

Teenager killed by police in mass demonstrations in Chile

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Hundreds of thousands of Chilean workers and students took part this week in strikes and demonstrations against social inequality and the privatization of education. The government of right-wing billionaire Sebastián Piñera responded to the two-day general strike, which ended on Thursday, with repression and violence, including mass arrests and the killing of at least one youth.

The 14-year old boy, Manuel Gutiérrez Reinoso, died early Friday from a bullet wound in the chest. Witnesses said he had been shot by police. Dozens of others have been hurt and as many as 1,400 detained or arrested. Police in full riot gear have used tear gas and water cannons against blockades set up by youth. Another youth, 18-year-old Mario Parraguez Pinto, was shot in the eye and is in critical condition at a Santiago hospital.

The killing of Gutiérrez Reinoso followed a demonstration of some 600,000 in the capital of Santiago and protests in other cities throughout the country. Protesters are demanding free public education, increased taxes on the corporations and the wealthy, and better pensions and health care for workers. The demonstrations were followed in the evening on both days of the strike by clashes between youth and police.

There is overwhelming popular backing for the demonstrators, with one poll putting support for the students at 72 to 81 percent. In contrast, an opinion poll this month pegged Piñera's approval rating at only 26 percent.

The strike was called by the Workers' United Center of Chile (*Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Chile*, CUT) and the Chilean Student Confederation (*Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile*, CONFECH). The two-day strike was the first of its kind since the end of dictator Augusto Pinochet's rule in 1990. The principal aim of the CUT, which is aligned with the Socialist Party, is to prevent growing popular anger from escaping the framework of bourgeois politics in Chile.

The privatization of public education was initiated toward the end of Pinochet's rule and accompanied by a drastic cut in state funding. Today, only 40 percent of the 3.5 million secondary students attend public schools, which are grossly underfunded. Fifty percent attend partially-subsidized schools, in which the family is required to pay a significant proportion of the costs. Ten percent attend private schools, where they receive the best education.

College and university students pay up to \$1,000 a month in tuition and regularly graduate with up to \$40,000 in private debt. Tuition in Chile far exceeds most countries, except for the United States, the principal backer of the Pinochet dictatorship and the ideological source of many of its policies.

Three-quarters of the financing costs for higher education is paid out by students and their families. The state spends only 4 percent of its GDP on education and has one of the most unequal education systems in all of South America.

Student demonstrations began on May 13, and the government has responded with increased repression as the demonstrations have grown. On June 30, demonstrations throughout the country involved at least 120,000. On August 4, 874 high school students were arrested after a rally was attacked by paramilitary police forces. Five days later, a demonstration of tens of thousands in Santiago was met with water cannons, tear gas and mass arrests.

In July, Piñera announced a proposal that combined a few token gestures with an expansion of the role of private profit in the university system. In opposition to student demands for free public education provided by the state, he replied, that education is a "consumer good" that must be paid for, and that "nothing in life is free."

Piñera also reshuffled his cabinet, including dropping his education secretary, Joaquín Lavín, a University of

Chicago trained economist and open defender of Pinochet. Lavín is a member of the Independent Democrat Union (UDI), the party of Pinochet supporters established at the end of his dictatorship. The UDI is, along with Piñera's National Renewal, the leading party in the ruling coalition.

While the privatization of education was initiated by Pinochet, the so-called opposition parties have continued these policies for the past two decades.

From 1990 to 2010, Chile was ruled by the Concert of Parties for Democracy (*Concertación*), which includes the Socialist Party, the Christian Democratic Party, the Party for Democracy and the Social Democratic Radical Party. Michelle Bachelet, a Socialist Party member, was president of Chile from 2006 to 2010.

In 2009, the *Concertación* was joined in an electoral bloc by the Juntos Podemos Más, which includes the Communist Party of Chile.

All of these “left” and “center-left” parties bear responsibility for the present state of inequality in Chile. Throughout her period as president, Bachelet supported the privatization of education and health care.

As noted, the CUT union federation is associated with the Socialist Party, and its president, Amador Martinez, is an SP member. As for the student federation, its leading spokesperson, Camila Vallejo, the president of the Federation of Students at the University of Chile (FECH), is a member of the Communist Party youth organization.

Through the unions and the student federations, these parties are now attempting to maintain control of a growing movement of opposition among Chilean workers and youth and prevent it from taking an independent organizational and political path.



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