

Chilean Promised a New Deal; Now Striking Youth Demand It

THE NEW YORK TIMES
JUNE 5, 2006

SANTIAGO, [Chile](#), June 4 — Less than three months after she took office promising to lead a government that welcomed greater citizen participation, President Michelle Bachelet is facing her first domestic crisis. To the surprise of many here, the challenge comes not from the right but from a group expected to be sympathetic to her center-left coalition: high school students.

In protests that began in mid-May, more than 700,000 teenagers have walked out of classes at public high schools, demanding the overhaul of an education system they say is inferior and discriminatory. They have occupied several hundred schools, sleeping there overnight with sympathetic parents bringing them meals, and last week thousands marched in the streets of the capital here and in other cities in this nation of 16 million.

Ms. Bachelet, a 54-year-old pediatrician and a survivor of Gen. [Augusto Pinochet's](#) dictatorship, took office March 11 as the first woman to be elected president of Chile and as a symbol of its reconciliation with its dark past. She campaigned on the promise of more tolerant and nurturing leadership, and the students — teenagers with no memories of the Pinochet era and its political repression — seem to have taken her at her word.

Their demands include more teachers and school construction, so as to reduce class sizes, and also the elimination of fees for the national college entrance exam and free bus fare. With prices of copper, the country's chief export, at record highs and government coffers bulging with years of budget surpluses, the students maintain that the state can afford to invest more in education.

The protesters are clearly idealistic, as evidenced by a banner of solidarity hanging outside an elite private school that evokes the May 1968 student uprising in France: "Be realistic, demand the impossible."

In his last act before stepping down in 1990 after almost 17 years in power, General Pinochet issued a decree greatly reducing the central government's involvement in and supervision of education. Instead, authority was shifted to communities and education was opened to free market forces, with private companies allowed to compete with the [Roman Catholic Church](#), traditionally the main provider source of private schooling.

Since the return of democracy, financing for public education has tripled and poverty has been reduced by half. But inequalities persist, both among regions and between public and private schools. On average, according to one recent study, private schools spend at least five times more per pupil than the poorest public schools do.

The student movement enjoys widespread popular support here. The backing increased last week after the national police beat some marchers and sprayed others, a few as young as 12 and many dressed in black and white school uniforms, with tear gas and water cannons. The head of the police special forces unit has since been fired, and Ms. Bachelet has condemned what she described as the "excesses, abuses and unjustified violence."

In a speech to the nation on Thursday night, Ms. Bachelet, who is scheduled to visit the United States later this week, announced a \$135-million-a-year package that includes a free lunch program for the poorest students, the repair or renovation of up to 1,200 public schools and the elimination of the \$40 college exam fee. "The state will be the guarantor of a quality education for all Chileans," she promised, adding that the nation's youth deserved "to be able to study in dignified conditions."

But on Friday, the main student leaders rejected the proposal, saying it was not generous enough. They said they would renew their protests on Monday, and teachers and university students and professors have pledged to join them.

"In a democracy, everyone has the right to mobilize," Ms. Bachelet responded Saturday in a radio interview in which she referred to the striking students as "los chiquillos," which translates as the kids or youngsters. "But the truth is that this is the maximum the government can offer."

She added, "The reforms will go ahead with or without a strike."