9-7-2012

After Long Lull, Chile’s Student Movement Rumbles Back to Life

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14087

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
After Long Lull, Chile’s Student Movement Rumbles Back to Life

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: Chile
Published: 2012-09-07

A flurry of school occupations and street protests has provided a sudden burst of momentum to Chile’s student-led education-reform movement, which had lain conspicuously low in recent months following its tumultuous rise to prominence in 2011.

Tens of thousands of students, families, teachers, union members, and others sympathetic to the cause gathered Aug. 28 in downtown Santiago to demand far-reaching changes to the country’s education system. Smaller protests took place in Concepción, Valparaíso, Puerto Montt, and other Chilean cities. Organizers estimated overall attendance for the marches at 180,000—proof, they said, that the movement is alive and well.

"Throughout this whole week, the government said we’re a minority. Today we sent a clear sign of this movement's massiveness and power to convene people," said Gabriel Boric, president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH). "The government also said we're divided. Today we offered a clear sign of unity among secondary students, university students, teachers, and education workers, all pushing for the same objective."

The demonstrations capped a turbulent month of student agitation that in many cases ended in violent confrontations with carabineros, Chile’s uniformed police force. Whereas last year’s wave of protests was led primarily by the FECH and other university groups, much of the recent activity is being carried out by high school students. Nicknamed pingüinos (penguins) for their black and white uniforms, Chile’s secondary school students led their own "revolution" in 2006 (NotiSur, June 23, 2006).

In early August, students launched sit-ins, or tomas as they’re referred to locally, at numerous high schools in Santiago and elsewhere in the country. Many tomas executed during the 2011 uprising lasted for months. This time around authorities are taking a zero-tolerance approach, sending in carabineros to bust up the sit-ins by force. Police and protestors have clashed in the streets as well. Carabineros arrested some 75 people during an unauthorized Aug. 8 demonstration in Santiago, where hooded vandals torched three city buses, causing more than US$800,000 worth of damage.

Abuse allegations

Government authorities say such incidents are exactly why a heavy-handed police crackdown on the protests is necessary. "The leaders are opening the doors to vandalism and delinquency," presidential spokesperson Andrés Chadwick told reporters. "How much more can we take of these illegal marches that call for school takeovers and threaten a violent August? What does that have to do with education?"

Students counter by accusing police not only of inciting the violence but of perpetrating it as well. "Violence begets more violence, and, in a democracy, that’s not the way to express oneself," Eloisa
González, the outspoken head of the Asamblea de Estudiantes Secundarios (ACES), a high school organization, explained in an interview with Radio Bío-Bío. "[The government] shouldn’t make itself out to be the victim when they’re the ones provoking [the violence]."

Human rights observers have corroborated numerous instances of police brutality toward student demonstrators. In a report published Aug. 27, the Corporación de Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos del Pueblo (CODEPU), a Santiago-based rights group, listed cases where students had been viciously beaten, shot with paint balls and tear-gas canisters, detained arbitrarily for hours, and had their lives threatened by police. Carabineros have also been accused in some cases of sexual abuse. Several high school students in the central Chilean city of Rancagua claim a police officer shoved his exposed genitals in their faces. Another group of girls said they were forced to strip after being detained in Santiago.

"We’ve witnessed firsthand how carabineros have brutally repressed high school students," the CODEPU report reads. "We can attest that there has been an increase both in the force and in the sophistication of the methods being used."

**Opposing visions**

The student movement—dubbed the "Chilean winter" by some in the international press—began in mid-2011 as a series of isolated marches and sit-ins by students demanding increased school funding and quality improvements for the nation’s classrooms (NotiSur, July 22, 2011). As the school year wore on, marches increased in size and frequency. One gathering in Santiago’s Parque O’Higgins drew more than 500,000 people.

Student organizer Camila Vallejo, a sharp-tongued geology major with movie-star looks, became a household name. Media attention was constant, both in Chile and abroad. The movement—and its celebrity leader—earned write-ups in many of the world’s major newspapers, including The New York Times and The Economist. In an online poll, readers of England’s The Guardian named Vallejo the 2011 "person of the year."

Emboldened by their early successes, Vallejo and her fellow student leaders extended their demands to include an end to for-profit education. They also called on the central government to reassert control of Chile’s primary and secondary schools, which the military regime of dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) had placed under municipal management, and to guarantee free quality education for all.

The shooting death of 16-year-old Manuel Gutiérrez, who was struck by a police bullet during an Aug. 25, 2011, protest in Santiago, prompted Chile’s conservative President Sebastián Piñera to intervene personally in the student conflict (NotiSur, Sept. 23, 2011). Piñera invited student leaders to La Moneda, Chile’s presidential palace, to initiate talks "immediately." Within weeks, however, the negotiations fizzled. President Piñera says he is committed to improving the quality of Chile’s schools and to making them more financially accessible. But he disagrees that implementing a system of cost-free universal education is the way to do it.

"We know that some are proposing free education for all, and not just for low- and middle-class [students] who need it most," the president said in this year’s May 21 State of the Nation address (NotiSur, June 15, 2012). "Frankly, in a country like ours, with so many shortages and inequalities,
it's just not right that the state use the resources of all Chileans to finance the education of the most [economically] favored."

Trading barbs
The movement took a heavy political toll on Piñera, whose approval rating dropped precipitously during the course of 2011, falling below the 30% mark—where it remains. The protests also cost two education ministers their jobs. Yet by year’s end, the government had seemed to weather the storm. Protestors ended their months-long sit-ins, and student leaders announced a temporary end to the demonstrations, saying they would spend the southern summer taking stock and assessing their options for the 2012 academic year (NotiSur, Jan. 13, 2012).

For most of this year, the movement lay dormant. Last month’s surge of activity, however, is proof that it never disbanded. The Piñera administration is doing its best to dismiss the recent upsurge in protests, saying they are unrealistic, unnecessary, and dangerous. The Chilean people are tired of all the uncertainty and mayhem, government officials insist.

Piñera’s current Education Minister Harald Beyer, a former economics researcher, accuses the students of taking an "all or nothing" stance that makes dialogue impossible. In a recent appearance on Chilevisión, Beyer dismissed the demand for universal free education as being "negative and regressive." And he chided student organizers for refusing to give the Piñera administration credit where credit is due.

"I have the impression we’ve made a tremendous effort" to improve the education system, said Beyer. The administration, he pointed out, increased education spending for the 2012 budget by 33%. It also submitted plans to Congress to lower student-loan interest rates—from 6% to 2%—and to make roughly US$1 billion available for government scholarships. "What’s strange is that [the students] won’t cut us any slack. That attitude doesn’t lend itself to reasonable democratic debate," said Beyer.

Nor does violent police repression, say backers of the reform movement. Student leaders accuse the government of saying one thing—that it is "open to dialogue"—while doing the exact opposite, like trying to crush the movement with heavily armed riot police. And they reject Beyer’s claims that their demands are unrealistic. Students say the structural changes they propose are not only feasible but also necessary.

"[The government’s education-reform] bills are bogged down [in Congress] because there’s no social consensus. The legislation isn’t going anywhere because it doesn’t have the support of those of us who forced this debate to take place," Gabriel Boric told reporters last week. "What Beyer said is wrong. We’re not taking an all-or-nothing stance. Our positions aren’t maximalist. We understand that changes aren’t accomplished overnight. But [real change] is going to require a willingness to transform the essence of our current education system."

Polls suggest a large majority of Chileans continue to support the movement—despite the violence associated with some of the recent protests. More than 80% of respondents to a recent survey by Cooperativa e Imaginacción said they back the student demands. Roughly the same percentage (82.4%) was critical of the government’s handling of the conflict. How to use that support to execute real structural reform, however, is an enigma that continues to perplex the protestors.