

Chile: Strikes erupt in mining and healthcare, as 20,000 march against Kast's austerity budget

Mauricio Saavedra
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A wave of strikes and protests is sweeping Chile as the government of ultra-right President José Antonio Kast presses forward with a 2027 budget that dismantles public education, healthcare and culture while showering tax breaks on the mining monopolies and finance capital. On Thursday, October 1, more than 20,000 students and workers marched through Santiago and other cities against the budget cuts, in the largest national mobilization since Kast took office in March. The demonstration was met with tear gas, water cannon and mass arrests by the militarized Carabineros police.

The march, called by the Confederation of Students of Chile (Confech) under the slogan “Not one peso less for education,” was authorized by the government’s own Presidential Delegation. It was backed by the Teachers Association and more than 30 social organizations, including the United Workers’ Center (CUT). Yet the Carabineros Special Forces, the same units whose record of murder and mutilation during the 2019 social revolt remains almost entirely unpunished, attacked the peaceful demonstration with water cannon and tear gas at multiple points along the Alameda. The latest reports indicate at least 31 people were detained, with numerous injuries and people overcome by gas.

The president of the College of Teachers, Mario Aguilar, described the repression as “brutal and unjustified,” stating that the march had proceeded “with total normality and order” until the police attacked without provocation. “They threw gas at us, they left us asphyxiated, people fainted. This is brutality. This is pure fascism,” he said.

The scale of the police violence stands in stark contrast to the treatment of a minor skirmish outside the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC), where a small band of ultra-right pro-Kast students from the Gremialist Movement and Solidaridad UC staged a counterdemonstration. A handful of hooded individuals within the march clashed with these right-wing students. The incident, involving a tiny fraction of the 20,000 demonstrators, has been seized upon by the government and the corporate media to criminalize the entire protest movement. The entire affair is being amplified by the corporate media and the right to justify the police-state apparatus that Kast is building with Washington’s backing.

US Ambassador, Brandon Judd, a Trump appointee, intervened directly in Chile’s internal affairs, applauding Kast for condemning the violence and announcing that those involved would be barred from traveling to the United States. “The United States works together with our allies throughout the hemisphere to confront political violence, and those who commit violent crimes do not have the right to travel to the United States,” Judd declared.

Strikes in health and mining

The student march came one day after primary healthcare workers concluded a two-day national strike. The National Confederation of Municipal Health Workers (Confusam) paralyzed Family Health Centers (CESFAMs), rural posts and other primary care facilities across the country on September 29 and 30, demanding an increase in the per capita funding that the state provides for each registered patient. The strike, which achieved 90 percent adherence, was met with threats from mayors who warned of disciplinary action against mobilized workers.

The health workers are demanding an increase of 1,000 Chilean pesos in the per capita allocation for 2027, after two consecutive years in which the amount was frozen. The government owes municipalities more than 37 billion pesos in transfers that have been withheld since December 2025. As Confusam President Gabriela Flores explained, the government’s belated payment of this debt “in no way solves the financing crisis of primary care. We continue to drag a structural debt that affects millions of people.”

Meanwhile, in the mining sector, the lifeblood of the Chilean economy, workers are moving toward strike action. On Wednesday, supervisors at the Escondida mine, the largest copper mine in the world, operated by the Anglo-Australian giant BHP, voted overwhelmingly—94.8 percent—to reject the company’s contract offer, opening the path to a strike. The union declared that the offer “demonstrated a complete disregard for the contribution made by supervisors and staff to the production and multibillion-dollar profits of the world’s largest copper mine.”

At the Centinela mine, controlled by Antofagasta Minerals, part of the Luksic group, one of Chile’s wealthiest oligarchic clans, some 730 workers from two unions voted 98.7 percent in favor of strike action. The workers are fighting against “odious differences” in pay and benefits between workers performing identical functions but belonging to different unions. “This resounding vote is an expression of the consciousness of the union rank and file about the need to end the systematic discrimination they have suffered,” the union stated.

The labor unrest in mining is unfolding against a backdrop of deadly working conditions. Two workers died in less than a week in the Antofagasta region. On September 23, a worker was killed in a maintenance accident at Escondida, prompting BHP to suspend operations. On October 1, Waldo Alexis Castillo Barraza, a 49-year-old mechanic employed by the contractor Berliam SpA, was crushed to death while changing a pulley on a conveyor belt at the Radomiro Tomic mine, operated by the state-owned Codelco. He had celebrated his birthday the day before.

These deaths are the direct product of the profit-driven intensification of labor in the mining industry, where maintenance is deferred, safety is sacrificed and workers are killed with impunity. The Federation of Workers of CCU has joined the call for a full investigation and for the

immediate implementation of a National Policy on Safety and Health in Mining, which the government has stalled.

The deepening economic crisis

The strikes and protests are erupting amid a sharp deterioration of the Chilean economy. The Monthly Index of Economic Activity (Imacec) fell 1 percent in August, the second consecutive monthly contraction, dragged down by a 17.4 percent collapse in mining output—the worst single-month decline in 15 years. Copper production has fallen to levels not seen since 2003, as the mining companies, having starved investment for years amid political uncertainty, now confront declining ore grades, water scarcity and extreme weather.

Copper exports fell 3.2 percent in August, the first decline since December 2023. Yet copper prices remain at near record highs, driven by insufficient global supply—a situation that Deutsche Bank projects will push prices to US\$10 per pound by mid-2027. The mining monopolies are profiting enormously from the very scarcity their own investment strike has produced, while the Chilean state, dependent on copper revenues, is forced to borrow and cut.

Unemployment has risen to 9.6 percent, its highest level since 2021, with female unemployment at 10.3 percent. Inflation remains stubbornly high, driven in part by the government's decision to end the fuel price stabilization mechanism (MEPCO), which has sent diesel prices soaring by 95 pesos per liter and kerosene by 281 pesos per liter. The diesel crisis is itself a product of the US war of aggression against Iran and the broader militarization of the Middle East, which has disrupted global refining and driven up energy costs worldwide.

The crisis of the Chilean economy is a specific expression of the deepening crisis of the world capitalist economy, in which the major imperialist powers, led by the United States, are resorting to war, protectionism and the militarization of trade to resolve contradictions they cannot resolve peacefully.

The Kast government is becoming increasingly unpopular. The latest Cadem poll shows Kast's disapproval rating at 57 percent, with only 36 percent approving his performance. Concern over unemployment has surged seven points in a single week. Fully 59 percent of respondents said a family member, friend or coworker had lost their job in the past year.

A measure of the government's crisis is the extraordinary turnover in its own ranks. In barely seven months, 41 regional authorities have left their posts, and the total number of departing authorities has reached 51. The government is hemorrhaging personnel even as it attempts to impose the most radical austerity program since the Pinochet dictatorship.

Kast's government is closely tied to the Trump administration, which has embraced it as a model for its "Shield of the Americas" project of consolidating right-wing, pro-US regimes across the hemisphere. The intervention of Ambassador Judd in the aftermath of the October 1 march is only the latest expression of this relationship. Washington sees in Kast a reliable ally for its war preparations and its assault on the working class of the Americas.

The budget: a declaration of class war

The 2027 budget presented by Finance Minister Jorge Quiroz is the current centerpiece of this assault. Public spending is projected to grow by just 1.5 percent in real terms—a figure that conceals the massive cuts

already imposed by executive decree during 2026. The budget concentrates its increases in security (up 9.1 percent) and in "growth, employment and reconstruction" (up 8.1 percent), while leaving the rest of the state at zero real growth. As one economist calculated, security and reconstruction together absorb 99 percent of the entire spending increase.

In education, the government has issued Ordinario 1691, which instructs the Local Public Education Services (SLEPs) to merge courses up to the legal maximum of 35 students per classroom, to classify the functions of head teacher and department coordinator as "complementary" and therefore dispensable, to prohibit the replacement of teachers on medical leave of less than seven days, and to refuse to replace teachers who retire.

The budget also eliminates a Becas TIC program, which has delivered computers to nearly 100,000 seventh-grade students annually since 2009, and cuts funding for the Bicentenary Lyceums by 46.7 percent, for research by 25.2 percent and for free higher education by 2.35 percent. The School Meals Program, which feeds more than 1.6 million low-income students, has been flagged for discontinuation.

In his interview on Mega's *Radio Infinita* program, Finance Minister Quiroz made the government's contempt for workers explicit. He confirmed that teaching hours would be cut by 3.6 percent and that dismissals were likely. "Let's not confuse the right to education with the obligation to employ," he said. "Let's not confuse the Ministry of Education with the Ministry of Teachers. Let's not confuse the Ministry of Health with the Ministry of those who work in the health sector."

Quiroz also announced a campaign against what he called "social fraud," essentially accusing the working class and poor of "gaming the system." He singled out the free higher education system as an area to "check, control and eventually eliminate" as the ideological preparation for cutting benefits: first criminalize the recipients, then cut.

In health, the government has already cut more than 413 billion pesos through Decree 333, the largest single adjustment of any ministry, hitting the hospital network and the National Health Fund (FONASA). Twenty-five health programs are flagged for elimination, including the National Dementia Plan, the Trans Health Program, the National Suicide Prevention Program and universal palliative care. In culture, the budget has been slashed by 16 percent with the Book Fund cut 21.8 percent, the Audiovisual Fund cut 16.2 percent and the Cultural Pass cut 66 percent.

The role of the union bureaucracy

The growth of the strike movement is occurring despite, not because of, the trade union leaderships. The Teacher's Association, despite the frontal assault on education, has not called its members out on strike. Instead, it has committed to cynical protests and marches to Congress, held earlier in September. Its strategy is to lobby parliamentarians and appeal to the government's "good faith," even as the government issues instructions to fire teachers.

Confusam's two-day strike was, in reality, a pressure tactic within an ongoing process of negotiation with the government. The union sits at the so-called "Tripartite Table" alongside the Ministry of Health and the Chilean Association of Municipalities, a corporatist mechanism through which the union bureaucracy is structurally integrated into the state and made complicit in administering austerity. In a communiqué announcing the belated regularization of the 2026 per capita payment, the Health Ministry boasts of this "permanent work" through the tripartite table, presenting the union's participation as proof that the government is "advancing in the commitments assumed."

The demand around which Confusam has organized this entire mobilization is a miserly increase of 1,000 Chilean pesos in the per capita

allocation—a figure that, even if granted in full, would leave primary healthcare catastrophically underfunded. The per capita currently stands at 11,932 pesos per registered patient, while the National Productivity Commission’s most conservative estimate places the real cost at 16,322 pesos, representing a chronic underfunding of approximately 37 percent.

These organizations, today dominated by the pseudo-left parties—the Communist Party and the Broad Front—cannot offer any way out. The Communist Party and the Broad Front are the very forces that, under former President Gabriel Boric, implemented the austerity, the police-state legislation and the anti-immigrant policies that prepared the ground for Kast.

The radicalization bubbling to the surface in Chile is colliding with a leadership that is determined to contain it. The task facing the working class is to break with these organizations and build independent rank-and-file committees, capable of uniting the struggles of miners, health workers, teachers and students into a single movement against the Kast government and the entire capitalist order it serves. The resources exist to provide every Chilean with decent healthcare, education and a secure livelihood. What is lacking is not money, but the political independence of the working class from the parties and unions that serve as instruments of capitalist rule.



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