

Opposition grows in Chile to school reopenings amid COVID-19 surge

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Four days after face-to-face education was resumed in Chile, 30 schools were temporarily closed due to the detection of coronavirus infections of children and staff. Another 21 schools quarantined the infected but kept the facilities open. Nonetheless, the ultra-right Chilean government of President Sebastian Piñera is proceeding with a reckless policy of progressively opening all public and subsidized private schools in the country.

The 2021 academic year started on March 1 with mixed modes of teaching and amid opposition from the wider community. Demonstrations rocked the capital at the beginning and the end of this week as high school students and youth were confronted by a massive deployment of Carabineros Special Forces with the now standard operating procedure of brutal repression and arrests. Only a fraction of the primary and secondary public school population attended in-person classes.

Overwhelming pressure is being exerted on teachers in the face of a surge in COVID-19 cases. Education Minister Raúl Figueroa reiterated the supposedly voluntary nature of returning to on-site learning. Teachers and education employees, however, were directed to be present at schools just in case students turned up, making a mockery of the claim.

“I want to be very clear that it is the parents who must make the determination of whether or not their children go or not at this time to face-to-face activities,” Figueroa threatened, adding that “for a long time now countries in the Northern Hemisphere have also been doing it.”

South American governments are using the authority of UNICEF to force schools open in a bid to implement criminal herd immunity policies.

The regional director of the organization claimed that “children in Latin America and the Caribbean have been out of the classroom longer than any other children in the world.” In line with this, BBC interviewed UNICEF emergency education specialist, Ruth Custode, who claimed “that the opening process cannot be postponed any longer, even if it is gradual.” Custode continued, “Governments must think about the risks of opening schools versus the risks of not opening them. By far, not opening them will be more detrimental to the region.”

In the past two weeks minister after minister has joined the drive to browbeat teachers into submission. Economy Minister

Lucas Palacios slandered educators as lazy. In his interview with T13 Radio, Palacios said that “in the case of teachers, it is striking that they seek by all means not to work, it is a unique case in the world, and I would say that it is worth studying.”

To suit the government’s agenda, Health Minister Enrique Paris that “children transmit the coronavirus very little.” Education Minister Raúl Figueroa, who opposed the school closures throughout last year, falsely argued that “schools are safe spaces when they comply with the required sanitary measures and protocols.”

Various scientific studies have conclusively demonstrated that school closures are associated with a significant decline in both incidence of COVID-19 and mortality. What is more, the experiences in the United States and Europe attest to the false and misleading character of the government’s arguments. Lockdowns and school closures are today more necessary than ever.

Last Friday, the country recorded 5,325 COVID-19 cases in 24 hours, the highest figure in eight months. Schools were closed last March, when the virus had just made its appearance, and education went online due to widespread public concern.

Today, with the number of suspected cases and deaths reaching over 950,000 and 27,000 respectively, the right-wing government is forcing teachers into the classrooms as it pushes a “back to normal” paradigm. This “new normal” is all the more criminal given that in Chile the 24- to 69-year-old working age group constitutes 73 percent of cases and one-third of deaths. Moreover, the more infectious and lethal British and Brazilian strains have been detected since February and have now made their way throughout the country.

The spurious grounds for reopening schools—that the government is concerned for the well-being of children and youth—is belied by reality. Twelve months of the pandemic have exposed the utter disdain the political establishment has for the poor and working class families.

Undoubtedly, children have suffered from the consequences of social isolation, and intra-family tensions reached new heights last year, due to forced confinement. The primary contributor to this tragic situation has been insecurity arising from mass unemployment, hunger, the threat of evictions and homelessness, all which rose sharply in a country suffering

from multidimensional social inequality.

But neither the executive nor the legislature provided any meaningful assistance to deal with these deep social disparities with millions living in the overcrowded working class communities of Santiago or in the countless shantytown *campamentos* throughout Chile, lacking potable water and a regular supply of electricity and gas, let alone access to the internet.

The teachers union bears direct responsibility for the dire conditions facing education staff. Despite immense support within the working class and among youth for teachers, the unions have refused to mobilize their membership out of fear that it would unleash a tidal wave of social opposition.

Nor are the unions opposed to on-site instruction. What they want is to be invited to the negotiating table. Two weeks prior to the schools reopening a government-union roundtable was arranged which put forward a nine-point plan. This consisted of delaying on-site learning until the entire education population was vaccinated with both doses and dynamic quarantining reaching Phase 4.

“We believe that there is no possibility of returning in March, mainly because of the pandemic situation and because beyond the vaccine, which is an important element, we will not have the two doses by March 1. There has been a lot of improvisation in this respect, and we are not all going to arrive inoculated on that date,” union President Carlos Diaz said coming out of the meeting. (By March 1 half the 513,000-strong workforce was vaccinated, with the remainder receiving the first dose by March 5, and 3.9 million have been vaccinated with a single dose.)

When the government rode roughshod over the union’s demands, Diaz offered only an accusatory finger but proposed nothing to protect its membership. “In case of any contagion, any death, the responsibility will be on the Ministry of Education and the government of Sebastián Piñera.”

With 51 schools affected by coronavirus cases as of Friday, March 5, Díaz made a perfunctory call “to the Government of Sebastián Piñera, to the Ministry of Education, because given the conditions that we have today, it is not possible to continue with these on-site classes.”

Díaz, a member of the Humanist Party, is aligned with the pseudo-left front Frente Amplio that holds seats in the legislature and together with the Communist Party controls the trade union apparatus. These two multiparty organizations have been instrumental in allowing the deeply hated Piñera to remain in power for the last two years. Through verbal opposition to the ultra-right government, they posture as “lefts,” while thwarting every initiative to save the lives, jobs and conditions of the working class.

The unions long ago ceased to be national reformist organizations. During the military dictatorship, they were transformed into corporatized instruments to increase productivity and police wage cuts and job destruction in the

drive to make the economy internationally competitive. This process is no more exposed than in the privatization reforms of education that were consolidated under civilian rule.

The corporatist agenda has only accelerated during the pandemic as trade union federations drove miners and other “export-oriented” sectors back to work. They helped impose wage cuts, supported the furloughing of hundreds of thousands of workers in private industry for the employers’ benefit and refused to call any industrial action against poverty, hunger, insecurity and evictions impacting the working class.

This bitter experience with the unions is not unique to Chile but universal. Teachers internationally have come into direct conflict with their union leaderships, who are also negotiating the reopening of schools to meet the requirements of the financial and corporate elites.

In recent months, planned action by Chicago teachers was betrayed by the Chicago Teachers Union, paving the way for a reopening of schools across the US. A mass strike of teachers in São Paulo, Brazil has been sabotaged by the APEOESP union, and wildcat French teacher strikes have been strangled by the unions.

From these common experiences, workers in Chile must draw definite conclusions. They must break with the Stalinist PCCh, the pseudo-left Frente Amplio, the establishment left and the union apparatus and create new organs of political power that are comprised of and controlled by the rank and file.

With its on-line publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*, the International Committee of the Fourth International has created the instrument through which teachers, health care professionals and other workers can democratically discuss the fight for workplace health and safety, decent incomes and conditions, and establish international rank-and-file committees which will organize the fight for these life-and-death questions as part of the struggle for the socialist transformation of society on a world scale.



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