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Chile

# Chile's Nationwide Teacher Strike Has Thousands Taking to the Streets

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV534 - July 2019 -

Publication date: Sunday 14 July 2019

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**Eighty thousand public school educators in Chile are out on an indefinite strike. Their target is the country's neoliberal education system — a cruel legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship that overthrew Salvador Allende.**

Eighty thousand public school educators in Chile are out on an indefinite strike. Their target is the country's neoliberal education system — a cruel legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship that overthrew Salvador Allende.

Six weeks ago, the president of the Colegio de Profesores de Chile (CPC) announced an indefinite strike after the government “shut the door” on negotiations over demands to end the precarious working and learning conditions in the country's public schools. [1] The union, which represents all of Chile's public school educators, estimates that more than eighty thousand teachers have adhered to the strike. [2]

Since then, the CPC has called for a series of mass demonstrations that have mobilized hundreds of thousands of students, teachers, and workers to Chile's streets. As protests escalate, and 1 million students continue to be outside of class, history appears to be repeating itself for conservative president Sebastián Piñera's administration, which entered a crisis of legitimacy during his first government in 2010, also as a result of student and teacher unrest.

## Open Wounds

As with most political movements in Chile today, this situation has its roots in the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. And while Pinochet's military junta overturned the democratic gains made under Allende, the center-left alliance called the Concertación negotiated with Pinochet to ensure that the regime's neoliberal pillars remained intact during the “transition to democracy.”

For this reason, Chile retains the military regime's constitution, which to this day does not guarantee education as a right. Rather, the document calls on the state to assume a subsidiary role by establishing a voucher system, creating a market for education — along with all the inequalities the market creates. The dictatorship also fragmented the education system by transferring the administration of public schools into the hands of municipalities, corporations, and private operators of charter schools.

This meant that teachers' working conditions were no longer a public matter under the law, but rather were subject to the weak labor laws that govern the private sector. As such, teachers — the vast majority women now heading into old age — did not benefit from the 1981 decree that readjusted public wages by upward of 90 percent.

More than four decades later, fifty-eight thousand teachers are still waiting for the payment of this readjustment, which would amount to 30 percent of their wages and total almost \$14 billion USD. [3] The payment of this historic debt ranks first among the CPC's list of demands and is also at the center of the national political conversation. [4] This movement, which emerged almost entirely out of a grassroots struggle, now wields enough power to set the tone of the debate.

## Political Context

The assassination, abduction, and exile of Chile's working-class fighters at the hands of Pinochet's dictatorship after the overthrow of democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende severely crippled traditional leftist parties, namely the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. Since then, these parties have tried to preempt popular mobilizations through tightly controlled reform agendas that seek to alleviate, as opposed to end, the clientelism and gaping inequalities that dominate Chile. And although the rising tide of new working-class parties is pushing the Socialists and Communists back to the left, their role in cementing the neoliberal consensus has lost them the support of millions of working-class Chileans.

Accordingly, when Socialist candidate Michelle Bachelet won the presidency in 2006, she did little more than to invite young people to participate in government "working groups" to temper the militant energy of hundreds of thousands of middle and high school students who took to the streets and occupied their schools to protest the gross inadequacy of the public education system. Anticipating that Bachelet's reforms would not hold off another insurgency for long, economic elites turned to center-right, law-and-order candidate Sebastián Piñera in 2010.

As René Rojas notes, Piñera "failed miserably" in his attempt to demobilize the middle and high school students who had, by that point, gone onto college and reignited the student movement alongside militant teachers, port workers, and miners around broader anti-neoliberal demands for pension and labor reforms. Finding no solution for the endless waves of marches and campus occupations "now inculcated with a dose of class distrust," Piñera unleashed a scale of repression "not seen since the dictatorship," employing water cannons and attack dogs, and making hundreds of nightly arrests.

The government crackdown of 2011 helped earn Piñera a 26 percent approval rating, making him the most poorly evaluated president since the return to democracy in 1990. [5] searWith growing popular support for mobilizations and sharply declining government approval, the country's elite had no alternative but to open itself to a coalition with the Communist Party in the 2014 elections.

The support of the Communists, and the begrudging endorsement of the leaders of the movement, secured Bachelet a second term. But Bachelet's piecemeal reforms to desegregate (rather than integrate) schools and to regulate (rather than end) profiteering in education were unable to mitigate the government's crisis of legitimacy. [6] They also led to a series of important ruptures within the labor movement and the broader political order.

## In With the New

The rebellion of the rank and file, or "rebelión de las bases," was a spontaneous movement of educators that mobilized more than sixty thousand teachers against then-CPC president Jaime Gajardo, also a Communist Party leader, for striking a key deal with Bachelet's administration behind the backs of teachers. [7]

Gajardo, having betrayed the confidence of his base, lost the seat he had occupied for well over a decade to Mario Aguilar in 2014. Under Aguilar, the newly reinvigorated CPC distanced itself from the establishment, choosing instead to draw its strength from a younger, more militant generation of educators who had experienced the 2006 and 2011 mobilizations and were unafraid to fight tooth and nail to save public education.

By all accounts, the double cross of the traditional leftist parties had a profound impression on the generation that led the student mobilizations in 2006 and 2011. Some of the movement's key figures, who at the time presided over their campus's student federations and were then propelled into the national spotlight, seized the momentum to form new political parties and contest key elections.

The political forces that took shape after the rebellion of the rank and file coalesced around a mass political organization to form the Broad Front (Frente Amplio) coalition in time for the 2017 presidential elections. Although the center-left coalition lost to Piñera's center-right pact in the general elections, the Broad Front was a mere 3 percent short of burying the center-left establishment in the primaries.

The mass support garnered in a short period of time by the Broad Front is a testament to the vulnerability of Chile's once-hegemonic neoliberal regime. And in this regard, the emergence of a national teachers' strike today, two years after the formation of the Broad Front, shows just how much ground the working class has gained through organization.

## The Conflict Today

The CPC strike, now in its sixth week, bets on these gains to achieve a victory for teachers, for whom this wager represents their only shot at a dignified, more democratic education system and way of life. [8]

For teachers, this principally means payment of the historic debt to their retirement funds, an end to the punitive teacher evaluation system, and job security for the more than fifty thousand teachers who work on short-term contracts and face imminent layoffs every December without even receiving benefits. Additionally, the CPC has endorsed students' demands for a new, democratic education system.

In this respect, the CPC's demands reflect both the miserable state of public education in Chile and the urgent need for an alternative to *el modelo*, the neoliberal model. Framing this struggle as a challenge to the political consensus has been crucial to the longevity of strike, giving the movement ample room for broad coalitions from which to draw support. At the same time, this line of rhetoric has forced the political elite onto a sinking ship they will never abandon: their quasi-religious faith in the healing powers of the free market.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Marcela Cubillos, daughter of a dictatorship-era minister and the sitting minister of education, was noticeably absent from the negotiations that led up to the strike. Moreover, refusing to lend the strike any sort of legitimacy, Cubillos has repeatedly avoided meeting with teachers or even commenting on the strike, effectively evading her role as an intermediary between the government and educators. [9] Deeply dissatisfied with the ministry's staunch refusal to budge, Aguilar affirmed that the CPC had "an obligation to mobilize" in the face of such blatant "disrespect" and abuse of teachers. [10]

Initially, the government adopted the same strategy it employed in 2011: refuse to meet with teachers and antagonize the movement. As a result, the past six weeks have been marked by an increasingly tense back and forth between the ministry and the CPC.

For example, in a direct provocation to teachers, President Piñera declared the strike "illegal" and the demands "impossible" to meet. In response, Aguilar affirmed that the president's "managerial" declarations were not well received by teachers, adding that "it is not in the President's best interest to talk about illegalities," in reference to the numerous cases of corruption and conflicts of interest that have plagued Piñera's administration. [11]

In this same way, the president's claim that the strike "has caused tremendous damage to public education, and especially to vulnerable students" has been met with widespread derision from students themselves. After all, in the past year alone, Piñera's administration has waged a brutal war on students, first by pushing legislation that exempts young workers who are attending school and university from important labor protections, and second, for

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proposing a measure that effectively criminalizes student organizing under the guise of creating “safe learning environments.” [12]

Despite the current administration's efforts to sow divisions between students and teachers, the Confederation of Chilean Students (CONFECH) and the organization of high school students joined the CPC last week to call for the first national strike of all sectors of education. Also present at the press conference were representatives from associations of government workers in the education system. [13]

“For us as teachers, counting on this broad base of support has been invaluable. It's part of that almost 70 percent of the population that supports our movement,” proclaimed Aguilar to a room full of teachers, students, workers, and political allies.

Indeed, the threat of a national education strike gave Minister Cubillos the nudge she needed to arrive at the negotiating table this past Monday. Following the anticipated meeting between the minister and the president of the CPC, Aguilar declared that substantial gains were made. Most notable among these are an end to the grueling teacher evaluation process, a commitment to invest in underperforming schools and public school infrastructure, higher wages for special-education teachers, and the creation of a government committee on the issue of the historic debt for veteran teachers. [14]

While these concessions meet fewer than half of the CPC's original demands, they represent a historic victory for teachers, who have been fighting a losing battle since the military regime took power. [15] As such, Aguilar has called on the more than fifty thousand teachers in the CPC to vote an end to the strike, arguing that “the most important achievement of our movement is the respect of the people; it is the love of the people that teachers have recovered. [16] For this reason, I believe that it is time to fold the strike. It is time that we take what has been offered and ensure it is implemented.”

Whether the rank and file votes to prolong or end mobilizations, these last thirty-seven days have broadened the horizon of possibility for a movement that, a little over decade ago, was unable to win even the slightest of concessions.

Just as the recent educators' strikes in the United States have advanced “hand in hand” with the massive growth of the socialist movement, the battle to save public education in Chile has emerged in the context of a mounting opposition to capitalism in the country. [17] The strike is not only a test of the political organization of the movement, but also a testament to the political development of the working class. Through struggle, and against all odds, Chileans have reignited a movement many believed to have died with Allende.

[Jacobin](#)

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