



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Chilean high school students strike, win education reform, "Penguin Revolution," 2006

Time period notes: This campaign primarily fell within these dates, but there had been isolated protests and marches in previous years that echoed some of the demands of this campaign. Likewise, after the campaign ended, there was another protest to accelerate the implementation of reforms.

April

2006

to: June 9

2006

Country: Chile

Location City/State/Province: Santiago

Goals:

"Amongst the students' short term demands were free travel passes on buses and the waiving of the university admissions test (PSU) fee, while the longer term demands included: the abolition of the Organic Constitutional Law on Teaching (LOCE), the end to municipalization of subsidized education, a reform to the Full-time School Day policy (JEC) and a quality education for all."

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings › through Coordination Assembly of Secondary School Students

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 051. Walk-outs › primarily in public schools

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings
- 051. Walk-outs › private schools also join

- 173. Nonviolent occupation › Students occupied classrooms and academic buildings

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation › Students occupied classrooms and academic buildings

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation › Students occupied classrooms and academic buildings

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Primarily high school students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

German Westhoff, Julio “Gordo” Isamit, César Valenzuela, María Jesus Sanhueza and Juan Carlos Herrera

Partners:

Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH), Teachers National Union, surDA social movement

External allies:

not known

Involvement of social elites:

not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH)
- Teachers National Union

- surDA social movement

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

more schools joined the strike as time progressed, making the strike and campaign more powerful

Segment Length: 1-2 weeks

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

President Bachelet, police force

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

not known

Campaigner violence:

There are some allegations of violence during some student marches (although some claim that these marches were infiltrated.) Through the main thrust of the campaign, leaders called for nonviolence. After the official movement had ended, there was a march in August that involved violence from both student campaigners and police officers.

Repressive Violence:

Widespread police brutality including tear gas and beatings.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The students won most of their demands, with the exception of free bus passes for all and the number of seats that they wanted on the new Education Commission. And while the movement grew quickly, I awarded .5 for survival because the leadership fractionalized, although the reforms did come into play in the years following the movement.

In April of 2006 Chilean high school students had many complaints against the government and the way it ran the public school system. Chief among their concerns included bus fares and university exam fees. Over the previous few years, there had been isolated protests throughout the city, but none had gathered very much momentum. In 2006, however, in the first major social movement since “Chileans overthrow Pinochet regime,” the students took the general public by surprise.

A few schools organized protests on 24 April in opposition to fare increases on the student transport pass. Two days later, Santiago police arrested 47 students for participating and organizing these protests. On May Day, student protests were widespread (although they were not all directly related to this movement) and a reported 1,024 students were arrested. On 19 May students at Instituto Nacional and Liceo de Aplicación began an occupation during the night, and became the first of hundreds of schools to occupy their buildings until the movement's demands were met. What started out as the Coordination

Assembly of Secondary School Students (CASSS) and a small walk-out ballooned into a nation-wide phenomenon on 22 May, following President Michelle Bachelet's address during which she neglected to mention education reform. That is when students began to occupy the first all-girls school.

3 days later, 14 schools were on strike, 22 were occupied and 70,000 students were actively engaged in the struggle. These public high school students quickly gained the support of the university students union and the most prominent teachers union. Students demanded "free travel passes on buses and a waiver of the university admissions test (PSU) fee. They also called for "the abolition of the Organic Constitutional Law on Teaching (LOCE), the end to municipalization of subsidized education, a reform to the Full-time School Day policy (JEC) and a quality education for all." LOCE is a Pinochet-era education policy (it was passed on the last day of the Pinochet dictatorship) that decentralized and deregulated the Chilean education system.

On 26 May, the students at Atamira de Peñololen School walked out, spurring other private schools to join the movement. Soon, dozens of other private schools followed suit, posting signs along their fences that read "Private, but not Silent" and "Education is a Right, not a Privilege."

At that point, the Coordinating Assembly (CASSS) began meeting every day, with German Westhoff, Julio "Gordo" Isamit, César Valenzuela, María Jesus Sanhueza and Juan Carlos Herrera as spokespeople, leaders, and soon, national celebrities. They represented a variety of political persuasions, from right wing to communists, promoting a vision of political neutrality and young leadership; all were 16 and 17 years old at the start of the movement. SurDA, an older, but still active Chilean movement from the transition to democracy, provided support by helping the students organize their Assemblies.

The Assembly decided to meet with Chilean education minister Martín Zilic on 29 May, threatening a national student strike for the following day if he did not cede to movement demands. When the minister did not show up at the meeting, students immediately called for the strike.

On 30 May an estimated 790,000 students took to the streets, The police met the demonstrators with violence that shocked Chile. Scores of students were wounded, along with 3 journalists, 2 cameramen and an undercover police officer, who was admitted to the hospital with truncheon wounds. Nevertheless, students marched through tear gas to the center of Santiago "with their arms held high, as if surrendering."

At this point, students were occupying 320 schools and more than 100 schools were on strike. Estimates of 800,000 to 1 million students were on strike after that first day of marching and violence. The campaign coined the name the Penguin Revolution because of the black and white school uniforms that many of the students wore in marches.

The next day, President Bachelet condemned the police brutality, publically stating, "I manifest my indignation at the excessive and unjustified violence inflicted on journalists, cameramen and students." She proceeded to dismiss Osvaldo Jara, head of Chile's riot police. She made an offer to the students that included reorganizing the Ministry of Education (with a separate regulatory institution), establishing an Assistant Presidential Council on Education to propose methods to improve the quality of education, reforming LOCE, funding free lunches for half a million new students, and 770,000 by 2007, investing in infrastructural improvements in 520 schools and replacing school furniture in 1,200, a free transport pass for the most needy students, extending transit passes to be valid seven days per week and 24 hours per day for each student, and free entrance exams for university for 80% of the annual applicants.

Students rejected the President's offer because she failed to include free bus fare and did not give students enough representation on the Education Commission. They planned another strike for 5 June.

In response, President Bachelet said that the bus fare would have costed "\$300 million every year, the equivalent of 33,000 low cost houses or hospital attention for thousands of poor children" -- although a Chilean journalist suggested that the cost was equivalent to one of Chile's 9 new F-16 fighter jets, discrediting her comparison.

After this, the movement lost some of its strict discipline and solidarity. Public support began to fall away from its one time high

at 76%. In-fighting started to emerge among student leaders. Two of Santiago's public schools ended their strikes. Other political movements attempted to co-opt the students, resulting in political fracturing and disagreement.

The movement nevertheless went ahead with the 5 June strike, with the support of university students, high school teachers, truckers and workers amongst other unions. The strike was national, and 12,000 people gathered peacefully in Valparaíso. In all, more than 240 people were detained during the day of the strike.

On 9 June, María Jesus Sanhueza declared, "On Monday we return to classes. This isn't the end of our movement, just a change in the way our demands are articulated. We go back incredibly happy with what we have achieved. We know full well that our victory is historic and hard earned."

The movement accepted the government's offer, justifiably declaring victory.

Research Notes

Influences:

(2) This campaign strongly influenced the university student strike in 2011-2012.

Sources:

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Samantha Shain 09/12/2012

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