Teachers Strike, Student Protests Add to Chilean Government’s Woes

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A succession of street demonstrations and a nearly month-old teachers strike are heaping new pressure on the already hobbled administration of President Michelle Bachelet, which has fought an uphill battle in recent months to reassert itself—and move forward with its ambitious reform agenda—amid a whirlwind of corruption scandals.

On June 17, tens of thousands of public school teachers gathered in Santiago, the Chilean capital, to protest a government-backed Carrera Docente (teaching career) bill that promises major changes to the teaching profession. The march was the latest in a series of activities organized by the Colegio de Profesores, Chile’s professional teachers association, which has been striking since June 1 and wants the controversial legislation, which the administration submitted to Congress in late April, to be withdrawn and renegotiated. The partial strike is affecting some 1.3 million students in approximately 2,000 public schools, according to the daily La Nación.

The actions have led to a standoff with the Bachelet government, which sees the bill as key to boosting education standards—something student protestors have been demanding for years. The legislation also promises a 28% increase in starting salaries for teachers, from US$840 per month (for a 37-hour week) to US$1,260, allows teachers to spend a bit more of their time on nonclassroom activities (preparation, meetings, etc.), and establishes a five-step career trajectory whereby teachers can eventually work their way into directorial positions with salaries in the US$4,000 per month range.

"This bill is not going to be withdrawn," the president’s top spokesperson, Marcelo Díaz, told reporters June 12. "This is a project aimed at substantially raising the quality of education in Chile’s public schools. For that reason it has to run its course. … We would love it if [the Colegio de Profesores] would end the strike because what’s suffering the most are the public schools, which is what we’re trying to strengthen."

Teachers reject the bill as not going far enough regarding salaries and nonclassroom hours allowed. They also object to the five-step career scheme, which calls for teachers to be tested and evaluated every four years as a prerequisite for advancement. The first three steps of the career ladder would be obligatory. The president of the Colegio de Profesores Jaime Gajardo says the plan heaps "a greater burden and more stress" on teachers and would thus be a major setback in working conditions. "[It represents] a policy based on distrust, is highly competitive, and won’t, therefore, contribute to improving the quality of education," he told reporters earlier this month.

Deadly demonstrations
The Colegio de Profesores accuses the Ministerio de Educación (MINEDUC) of drafting the Carrera Docente bill without seeking input first from the teachers. Student organizations have made similar complaints, saying they, too, have been kept at arm's length by the Bachelet administration, which
pushed through a first round of education reforms in January and promises more sweeping changes in the years to come (NotiSur, Feb. 13, 2015).

"We hope that MINEDUC offers us some content, some clarity regarding the advances the government has made this year, where they’re going with the education reform," Valentina Saavedra, president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH), recently told Radio Universidad de Chile. "Because as of now nobody knows what those advances are. ... We want this to be a public debate."

Student organizations have rallied behind the Colegio de Profesores, openly supporting the strike and joining teachers in recent street demonstrations. But they have also organized various protests of their own, including one on June 10, when some 200,000 people marched in Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción to demand greater transparency from the Bachelet administration and urge deeper reforms.

Bachelet promised recently to guarantee higher education costs for 60% of the country’s low-income students starting next year. She plans to up that percentage year by year until 2020. The Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile (CONFECH) and other student groups say free education should be universal effective immediately, not five years from now as the president has promised. They also want an end to all for-profit education in Chile, not just for institutions that receive state funding, as one of Bachelet’s recently enacted reforms dictates. "We’re still really far from realizing our dreams. [Bachelet’s] reform is very insufficient," Claudia Arévalo, spokesperson for the Asamblea Coordinadora de Estudiantes Secundarios (ACES), told the teleSUR news network late last month.

The June 10 demonstrations—which took place just as Chile began hosting the Copa de América, a major international soccer tournament—were the largest yet in a series of protests that have increased in frequency and size since mid-May, when a pair of students were shot dead by an enraged resident during a rally in the port city of Valparaíso.

A week later, also in Valparaíso, a student demonstrator was seriously injured after being struck head-on by a police water cannon. The victim, Rodrigo Avilés, 28, spent two weeks in an induced coma and remains bedridden, according to media reports. "He’s speaking, making attempts to communicate," the organization Chile Une said in a June 14 press release. "They’re considering whether to remove the tracheotomy in the next few days so that he can breathe on his own."

Second-year slump

The protests and teachers strike could not have come at a more inopportune time for President Bachelet, who began the year with a flurry of legislative victories but found herself suddenly on the hot seat, starting in February, when her son, Sebastián Dávalos, was implicated in a lucrative and presumably illicit land deal (NotiSur, April 24, 2015).

A second corruption scandal followed, this one involving mining company Sociedad Química y Minera de Chile S.A. (SQM), whose top shareholder, Julio Ponce Lerou, is a former son-in-law of dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). News reports suggested that some of Bachelet’s political allies, including then interior minister Rodrigo Peñailillo, had at least indirect dealings with SQM, which is accused of tax fraud and involvement in illegal campaign financing. Peñailillo, a close confidant of the president, is also being investigated for illegal "pre-campaign" spending he allegedly orchestrated on behalf of Bachelet.
The scandals, combined with an ongoing economic lull (the economy grew just 1.8% in 2014, the lowest rate since 2009, according to the Banco Central) and a spate of natural disasters, have eaten away at Bachelet’s approval numbers. A survey released June 15 by the polling firm Plaza Pública-Cadem measured support for the president at 24%, the lowest since her term began in March 2014. Bachelet, who was also president from 2006-2010, finished her first term with approval ratings in the 80% range. She was re-elected, in late 2013, with 62% of the vote (NotiSur, Dec. 20, 2013).

Desperate to right her political ship, Bachelet took to the airwaves on April 28 promising "severe measures" against corruption, influence trafficking, and conflicts of interest (NotiSur, May 29, 2015). Two weeks later, she implemented the most thorough Cabinet overhaul since Chile’s return to democracy in 1990, sacking five ministers (including Peñailillo) and shuffling another four into new positions. And, on May 21, a national holiday marked annually by a presidential State of the Nation address before Congress, Bachelet again took center stage, highlighting her administration’s accomplishments and charting its course for the years to come.

"I came into the presidency elected by the majority of my compatriots at a moment of great demands and expectations," the president said. "The mandate I received was clear: lead the transformations that allow us to be a less unequal, more cohesive, peaceful, and developed society that benefits every man and woman in the country. That’s what I’m committed to and that’s what I’m doing. That’s the goal that guides our efforts."

That same day, a police crackdown on protestors outside the Congress building in Valparaíso left Rodrigo Avilés unconscious and fighting for his life. The incident led to new demonstrations, including an unauthorized evening protest in Santiago on May 28, which culminated in dozens of arrests and involved looting and other destruction of property. The pre-Copa América protests on June 10 were larger still, leading some observers to suggest that the powerful student movement that pummeled President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) may be rumbling back to life (NotiSur, July 22, 2011, and Aug. 19, 2011).

"We can walk with our heads high knowing that the popular movement has re-emerged," Ricardo Luer, president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de La Frontera in the southern city of Temuco, told Radio Universidad de Chile. "The student movement has ceased to be just students and is sparking a larger social movement that isn’t just fighting for education but also for things like health care."