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Chilean unions scramble to quell mass strike movement

Chile is facing its deepest political crisis since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1990, being rocked by a mass strike movement involving hundreds of thousands of teachers, retail workers, copper miners, dockworkers and others. Increasingly, workers are broadening and merging their demands in defense of jobs, living standards, public education and other basic rights.

A national strike involving 80,000 teachers in Chile is reaching day 28 and has mobilized support and stirred confidence among broader sectors of the working class. On Friday, 17,000 Walmart workers voted overwhelmingly to strike to defend their jobs after 2,000 layoffs this year at the largest supermarket chain in the country, partly due to automatization.

Dockworkers in the southern city of Valparaíso set up barricades on Wednesday at the Southern Pacific Terminal against the blacklisting of militant workers and the nonpayment of training sessions agreed to last December, when the local union and city government, both controlled by the pseudo-left Broad Front, **suppressed** a 36-day strike in the southern city of Valparaíso.

These struggles have gained the support of masses of university and high school students, truckers and railworkers who have joined the demonstrations across the country. The public employee union at the Ministry of Education announced a one-day strike Monday in support of the teachers.

The teachers are demanding major investments in infrastructure and pedagogical materials, the reintroduction of History into core curricula at high schools, and the payment of the “historical debt”— about US\$14 billion in bonuses that 70,000 teachers stopped receiving in 1981.

The government of the right-wing billionaire Sebastián Piñera has responded to the strike wave by violently repressing major teachers’ demonstrations throughout the month and rejecting their demands. The militarized police force, the *Carabineros*, entered the Providencia high school on Thursday in the northern city of Antofagasta to monitor a sit-down strike by students, provoking an uproar of denunciations online.

Amid news of a sharp economic deceleration and growing unemployment, the minimum support for the Piñera administration one year after it came to power is rapidly vanishing, with its approval rating dropping 8 percent between May and June to 28 percent. All other right-wing administrations in Latin America that were elected on a wave of opposition to the austerity imposed by the so-called “pink tide” governments are facing similar political crises.

While compelled to call strikes to let off steam under conditions of growing radicalization, the trade union bureaucracy led by the Chilean Workers Union Central (CUT) and its pseudo-left apologists are now scrambling to end the strike movement in the face of the ruling class’s refusal to make the slightest concessions.

The Inter-Company Leader Union (SIL) at Walmart said the strike could start on Wednesday or Thursday after the legally mandated “conciliatory” period. Whether SIL launches the strike or not remains to be seen. In 2017, SIL cancelled a strike after being approved by the workers, accepting a 7 percent raise for two years that barely kept up with inflation.

At the Chuquicamata copper mine controlled by state-owned Codelco, where 1,700 miners were fired last June as part of its transformation from the world’s largest open-pit copper mine to largely automatized underground operations, the three unions sold out a 14-day strike that had faced violent **repression**. On Thursday, it rammed through the same contract that workers had voted against the previous week. The CUT had claimed to “support” the struggle, but left miners totally isolated.

No stipulations were reached regarding healthcare benefits workers fear losing or about the announcement in March by Codelco that it plans to fire 4,000 miners this year, including 1,211 in Chuquicamata. Workers expressed scorn on the social media pages of

the union. “They sold us out, marking a precedent that there is no confidence in the leadership,” wrote Héctor, while Jose Lara added: “Even labor contractors give more of a fight in a strike.”

It is worth noting that the main economic beneficiaries of this betrayal will be HSBC, JPMorgan, Citigroup and Scotiabank, who top the list of buyers of \$1.3 billion worth of Codelco bonds for 2020-2025.

At the same time, striking teachers are denouncing online that the trade union Colegio de Profesores (CPC, Teachers Association) is carrying out closed-door assemblies and keeping total secrecy around a proposal given Friday by the government before a vote Monday.

Across all sectors, workers face the immediate need to take the struggle into their own hands, with the endless sellouts demonstrating that trade unions in Chile and internationally were long ago turned into tools of management and pro-capitalist politics. In Chile, as in most Latin American countries, this was historically facilitated above all by the Stalinist Communist Party (CP), which exploited the prestige of the Russian Revolution to command and betray the support and revolutionary aspirations of masses of workers, on behalf of their ties with the national bourgeoisie and imperialism.

The Colegio, for instance, was founded in 1974 as a corporatist tool by the fascist Pinochet dictatorship to crack down on opposition to the most aggressive “shock therapy” cuts and privatizations the world had ever seen. In the mid-1980s it was taken over by the conservative leaders of the CP to preempt efforts to build an independent organization backed by “an immense majority” of teachers, as mentioned by historian Christian Matamoros Fernández.

The CP had also blocked workers from developing their own class organizations and revolutionary leadership before the 1973 coup and counterrevolutionary terror organized by the CIA that installed Pinochet. Along with the Castroite and Pabloite organizations, the Stalinist CP claimed that the bourgeois nationalist government of Salvador Allende represented a “peaceful parliamentary road to socialism.” This, however, didn’t stop the Stalinists from elevating the fascistic layers of the army by calling upon Allende to order them to repress strikes in 1972, particularly among copper miners.

Then, during and since the “transition to democracy” the Stalinists and the Social Democrats played the crucial role in preventing a renewed social explosion while leaving

the dictatorship's economic liberalization, religious bias, police-state structures and corporatist union relations essentially untouched.

The Luksic group, the richest and most powerful in the country and whose matron Iris Fontboná controls \$15.4 billion, “was able to take advantage of the laissez-faire policies of the Pinochet dictatorship, but a qualitative leap in its economic, political and cultural power transpired under the center-left Concertación administrations” led by the Socialist Party and the CP, writes researcher Fernando Leiva.

Since 1990, an upper-middle-class layer of executives, state bureaucrats, union officials and academics has enriched itself, with the portion of Chileans with more than US\$100,000 in assets growing to 11.4 percent (compared to the world average of 9.4 percent, according to the Global Wealth Report). Meanwhile, as reported last year by Fundación Sol, 50 percent of full-time workers make less than 410,000 pesos (US\$600) per month and 70 percent of those in the commercial sector, the largest in the Chilean workforce, make less than 410,000 pesos (US\$620).

The ruling class and imperialism have promoted the Broad Front as a “progressive” cover for the status quo. The Broad Front has brought in a layer of younger leaders from the 2011 mass student protests—most prominently Giorgio Jackson and Gabriel Boric—while recycling many forces from the transition period, like the Humanist Party.

A parallel process has occurred in the trade unions. The Broad Front has taken over an increasing number of unions, including the Colegio de Profesores led by Mario Aguilar of the Humanist Party. The main Workers United Center is currently under the leadership of the CP operative Bárbara Figueroa, a 2011 student leader.

The trade unions, the political forces leading them and the pseudo-left organizations insisting that they can be reformed and pushed to the left have long played the key role in subjugating workers to the profit imperatives of capitalism.

The way forward lies in building independent organizations run democratically by workers and a revolutionary leadership that carefully assimilates the history of betrayals by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalist movements in Latin America and of the intransigent struggle waged for the political independence of the working class by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

2 July 2019