Pseudo-left presidential candidate Gabriel Boric intervenes to close down 83-day strike in Chile

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1 September 2021

A number of pseudo-left tendencies are promoting a deal hatched between Chile's unions, the parliamentary left and the multinational retail chain owned by the billionaire Solari family as an historic and unprecedented victory. It is nothing of the sort.

Some 189 supermarket workers in the northern mining region of Atacama went on strike on June 7 after negotiations with supermarket chain "Tottus" broke down earlier in March. By the middle of August, out of sheer desperation, several workers initiated a hunger strike after their demands for basic minimal improvements, safety conditions and minor salary increases were sidelined and ignored for months.

These workers are among the most exploited. With a salary of between 260,000 (US$336) and 280,000 (US$362) pesos per month, the incomes of the predominantly female staff do not even meet the poverty-level minimum wage.

Their basic demands included a four percent salary increase and a top-up in meal and transportation allowances that would raise the current 3,500 pesos (US$4.51) to 9,000 pesos (US$11.61), in addition to a one-off payment of 500,000 pesos (US$645) for each worker to end the conflict.

The industrial action, which lasted 83 days, was shut down when the Socialist Party governor of Atacama, the ex-Christian Democrat and now "Social Green Regionalist Federation" (FRVS) deputy for Atacama, Jaime Mulet, and the Stalinist-Frente Amplio presidential front man, Gabriel Boríc, intervened.

All were full of self-congratulation. The governor of Atacama, Miguel Vargas Correa, claimed "a good agreement has been reached. We are very happy, very proud to have contributed a grain of sand in this process. We have helped to reach a good agreement that satisfies the interests of the workers and also reflects the company's opinion."

He especially praised the head of the union, Priscilla Fernández, whose effort "has been commendable," as had "the leaders of this organization, who have carried the name of the workers in the Atacama region."

The union president in turn patted the governor on the back: "I am proud of the Governor, a person like him deserves where he is, that he got involved out of the blue and tried to solve and mediate, and get to the heart of the company. He did not want his people suffering in the region, it is admirable, very admirable. Not just anyone does that."

The Stalinist Communist Party chimed that the agreement "undoubtedly" represented "a precedent in the history of the union struggle in Chile," while the most sycophantic defenders of the union bureaucracy's maneuvering was a pseudo-left group known as the Socialist Workers Movement (MST).

The MST is one of three organizations in Chile—the other two being the Revolutionary Workers Party (PTR) and the International Workers Movement (MIT)—that falsely claim to be Trotskyist but in reality draw their inspiration from the unprincipled and national opportunist politics of Morenoism, a Latin American variant of Pabloism. This political tendency has been characterized by its unabashed glorification of bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalism, guerrillaism and the national reformist bureaucracies, e.g., the union apparatus, as the path towards socialism. Morenoism has principally sought to straitjacket the working class to these tried and tested institutions of Latin American capitalism.

Under the tweet "GREAT TRIUMPH OF THE TOTTUS CIPIAPÓ(sic)/VALLENAR UNION STRIKE" the MST went into ecstasy because the supermarket chain owners entered into an agreement, accepted the meager demands and did not lay off any workers.

"This tremendous victory is the product of the heroic struggle of the union and its president Priscilla," it trumpeted. "We salute this triumph with the deepest embrace of struggle. Great union Tottus Copiapó Vallenar! Up with those who fight! Without mobilization there is no change!"

This was not a victory for the working class. Quite the contrary. The real precedent established in the Tottus dispute was the union's further integration into the state amid the resurgence of the class struggle.

The multi-national retail chain Falabella, of which Tottus is a subsidiary, employs 96,000 workers in Chile, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, Brazil and Mexico, down from 104,000 in 2019 and 113,000 in 2017. This past June, the chain closed its whole

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operation in Argentina, destroying at least 800 jobs in the Federal Capital and in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Mendoza, Rosario and San Juan, although no total figure has been released.

Nonetheless the retail giant did not close the doors of its hundreds of other department stores, home improvement depots, supermarket chains and banking offices during the coronavirus pandemic, despite several of its super-exploited workers contracting and dying of COVID-19.

In its 2021 first quarter consolidated financial results, Falabella reported a 10.7 percent increase in revenue year on year (from US$3.1b in 2020 to US$3.4b 2021) and a 17.5 percent increase in gross profits (from US$1.05b in 2020 to US$1.24b in 2021). Falabella, with a stock market value of approximately US$19.5b, is majority-controlled by five families with a combined net worth of more than US$10 billion.

These stark figures don't just point to the unbridgeable social chasm between bourgeois and proletarians, they also present Falabella workers with all the objective reasons to unify across the continent in a common struggle to demand a safe working environment, proper protective equipment, substantial increases in wages and better conditions, and an end to job losses and store closures.

They also need to turn to sections of workers in Chile and internationally who in the last months have been involved in industrial action to protect lives and improve conditions. This includes miners, teachers, health workers, public servants, auto and auto parts workers, and other workers facing similar experiences.

Yet the union bureaucracy did everything in its power to keep the dispute isolated from the rest of the working class while appealing to members of parliament, constituents from the Constitutional Convention, the labor directorate and other state authorities to come to the rescue and help shut down the strike.

The state intervention was ramped up after three workers began a hunger strike out of sheer desperation. Fernández, the president of the union, solicited the support of a gamut of so-called "left" officials, who used the platform for purely electoral motivations. The union board first met with constituents of the Chile Digno pact, who in a communiqué claimed to be in "solidarity" with the strikers and to "emphatically" support their demands, but committed themselves to nothing.

The union leadership also met with Broad Front (Frente Amplio) congressman and former student leader Gorgio Jackson—from Democratic Revolution (RD) and closely aligned to pseudo left candidate Gabriel Boric—and Greens Regionalist deputy Jaime Mulet, who also happens to campaign for Boric.

"Workers today are victims of a society and of a legal model with labor relations that is absolutely unfair and concentrates wealth. This must be changed," exhorted Mulet before plugging Boric's campaign. "We are doing everything we can within our reach, with the commitment to become government with Boric, to make fundamental changes that today are absolutely necessary."

Finally, on the day before the settlement, the union bureaucrats met with Boric himself. After he made the perfunctory statement about workers "asking for elementary dignity" he gave a campaign spiel promising to head a government of the workers: "Our future government is going to be with the demand of the workers and the labor legislation has to be in defense precisely of those who generate the wealth in Chile, that is our commitment today."

The fraud that the Tottus agreement was an "unprecedented victory"—as promoted by the Morenoites and the Stalinists—should be treated with contempt. Without invalidating the courageous stand of the 189 Tottus retail workers, it must be stated frankly that the union apparatus transformed the strike into an election campaign stunt.

Nor is that their worst crime. For the last 22 months, the corporatist unions demonstrated their subservience and loyalty to management and the government by helping to keep non-essential retail open despite the global pandemic, and they did nothing to oppose the furloughing or laying off of thousands of workers.

This has been the well-trodden path of the parliamentary left, the Stalinist Communist Party, Frente Amplio and the corporatist trade unions, ever since the return to civilian rule. They have maintained tripartite arrangements, working simultaneously with business and with past center-left coalition governments, just as they have today assisted the incumbent right-wing presidency of Sebastian Piñera.

In opposition to the unprincipled politics of the Morenoites, the International Committee of the Fourth International calls on workers to break with the corporatist trade union apparatus, Stalinism, the Frente Amplio and the rest of the pseudo-left organizations that seek to tie them to the bourgeois state. In their place it calls on workers to develop independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces, on an international scale, as new organs of struggle.

It is to this end that the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*, has initiated the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

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