

Walmart workers and teachers on strike in Chile speak out against unions, police-state repression

Andrea Lobo
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More than 17,000 Walmart workers and 80,000 teachers continue to strike nationally in Chile while facing escalating police-state repression and efforts by the trade unions and the state to isolate and suppress their strikes.

Entering their second and seventh weeks of strike respectively, workers at Walmart and teachers are part of a continued resurgence of the class struggle across Latin America and internationally against renewed attacks against social services, wages and jobs to keep feeding the predatory speculation of the ruling financial aristocracy.

Since teachers voted for a second time against the same rotten contract offered by the administration of billionaire Sebastián Piñera, which ignores their chief demand, the president of the Colegio de Profesores (Teachers' Association), Mario Aguilar, has tried to talk his way into ending the strike now that winter vacations have begun.

After confessing that he had argued in favor of "ending the strike without asking the rank-and-file," Aguilar told 24AM, "There was virtually a tie. It was an unexpected result, with a difference of 255 votes that is almost nothing." While confusion abounds, teachers have reported online that union leaders are sending text messages ordering them to "return to classes normally on Monday, July 29."

Leo, a teacher in Santiago, wrote on the union page, "Not a single goal reached, history and physical education will remain outside of the curriculum, nothing about the professional recognition of pre-school teachers, nothing about the historic debt. Dismissiveness has won, and the teachers strike ended in failure right when society was joining us with more than 68 percent of support. Aguilar, his Humanist Party and the Broad Front have determined to end the strike ... not a goal reached."

Polls show that a similar percentage of Chileans support the Walmart strike.

During the weekend, Walmart workers marched to central plazas across the country and in some areas were joined by striking teachers.

Anthony, a Walmart worker in the south of Chile, told the WSWS, "Many of my co-workers are counting on a good settlement because of not getting paid and the debts that are mounting. But, we still don't know anything."

Asked about the demands that workers continue to raise, he listed: "A raise in compensation for multi-functionality, a bonus for transportation, a bonus for assistance, better hours, a bonus for seniority, a halt to all firings and training. Look, if a manager makes 700,000 pesos it's logical that the worker doing multiple tasks should get a salary that allows him to work and live comfortably."

Juan, a Walmart worker from the coastal city of Valparaíso told the WSWS, "We've been able to close down half of the [400] stores nationally and affect sales in all stores, but even with that the company yields in negotiations..."

"I work replacing products in the sales room. That is my specific function, but the new contract leaves us as room operators, which means I can be ordered to carry out countless tasks in the store, even cleaning bathrooms. This is not to belittle those who have that job, but the problem is that they burden you with more work for the same salary that is already low as it is.

"The automatization is being done without considering the transformation of the posts affected, which leads to an important number of job cuts, so we are fighting for that not to happen. It would be fantastic to be able to organize and stop these business models that only seek profits without caring about anything else. A lot of responsibility falls on the government, which doesn't protect workers and gives a green light to multinationals like Walmart to do whatever they want."

He explained that management has begun "judging us according to our productivity, while the company wants to end all full-time contracts and prioritize part-time work. That is another conflict because here in Chile, you only survive if you work full time. So, all of these elements are used by the administration to browbeat workers."

Asked about the response of the union to threats, Juan indicated, “The union is constantly in talks with managers locally and the company and their advice is to limit ourselves to doing our job and remaining at ease.” He concluded: “There is nothing else to do but to confront these injustices by mobilizing and raising our voice. We can’t let companies walk all over us. We must find cohesion with all workers and fight for a better world.”

Anxiety is growing among strikers, who have gone to social media to denounce the lack of communication about the negotiations. “There is no need for such air-tightness. I hope that you respect different opinions within the union,” wrote a Walmart worker.

In response to the failure of the trade unions to suffocate the wave of strikes, amid a total reluctance to fulfill workers’ demands and a long list of pension, healthcare and other regressive reforms planned by the Piñera administration, the ruling class is resorting increasingly to the methods of state terror through its militarized police force, the *Carabineros*, that were rampant during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship.

While the police repression began immediately as thousands of teachers and students marched in the major cities in early June against the elimination of history from core curricula, which ultimately forced the union to call the national strike, *Carabineros* invaded a high school on June 27 in Antofagasta to intimidate students carrying out a sit-down protest in support of their teachers.

In a press conference Thursday, professor Paulina Cuadra notes that while peacefully demonstrating with students, the *Carabineros* fired their water cannon directly against them and immediately snatched her into a truck with several colleagues. Once at the station, the special forces ordered her: “Get in there and take all your clothes off,” Cuadra cites the officer. “I didn’t take my underwear off because the officer kept making gestures with a latex glove.”

Amid pictures shared online by Walmart workers showing *Carabineros* entering the stores to intimidate workers, Juan warned that this weekend, “Walmart has been counting with the backing of the *Carabineros* to repress the protest actions and they are already acting to prevent the shutting down of stores, coordinating with managers in these locales.”

At the same, time, as Piñera’s popularity slides, polls show a consistent and even growing opposition to his Social-Democrat and Stalinist predecessors that betrayed their promises of social reforms. Support for the Broad Front politicians has also remained stagnant, with only 19 percent of Chileans identifying with any party.

In this context, the role played by pseudo-left organizations like the Revolutionary Workers Party (PTR), which publishes *La Izquierda Diario* and leads a reformist

current within the Colegio de Profesores, can only be described as criminal. On July 11, they wrote, “Why hasn’t Aguilar called a national united strike of all sectors? Why has he not called common assemblies with members, students and workers? Why has he not called mass assemblies of teachers, students, members, other workers, at the high-school, regional, communal and national levels?” on top of six other similar questions that it doesn’t bother, and probably couldn’t answer, because they apply to themselves as well.

What explains both the treacherous policies of the unions and the politics that attract leaders into groups like the PRT dedicated to subordinate workers to such bankrupt organizations is their nationalist and pro-capitalist character. Namely, the union officials and their apologists represent layers of the upper-middle class that offer an indispensable service to the ruling class and imperialism: using pseudo-left demagoguery to keep workers from freeing themselves from the nationalist straitjackets of bourgeois politics and the unions, while the ruling class builds up its repressive apparatus in preparation for future social upheavals.

The political disarming of the revolutionary struggles of workers during the 1960s and 1970s by Stalinism, the Morenoite and Pabloite predecessors of the PTR and other petty-bourgeois nationalist forces behind the bourgeois nationalist government of Salvador Allende, set the stage for the counterrevolutionary terror and privatizations and social cuts under Pinochet still being fought today.

Workers must form rank-and-file committees in each workplace and working-class community, independent of the unions, that will advance their own demands—not what the companies and the state claim is “affordable”—and appeal to workers across the country and internationally. Likewise, a new revolutionary, political leadership must be built in the working class under an internationalist program embodying the historical lessons of the struggle for socialism.



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