

Students across Chile protest criminalization of youth and education cuts

Part 1. Privatized Education: background to a social crime

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This is the first of a two-part series.

Students are on the march in Chile, most recently taking to the streets across the country on June 3, in the largest mobilizations since President José Antonio Kast took office.

High school and university students marched in their thousands in the capital Santiago on a day that ended with 35 arrests and several youth seriously injured by riot police using water cannon and tear gas to violently disperse the protesters.

The University of Chile's (UCH) health brigade reported having treated more than a dozen students, several being referred to emergency care due to serious injuries suffered at the hands of the notorious Carabineros Public Order Control units. A fourth-year law student from UCH who was participating as a human-rights observer underwent emergency surgery for facial fractures, a situation that has occurred many times during past protests.

Thousands more rallied in the regional cities of Valparaíso, where the national Congress sits, in the mining north of Antofagasta, and in the university city of Concepción to the south.

More than 25 student federations participated nationwide in protests called by CONFECH, the student confederation, and the Coordinating Assembly of Secondary School Students (ACES). The Teachers Association, the main teacher's union, made a timid call on members to join the protests but did not initiate strike action.

The protests were directed against Kast's newly installed fascist government and its across-the-board spending cuts in the public sector in the service of Chilean and international capital. Through the authoritarian mechanisms of executive decrees and administrative directives, the government is launching a systemic assault on the democratic rights and social conditions of the working class to make it pay for an intensifying economic crisis gripping the country.

Kast took office claiming he had a mandate to slash public spending by US\$6 billion in the first 18 months and US\$21 billion by the end of his four-year term, equivalent to roughly 8 percent of GDP. In education this will mean cuts to programs such as school meals that feed 1.6 million 6-to-19-year-old students suffering high food insecurity.

The broad student support that the rallies attracted demonstrates the resurgence of the class struggle and the radicalization of new layers that have matured under the government of Gabriel Boric, the ex-student radical whose empty promises to reform the market-based education system evaporated during his four years in office. Instead he turned the riot police against secondary students occupying their schools and sought to suppress all social protests.

"No to the mega-reform," "No to budget cuts," read some banners. "For an education system that serves the country and the vast majority."

ACES called on school students to oppose the Kast government for

"putting the interests of big business ahead of the needs of students and our families."

The "Metropolitan Region Secondary Schools Cordon," established in 2025 by students from a dozen emblematic public schools, issued the demand for "an end to punitive approaches" and made a call for "action to address structural deficiencies, which are the true causes of school dropout rates, systematic violence, and problems with school coexistence."

Kast's war against the youth took center-stage in his first State of the Nation address on June 1. His two-and-a-half-hour insipid ramble reiterated that Chile was in the throes of a "security emergency" to justify a battery of extraordinary law-and-order measures.

"No one who burns a bus, no one who destroys public property deserves free education. A good education is incompatible with the destruction of public property," Kast said at one point, revealing the elitist conviction of the fascist president, and the ruling class he represents, that education is not a social right but a privilege that can be revoked as punishment.

The Kast government has moved rapidly to introduce sweeping second-generation disciplinary and penal legislation that builds on laws enacted under Sebastián Piñera's right-wing government (2018-2022) and Boric's pseudo left-Stalinist coalition (2022-2026).

The *Protected Schools* Bill, which completed congressional passage in early June 2026, empowers schools to conduct backpack inspections, prohibit face coverings, sanction students for disrupting classes or occupying facilities, and strip students convicted of certain violent offenses of their eligibility for state-funded university tuition.

Running parallel to this is the *Registry of Vandals and Incivilities* Bill, establishing a database tracking those who commit offenses ranging from attacks on police to property damage during protests.

Simultaneously, the *Criminal Liability of Adolescents Reform*, championed by right-wing deputy Andrés Longton, aims to double the maximum custodial sentence for offenders aged 14–16 from five to ten years for grave crimes.

These are not measures against crime but mechanisms for the criminalization of youth. They represent a qualitative intensification of the police state framework, specifically targeting youth as a population to be surveilled, disciplined and incarcerated. The stripping of social benefits amounts to the economic proscription of political struggles against Chile's privatized segregated education system, a product of Pinochet's "free-market miracle" entrenched by subsequent civilian regimes.

The Tragedy in Calama, a symptom of a crisis long in the making

On 27 March 2026, María Victoria Reyes Vache, a school inspector at the Obispo Silva Lezaeta Institute in Calama mining city in the northern region of Antofagasta, was stabbed to death by an 18-year-old student, Hernán Cristóbal Meneses Leal, who had allegedly planned the attack over several months.

According to investigators, Meneses brought multiple knives, a sword-like weapon, gasoline, and materials described as components of an improvised flamethrower. He was subdued by staff and fellow students and later charged with qualified homicide, four counts of attempted qualified homicide, and an offense related to carrying incendiary devices.

What has emerged about Meneses is a portrait not of a hardened criminal but of a profoundly isolated and disturbed young man. Court filings and media reports indicated diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders, as well as a history of social isolation and bullying.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not create the crisis in Chilean education but acted as a devastating accelerant. Chile experienced one of the longest school closure periods in the OECD. When schools finally reopened, the accumulated damage became visible: approximately 19,000 school-violence complaints in 2024, with more than 133,000 over the preceding decade. Attacks on teachers reached 125 in 2025—a 39 percent increase over the previous year, the highest since 2017. The Ministry of Education reported an average of 43 daily incidents involving crimes, weapons, drugs or threats during 2025.

The government's own fiscal policy deepened the damage. Boric implemented a sharp austerity program in 2022-2023, producing a rare fiscal surplus at the cost of withdrawn emergency services, followed by years of attempted consolidation even as social needs mounted.

The Calama tragedy occurred against the backdrop of a youth mental health crisis that the Chilean State has chronically underfunded and neglected. The 2024 Longitudinal Survey of Early Childhood found that 33.9 percent of adolescent girls aged 14–18 and 19.5 percent of boys showed moderate or severe symptoms of depression or anxiety.

Suicide mortality among 10–19 year olds stands at 5.4 per 100,000, with young males approximately 3.5 times more likely to die by suicide than females. Admissions for suicide attempts and self-harm among adolescents increased substantially between 2019 and 2022 and remain an unresolved public health emergency.

Yet Chile spends only 2–3 percent of its health budget on mental health—among the lowest in the OECD—amounting to roughly US\$60-100 per capita. The country has fewer psychiatrists per capita, fewer psychologists in the public system, and fewer child and adolescent mental health services than comparable nations, with severe regional disparities outside Santiago.

What followed the tragic murder of school inspector María Reyes was a textbook example of how the state and the corporate media jointly manufactured a crisis to justify repressive policy.

Within days of the Calama incident, at least 66 schools across 14 of Chile's 16 regions suspended classes due to threats that referenced the original incident. Within weeks, 26 students had been detained nationwide for threats, firearms possession, and weapons inside schools. Experts warned that the saturation media coverage of the Calama attack was directly generating the very threats now being reported as evidence of a security emergency.

Kast, far from seeking to calm the atmosphere, actively stoked it. Minister of Security Trinidad Steinert declared that the Calama attack “was not committed by students, but rather by what we would call criminals”—a calculated remark stripping violent youth of their status as students and recasting them as external threats against whom the school must be secured.

Hundreds of students marched in Antofagasta in early April against the education security crisis and against the Kast government's punitive

response.

Pinochet's “Economic Miracle”: A boon for finance capital & racketeers

The repressive apparatus Kast is expanding cannot be understood apart from the education system it is designed to police. That system is the product of the Pinochet dictatorship's free-market counterrevolution, which decentralized and privatized all levels of education and was enshrined in the Constitutional Organic Law on Education (LOCE) imposed in 1990 before the dictator left office.

Pinochet slashed the education budget from 7 percent of GDP in 1973, the year of his US-backed military overthrow of the Popular Unity government, to 2.4 percent in 1990, with the return to civilian rule. It gradually climbed to 3.9 percent of GDP by 2000 and 4.4 percent by 2010 and has since remained at approximately 5 percent of GDP.

These figures, however, hide the striking fact that public funding goes to private operators through the voucher-style subsidy system for the sake of profit rather than investing in the public school infrastructure serving the most vulnerable students.

This has resulted in municipal-run public education with diminishing resources as students are sucked into the subsidized private schools: in 1990 municipal-run schools enrolled 58 percent of students; two decades later they only captured 33 percent. In 2017 the government of Michelle Bachelet (2014-2018) brought back State-run schools (SLEP). Even so, the subsidized private sector continues to grow.

Breakdown of enrollment in Primary & Secondary Schools

Year Municipal SLEP Subsidized Private Elite

1990	58.00%	– 32.00%	8.00%
1995	56.00%	– 35.00%	8.00%
2000	53.00%	– 36.00%	9.00%
2005	48.70%	– 43.00%	7.80%
2010	40.70%	– 50.70%	7.90%
2015	35.90%	– 50.80%	8.90%
2020	33.00%	3.00%	54.00% 10.00%
2025	22.30%	12.70%	53.90% 9.80%

(Source: Ministry of Education)

The subsidized private sector, enrolling over half of all Chilean schoolchildren, operates on a straightforward business model: collect government per-pupil subsidies while minimizing costs to extract profit.

It was the explosive 2011 student rebellion—in which hundreds of thousands marched under the slogan “Put an end to profit” (Fin al lucro)—that compelled the civilian political caste to investigate what it had long permitted.

What the Office of the Superintendent of Education uncovered went far beyond poor outcomes. In 2012 alone, 75 subsidized schools lost official certification. In a single December action, 38 schools were closed, affecting approximately 5,800 students. Reasons included falsified attendance records to claim subsidies for phantom students, unpaid teacher social-security contributions, unqualified staff, and infrastructure deficiencies endangering children's safety. Another 14 subsidized private schools lost certification in 2013.

The broader pattern is starker still. Between 2015 and 2023, 745 schools closed across Chile—64 percent of them subsidized private—while only 193

new schools opened, a net loss of 552 schools. Tens of thousands of students had their education disrupted not by natural disaster but by the routine functioning of a profit-driven market in which their schooling was an afterthought to the balance sheet.

To be continued.



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