

Chilean port workers end month-long strike

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29 January 2014

A strike that has shut down Chilean ports since December was ended on Saturday after trade union leaders reached an early morning agreement with the government of President Sebastián Piñera. The private port operators agreed to accept the payment of bonuses and to rehire all fired strikers.

The agreement was reached behind the backs of the strikers. It leaves untouched the principal issues that triggered the strike and caused it to spread along the Chilean coast, namely the demand for an end to Pinochet-era laws designed to keep dock workers atomized, the abolition of contract and other forms of informal labor, and the right to unionize.

Since late December, thousands of Chilean longshoremen had joined the strike at several major ports in the country. On December 26, 350 longshoremen shut down the port of Antofagasta, demanding a raise of 150,000 Chilean pesos (US\$274.51). On January 6, the northern ports of Iquique, Tocopilla, Chañaral and Guasco joined the walkout. Following the brutal suppression of strikers by anti-riot forces, the southern ports of Lirquén, Penco, Coronel, San Vicente, Calbuco, Corral, Puerto Montt and Chacabuco also struck. Before the settlement, the dockworkers were mobilized on the picket lines at 15 ports throughout the country.

Among the demands were the right to unionize, and the abolition of laws left over from the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1989), that separate workers into “first”- and “second”-class labor. This reactionary system has been maintained with impunity since the end of the dictatorship by both “left” and right governments. This includes that of Socialist Party president Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), who was elected again last month, heading the “New Majority” coalition, which includes Chile’s Communist Party, rewarded for its role in selling out last year’s student protest strikes and mobilizations.

Initially, the port enterprises responded to the striker’s raise demands with half measures like a 15 percent salary rise, while completely rejecting the demand that the raise also include contract workers. The large port oligopolies turned to strikebreakers and demanded that the government repress picketers. This led to the near death of one worker, Luis Gonzalez Fuentes. Last March and April, a previous strike did result in the death of unionist Enrique Solar, savagely beaten by the *carabineros*, Chile’s militarized police.

The powerful strike shook the ruling class, not only because of its direct effect on the country’s economy (with multimillion-dollar losses in imports and exports), but for its jeopardizing Chile’s international image as a preferred country and safe haven for foreign investment. With the government increasingly wanting a quick resolution to the strike, Interior Minister Andrés Chadwick raised the possibility of invoking the Internal Security Act enacted in 1975 during the fiercest repression of the Pinochet dictatorship, which provides extreme penalties in situations deemed by the authorities as disturbances of public order.

Labor Minister Juan Carlos Jobet had insisted that the government would not engage in talks until the strike was ended. Behind this posture of intransigence, negotiations were already taking place, however, undoubtedly with the participation of the incoming Bachelet administration. The political establishment co-opted the union bureaucracy into ending the strike, on the basis of limited economic concessions to the strikers.

Losses in copper exports were approaching US\$67 million a day. Losses on fruit exports reached US\$40 million a week.

International investors closely monitored the situation in Chile. Ken Tsuchikawa, CEO of the Asian mining giant Mitsui, declared that the country “is not as reliable” for investment, confirming the fears expressed

by Chilean ministers.

The problem of a “bad” image was deepened when the Santiago daily *El Mercurio* revealed the precarious future of the copper industry, the backbone of Chile’s export economy. According to Thomas Keller, CEO of Codelco (Chile’s state-owned copper company), more than US\$6 billion worth of fresh capital is needed to expand operations. Meanwhile, Chile was recently included in a group of eight emerging countries classified as “fragile economies.”

Contrary to what Chile’s tabloid press says, the strike was broadly supported by the people. Miners, bank workers and students repeatedly joined the strike and mobilized in solidarity, as did contract workers at Codelco, forestry workers, farmers and truckers.

The right has made it clear it will fight for the continuity of Pinochetism. Sven von Appen, a fascist billionaire (his family owns the Ultramar holding company that runs 20 ports in the country), declared at the outset of the conflict last December that if Bachelet failed to manage it correctly, “We’ll look for another Pinochet.” If the strike had continued, there is little doubt that the government would have invoked the Pinochet era laws and repressed the dockworkers.

Seeking to divert pressure by the ranks, the spokesmen of the Port Union of Chile called for an international boycott of all ships carrying cargo for Sven von Appen’s companies. As is now clear, this was a fig leaf used to conceal the sellout that was being prepared.

The large numbers of militant strikes that have occurred since 2010 are an indication that the Chilean working class has recovered from the brutal repression unleashed with the 1973 coup and the subsequent 17 years of dictatorship and is ready to fight for its rights.

It is a sign of its hostility to this rising class struggle that the Chilean Communist Party (PCCh) has published not a single statement on the dockworkers’ strike. Instead, in its latest editorial comment, it concentrates on sowing illusions in the “the great hopes” posed by President Bachelet picking her new cabinet, which includes one PCCh member.

Finally, there is the role played by the pseudo-Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), which is politically aligned with the French New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA). In a lengthy statement, the PRT reduces its program to that of strengthening the unions

by replacing the sitting bureaucrats with more-militant leaders. Much of the PRT’s statement is dedicated to denouncing the union in the port of Bio Bio for limiting the strike to a one-day protest.

Nowhere in this skeptical statement is there any reference to the burning necessity of building a revolutionary party in the Chilean working class. Active in the student movement, the principal political role of the PTR is to complement the efforts of the Stalinists to keep Chile’s working class tied to the bourgeois state.



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