

Chilean transit workers protest layoffs, lack of COVID protection in Santiago

Mauricio Saavedra
15 March 2021

Employees of Santiago's Metro public transport system have staged a number of one-day protests to oppose mass layoffs, salary reductions, the lack of personal protective equipment and to demand they be vaccinated as at-risk essential workers. This has become all the more urgent with the return of face-to-face classes in the schools since the beginning of March.

Subway lines are today operational with 1,100,000 daily commuters, even as coronavirus cases are nearing 6,000 a day. Figures vary, but at least 13 Santiago transit workers, including bus drivers, have died of complications from COVID-19, and hundreds have contracted the virus. Many more have been affected throughout the country.

The Metro's 14,000-strong workforce, consisting overwhelmingly of contract labor, have conducted stoppages in January, February and March, most recently last Friday against job losses and unsafe conditions.

In their attempt to fight back against the threat to their lives posed by the pandemic and the destruction of their jobs, wages and conditions, Chilean transit workers confront an obstacle in the form of the transit workers unions. The unions' concern is not protecting workers' interests but rather serving as part of the apparatus that implements the ongoing austerity agenda.

"The null dialogue of the administration, headed by the worst president that the Board of Directors of this passenger transport company has ever had, Louis de Grange, has pushed this union to take this measure," the Metro Federation said in a press statement referring to the March 10 protest, one of several this year.

This message was reiterated by Paula Rivas, president of Metro's professionals and technicians union and vice president of the Metro Federation. He said, "The company has not wanted to dialogue with the union organizations, with the workers' representatives. There is a systematic refusal to maintain a dialogue."

Santiago's Metro, jointly owned by the Corporation for the Promotion of Production (CORFO) and the State Treasury, is being kept afloat by government infusions and

by issuing US\$1.5 billion in bonds on the international debt market.

Massive damage was caused during the October 2019 social eruption. The historic demonstrations were triggered by the police state violence unleashed against student civil disobedience protests opposing another hike in transit fares, one of four between 2018 and 2019. To date, only seven people have been prosecuted for the estimated US\$350 million in damages to 110 of 136 Santiago subway stations, as well as trains and buses. Video footage has since surfaced on social media alleging that agent provocateurs were either directly involved in instigating criminal acts of vandalism.

The Metro went into further arrears due to the precipitous drop in passengers with the spread of the coronavirus contagion. From 2.8 million daily commuters prior to COVID-19, ridership has fallen to 1.1 million daily passengers today. Eighty percent of revenues comes from ticket sales.

"Chile is expected to offer extraordinary support to avoid Metro's default and continue its undertaking as an operator of Metro's system of the Metropolitan Region of Santiago," Fitch Ratings wrote in March last year.

The rating agency continued: "Metro would be stressed to reduce costs given revenue prospects to be flat (or even decreasing) in 2020. Management began an extensive plan to control operating costs, such as freezing staff hiring, renegotiating the agreements with relevant suppliers, and austerity policies on general expenses."

To this end, the state-owned company unloaded its financial difficulties on the back of its employees through unpaid bonuses, increased workloads, salary reductions and dismissals. Since last year 1,800 positions, including 600 janitors and 410 cashiers have been wiped out.

Fully 70 percent of the Metro workforce is employed by 77 subcontractors that provide workers such as janitors, cashiers, guards and customer assistants during rush hour service. The level of insecurity among this section of workers is severe. For several months following the onset of coronavirus, casuals received no personal protective

equipment. Several subcontractors forced their employees to take out their severance insurance. That is, the workers effectively paid themselves. Casuals account for two-thirds of those infected with COVID-19.

The corporatization of the Metro system was completed three decades ago under the center-left coalition government upon the return to civilian rule. In 1990, the Metro was transformed into a state corporation, which meant that it operated “as any other business” with the whip of the market behind it. Efficiencies were achieved through the outsourcing of labor and through the continuous rise in fares to cover operating costs.

With the capitalist business model came the obscene salary disparities between management and the employees. General Manager Rubén Alvarado is paid \$18,907,563 (\$26,503) per month; Projects Manager Felipe Bravo, \$17,400,000 (US\$24,402); and Chairman of the Board of Directors Louis de Grange, \$8,800,000 (US\$12,336). Alvarado receives 58 times the starvation wage earned by a cleaner (US\$456), and de Grange’s salary is equivalent to about 18 times (US\$685) the remuneration of a Metro guard.

But where were the unions in this whole process?

While the company was unable to impose any workplace reforms during the 2019 mass social explosions, it was able to proceed the following year as the country was placed under a State of Emergency ostensibly to deal with the virus. The class struggle was unstably quelled by the parliamentary left, the unions and their various pseudoleft apologists who promoted a constitutional referendum calling for the abolition of the much-hated Pinochet Constitution.

“In 2020 in the face of a possible dismissal of 600 workers we ceded benefits from our various collective bargaining agreements. We have paid for this crisis with workers’ money, with benefits earned after 31 years of unionism,” said Eric Campos Bonta, president of the Metro Federation.

Campos, who has worked in the subway for 10 years, is also a member of the Stalinist Communist Party (PCCh) and is running as a pre-candidate in the upcoming election for the Constituent Assembly. Clearly, he has political ambitions.

Boasting a 95 percent unionization rate in Santiago’s Metro, the political operators that control the union apparatus have imposed a firm grip over these oppressed workers, only to be able to sit at the negotiating table with big business and through this mechanism climb up the political ladder.

The union apparatus and the fake “left” organizations that control it bears direct responsibility for the dire conditions facing the working class as a whole, whether they be teachers, transit workers, health care professionals or miners. The unions long ago ceased to be national reformist workers

organizations. This degeneration is not unique to Chilean unions but is connected to a universal process tied to the developments in the globalization of production and the financialization of the world economy.

In Chile, the unions were disbanded during the first half of military rule and then resuscitated as the class struggle took a sharp turn to the left during the deep economic crisis of 1982. But the organizations resurrected bore no resemblance to those that existed in the first half of the 20th century. They had been transformed into openly corporatized instruments to increase productivity and police both wage cuts and job destruction in the drive to make Chile’s “export-oriented” economy internationally competitive.

With the return to civilian rule, the formerly outlawed Stalinist Community Party was initially denied a place in the parliamentary framework. It became the dominant political force in the trade union apparatus and through it provided critical support to the two decades of Christian Democrat-Socialist Party rule.

By the 2000s, this political instrument was thoroughly exhausted and a new pseudo-left force, Frente Amplio, was cultivated from the 2006 and 2011 massive student rebellions, to contain the shift to the left and swing it back into parliamentary politics.

Both Frente Amplio and the Communist Party have been instrumental in defending bourgeois rule for the last 20 years. But they are also deeply discredited. So all efforts are being made to keep the working class tied to them. This is the role of organizations, such as the Morenoite Partido de Trabajadores Revolucionarios, which functions as a cheerleader for the unions.

Implacably opposed to these forces, the International Committee of the Fourth International calls on youth and workers to draw the lessons of the long and tragic history of the struggle for socialism in Chile and break once and for all with the Stalinist PCCh, the pseudo-left Frente Amplio, and the establishment left and the union apparatus. Establish new organs of political power controlled by the rank and file and based upon the perspective of socialist internationalism. Through the *World Socialist Web Site*, the ICFI has created the instrument for this struggle to be realized.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact