Independent truck drivers' strike paralyzes largest port in Chile

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The strike by independent truck drivers that has paralyzed the port of San Antonio, Chile's principal gateway for exports, entered its seventh day on Wednesday with no agreement in sight. The movement, launched on the night of 28 October by the Independent Truckers Association of San Antonio (Agreporsai), has blocked access to the extra-port container depots that feed the terminals of STI and DP World, stranding thousands of containers and forcing the diversion of the first "Cherry Express" vessel of the export season to Valparaíso.

Also on Wednesday, small and medium transport companies in the Metropolitan Region, grouped in the National Freight Transport Federation (Fenatrac–Fuerza Tolvera) launched their own strike against the rise in fuel costs and TAG tolls, which they say are putting the survival of hundreds of small businesses at risk. "We're not stopping because we want to stop working, but because, under these conditions, business is no longer sustainable for our small and medium-sized enterprises," declared the organization's president, Patricia Angulo.

The action follows warnings of independent truckers in Coronel, in the Bío Bío region, who have not ruled out joining the protests, while a caravan of truckers in Antofagasta has also mobilized against the Kast government.

The growing strike is far more than a local dispute over freight rates. It is the sharpest expression to date of a social explosion that is building across Chile, as the ultra-right government of José Antonio Kast presses forward with an austerity program that is immiserating broad layers of the working class and petty bourgeoisie. And it is unfolding as part of a developing international wave of class struggle, from the copper mines of northern Chile to the auto plants, healthcare systems and logistics networks of North America, Europe and elsewhere.

The immediate trigger of the strike is the relentless rise in the price of diesel, which has accumulated an increase of more than 400 Chilean pesos (CLP) per liter since late July and now stands at a historic peak of roughly CLP 1,589 per liter. The truckers' costs have been driven up not only by fuel but by tolls, the installation of new TAG gantries and the maintenance of their vehicles, while the rates they receive for hauling containers have remained frozen since 2022.

The origins of this crisis lie in the war of aggression launched by the United States and Israel against Iran, which has disrupted the flow of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, sending the price of oil soaring from around US$70 to over US$100 per barrel. The escalation of the conflict has driven up energy costs worldwide, and Chile—an importer of nearly all its fuel, with the United States supplying two-thirds of its diesel—has been hard hit.

Upon assuming office last March, the Kast government modified the parameters of the MEPCO fuel price stabilization mechanism that transmitted the full shock to consumers as part of a broader agenda to shift the cost of a deepening economic crisis onto the population while showering tax breaks on the mining monopolies and finance capital.

The strikers at San Antonio are not the big transport companies represented by the established confederations. They are, in the words of their leader Manuel Araya, small owner-operators who fulfill "90 percent" of the port haulage work. They are being crushed between the monopolies that generate the cargo—the shipping lines and logistics operators—and a state that has abandoned any pretense of cushioning their costs.

The companies provocatively offered increases of between CLP 1,000 and CLP 2,000 (roughly US$1 to US$2) per transfer, an offer Araya called "a mockery." The truck drivers are demanding tariffs of roughly CLP 80,000 for certain routes, against current rates of CLP 46,000 to CLP 48,000.

"We flatly refuse to move our machines until the managers of each depot sit down to talk with us," Araya declared. He has named the seven companies that refuse to negotiate: D&C, Sitrans, Agunsa, Medlog, CLEP, SIX Extraportuario and Contopsa. "This will not be resolved until they have the will to sit down and talk with us… we need respect."

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The strike has already had a material impact. More than 3,000 containers have been prevented from entering the port, with a similar number unable to leave. Some 4,500 empty containers are piled up in the terminals. The first Cherry Express vessel, scheduled to begin loading Saturday and sail for China on Monday, has been diverted to Valparaíso, and a second is expected to follow.

The response of the fruit exporters and the government reveal the class character of the conflict with brutal clarity. Iván Marambio, president of Frutas de Chile, has declared the situation "extremely serious" for the industry, warning that "practically half of Chilean fruit leaves through San Antonio." He called for the state to intervene and for the trucks to be "removed by public force." Antonio Walker, president of the National Agricultural Society, has adopted the same line, insisting that "in the end, these pressure tactics, rather than helping, actually have a negative impact. And they primarily affect employment."

The hypocrisy is staggering. The same exporters who demand that the state use force against striking truckers are the beneficiaries of a system in which the fruit industry, the country's second-largest export sector, with US$8.2 billion in shipments last season, is built on the super-exploitation of seasonal agricultural labor, the squeezing of the small transport operators who move its product and the port workers who are paid on a shift by shift basis.

Sub-secretary of Economy Karlfranz Koehler has called on the truckers to lift the blockade while urging the cargo generators to "consider" updating their tariffs, a formulation that concedes nothing and imposes nothing. He expressed the government's "conviction" that neither side wants "to hold the fruit of all Chileans hostage."

Finance Minister Jorge Quiroz was more explicit, ruling out any new measures for the sector and rejecting any additional borrowing to freeze fuel prices, citing the need to "manage our debt levels" and preserve "fiscal solvency." The same minister who presides over tax breaks for the mining monopolies and a budget that cuts school meals for 1.6 million children now pleads fiscal discipline when confronted with the demands of small truckers.

The most significant development of the strike is the pressure that is building among the port workers that the union apparatus is desperately trying to contain. The Chilean Port Workers Union Confederation (CUPCh) has issued a statement declaring that it "fully support the truck drivers' demands" and that it is "deeply" concerned for the families affected by each day of inactivity. The union has called on the government to "stop being spectators" and warned that, absent a concrete response, the port workers "haven't ruled out joining the protests." Patricio Fredes, a leader of the Port Union, has made similar statements.

None of this should be taken at face value. These are corporatist union apparatuses integrated into the state through tripartite mechanisms, functioning as the industrial police of the corporations. Their declarations of "solidarity" with the truckers are a substitute for action. The bureaucracy issues statements of support precisely because it senses the danger that the strike at San Antonio will inspire the port workers to move independently of it.

The truckers of San Antonio acted outside and against the leaderships that have spent the year containing their anger. Sergio Pérez, president of the National Confederation of Cargo Transport (CNTC), is a figure whose political history is inseparable from the right. He served on the Citizens' Council of Sebastián Piñera's 2017 presidential campaign, has declared his admiration for León Vilarín, the truckers' leader who helped paralyze the country in 1972 in preparation for the Pinochet coup, and has stated that "the military intervention of '73 brought order to the country."

Pérez is also very close to Kast, having had his righthand man appointed as regional transport secretary after defending the government's management of the MEPCO and praising the fiscal "subsidy" of a miserly CLP 300 per liter, while the small truckers he claims to represent are being driven out of business.

The strike at San Antonio follows, by barely a month, the sellout of the copper miners at BHP's Escondida—the world's largest copper mine—where the corporatist union apparatus once again moved to shut down a struggle that had erupted against the companies' drive to intensify exploitation.

The truckers of San Antonio are independent owner-operators, a layer of the petty bourgeoisie that is being proletarianized by the crisis, squeezed between the monopolies and the state, their capital of work devoured by fuel costs, their incomes arriving 30 to 60 days late. Their strike is a movement of a layer that has been driven to the wall, and its eruption, outside and against the established associations, is a harbinger of what is coming.



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