# Class struggle erupts in Chile amid Kast government's austerity onslaught

**Mauricio Saavedra**
**26 November 2026**

Over the past two weeks, Chile has entered a new stage of social and political crisis. A wave of mobilizations involving independent truckers, university and secondary school students, public sector workers, municipal employees, primary health workers and now teachers in their thousands has shaken the government of José Antonio Kast at precisely the moment when his administration is forcing through the most austerity-laden budget since the restoration of civilian rule.

The movement is the product of eight months of a government that came to power on the most openly right-wing platform since Pinochet, and that has governed with a contempt for the working population as undisguised as it is deliberate. The budget now being finalized in Congress for 2027 represents a fundamental redistribution of public resources away from the population and toward the repressive and military apparatus of the state: total spending is held to 1.4 percent real growth, with the gains channeled to security (+9.1 percent) and defense (+7.6 percent) and the losses distributed across education, health, social programs and the rural economy.

Against this backdrop, the independent truckers struck last week, their blockades spreading from Arica to Puerto Aysén. The students launched "mochilazos" (backpack protests) that included school occupations in Santiago and other regional cities. The National Confederation of Municipal Employees (Asemuch) held a "National Day of Protest" on Thursday. Fundación Integra unions brought early childhood education workers into the streets. And on Tuesday, November 24, more than 10,000 teachers marched along the Alameda in Santiago, with hundreds more from the Atacama to Los Lagos in the largest teachers' action since 2019.

The mobilizations are the response of the working class and the impoverished petty bourgeoisie to the 2027 budget, now in its final hours of congressional negotiation before the November 29 constitutional deadline.

One recent study identified cuts of more than 325 billion Chilean pesos (CLP), or US$312 million, across 48 social programs in the original executive proposal. A broader accounting found reductions of CLP 793 billion across 220 programs out of 590 analyzed by the Budget Directorate (DIPRES).

The youth and women's employment subsidies will be eliminated. The National Care System is cut. Funding of CLP 33.6 billion for SENCE, the state agency responsible for labor training programs, vocational skills development and employment subsidies, will not be restored, nor will the Social Dialogue and Union Formation program. PRODEMU, the women's development foundation, has been eliminated.

Education is the most visible battleground. The government's original proposal cut the "Yo Elijo Mi PC" laptop program for public school students (CLP 35.8 billion), reduced funding for JUNAEB (which provides school meals and student welfare), and imposed hour ceilings on the Local Public Education Services (SLEPs) that amounted to a legally mandated reduction of approximately 83,000 contracted teaching hours, translating to the elimination of up to 2,280 full-time equivalent positions, with the worst proportional cuts falling on the most remote regions.

Teachers Association (Colegio de Profesores) president Mario Aguilar claimed credit for a partial reversal: the binding legislative rider compelling SLEP executive directors to eliminate 83,000 contracted teaching hours has been struck from the budget bill. Now cuts of 40,000 hours are authorized at directors' discretion, and the remaining 43,000 hours will be reduced primarily through voluntary retirement. This is not a victory. What the settlement has done is transfer the site of struggle to individual SLEPs and municipalities, where teachers will be compelled to fight school by school, in isolation from one another, against local administrators who will face their own fiscal pressures in an institutionalized strategy of divide and conquer against the teaching workforce.

In health, the government's claim of a 4.7 percent increase is a fraud. The health unions and the Medical Association (Colegio Médico) have calculated that the budget falls roughly CLP 1.8 trillion below projected 2026 spending, that 25 hospitals will receive less than they need, and that the immunization program has been cut by 5.3 percent. The Public Health Undersecretariat, the planning, epidemiological surveillance, and regulatory body of the health ministry, was assigned zero pesos in the original proposal. The Ricarte Soto Law, which funds treatments for rare and catastrophic diseases, received a 14 percent cut that was restored only after it became a cause célèbre. Chile's public health spending of roughly 5.8 percent of GDP remains far below the OECD average, in a system where out-of-pocket costs are double the OECD norm.

**Rabat and the sentence reductions**

It is in this context that the constitutional indictment against Justice Minister Fernando Rabat must be understood. The Socialist Party (PS), the Party for Democracy (PPD), the Communist Party (PC) and the Broad Front (FA)—the parties of the so-called "left" opposition—have filed a constitutional accusation against Rabat, to be voted on in the Chamber of Deputies on Monday, November 30.

The initial public scandal centered on 56 sentence-reduction decrees he issued for individuals convicted of sexual offenses against minors. This produced an eruption of popular outrage; the demand for Rabat's resignation featured in both the student mobilizations and the broader social anger that has accumulated around the government. The parliamentary commission reviewing the constitutional indictment has since discovered that in eight months the Ministry of Justice under Rabat has decreed more than 1,800 sentence reductions.

Buried within the scandal, and receiving far less media attention, are the specific cases of Pinochet-era human rights criminals who benefited from Rabat's decrees. The initial framing of the scandal served the corporate

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media's preferred narrative of a government that was merely negligent. The inclusion of those convicted of crimes against humanity in the reduction program points to something more deliberate: a government whose ideological roots run directly to the former dictatorship, extending administrative relief to individuals whose crimes Chilean and international law have consistently defined as imprescriptible and ineligible for administrative clemency.

Among those released were César Acuña Luengo, a former agent of the CNI secret police,, who in 2017 received only 10 years and one day for the aggravated kidnapping of five members of the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front in 1987 who were subsequently thrown into the sea; former Air Force intelligence officer Manuel Cabezas Pérez, convicted of repeatedly torturing Patricio Rivera Cornejo and Ramón Pavez Casanova in 1973; and former Carabineros officer Miguel Arias Navarrete, convicted of the aggravated kidnapping of Justo Flores Martínez, an 18-year-old worker detained illegally and subsequently executed in October 1973.

The obscenity of this history is compounded when one examines who authored the law now being invoked. Law 21.421, which excluded convicted sexual offenders against minors from administrative sentence reductions, was enacted in the final weeks of the second Piñera government by Justice Minister Hernán Larraín. This is the same Larraín from the *Pinochetista* Independent Democratic Union (UDI) who vociferously defended Paul Schäfer, a former Nazi sub-official in charge of Colonia Dignidad, a closed German compound in rural Chile where hundreds of children were systematically abused over decades.

Following the 1973 US-backed military coup that brought Gen. Augusto Pinochet to power, the compound was transformed into a torture center put at the disposal of the secret police. UN human rights experts, in an October 2026 statement, estimated that more than 100 people may have been forcibly disappeared at Colonia Dignidad. Following the Kast government's decision to revoke the expropriation of Colonia Dignidad in April, the investigative news site *CIPER*published an account claiming that "the colony's leaders were responsible for the murders of about 100 Chileans, some 500 victims of sexual crimes, 120 tenants who were violently displaced, 300 enslaved German settlers, and the political imprisonment of about 500 Chileans."

It is necessary to state clearly what this impeachment drive is and is not. It is not a defense of the working class. It is a maneuver within the bourgeois state, conducted by parties—the PPD, the PS, the PC, the FA—that have spent eight months collaborating with the Kast government on the budget, on debt and on security legislation.

Kast's approval ratings have fallen to record lows—28 percent approval, 69 percent disapproval. Rabat's approval is lower still, the most unpopular cabinet minister in a deeply unpopular government.

Faced with this situation, Kast has responded with open contempt. "There is political noise in the air, yes, but we're not going to lose sight of our goal because of political noise," he declared after Monday's cabinet meeting. Kast announced that he will not change his cabinet. He will not dismiss Rabat. He will not alter the direction of his government.

This arrogance does not flow from strength. It is the confidence of a government that knows it will not be held accountable by the forces nominally arrayed against it. Kast does not need to fear the opposition parties. He has learned, over eight months, that the parties of the Chilean "left," despite their rhetorical opposition, have functioned as a stabilizing force for his government at every critical juncture.

The Socialist Party and the PPD were brought into the Approve Dignity coalition government of Gabriel Boric, headed by the Broad Front and the Communist Party, that preceded Kast's rise to power. These four parties acted as the principal political managers of the working class during the most dangerous period for Chilean capitalism since the revolutionary upsurge of 1970-73: the social explosion of 2019 and its aftermath. Their task, executed with considerable skill, was to channel the mass uprising that brought 1.2 million people into the streets of Santiago into the dead end of the Constitutional Convention, neutralize its revolutionary content, and deliver the working class to a "progressive" government that maintained fiscal discipline, anti-immigration enforcement, and the fundamental prerogatives of capital.

Kast won the presidency in December 2025. The Chilean "left" formed part of a minority opposition. What has that opposition looked like in practice?

In June, PPD Senator Pedro Araya negotiated a separate agreement with Finance Minister Jorge Quiroz on the government's "mega-reform" miscellaneous bill, handing Kast a legislative victory he would not otherwise have achieved. The same senator negotiated the security reform individually with the government in October.

In July, PS president Paulina Vodanovic and caucus leader Juan Luis Castro negotiated a tax-stability agreement with Quiroz behind the backs of the party caucuses. Castro, as Health Commission president, hailed as victories the health budget negotiations that systematically starve the health system.

During the budget debate, the PC, Christian Democratic (DC) and PPD senators handed the government its US$25 billion debt authorization.

On November 25, the PPD caucus joined the Party of the People (PDG), a right-wing populist vehicle, in supporting the government's universal childcare voucher project, against the teachers and childcare unions who exposed the reform as a privatization measure.

Meanwhile the main union bureaucracy, dominated by the same "left," has submitted a list of demands calling for a nominal wage increase and committed itself to "negotiating tables and institutional agreements." Its president, José Manuel Díaz, met for two hours with Richard von Appen, candidate for the presidency of the employers' federation, and praised the meeting: "We believe these conversations are good for society, good for the business community, and good for the labor movement."

This is the division of labor that has defined Chilean politics since the restoration of civilian rule.

**The forged signatures case engulfs "Democratic Socialism"**

Now the PS-PPD bloc, known as "Democratic Socialism," has been thrust into a profound political crisis centered on a forged signatures scandal. The corporate media has devoted enormous attention to the "Signature Case" (Caso Firmas)—in which PS senators revoked the constitutional leave of Senators Fidel Espinoza (PS) and Ximena Órdenes (PPD) while they accompanied Kast on his tour of Asia, allegedly using Órdenes' signature without her consent.

The right-aligned media's gloating over this case serves a clear purpose: to divert attention from an unpopular government and its austerity budget.

But the case is not merely a diversion. It is a revelation of the political decay of "Democratic Socialism." The maneuver itself—withdrawing the leave of two senators abroad to manipulate the quorum for the budget vote—was an attempt to alter the arithmetic of the Senate chamber, not to mobilize any social force against the government. It was a parliamentary trick, and when it failed, it collapsed into a criminal investigation and a factional bloodletting.

The Valparaíso Prosecutor's Office has opened an investigation; a complaint has been filed against caucus leader Juan Luis Castro; and Castro has publicly implicated PS president Paulina Vodanovic as the instigator of the maneuver, before retracting and taking responsibility himself. The government was given a gift it could not have manufactured.

The PS and PPD's conduct requires a historical accounting. The

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Socialist Party was founded in 1933. Its founding membership included figures from the professional and upper middle classes, intellectuals, and, a fact rarely discussed in its official historiography, members of the military brass. Its ideological formation, like that of several parties that emerged from the Latin American left-nationalist ferment of the 1930s, was always more closely akin to bourgeois nationalism with socialist rhetoric than to a party of the working class organized around a Marxist perspective. The popular front strategy it adopted in alliance with the Communist Party from the late 1930s onward integrated it into the state structures of bourgeois democracy as a managing partner rather than an independent class force. Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government of 1970-73 was a bourgeois reformist government that sought to manage capitalism through nationalizations and wage increases while leaving the state apparatus—the armed forces, the judiciary, the police—intact. That apparatus destroyed it in September 1973.

But there is a gaping chasm between Allende and the present leadership. The PS that emerged from the Pinochet period, after the "Socialist Renewal" of the 1980s conducted in European exile, was a party that had explicitly repudiated the ideological content of its pre-coup positions and embraced the framework of liberal democracy, market economics, and integration into the institutions of the capitalist state. The renewal was conducted under the influence of Eurocommunism and social democracy, drawing the theoretical conclusions that the centrists of the European left had drawn from the defeats of the 1970s: not that the working class needed a revolutionary party, but that the working class needed to be managed more skillfully within existing institutions.

The coming to power of Allende, whatever his limitations, was associated with a movement of the masses that had to be crushed by a military coup. The present leadership of the PS represents nothing but itself. It has no mass base, no program, no perspective. It exists to administer the parliamentary positions it holds, to negotiate with the government, and to contain the anger of the working class. When that anger erupts—as it is erupting now—the PS's function is to channel it back into the dead end of the institutions. Kast's confidence in the face of record-low approval ratings and street mobilizations is based on the same calculation that has sustained every right-wing government in the region that has faced mass opposition without mass organization: so long as the existing pseudo-left parties serve as the nominal representatives of the working class, those parties will contain, channel, and ultimately dissipate the class anger that might otherwise develop into a revolutionary challenge to capitalist power.

What the working class does not yet have, which the events of these two weeks have underlined with particular urgency, is a party that tells it the truth about where it stands, who its enemies are, including those who present themselves as its friends, and what political program corresponds to its actual interests. The Socialist Party was never that party. In 1973, the absence of such a party, combined with the political position of Allende's government, left the working class disarmed before the coup. Today, under conditions that are qualitatively different but that contain the same fundamental problem of leadership and program, the building of that party is the central political task.

The working class of Chile can take no side in the factional struggles of the bourgeois parties—not in the impeachment of Rabat, not in the Caso Firmas, not in the negotiations over the budget. Its interests lie in the international unity of the working class, in the fight against the austerity of the Kast government and of every government that preceded it, and in the socialist transformation of society. That is the perspective the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International bring to the unfolding crisis in Chile.

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