

Frente Amplio and Piñera government in Chile suppress 36-day dockworkers' strike

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22 December 2018

On Friday, the trade union of dockworkers at the Southern Pacific Terminal (TPS), located in the Chilean city of Valparaíso, called off a 36-day strike which had been characterized by enormous courage and militancy in the face of brutal repression. Many disgruntled workers and supporters had set up barricades and marched across the city throughout the day.

The right-wing administration of billionaire Sebastián Piñera and the pseudo-left Frente Amplio, which governs the city, worked alongside the trade union to isolate the striking workers at a time when the Chilean and global economies are slowing down and social unrest is intensifying domestically and across the world.

Earlier this year, the state-owned company Codelco announced 1,700 layoffs at the Chuquicamata mine and possibly thousands more next year across several copper mines—the country's main export—renewing calls for strikes. This month, LATAM airline workers, Integra kindergarten teachers and other sectors also struck.

At Valparaíso, virtually all 600 dockworkers are hired under “casual” agreements. They rely on eight-hour shifts distributed to “on-call” lists and do not make the minimum salary or receive any benefits at all. In recent months, largely because of a major drop in world trade, workers had been spending weeks, and even months, without getting called to work.

The strike began on November 16, when workers in two stations decided to carry out a wildcat strike. Shortly after, they had paralyzed a port that manages 55 percent of Chilean fruit exports and many other products. The action came immediately into conflict with the existing leadership of the trade union, which was seen as a tool of management. This led workers to sideline the president, Roberto Rojas, and back Pablo Klimpel, the leader of a dissident faction, the United Dockworkers of Valparaíso (PUV).

Within the first week of the strike, however, Klimpel was already discarding workers' demands, claiming “it's all negotiable” and suggesting that he was willing to call an end to the strike if the company would only sit down and make

an offer, which TPS rejected until the fourth week.

As recently as Wednesday, workers voted unanimously against a second offer by the TPS and the trade union. The deal included a \$100 bonus, a \$360 “gift card,” a basket of food, the option of a \$722 loan from the company, and a paid training on workplace safety.

Workers immediately left the assembly angry and proclaimed that the agreement was virtually the same as the one they rejected the previous weekend, seeing the marginal increases in bonuses and loans as a “pittance” and a “mockery.”

Surely, many workers saw through the treacherousness of the new trade-union leadership, which had expressed optimism as they peddled one insulting agreement after the other, while Richard Von Appen, the president of the company that manages TPS, Ultramar, called these proposals “gifts” and continued to call the strike “illegal.”

Popular support for the strike on the streets at the second largest city of the country and on social media was widespread and growing across the country. Demonstrations of solidarity by other workers, including marches and roadcuts, were organized by Valparaíso residents independently of the trade unions.

After several workers and union officials received violent threats, and the police illegally raided the offices of the union on Tuesday, making several arrests, social anger was brimming.

Students from several faculties of the University of Valparaíso (UV) had been protesting in support of dockworkers for several days. On Tuesday, anti-riot police violently dispersed a sit-in protest at the UV. That day, students at the Playa Ancha University (UPLA) voted to suspend classes in support of the dockworkers and UV students.

On Wednesday and Thursday, the Valparaíso dockworkers kept protesting, chanting that “the New Year will be celebrated with barricades,” making calls for a national strike of dockworkers and other sectors and carrying signs calling for the expropriation of the ports.

Moreover, after 11 other ports had already carried out a two-hour strike in solidarity with Valparaíso, dockworkers across the country began carrying out wildcat strikes and setting up barricades since the beginning of the week.

In fear, the Piñera government intervened and agreed on Thursday to pay an emergency \$1,000 bonus from taxpayer money to end the strike.

The trade union quickly called for a makeshift vote at midnight on Thursday and another one in the early hours of Friday, with several reports indicating workers were angry and most could not vote. Among those present, 200 voted in favor and 40 against the new offer.

The trade union officially sold out the strike while discarding the demands made by workers, namely against the precariousness of their jobs.

At the center of this operation was the Frente Amplio party (FA; Broad Front). Pablo Klimpel, the union leader, has close ties with the FA and is an open supporter of Valparaíso mayor, Jorge Sharp, also from FA.

Sharp condoned the repression by the carabineros and, beyond symbolic calls to improve conditions for workers, appealed several times to the Piñera administration to “end the strike as soon as possible.”

On December 14, as the streets in the city were barricaded and manned by dockworkers, students and supporters, Sharp called on “La Moneda [presidential palace] in its totality to act on this matter with a lot of force and end this conflict.”

The role of Sharp, Frente Amplio and its cronies in the trade unions in derailing social opposition on behalf of big business demonstrates that this relatively new “left” flank for the bourgeois establishment is no different from the one provided throughout the last century by Social Democracy and Stalinism of disarming workers politically. Most recently, they have ensured that the widespread privatizations—including port concessions—and deregulation schemes carried out under the fascist and US-backed dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, remain virtually unscathed.

Last week, Sharp hypocritically acknowledged that three months of profits from the Valparaíso port could cover “the 9,000-home deficit in the municipality,” but declared that “workers have a duty not to harm the city with their protests.”

Frente Amplio and the trade union bureaucracies, including the Trade Union Central (CUT), controlled by the Stalinist Communist Party, also rely on several orbiting pseudo-left organizations that feed illusions in the FA among radicalized workers and youth.

The coverage and analysis provided by the Morenoite Workers Revolutionary Party (PTR) was widely followed during the strike and even shared on social media by the

trade union.

The PTR’s online newspaper *La Izquierda Diario* promoted the new trade union leadership and romanticized the political influence of Frente Amplio in the city, which it said is “representing a universe of 50,000 to 40,000 voters.” It even claimed that FA “could play an important role in mobilizing the social force needed to defeat Von Appen and the repression.”

Such statements suggesting that local mobilizations led by Frente Amplio, a party thoroughly embedded in the bourgeois state at the local and national level, could “defeat” a financial group that manages billions in assets across Latin America and the repressive Chilean state, defy all logic.

On Thursday, the PTR denounced efforts by Sharp to “mediate” the conflict and warned that Von Appen will seek to get rid of militant workers as soon as the strike ends, referring to hundreds of layoffs by the same company after a strike in 2014, but still added: “Only an infant would reject the negotiation and the compromise that workers must accept under certain relations of forces” and that Frente Amplio still represents “a support that workers can’t reject.”

Such conceptions are based in a rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class and of socialism. What the Frente Amplio and the Morenoite organizations have in common is that they represent privileged layers of the middle class, hungry for the financial elite to hand them over a greater share of profits from the exploitation of workers. In return, they offer their services suppressing the class struggle with a “left” veneer.

The essential lesson from the strike is that workers must build authentic, democratic workers’ rank-and-file committees, organized independently of the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions and the entire political establishment to appeal, not to the CUT and bourgeois politicians, but to their best and only allies—the millions of workers across the country and internationally entering the class struggle.

A new political leadership needs to be built in the working class under a socialist and internationalist program, to fight for state power and the expropriation of all major corporations and wealth of the Chilean and international financial oligarchy, to place them under the democratic control of the international working class.



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