

Two killed during mass protest by Chilean students

Bill Van Auken
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Two young protesters were gunned down in the Chilean port city of Valparaiso Thursday during mass nationwide demonstrations against the failure of President Michelle Bachelet to implement educational reforms promised during her 2013 election campaign.

Killed were two students from Universidad Santo Tomas in Viña del Mar, Exequiel Borvarán, 18, and Diego Guzmán, 24. Guzmán was a member of the Juventudes Comunistas, the youth movement of the Chilean Communist Party.

According to witnesses, the two were among demonstrators who were either putting a poster on the wall of a residential building or spray-painting a slogan. The owner of the house challenged them, and a group of demonstrators gathered to defend the action. After first joining his father in confronting the demonstrators and threatening them with a revolver, the son of the building's owner fired on the crowd from the second floor of the house, mortally wounding the two students. They were taken to a nearby hospital but died from their wounds.

Police who arrested the accused gunman, Giuseppe Briganti, said that they had recovered the pistol used in the killings along with a quantity of money and drugs during their search of his family's house. The government quickly issued a statement affirming that Briganti "has no link to the police forces who were at the march."

President Bachelet offered condolences to the families of the two slain students and described their murder as "an act of total irrationality, absolutely unjustified."

While the double murder is a horrible crime, it is not merely an inexplicable act of irrationality. The bloody violence in Valparaiso reflects growing social tensions within a country that still lives with the legacy of the

brutal mass killing, torture and imprisonment of workers, students and leftists under the US-backed dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, who ruled Chile for over a decade and a half. Part of that legacy was the criminalization of protest and the branding of all those opposed to the policies of the capitalist state as "terrorists."

The students had taken to the streets precisely because of Bachelet's failure to deliver on her promise to finally carry out a major reform of the education system imposed under Pinochet's military junta. The dictatorship abolished the right to free higher education, imposing tuitions that now amount to thousands of dollars in a country where half the population earns less than \$450 a month. It also encouraged the development of private universities to exploit education as a source of profit.

The same system has remained in place since the end of the dictatorship, despite the previous two decades of rule by the so-called Concertacion, a coalition that includes Bachelet's Socialist Party, the Christian Democrats and other smaller political groupings.

In the aftermath of the killings, students and their supporters held candlelight vigils in the capital of Santiago, Valparaiso and cities across Chile.

Valentina Saavedra, the president of the Federation of Students of the University of Chile (Fech), spoke at the Santiago demonstration, saying that "the same thing could have happened to any of us and none of us are criminals."

Ricardo Paredes, of the National Coordinator of Secondary Students (Cones), said that "we are not even talking about state repression, we are talking about civil violence; this is the legacy left by the dictatorship, the hatred of some against others."

The mass student protests, which saw more than

100,000 march in Santiago (which had the largest of the demonstrations), represent the first major challenge in the streets to Bachelet, who took office at the beginning of last year.

They took place as her government, mired in corruption scandals, including a suspect land deal involving her son, has plumbed new depths of unpopularity. A poll released last week found that her approval rating had fallen to 29 percent.

For masses of Chileans, the government has failed to deliver on Bachelet's promises to fight social inequality, which remains the highest for any of the 34 countries that make up the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Wages remain stagnant for the vast majority, and economic growth has come to a near standstill amid falling prices for copper, Chile's main export.

The influence-peddling scandals have only exposed the government and all of the major parties as instruments of Chile's capitalist ruling class.

Hostility toward the Bachelet administration has been expressed most sharply by Chile's students. Ennio Vivaldi, the rector of the University of Chile, warned Thursday of an "atmosphere of radical distrust on the part of the students toward the system, the parliament, in the authorities in general." He called for the government to take even "minimal actions" to defuse the growing anger in the country's universities.

Bachelet's response has been to turn even further to the right. In a major shakeup last week, she fired her finance minister and other cabinet members, shifting control more firmly into the hands of Christian Democrats and other figures close to big business interests.

The sacking of the finance minister marked the first time that someone has been fired from this post since the end of the dictatorship. Picked to fill the position was Rodrigo Valdes, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology-trained economist who worked previously for the International Monetary Fund.

Santiago's Chamber of Commerce hailed the appointment, declaring Valdes a "great professional" and predicting that "this new cabinet will help improve the investment climate if there is greater openness to the private sector's proposals."

Even as the rightward shakeup of the government signaled a turn from even the minimal reforms Bachelet

had previously advocated, Bachelet brought a second member of the Chilean Communist Party into her cabinet, naming Marcos Barraza as minister of social development. He joins Claudia Pascual, who kept her post as minister for women amid the general reshuffling.

The Chilean CP, which was brought into the government in the attempt to provide it with somewhat more of a "left" face in order to contain and divert the struggles of the workers and students, was rewarded for its wholly uncritical attitude toward the corrupt capitalist administration headed by Bachelet.



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