

Teachers, parents and students defy order to reopen schools in Chile

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Many thousands of parents, students, educators, and childcare workers have opposed the Chilean government's push for face-to-face teaching during an expected peak of the coronavirus pandemic. The push by the ultra-right government of President Sebastian Piñera is in response to the deepening economic crisis and demands from the financial and corporate elite for immediate implementation of return-to-work measures irrespective of the health consequences. Education Minister Raul Figueroa and Health Minister Jaime Mañalich have spearheaded the back-to-work drive.

In a deceitful diatribe last month, Mañalich said he had opposed the closure of schools from the outset because it put children in harm's way. "We never wanted, we never shared as a health ministry the idea of closing the schools, never. And the evidence we now have accumulated shows that this was indeed a serious mistake, which left children without vaccination, without education, without food, without protection," he claimed.

This was nothing but a malicious attempt to browbeat parents to send their children back to school. The fact is that the entire administration has responded to the pandemic with criminal negligence and brazen lies, seeking from the beginning to downplay the dangers posed by the novel coronavirus. Mañalich first argued that the virus would mutate into something like the regular flu. In early April, he falsely claimed that the number of infections had plateaued and Chile had reached its first peak. Today he is issuing COVID-19 immunity cards insisting that once infected, recovered patients cannot be reinfected, in complete disregard of the World Health Organization's warning to avoid categorical assertions on the as yet unknown impact of the virus.

The public hospitals continue to be starved of critical equipment, PPE and personnel, while it has been revealed that some private hospitals have accepted no COVID-19 patients. New mechanical respiratory ventilators that the minister claimed were purchased in January have dwindled in the course of three months from 1,000, to 600 to 400 to 72 when they finally arrived last week.

As for Mañalich's claims of concern, to date the majority of the country's children have not been immunized for influenza because the health departments nationally ran out of vaccine earlier in April, while the hampers the government promised would feed every child per indigent family have proven to be as elusive as the ventilators.

Figueroa, contradicting Mañalich's feigned alarm, issued his own malicious comment: "I'm constantly hearing from parents who feel that going back to school means putting their children at extreme risk. We know better, because children are not a risk factor for the virus."

But the Health Ministry's own partial and deficient figures reveal that well over 1,000 children and adolescents have contracted the

virus and, moreover, are able to infect those mainly affected in Chile, 20- to 60-year olds, who combined make up 76.6 percent of the total confirmed cases, which since March 3 has rapidly ascended to 22,016 as of Tuesday. This "working age" group comprises 57 percent of those requiring hospitalization, including ICU care. The breakdown of the 275 people who have died is not available. Nor is it the actual figure of deceased, because as Mañalich himself explained, he counts as recovered "people who have reached 14 days since the diagnosis or who have unfortunately died." Such is the contempt for human life!

Teachers, students and parents have issued intense criticisms of Figueroa's and Mañalich's incendiary statements. Secondary student coordinating assembly leader Isidora Godoy said that secondary students would not return to classes while the number of infections continue to rise, explaining that the municipal schools "don't have the minimal health measures. Winter is coming and we find classrooms that leak, dirty bathrooms," among other things.

Silvia Silva, head of childcare workers, insisted that "from day one we made a categorical call to [childcare] workers not to show up at their workplaces. We have been insistent...that neither voluntary nor of any type of work will continue since our service is tremendously sensitive."

Luciana Cortés, a teacher in the Commune of Pedro Aguirre Cerda, and one of many who have voiced their opposition online, said, "We believe that today the government has not provided the necessary conditions to sanitize our schools. ... I call on education workers, assistants, parents, students and teachers, to say that on the 27th or when the government wants to start teaching, we will not return to class."

Online classes were initiated in March, but as with every other aspect of social life, it has revealed how stratified Chilean society is: 44 percent of households do not have a fixed Internet connection, 170 communes of the country, representing over 77,000 people, have no Internet access, and only 30 percent of the population have adequate access to the Internet. A television channel was launched to provide educational resources.

Five hundred teachers were laid off at the end of last year, and hundreds more were dismissed before the beginning of first term by Socialist, Stalinist-Communist, pseudo-left and right-wing mayors alike. It is part of the massive job destruction that continues unimpeded. Four hundred thousand workers were made redundant between February and March, many of whom received no compensation for years of service. Following the enactment of a law permitting employers to furlough workers due to the pandemic, another 56,986 companies took advantage of the new law affecting 800,000 jobs in the second week of April.

Moves are now afoot to slash salaries, including those of education workers whose incomes start at a meager US\$900 per month for a 44-hour shift, with rent taking more than half their earnings at an average of US\$580.

Evelyn Matthei, the particularly repugnant Providencia mayor from the ultra-right Union Demócrata Independiente (UDI), who appears on TV ad nauseam, declared, “The question is, are we going to be able to continue paying [teachers], because I want to tell you that I am not making it to the end of the year in the municipality, I am cutting everyone’s salary, everyone.”

A general’s daughter, she succinctly summarized the Chilean ruling class’s attitude towards the working class and the education of its children: “Let’s see, first of all, half the matter is useless. I was a teacher for a whole year, half of the subject spent in mathematics is pure rubbish, it will never be useful to them again in their lives, why do children have to learn to make logarithms, has anyone ever used logarithms?”

The coronavirus has exposed a profound crisis in every social area. While the conditions of everyday life were always precarious, today they are becoming unbearable. The Chilean state does not guarantee the right to health, education, social services, housing, financial security, pensions or any other social necessity because it has all been placed in the hands of major domestic and transnational corporations and conglomerates.

The population at large has been left to fend for itself under the auspices of the “free market.” The results can be seen in the latest indices on social inequality: the richest 1 percent in Chile concentrates in its hands 33 percent of the national income; 70 percent of workers earn less than US\$660 per month, 70 percent of retirees receive a pension of less than US\$330, 11.5 million people are in debt, and 4.7 million are in arrears.

Where the state has intervened, it’s been to transfer the public wealth to the banking and corporate elite. Aside from beefing up the repressive institutions, one of the first measures Piñera implemented in response to the pandemic was a US\$12 billion package, consisting largely of the capitalization of the State Bank to increase liquidity and implementing tax exemptions in which the greatest beneficiaries were large and medium-sized companies. Further measures were announced in the second week of April to ostensibly guarantee liquidity to SMEs in the form of zero-interest loans guaranteed by the state, but in which again large companies took the lion’s share.

With regards to the more than 1.2 million recently laid off, the support system that Piñera enacted with the approval of Congress, the so-called “severance insurance,” rests on the unemployed accessing funds they were forced to accumulate in individual accounts while employed, with a negligible contribution from the state. As for the 2.6 million-strong informal sector of street vendors and super-exploited laborers without contracts, virtually no assistance has been forthcoming. A much-vaunted stimulus package to assist this precarious sector hardest hit by quarantining measures and social distancing policies, consisted of a one-off payment of US\$60, enough to continue starving in shantytowns or on the streets as the coronavirus reaches its peak this winter.

It is significant therefore that students, teachers, lecturers, education and childcare staff, and other sections of working class across Chile rebuffed the Education Ministry’s orders to reopen the schools this past April 27. The impasse demonstrates that the entire political establishment is devoid of legitimacy in the eyes of millions and its every decision is perceived with extreme hostility and deep suspicion.

With regard to opening schools, the government was obliged to do a *volte face*, but it is still pushing for a return to onsite work.

The response also reveals that the unprecedented mass demonstrations that erupted in October of last year have since evolved and include ever-wider sections of the working class, not only in the form of strikes and rallies, but in local actions and initiatives that aim to protect the safety of communities from the spread of the coronavirus. In fact, demonstrations continue to break out throughout the country under quarantine and curfews enforced by the notorious Carabinero police and the military.

May 1 saw the Carabineros carry out the violent arrests of protesters, beating and rounding up leaders of the CUT union federation, human rights lawyers and members of both the domestic and international media, including CNN Chile, Prensa Latina, and Telesur. In an earlier incident that recalled the worst days of the military dictatorship, two Carabineros driving an unmarked vehicle opened fire on an April 27 demonstration in the Santiago neighborhood of La Florida, wounding 10.

As social tensions mount, there is growing opposition to the official Chilean left made up of the Socialist Party, the Stalinist Communist Party (PCCh) and their pseudo-left satellites, who in their positions as mayors, deputies, senators and union leaders have been instrumental in imposing government policies.

One teacher, Raúl Núñez Browton, raised sharp criticisms of the teachers’ union which “had not taken into account the rank and file at all.” Issues such as the reduction of classroom sizes, the government’s refusal to pay retired teachers their entitlements for two years running and the “historical debt” owed to teachers who were persecuted under the 17-year military dictatorship, the lack of tenure, and the precariousness of contracted labor—none of these pressing issues had been dealt with by the union leadership.

“We also have to remember that so many mayors like Recoleta’s [PCCh mayor] and many others that are now playing the good guys, these mayors are the ones who have blacklisted and persecuted teachers...their parties such as the PS, the PCCh voted against workers with the [furlough] law that clearly favored big business.”



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