

President Piñera unleashes repression against Chile's student movement

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Using mounted police charges, rubber bullets, teargas and water cannon, the right-wing government of President Sebastián Piñera violently suppressed a student march last Thursday in Chile. Hundreds of protesters were injured, and 250 were arrested.

The police attacked passersby, beat up journalists and staged a particularly brutal attack on student leaders immediately after they had held a press conference.

The Confederation of Students of Chile (CONFECH) had called the march after its negotiations with the government collapsed over the demand for free, state-run education for all. The five-month-old protest movement has seen the occupation of over 100 high schools nationwide, and a dozen universities shut down by strikes and protests.

In what appeared to be a deliberate provocation, the government brought back the same proposal that the students had rejected two weeks earlier. At the same time, Piñera announced on Sunday a proposed bill that would criminalize student demonstrations and the occupations of high schools and colleges. The draft legislation includes penalties of up to three years' imprisonment.

At least 132 protest demonstrations have occurred this year in the Chilean capital of Santiago alone. Thirty-six of the largest have been by students demanding an end to the educational legacy of the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet.

Predictably, the breakdown of negotiations drove the students to resume their protests. This time, however, Santiago's regional governor, Cecilia Perez, denied permission for the students to march along the Alameda, Santiago's main boulevard, the route of all the previous protest marches through downtown Santiago to the La Moneda Government House.

The refusal to approve the route had only one explanation: it was to provide a green light for repression by Chile's militarized police.

On Thursday of last week, the University of Chile and many other places became urban battlefields. The fierce fighting lasted all day as students attempted to move through the Alameda, which had been occupied by police special forces.

University students defended themselves by barricading the University of Chile, and High School students set up their own barricades at the Liceo Darío Salas.

According to *La Tercera*, the Santiago newspaper, loudspeakers, the police told protesters to assemble in the Bustamante Park, because the march was not authorized in the Alameda." This only served to bring students together in one place to better repress and disperse the protest. Everything indicated a police operation that had been well planned in advance.

"Residents of the area of Plaza Italia assisted those protesters affected by the action of the water cannons and tear gas," reported *La Tercera*, and as a result of the aggression against students, "the traffic was cut from Plaza Italia to the east."

The student protests received popular support in other Chilean cities. In Valparaíso some 2,500 school and university students marched on Congress. In Valdivia nearly 1,000 students and education workers marched.

There were several clashes in the northern city of Antofagasta, where the police special forces made use of water cannon on the pretext that the demonstrators were obstructing traffic.

Chilean citizens repudiated Thursday's police violence with *cacerolazos*, banging pots and pans throughout the country. Polls have indicated that 70 percent of the population backs the students' demands.

The sequence of events, going from "dialogue" to Piñera's deliberate provoking of the students along with the refusal to approve the march route, point to a deliberate government orchestration of the confrontation aimed at branding the students as criminals, turning the Chilean people against them and pushing through a new law criminalizing demonstrations.

Regional governor Cecilia Perez's threat, that she was "always going to enforce the law on those irresponsible people who claim to be above it," was echoed by other politicians. Juan Antonio Coloma, president of the Pinochetist Independent Democratic Union (UDI), stated: "Chile has to deal decisively with the law and the continuing public disorders that are occurring."

Meanwhile, Piñera, a billionaire who made his fortune in the 1970s when Pinochet was brutally repressing the Chilean working class, said his government "always will put forward the right of the immense majority," referring to the draft law [to imprison students] that is now before parliament.

This threat comes from a president who has less than 30 percent approval and is detested by the millions of Chileans who support the student demonstrations and who want a radical change to the neoliberal model imposed at gunpoint by the Pinochet regime.

The layer of Chilean society that Piñera represents was reflected in the cynical statement by his education minister, Felipe Bulnes, who insisted that the government had a “different vision” than the students, claiming that their demand for free higher education for all would mean that “the poor end up subsidizing the education for the richest.”

The government has rejected any fundamental structural changes in Chile’s education system, proposing instead \$4 billion in extra funding and minor reforms, while rejecting state control and free education for all. Students said that the negotiations were like “talking to a wall.”

Around the world, for-profit education has served to deepen social inequality between a small elite that has been enriched beyond measure on the backs of the vast majority. It is part and parcel of the turn toward wholesale privatization and financial speculation that has ended up producing the world’s deepest economic crisis of the last three quarters of a century.

Piñera’s decision to opt for repression took the center-left parties of the *Concertación* coalition by surprise. They had been the first to applaud the negotiations between the students and the government and fear now that the violent repression will cast them in the role of Piñera’s accomplices.

In a document entitled “Our Commitment”, the *Concertación* parties—the Socialist Party (PS), Christian Democrats (DC), Social Democratic Radical Party (PRSD) and Party for Democracy (PPD)—refer to a “new stage” and raise three points: a new constitution, an “Agenda for Equality” and “Inclusive Development.”

This is nothing but recycled quackery from a coalition that ruled Chile for 20 years, from the end of the dictatorship in 1990 to 2010, without initiating any fundamental reform of the educational system. Its aim now is to divert students from the struggle for a socialist solution to the problem of education, which would confront the capitalist state that these parties defend.

The declaration of the former president and Socialist Party leader Michelle Bachelet—that her government “did not have the support of all political sectors to advance from profit-based education, to education that is free and to guarantee quality education for all”—is a lie. It was when she was in office in 2006 that Chile saw its largest ever student strike, organized on the demand that President Bachelet repudiate the Pinochet education law and with over half a million young people participating.

Internally, the *Concertación* also discussed the need to include other political organizations in its coalition, such as the Communist Party (PCCh) and the Progressive Party, and the

creation of a new center-left party. It is desperate to revamp the coalition, which today polls only 11 percent support, trailing the unpopular Piñera.

The PCCh is invited to participate because of its influence on the student movement, but also because it is seen as a proven instrument of bourgeois rule. In the early 1970s, with its policy of a parliamentary road to socialism, it was primarily responsible for keeping the mass struggles of the working class subordinated to the government of President Salvador Allende. It supported the repression of striking miners and sought to cultivate illusions in the “professionalism” of the Chilean army, thereby paving the way for the coup that plunged the people of Chile into 17 years of dictatorship and repression.

The CONFECH student federation together with the United Workers Central (CUT) have called for another general strike in support of the students’ demands to be held on October 18-19.

At the same time, however, CONFECH leader Camila Vallejo, who is affiliated to the youth arm of the Chilean Communist Party, the JJ.CC., told TVN television in Chile that the student movement had to begin thinking in the “long term” about how it would realize its demands.

“We cannot be on strike for three years,” she said, “obviously we will have to look for different conditions for mobilization.” She indicated that this could focus on “the next political events, like the elections.”

Clearly, the *Concertación* politicians and their allies in the Chilean Communist Party would like to channel the popular mass movement of Chilean students behind a campaign to bring the discredited Socialist Party-led coalition back to power. Given its two-decade record, however, such a course is a prescription for the betrayal of the students’ struggle.

This struggle, for the right to a free and high quality education for all, is in direct contradiction to the austerity measures that are being enforced by capitalist governments all over the world. It can be achieved only through the independent, revolutionary mobilization of the entire working class in the struggle to put an end to capitalism in Chile as part of the struggle for socialism throughout Latin America and on a world scale.



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