

# Chile: the "uprising of the penguins"

Sat, 24/06/2006 - 22:00

*From Diego, a sympathiser of the League for the Fifth International, in Santiago, Chile.*

In Chile in May and early June this year, 1,300,000 secondary school students engaged in over a month of struggle against the neoliberal organisation of education. Because of their school uniforms consisting of a black blazer and white shirt their nickname is 'the penguins'. Thus their militant struggle, which included fierce clashes with the brutal police force inherited from dictator Augusto Pinochet, their struggle came known as the uprising of the penguins (el levantamiento de los pinguinos),

The most important thing about this uprising is that it directly challenged the entire neoliberal programme of this and previous Chilean governments. The Chilean neo-liberal 'model' is the oldest in the world, actually predating Thatcherism and Reaganism. It was introduced by the bloody dictatorship that overthrew Salvador Allende on September 11 1973. 3,000 Chilean socialists, trade unionist were executed, or 'disappeared' <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forced\\_disappearance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forced_disappearance)> ?, more than 27,000 were imprisoned and tortured many more exiled <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exile>> .

Born in this bloody fashion the Chilean model has for three decades been held up throughout Latin America as a shining example of how to achieve development.

But now there is another example coming from Chile to join those of mass struggles in other countries. A whole new generation in Chile has joined the continent-wide resistance to neoliberalism. It can have big consequences for future political development in Chile and beyond.

The central demand of the school students movement was an end to the hated LOCE (Organic Constitutional Education Law) which was incorporated into the constitution a day before Pinochet left office in March 1990. This law was for handing the education to local councils, with few resources, and to opened the way to the privatisation of schools, colleges and universities. According to the opinion polls, 84% of the Chilean people supported the students' struggle, and a mere 14% support the government's handling of the crisis.

One of the most important points was how well the students organised themselves. In the secondary school they elected delegates for every class. The delegates or class presidents met and elected a school president. These school presidents then went to a regional meeting and elected delegates that were in turn sent to Santiago, for a national meeting. Here in the capital, they elected their spokespersons, both young women and men, to be the official representatives of the movement. All the leaders at all levels could be recalled by their respective assemblies if they not represent what the students decided and they could then be replaced by other delegates who would.

They implemented a truly iron discipline, not one delegate representing the students could speak on personal basis; they could only speak what had been agreed, democratically, by the students' assemblies. And very importantly, they never leaked information to the media about what they were preparing or

deciding to do. In every school they organised commission: for security, cleaning, propaganda, cooking, the collection of food and money, entertainment, etc. No drugs or alcohol were allowed on the school premises.

Behind the locked gates of their schools, students organised, both aspects of living in their schools and caring for each others' needs, as well as the future of their movement. Students took turns occupying the buildings, ensuring that at least 30 students were inside during the day. Students with the most understanding parents slept over at night. They took turns shopping, cooking and soliciting donations for food brought a stereo systems into school premises, ensuring that sound waves of reggaetón fill the space of the nearly empty halls. A vast majority of the youths' time was spent in discussion of the movement's course

They even allocated some time, to give a good lick of paint to the toilets, and some with artistic talents painted murals about the struggle, or wrote short theatre pieces to entertain their fellow students and guests. We were invited in the Internado Barros Arana to attend a short play satirising the government.

During the dozens of demonstration that took place in the cities, mainly in Santiago, lumpen and criminal individuals some times infiltrated the students; some of these crooks try to steal the student's belongings. In situations like these, the students captured these individuals, and some times some agent provocateurs and give them a good hiding. In other words they imposed their own vigilance and justice.

Since the strike began many secondary school students embarked on the process of understanding the law that structures education in Chile. The students of Liceo B-30 and many other have been able to do this with the help of university students who have provided them with materials and given them brief lectures about the politics that affect the quality of education in Chile. A student organizer of Liceo B-30, recounts that "in three days, really, really quickly," their classmates began to have an understanding of the politics in the background of their education, a realization that in effect changed the objectives of the secondary school movement from simple demands for lower student costs to a complete upheaval of the politics of education in Chile.

The students were hungry to learn and understand as soon as possible, not only the problems related to the educational system but also politics. Our materials, like those of other leftists were distributed by themselves to their fellow comrades, and when some times we were running off copies, they stick them in a mural so that everybody can read our bulletins and any news or political position on the problems they were facing.

On the Saturday 3rd June, two days before the national strike, the students invited all the political and social organisations to have their say in the Instituto Nacional Barros Arana in Quinta Normal, Santiago. They allowed delegates of the entire organisation to go into the occupation. All delegates had to leave their Identity Cards in the entrance of the premises. All delegates were allowed to speak for a few minutes and listened attentively to the dozens of contributions. When some students try to boo the reformist party leaders, the students intervened to stop heckling and allow the speaker to continue. The atmosphere was extremely democratic and no media or photographers were allowed in the assemble hall. The students decided that the national day of stoppage should be in the premises of the occupations. But the Patriotic Front Manuel Rodriguez called for march and rally in Santiago centre. Later when the media reporter try to drive a wedge between the students movement and the left wing groups about the different tactics for the day, the students refused to criticise the left wing groups.

It is clear through all this that the students rediscovered the best elements of revolutionary democracy, free speech, a democratic way to conduct polemical battles, democratic student's councils with the power to

take action and to demote any leader or group that break the discipline of the movement and, community and solidarity principles. This is a very important gain in a country that still bears the scars of dictatorship and the rotten compromises made by the reformist parties, both Socialist and Communist, that saw a transition to democracy which guaranteed impunity for Pinochet and his torturers and left the state apparatus of repression, the police and the army, stuffed with those trained under Pinochet.

On Monday 5th June more than one million students, teachers, medical workers and others joined the strike. The CUT [the Chilean TUC] shamelessly refused to support the students strike call. Reports from outside Santiago indicate there were more strikes in support of the students outside the capital, in those towns and cities where the influence of the trade union bureaucracy was less strong. Also, the Communist Party, called only for a reform of the Law whereas the students demanded its total abolition. Due to many days of street fighting with the police, the students decided that day to call for school occupations, though, unfortunately, the students' assembly did not call for a central demonstration to unify all those who opposed the government. However, they did refuse to criticize other organizations that called a demonstration in Santiago.

One of the reasons why the students decided to remain in occupation, thousands of them the whole length of the country, is because during the previous weeks dozens of confrontations with the police took place in the main cities of the country with thousands of students arrested. To regain their breath and retain popular support, they decided to organise meetings, music and popular theatre in the occupations.

Myself and a group of comrades visited and distributed thousands of two special student bulletins, we called 'El Pinguino Rojo y Negro' (The Red and Black Penguin). We were immediately invited inside the occupations to have talks and discussions. In the evening we joined the demo in central Santiago. Despite official permission for a march was requested by the Patriotic Front of Manuel Rodriguez, the former armed wing of the Communist Party, and other organizations called for a demonstration in early afternoon, the authorities refused to give permission for a demo. But, thousands of youth and other activists came anyway to the city centre to protest against the government and to support the students.

One group of university students, from the history faculty, arrived with a banner that read, 'We are not attending History classes, and History is made on the streets'. The special riot police confronted us. Massive water cannons ('guanacos?'), groups of heavily equipped riot police, trucks carrying tear gas canisters and, ominously, busses evidently waiting to be filled with anybody arrested, were seen from the early morning in the centre of the city, on all the main junctions approaching the Universidad de Chile, and beyond.

At five o'clock afternoon scuffles broke out between youth and the riot police around the National Library and they moved to the Universidad de Chile and the neighbouring Instituto Nacional, which was occupied by the students. Groups of youth emerged from the university and confronted the hated riot police and water cannons with bricks and stones. In response, other groups of students emerged on top of the roof of the university and pelted the squads of riot police below with wall paint. A cat and mouse game developed which lasted until late in the night, the city centre was swirling with clouds of tear gas, like in the previous weeks. During the night right-wing group of neo-nazis organized attacks on some of the occupied schools, so students set up 'security commissions' armed with metal bars and clubs and the university students went to the support of the occupations to protect the secondary schools students.

The school students uprising and those who joined their struggle from the universities and colleges, represent the entry of a whole new generation into struggle. They were born, not under the Pinochet dictatorship, but during the 'boom' years of the Chilean economic miracle, the bourgeois-reformist governments of the Concertacion. Now the youth want their share of the 'development', especially when

the price of the cooper doubled its price, due to the request for this metal in China.

But they are fighting for a lot more than that. They are also in revolt against the "consumer society", and privatisations programmes of the government. The idea that education is a business and that it should be run as such, aroused hostility to such ideas. It is reflected on many banners hung around Santiago, which included the slogan, "To fight market education, we need organised students".

For the time being the students forced the government to make some concessions, like the free students travel card, free lunches for the poor students, to promise to review the long hours, to provide grants for the poor students. Their struggle even penetrated amongst the children of the rich in posh private schools and universities. Dozens of them too were in occupation and strike in support of the other students. At the moment there is a truce, the government is manoeuvring to organise a special commission to draw up a programme for educational improvements, as the students demand the right to make proposals to run a free and public education system and, the right for the students, parents and teachers to draft proposals to re-draft the laws.

This special commission has three months to produce proposals. But the students want not only a quality education; they want the abolition of the LOCE, the law passed by the Pinochet dictatorship. So they are ready to return to the struggle, if this commission and the Parliament do not deliver what they are asking for. Any hope that Michelle Bachelet (elected in January and inaugurated on March 11) would be radically different to her predecessors are already beginning to fade amongst many students. Posters recently appeared in Santiago, stating "Bachelet: speeches for the poor? government for the rich". All this despite the fact that Bachelet quickly found an extra US\$135 million for the education budget, including the provision of tens of thousands of extra school meals, a change to the university entrance exam payment scheme, and some smaller concessions.

The most important thing, it is that this struggle was a turning point in the struggle in Chile. It has opened a new chapter following the years of dictatorship, the transition period, and the "development" of the economy. Anti-neoliberal and even anti-capitalist ideas came into the foreground once again. These weeks of mass struggles by young people provide enormous opportunities to build support for the revolutionary socialist programme in the months and years to come.

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/chile-uprising-penguins>