsidized schools that would supposedly compete for students. Parents are provided with vouchers that, for the most part, they can use at either public or subsidized schools. To pay for the subsidies, government resources were shifted from the public school sector to these subsidized nominally non-profit institutions. Included in this policy were funding formulas based on school attendance, which effectively punished inner-city and rural schools.

Today the subsidized sector, which generates substantial, often disguised, profits for the firms that run it, is almost as large as the public school sector, (45 percent vs. 46.5 percent; the rest are private and special government schools.) In the case of higher education, university students face tuition costs of up to US\$1000 a month. Since many students wind up with debts of US\$30,000 or more, the student loan industry has become a source of extraordinary profits for Chile’s financial sector.

The inequality of education in Chile is a reflection of lopsided distributions of income and wealth. The top ten percent of the population controls 40 percent of the nation’s wealth; the top ten families collectively control US\$25 billion in wealth, while nearly one third of the population exists in poverty with virtually no assets, and more than half the households live on less than US\$600 a month. In Latin America, only Brazil and Guatemala have a less equal distribution of wealth.

The Piñera administration has alternated between police repression and the pretense of concessions.

Despite the continuing and severe repression that they already have endured, students are persisting in their struggle. So far, the government has made assurances that the military will not be used against the students; however, *El País* reports that some politicians on the right are now saying that it will be necessary to bring out the army. Ominously, the Spanish daily indicated that September 11, the anniversary of the military coup that overthrew the Allende government in 1973 and marked the beginning of Pinochet’s dictatorship, is less than a month away.

The latest government proposal, a list of 21 measures, was made public on August 1. The proposal, which supposedly would guarantee quality education for all, sidesteps the issue of government-provided education that is free of costs to all students. Piñera’s proposals were rejected by student leaders as “more of the same.”

The Piñera government has invited students to a dialogue, which was rejected by the Confederation of University Students and accepted by the high school students, who made it clear that they plan to move ahead with occupations and protests. “We are open to talk to Parliament,” said high school student leader Freddy Fuentes, “as long as the discussion takes place on the basis of our demands, and not on the basis of what the government proposes.”

Education, according to Piñera, is a “consumer good” subject to the laws of supply and demand. “We would all like things to be free,” declared the billionaire President recently, “but I want to remind all that nothing is free in life.”

For the student protesters, education is a basic democratic right, and they are demanding that the country’s Constitution say so.



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