

Chile's pseudo-left government sends police to break strike, arrest refinery workers

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Last Monday at least 180 subcontract workers manning five entrances of the Hualpén oil refinery and the San Vicente maritime terminal in the BíoBío region, 500km south of Santiago, were attacked by dozens of riot police with shields, water cannon, pepper spray and tear gas. Eleven workers were arrested. The recently elected Chilean pseudo-left administration of ex-student radical Gabriel Boric ordered Carabineros Special Forces to break up the picket line at one of Chile's main oil refineries.

Preparations for the repression were made by the government over the weekend after the state-owned company, the National Petroleum Company (ENAP), falsely claimed on May 6 that southern Chile from Biobio to Araucania regions would suffer supply shortages of gasoline, diesel and kerosene in less than a week if the strike continued.

In a communiqué, ENAP said it was obliged to stop “100 percent” of logistical operations and fuel distribution in the southern part of the country and claimed that it had been pushed into “the extreme situation” by the “unwillingness of [the union] FENATRASUB to engage in dialogue...”

Only weeks before, however, Julio Aranis, the newly appointed general manager informed the media of programmed maintenance to be carried out at the more than 20 plants at the Hualpén refinery in Biobio. In other words, the planned disruptions obliged the refinery to stockpile several months worth of fuel.

“This is the largest and most necessary maintenance that ENAP has carried out in its more than 70 years of life,” Aranis explained, adding that the US\$87 million two-month operation “will generate, at its peak, a job opportunity for close to 2,000 external workers.”

The scaremongering provoked panic buying and queues at service stations several blocks long in the

south of Chile over the weekend.

Knowing full well that there wasn't a remote possibility of shortages, Minister of the Interior and Public Security Izkia Siches nonetheless took up the refinery's talking points. She declared fuel transportation a “strategic” area for the country, vowing to take whatever measures necessary to “maintain supply and keep the roads clear for ENAP which is a strategic industry.”

“Our delegate has been in talks with the different teams of contract workers (and) we hope that this has a prompt solution,” she continued, “but undoubtedly our government has the duty to ensure free transit and obviously supply for the whole country.”

This was reported in the media as meaning that the pseudo-left Stalinist government would apply the State Security Law, a police state instrument closely identified with the military dictatorship to criminalize all manner of social opposition to its rule.

Boric answered that this was precisely what he was threatening: “We are working first on the path, which is the spirit of our government, which is precisely dialogue,” he said.

“But, of course, as a State, we have the duty to guarantee the supply of, in this case, fuel, to all areas of the country. I hope that through dialogue we will reach an agreement, otherwise the government, of course, will have to proceed accordingly.”

In his two months in office, it has become clear to masses of people that Boric's endless appeals for “dialogue” is a euphemism for suppressing the class struggle. The working class, youth, indigenous peasant communities and popular sectors, mistakenly believed that the election of a front of supposedly left-wing parties—Frente Amplio, the Communist Party and others that make up Apruebo Dignidad— would welcome and

even encourage an active fight to improve their social position.

This was the illusion sold to them in this case by FENATRASUB (the National Federation of Subcontracted Workers), which last September invited the then-presidential candidate Boric to speak to the workforce and requested his commitment to intercede on their behalf in return for their vote.

“This is how the government pays us,” said Victor Sepulveda the president of the union. “The same government for which you voted today is paying us with this, with repression. All those who voted for Boric today are receiving this in return so that they will have it in the memory of the workers of Chile. This is the payment of this government. A government of workers with a false discourse, instead of supporting us, represses them.”

Yet in the same breath the union continues to make appeals to the government to participate in tripartite negotiations.

Despite the crackdown, the workers have refused to back down and remain on strike.

The thrust of their demand is to eliminate the gap between subcontracted and plant workers through the renegotiation of a framework agreement, which stipulates the benefits that contractor companies have to include at the beginning of the bidding process. In 2021, the refinery imposed an agreement that froze existing conditions indefinitely.

Like so many other free market policies that stripped the working class of its rights and conditions, the military dictatorship opened the door to subcontracting in 1975. But it was under the center-left governments of the Concertación that this form of employment became ubiquitous in all areas of the economy including mining, agriculture, fishing, construction and retail.

Some subcontracted employees have been at the company since the 1980s, and incomes, benefits and conditions have not improved in 15 years. They even lack comprehensive health insurance coverage, grants for schooling, adequate Christmas bonuses and vacation leave.

This was made worse during the pandemic when ENAP, citing financial difficulties, furloughed subcontractors for three months, forcing these workers to live off their own savings. Moreover, the entire

workforce was denied Christmas bonuses, an indispensable payment that gets them through the holiday period.

The unions however, have done everything in their power to keep the strike isolated.

The National Federation of Subcontracted Workers is an umbrella of several unions representing hundreds of subcontracted workers in ENAP, which, besides Hualpén, has refineries in the Magallanes and Valparaíso regions. Yet these workers have not been called out.

Nor have the unions representing permanent employees at ENAP supported the strike. After remaining silent for the first few days of the strike, which was called on May 2, Nolberto Díaz, president of the National Federation of Petroleum Workers' Unions (FENATRAPECH), all but condemned the picket on the grounds that it “put at risk the delivery of the fuels that the population needs...” A more right-wing argument could not be found.

Since the police crackdown, in an act of cynicism, the government’s own coalition, Apruebo Dignidad, composed of the pseudo-left Broad Front and the Stalinist Communist Party, have issued various statements condemning the action. The union bureaucracies have similarly come out to make mealy-mouthed statements supporting the workers, knowing full well that remaining silent would constitute consent to police repression by a government they promoted.

Yet neither the official Central Unitaria Trabajadora (CUT) nor the anarcho-sindicalist opposition union bureaucracy, the Central Clasista de los Trabajadores y Trabajadoras (CCTT), has called out their members to defend their class brothers and sisters. To do so would be to jump out of their own skins.

It has taken two months for the Boric government to virtually rip to shreds not only an agreement, but its political credibility among increasing sections of the working class.



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