

Chilean dockworkers and the role of the unions and the pseudo-left: Lessons from the 2014 and 2018 strikes

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Port workers ended a 48-hour protest walkout in Chile on October 28, but threatened an indefinite strike if the pseudo-left administration of President Gabriel Boric fails to fulfill promises it made to the sector.

The protest action was called amid a worsening situation caused by spiraling inflation and rising interest rates that are pushing the economy into recession. It is part of a wider mobilization among youth and workers; student protests and a number of strikes among teachers, health professionals, pharmaceutical employees and migrant delivery workers broke out in October.

In light of this growing militancy in the working class, political lessons need to be drawn from the perfidious role of all the present organizations—including the Chilean unions, the pseudo-left backers of Boric and various Pabloite tendencies—that dominate the working class in order to prevent yet another series of betrayals invariably sold off as victories.

The latest port strike was called by the Port Union of Chile (UPCh) and its affiliate the Central Port Workers Front (FTPC), that claims to represent 8,000 mainly casualized and temporary workers at 24 terminals across the country.

The workers demanded the creation of a special pension system for employees forced into early retirement due to highly dangerous and physically demanding work. The pension they are asking for is equivalent to 75 percent of their last salary and a supplement for access to quality health care, which in Chile is an exclusive privilege of the wealthy few. They were met with police repression, which has become the go-to for the Boric administration when confronted by any form of social opposition.

Beginning in the port city of San Antonio in the Valparaíso Region at the terminals of San Antonio Terminal Internacional, DP World and Puerto Panul, other stoppages followed at terminals in the cities of Iquique, Antofagasta, to the north and San Vicente and Puerto Montt to the south. Significantly, a number of ports were not involved, and the port of Valparaíso handled some of the diverted services, effectively acting as strikebreakers.

Spokesman of the Port Union at San Antonio Terminal Internacional (STI) Ricardo Rodríguez told *Telesur* that the stoppage was due to “the lack of seriousness shown by the state with the port workers,” claiming that “from one day to the next, communication was cut off in spite of great attempts on our part to maintain the dialogue.”

The Frente Amplio-aligned UPCh is promoted by the pseudo-left and Pabloite organizations as a militant union. Founded in 2011, it claims to be a rank-and-file alternative to the Confederation of Port Workers of Chile (COTRAPORCHI) and the Longshoremen’s Union of Port Valparaíso that are closely identified with suppressing the class struggle since the 1990s with the slogan of “social peace,” entering into no-strike agreements with employers and the center-left administrations.

The Pinochet dictatorship’s labor minister, José Piñera, implemented labor laws imposing heavily restricted collective bargaining, allowing the hiring of strikebreakers during strikes and promoting competing unions within companies. The Socialist Party and PPD in government and the Stalinist-dominated unions maintained Pinochet’s anti-labor laws, invoking the contemptuous lie that they were hamstrung from doing anything about them by Pinochet’s constitution!

This political caste that formed under the center-left coalition governments took advantage of illusions among a generation that had known only military dictatorship to remain in power from 1990 to 2010. They banked on their link to the Popular Front government, brutally overthrown by Gen. Pinochet’s US-backed fascist-military coup in 1973, which gave them a fake “left” veneer.

In power, the center-left and the unions deepened Pinochet’s free-market policies, which meant privatizations combined with mass sackings and the casualization of labor under an endless number of contracts, resulting in wages varying wildly for the same work. Casuals have no access to health insurance when unemployed and can only access the basic minimum pension, a starvation sum of 193,000 CLP per month (US\$204). Casuals are also denied parental leave, paid vacations and compensation for years of service. Their contract lasts literally as long as a day’s shift.

In 1997, Law N° 19542 transformed the public port system into autonomous companies that tendered the operations of terminals to private holdings with concessions of up to 30 years. Matte, Luksic and Von Appen, powerful Chilean capitalist families, control a large part of the port activity. In alliance with transnational interests, they have made a killing.

Port workers, of which 70 percent are casuals, endure derisory wages and inhumane shifts, coupled with bouts of underemployment and unemployment and extremely dangerous conditions. In one case, Antofagasta Port Company refused to indemnify the family of a worker who died after being forced to work 35 hours straight. Such tragedies are not uncommon; since 2000 there have been 3,864 accidents and 40 deaths of permanent laborers, and many more among temporaries.

A turning point was reached in the 2010s under conditions of an upsurge in the international class struggle following the global financial crisis. This was expressed with a radicalization of students who staged immense protests against the dysfunctional and expensive privatized education system and the growth of militant activity in various sectors of the working class, including the emergence of wildcat strikes in direct opposition to discredited official unions and the center-left parties.

The Port Union of Chile and other unions, the parties of the Frente Amplio coalition as well as a whole gamut of social and community organizations tied to the Stalinists and pseudo-left emerged during this period to take control of the situation and channel it back under the wing

of parliamentary politics. In every instance they were helped by the Pabloite organizations.

This was the case in the bitter month-long port strikes that emerged in 2014 and 2018.

In December 2013, during the last days of the right-wing government of Sebastian Piñera (2010-2014), 400 longshoremen shut down the port of Angamos in the Region of Antofagasta. The strike directly challenged Pinochet's labor laws: specifically, it called for casuals to be included in the framework of the collective bargaining process.

By the second week of January 2014, in face of brutal Carabinero and military repression, some 7,000 workers joined the strike. The ports of Iquique, Angamos, Antofagasta, Chañaral, Huasco and Caldera, to the north, as well as San Antonio in the centre and Lirquén, Penco, Coronel, San Vicente, Calbuco, Corral, Puerto Montt and Chacabuco, to the south, were paralyzed with pickets and barricades.

Fedefruta reported that the San Antonio stoppage alone was causing weekly losses of up to US\$40 million. Asoex, the exporters' association, claimed meat and wine exports were losing US\$80 million per week. Bolivia reported a loss of US\$30 million as a result of the stoppage at the port of Iquique. Codelco reported that US\$130 million in copper exports were paralyzed in Mejillones.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time: "The powerful strike shook the ruling class, not only because of its direct effect on the country's economy (with multimillion-dollar losses in imports and exports), but for its jeopardizing of Chile's international image as a preferred country and safe haven for foreign investment."

The bourgeoisie was also shaken by the support the strike had won among broad sections of the masses. Miners, bank workers and students repeatedly joined the strike and mobilized in solidarity, as did contract workers at Codelco, forestry workers, farmers and truckers.

It was at this point that the UPCh entered into discussions with the government, stitching together a sellout deal behind the backs of the strikers on January 25, 2014. It left untouched that which had triggered the strike in the first place and caused it to spread along the Chilean coast—Pinochet's labor laws designed to keep dockworkers atomized, contract and other forms of informal labor, and blocks to the right to unionize.

The myriad Pabloite organizations reduced their program to that of advisers or consultants, indulging in the crudest glorification of syndicalism, while making demands on the union bureaucracies to lend credibility to these outdated and bankrupt bureaucratic institutions.

The Pabloite Socialist Workers Movement (MST) called on the Stalinists who controlled Trade Union Central (CUT) to jump out of their skins, "abandon support for the bosses' governments and to organize the broadest possible solidarity with the dockworkers," a line echoed by its rival, the Socialist Workers Party (PTS).

The PTS also sermonized to the Port Union that it should not reproduce "the bureaucratic methods of the old union bureaucracy," calling upon it to be "a force to dispute the unions of the union bureaucracy of the CUT of the PC and the Concertación" to "unify the unions and organizations of the working class from the rank and file."

The 2014 defeat was a dress rehearsal for the role that the unions, the newly founded pseudo-left Frente Amplio and the Pabloites were to play in the bitter Valparaíso port strike of 2018, the first since 2000.

In November 2018 a wildcat strike of 600 temporary workers erupted at the TSP and TCVAl terminals in direct rebellion against the official leadership of the Stevedores Union of Port Valparaíso and its president, Roberto Rojas.

From the very beginning, the dockworkers showed immense resolve, courage and militancy, combating police-state violence and winning the support of students and workers. But without direction and leadership, the unions were able to quickly take the reins of the rebellion and begin

isolating the strike.

Pablo Klimpel, leader of a dissident faction inside the Longshoremen's Union and representative at the TCVAl terminal, and Osvaldo Quevedo, president of the Unifying Union of Maritime and Port Specialties (Sudemp), became the spokesmen of the casuals at TPS.

A self-professed Marxist and close ally of the newly founded electoral front Frente Amplio and supporter of the Frente Amplio mayor of Valparaíso, Jorge Sharp, Klimpel's line was that the strike would be indefinite until the companies discussed their demands. He did a 180 degree turn on November 28, 12 days into the strike, when Minister of Transport Gloria Hutt summoned the union representatives to Santiago and met separately with Klimpel's dissident group and the official union leadership.

"The Minister, in response to this call, got the workers to allow the access of contracted dockers to the TPS facilities as an act of 'good will' in order to be able to promote—under the guarantee of ministerial dialogue—a working table with the companies," reported *Portal Portuario*.

TCVAL, where Klimpel worked, accepted the call and entered negotiations the following day.

The TPS rank-and-file workers who had initiated the wildcat strike were left high and dry. Now that it could resume operations courtesy of the unions, TPS felt no compunction to negotiate and so it didn't until December 11, 25 days into the strike.

TPS is a subsidiary of the Von Appen group, a conglomerate valued at more than US\$1 billion with 55 operating companies in 17 countries and 14,000 workers. In Chile, besides TPS, the Von Appen group run the Mejillones, Puerto Coquimbo, Puerto Arica and Graneles del Norte terminals and the Ports of Angamos, Mejillones and Coronel in the north, centre and south of the country. The company also runs terminals in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina.

For those first 25 days, neither Klimpel nor the UPCh nor any other port union called their members out on strike at any of the Von Appen operations or any other port operation in Chile or in other industry, or—heaven forbid!—appealed to their brothers and sisters exploited by the same corporation in Latin America. The pseudo-left mayor, Jorge Sharp, condoned the repression by the Carabineros and, beyond symbolic calls to improve conditions for workers, appealed several times to the Piñera administration to "end the strike as soon as possible."

As the WWS correctly noted: "The role of Sharp, Frente Amplio and its cronies in the trade unions in derailing social opposition on behalf of big business demonstrates that this relatively new 'left' flank for the bourgeois establishment is no different from the one provided throughout the last century by Social Democracy and Stalinism of disarming workers politically."

When it became clear that the company was ready to negotiate, the unions rushed to reach an agreement. Again, the unions appealed to the working class not to paralyze the strategic industry, but merely to protest. "We are radicalized. With the fact that the company has not approached us to negotiate with us, we are radicalizing the movement," said Osvaldo Quevedo, president of Sudemp.

For the next nine days, marches on the streets of the port city were organized, streets were barricaded amid days of police-state repression that included the illegal raid of the union's headquarters and the violent arrest of at least 20 workers. Dockers, who held two-hour stoppages in several ports across the country earlier that week, organized wildcat strikes and set up barricades in response to this state provocation.

Students of the University of Valparaíso, who had held sit-in protests at the campus in support of dockworkers, were also violently dispersed by Carabineros special forces. In opposition to the crackdown against the dockworkers and their fellow students, Playa Ancha University students voted to suspend classes.

On December 21, 35 days after the beginning of the strike, Klimpel et al. rammed through at the 11th hour a miserable deal: a gift card of 250,000 CLP (US\$360), a food basket, a Christmas bonus of 75,000 CLP (US\$100), two training sessions on workplace safety, and the option of a 550,000 CLP (US\$722) loan from the company.

The rebellion of temporary casuals, who rely on eight-hour shifts distributed to “on-call” lists, had meant weeks, and even months without getting called to work. The least they were demanding was a bonus of 5,000,000 CLP (US\$7,600) to compensate for the underemployment and for an end to company “blacklists” against workers who speak up.

This was a defeat for the workers. Nearly six years later, dozens of workers involved in the 2018 port strikes remain blacklisted. Three of them are currently on trial for damages in a lawsuit filed by the Piñera administration, which Boric has upheld.

However, it was definitely a victory for the unions, which secured a seat in tripartite discussions. Klimpel candidly told a forum organized at the University of Valparaíso on December 27, 2018, six days after the sellout, about his involvement in roundtable discussions that would rubber stamp the needs of the port conglomerates.

The unions seek to be integrated as a critical component in the modernization of the ports that corporate and finance capital have been demanding.

With more than 4,200 kms of coastline on the Pacific, 95 percent of Chile’s foreign trade is conducted by sea, underscoring the strategic importance of both public and private ports to the national and international bourgeoisie. Chile produces 28 percent of the world’s copper supply and 21 percent of the world’s lithium supply and, together with Peru, Bolivia and Argentina, holds the largest reserves of both, essential elements in modern production that the US, Europe and China are vying to secure.

The OECD conducted two missions at the requests of the Michelle Bachelet government (2014-2018) and the administration of Sebastian Piñera (2018-2022) exactly for this purpose. In its second mission conducted to improve “labor conditions and competitiveness” the OECD found that “The high level of port labour conflicts is linked to mediocre labour conditions and the lack of institutionalised space for consultation and negotiations ... This does not stimulate trust among parties and weakens trade unions ...”

It recommended “A structural and permanent dialogue on port labour should be established, that includes representatives of employers, employees and the government. Such a dialogue should develop a rolling agenda of the main issues to discuss and resolve that are of concern to the main stakeholders ...”

As in the case of the Biden administration’s support for the unionization of the Alabama Amazon workers, the OECD recognized the critical function the unions play in smothering social opposition, especially under conditions where the working class has become radicalized by decades of obscene social inequality and poverty and the rising cost of living and interest rate hikes. Biden’s intervention at Amazon and that of the OECD is part of a broader strategy of the international bourgeoisie to integrate the unions into the state apparatus and corporate management.

During the 2018 struggle, the Chilean Pabloites reached new depths in their craven subordination to the unions, the Stalinists and the pseudo-left Frente Amplio. Everything they wrote was from the standpoint of shielding these agencies of the Chilean capitalist class.

Revolutionary Socialism (SR), the Chilean section of the Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI), tried to convince readers uneasy about the sellout that it really wasn’t one. In its only article on the strike on December 31, SR explained:

Many comrades make the calculation and indicate that the failure

of the movement to obtain the integrity of its demands would be a defeat for the longshoremen. This conclusion must be carefully weighed and we believe that there is an open debate on this issue. In effect, the bosses’ media have spread the idea that the movement was defeated, because they have a class interest in this conclusion: to prevent the contagion of the experience of the Valparaíso strike to the workers as a whole in Chile, if the movement is intransigent and the movement maintains its unity from the ranks, it is impossible for the bosses to defeat any workers’ movement.

The coverage and analysis provided by the PTR’s *La Izquierda Diario*, which was shared on social media by the unions, was no less shamefaced in its outlandish fabrications in defense of the unions.

“Almost a month into their intense struggle, the casual dockers ... have accomplished one of the greatest union and political feats of the bosses’ Chile: they have sat down at the same table with the company of the ultra-right-wing Von Appen family,” it wrote on December 12.

For the Pabloites, the unions and the working class are equivalent and they use both terms interchangeably. In reality the union bureaucracy’s interests are in diametric opposition to the workers. The track record demonstrates that the union’s “feat” of sitting at management’s table had been paved with a litany of betrayals.

Izquierda Diario admitted that “this immense achievement, however, has a lame leg” and accused the company of “imposing” Rojas as a representatives in the negotiations and “imposing that the strikebreakers could enter peacefully,” a boldfaced lie belied by the fact that both had been agreed to by Klimpel as early as November 28.

On December 16 they wrote that “without the unity of workers and dismissed workers, together with the Teachers’ Association, ANEF, Constramet, retail and classroom assistants, as well as other sectors such as feminist organizations, environmental organizations and student federations, it would not have been possible to develop a struggle of this magnitude.”

What the PTR concealed in this deceitful comment is that the port workers were kept isolated by the unions, the Stalinists and the pseudo-left for the duration of the strike and that the education, health and other union bureaucrats who made an appearance did so as individual representatives and “advisers”—a more useless contribution from them could not be invented.

On December 20, the PTR was making its customary appeal for the “CUT, unions, federations and all social organizations as well as Sharp and the Frente Amplio ... as well as the PC, which lead diverse union, student and cultural organizations, and have ample tribunes” to “put all their forces at the service of the triumph of the dockers in all their demands,” and so on.

Not taking its appeal seriously, in the same article the PTR developed the justifications for the sellout that would arrive the following day: “Under certain relations of forces” the unions must go into “inevitable negotiations” and “compromises,” it reasoned.

The PTR is the Chilean section of the so-called “Trotskyist Fraction-Fourth International” (FT-CI) led by the PTS of Argentina.

Irrespective of their claims to be Trotskyist, they decisively broke with the Fourth International in the 1950s and 1960s when they adopted anti-Marxist conceptions, advanced by Michel Pablo and Nahuel Moreno, that non-proletarian class forces could lead the socialist revolution without the construction of Bolshevik-type parties in advance.

Stalinists, Social Democrats and petty-bourgeois and bourgeois nationalists could become “natural Marxists” in response to the pressure of objective events, thus bypassing the need to develop and educate Marxist cadre as the authoritative leadership of the working class, the sole

consistently revolutionary force in modern society.

In practice, this has meant sowing illusions in bourgeois nationalist caudillos such as Juan Domingo Perón or bourgeois reformists of the Salvador Allende type and backing petty-bourgeois Castroite guerrillaism along with entering Popular Front-style coalitions with Stalinists, all with disastrous results.

The chief objective of these deeply pessimistic tendencies remains to keep the working class tied to the old and more recent bureaucratic organizations, petty-bourgeois and bourgeois nationalists and other agencies of capitalism and imperialism amid the resurgence of working class struggles.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its daily organ the *World Socialist Web Site* appeals to Chilean and Latin American workers and youth to draw some vital lessons and put an end to their subordination to the bureaucratic organizations, petty-bourgeois and bourgeois nationalists, the pseudo-left and other agencies of capitalism and begin the process of building their own organs of power, rank-and-file factory committees and other forms of democratic self-organization.

In this struggle, the ICFI is more than capable of providing guidance and leadership, having established the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, “the organizational form through which the billions-strong modern world proletariat will articulate its interests, unite across national boundaries and bring the decades-long social counterrevolution to an end. Through the IWA-RFC, the working class will gain consciousness of its role as *the* progressive social force to launch, broaden and *sustain* a globally coordinated counteroffensive capable of cutting a path to world socialist revolution.”



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