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Strudent Protests Demand Education Funding

by LADB Staff

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Large-scale student protests shut down Chile's public high schools and some universities for several weeks in May and June as students demanded greater government support for the nation's education system. The protests, which mobilized an estimated 600,000 to 800,000 students, resulted in hundreds of arrests and a number of violent scuffles with police and led to the resignation of the commander of Santiago's riot police. Newly inaugurated President Michelle Bachelet expressed sympathy for the student movement, although she and her ministers said the government did not have enough resources to fully fund their demands.

Complaints of regional inequalities

The students demanded major reforms of the country's education laws that give communities responsibility for public education. The students and many government critics say the system produces inequality because of regional differences in available resources. "We want the state to be the only guarantor and administrator of public education," said Javier Romero, a leader of the movement. "Only that would ensure equality."

Former education minister Jose Joaquin Brunner said Chile's poorest schools allocate an estimated US\$73 a month per student, compared with more than US\$385 at the wealthiest schools. Bachelet had promised in her May 21 State of the Union address (her first) to invest heavily in health, housing, and education, saying, "I present to the country the four major transformations my government will push." The first transformation involved Chile's cash-strapped private pension system (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11).

"The second transformation will happen in the education system. We need more pre-schools and schools and clubs of higher quality for the older children. The third transformation has to do with innovation and implementation of new policies to stimulate growth. The fourth transformation will permit us to have friendly neighborhoods with a good quality of life for the people," said Bachelet. Yet the scope and implementation of these social reforms did not satisfy student groups, who brought their strike to a national level a week later when students took to the streets despite reports that protest leaders had urged students to remain inside their schools without attending classes, a decision supported by many teachers, parents, and politicians.

Students seek redraft of Pinochet-era education law

One central legal mechanism the students sought to change was the education law (Ley Organica Constitucional de Ensenanza, LOCE). Bachelet said she agrees on the need to change the law, which was issued by former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) the day before he left power in 1990. Student spokeswoman Karina Delfino said protesters were calling for "a new, organic constitutional law, a new educational project," which students, parents, and teachers all take part

in drafting. They are pressing for a complete overhaul of the system but also have specific demands like free bus passes for all and an end to university entrance-exam fees.

President Bachelet said the government could not afford free bus passes every day for all students, which would cost US\$500,000 daily. But she has said the government would give free passes to the poorest students and also waive the university entrance-exam fee for the most deserving. The government is also planning to invest an extra US\$133 million a year in education. But some secondary school students thought the reforms promised by Bachelet did not go far enough.

"We, the students, wanted to be part of the process. We are very angry that she hasn't listened to us," said Diego, a student leader interviewed by the BBC. Another student, 17-year-old Hernan Perez from the Liceo de Aplicacion, says the question of bus fares is fundamental. "There are students who need to take at least three buses to get to school. They come from poor families so it's very hard for them to find that kind of money," he said. "And if they don't have their student pass they have to pay the full fare or sometimes the bus driver doesn't take them." In the last week of May and first week of June, more than 650 schools across Chile were occupied by the students, and nearly 300 others went on strike. The Instituto Nacional an exclusive state school that has educated past presidents such as Ricardo Lagos (2002-2006) was one of the first schools to be occupied.

"Chile is a democracy and students have the right to protest, but I very much hope they will do it peacefully," said Bachelet.

City riot police chief resigns after violent police action

The nationwide student protest turned violent May 30 as police struggling to contain raucous marchers opened fire with tear gas and water cannons. The government said at least 12 people were injured in the clashes, and nearly 400 were demonstrators arrested that day. Television images showed police beating at least three reporters during the clashes. Hundreds of students attempted to march through downtown Santiago. Masked young men threw rocks and erected barricades at some key intersections, and police responded. The clashes lasted until dusk, as police dispersed demonstrators who repeatedly regrouped. Authorities and leaders of the student movement said the masked men were infiltrators.

On May 31, President Bachelet fired Santiago riot-police commander Col. Osvaldo Jara, in response to the clashes. Police violence "was outrageous, unjustified," Bachelet told a brief news conference, standing alongside the president of Chile's Journalists Association, Alejandro Guilier. Clashes broke out again in subsequent days.

On June 5, masked demonstrators threw rocks at police and looted stores during the protests, which security forces broke up with tear gas and powerful sprays from water cannons. Police said 262 people were detained and 23 police officers and five journalists were injured. None of the injuries was believed to be life threatening.

The large-scale protest and the chaos that grew around it put President Bachelet in a difficult position. She agreed with the basic premise of the students' complaints, but she said the

demonstrations were "unnecessary," as she and her Education Minister Martin Zilic offered to spend up to US\$200 million through the coming year. Some sectors criticized Bachelet for appearing to cave in to student demands. No deaths had been reported as of June 8, but a 13-year-old female student was in critical condition after falling from a gymnasium rooftop during the protests.

Some 500 schools were back to normal on that day, as calm settled over the Chilean capital. During that week, student leaders gathered in assemblies to begin discussing Bachelet's proposal to include 12 students on a 73-member council she appointed to study sweeping education reforms. The street protests turned into a legislative struggle as student leaders went to the Senate to press for reforms in the second week of June.

"We have to resolve all the issues relevant to the commission, how we will participate if we choose to do so," said student leader Juan Carlos Herrera. Bachelet to use more copper money for education. Protestors urged the government to use some of its windfall from copper sales, the country's top export, to help poor students. Bachelet, who took office in March, is maintaining Chile's policy of saving most of the surplus revenue from copper, which touched a record earlier this year, for the future when prices drop (see NotiSur, 2006-02-24).

"We have a new administration here, so we're looking closely at how the government comes out of this," said Sebastian Briozzo, a Standard & Poor's analyst in Buenos Aires. "The government has raised its ambitions on the social agenda, so the ability to manage expectations will be an issue." Bachelet's effort to end the strike with concessions to the students could open the floodgates for protests if she is seen as weak, said Adam Isacson, an analyst with the Washington-based Center for International Policy (CIP). "Labor unions, copper workers, the unemployed will all be watching the outcome of this and hoping their chances of getting some of the copper windfall in the future has grown." Chile was holding US\$1.9 billion of the copper savings in the US at the end of April to avoid strengthening the peso.

On June 2, the government announced it would increase education outlays by 1.3%, or 31 billion pesos (US\$57 million), from this year's budget and 103 billion pesos (US\$188 million) over two years, Finance Minister Andres Velasco said. The offer did not immediately quell protests and students demanded further concessions.

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