



Photo by Mario Tellez Cardemil.

Leaders of the Chilean student movement:

Camila Vallejo, Giorgio Jackson and Camilo Ballesteros, September 2011.

CHILE

# Student Leaders Reinvent the Protest

by Ernesto Muñoz-Lamartine

Describing Chilean public education as one of the most segregated systems in the world, in a country where meritocracy does not exist, Giorgio Jackson, one of the leaders of the 2011 Chilean student movement, delivered a powerful and trenchant criticism of democratic governance in Chile, while laying out his vision for a new social compact in the South American country.

Speaking at an event organized by CLAS, Jackson, the president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad Católica de Chile (Catholic University's Students Association, FEUC), criticized the current center-right government's response to the most powerful and widespread national protests in a generation. Dubbed the "Chilean Winter" by the international press, the months-long, student-led movement took the country by storm. Though previous demonstrations were seen in the first half of President Piñera's four-year term, most notably

against the approval of a hydroelectric project in Patagonia (HydroAysen), the sheer number of those involved, the ingenuity displayed by the protestors and the support for their demands by a majority of Chileans have represented a clear test not only to the current administration, but also to the political and economic establishment in one of the more stable democracies in the region.

This is the first time in the last 20 years that a powerful social movement has challenged the consensus-based politics at the core of Chile's successful democratic transition. Neoliberal reforms enacted during Pinochet's authoritarian regime (1973-90) have remained largely unchanged by the center-left Concertación coalition (1990-2010), and therefore, the fundamentals of the Chilean "Washington Consensus" model were maintained and, in some cases, further entrenched. The current education system, with its emphasis on a subsidiary role

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for the state, was built on the same pro-privatization theoretical foundation as the Chilean pension, health and public utilities systems. Therefore, when students criticize the educational model, they also stand against the broader legacy of Concertación policies, which is why the opposition has found it so difficult to articulate a coherent response to their demands.

In his talk, Jackson painted a bleak picture of education policy in Chile. He described it as a system in which inequities are found from the start, with segregation beginning early in primary school. “The whole system is financed with vouchers, no fixed costs and no expansion plans for public schools.” Vouchers reach 93 percent of the population served, with half of them accessed through subsidized private operators that retain the right to select students. The vouchers are linked to per-pupil enrollment, and fixed costs are not covered. Since families can pay over the voucher value for what they believe are better schools, the result is what an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report called one of the lowest degrees of socioeconomic integration in the world.

The current education system, Jackson argued, is effectively undercutting public education by allowing private operators to “compete” under unfair rules. Though the system was designed to use the market to drive quality, increase choice and foster innovation, the educational outcomes have been the source of much debate by researchers.

Other indicators confirm the trend described by Jackson: Chilean higher education is one of the most expensive in the world, consuming up to 40 percent of the budget of a middle-income family. At the same time, public expenditure per student is the lowest among OECD countries at \$3,500 a year compared to the OECD average of \$8,831. Public expenditure on higher education as a percentage of GDP is also well below the OECD average of 4.6 percent. Public spending on tertiary education as a proportion of GDP is one of the lowest in the world at 0.5 percent. Finally, Chilean college students graduate with one of the highest rates of debt relative to future income in the world (174 percent).

Although higher education was liberalized during the 1980s, the number of universities exploded during the

Students protest by dragging their desks into the school quad during the 2006 “Penguin Revolution.”



Photo by antezzo.



Photo by Fabiola Torres.

### Chilean police respond to a student demonstration with tear gas, August 2011.

Concertación's time in office: from eight in 1980 to more than 60 in 2011. While regulations formally prevent colleges from being "for profit," tuition has increased by 60 percent in the last 12 years, making Chilean universities among the most expensive in the world. Despite the benefits of increased coverage (seven out of 10 students are the first in their families to go to college), huge differences in quality remain among universities, and they tend to replicate the patterns of segregation observed in primary and secondary education. The state has not retained a significant role in regulating and enforcing minimum standards.

For all the striking figures, however, this situation was nothing new in Chile. So one of the important puzzles about the student-led mobilization is: Why now? As Jackson explained, various elements can be seen as contributing to the scope and success of the movement. Its leaders — both Jackson and Camila Vallejo, the president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (University of Chile Student Federation, FECH) — were rapidly elevated to the status of public figures, surpassing opposition leaders both in media appeal and credibility. A well-organized confederation of student associations was able to mobilize large numbers of college and high-school students through street protests and the occupation of

public buildings. Social media were also used, as in the "Arab Spring" movement, to coordinate activities, protests and innovative "flash mobs."

As a sociological factor, Jackson pointed to the fact that his is the first generation "without fear." They were young enough to not have had any personal experience with Pinochet's authoritarian regime, having been born around the time of the democratic transition. Also, his generation participated in one of the handful of public mobilizations during the Concertación's rule: the 2006 "Penguin Revolution" — so-called because of the protestors' black-and-white school uniforms — that arose during President Bachelet's first year in office. The high-school students marching in 2006 were protesting many of the same policies that students are confronting today. While they did make some gains under President Bachelet, overall they were disappointed with the outcome. The latest student movement gives them a chance to try again with different tactics. Under a right-wing government, the symbolic weight of the coalition that defeated Pinochet was not there to deactivate the protest movement through negotiation. The political indecisiveness and several public blunders of the Piñera administration may have also played a role in the length

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and strength of the Chilean Winter. To date, two education ministers have fallen as a direct consequence of the movement.

All of these factors taken together help explain why the student movement took root in 2011. However, the key insight presented by Jackson, one that is confirmed by several opinion polls, is that the student movement is an expression of widespread dissatisfaction among Chileans with the political and socioeconomic status quo. Despite an economic situation that is stable by most standards (7.3 percent unemployment, 5.2 percent GDP growth, 3.3 percent inflation increase in 2011), a 2011 Latinobarómetro report shows that satisfaction levels with the democratic system fell by 24 points from the previous year to 32 percent. Additionally, only 1 percent of the population thinks that the country's best public policy is in education, compared to an average of 33 percent in Latin America.

Chileans certainly seem to be dissatisfied with their political leaders. In December 2011, the Centro de Estudios Públicos reported that President Piñera's approval ratings had sunk to a new low of 23 percent. His handling of education policy was rejected by 67 percent of Chileans, and a majority supported the student protests (62 percent), while rejecting "for-profit" universities (75 percent). Piñera was not alone in facing the public's wrath. The Concertación's approval ratings also fell to an all-time low (16 percent), while the governing coalition saw its support reduced by half, to 20 percent. Widespread disaffection with the available options is also evident in the declining number of Chileans who identify themselves with a political coalition: fully 60 percent were unaffiliated in 2011. Furthermore, 30



Photo by Ailoshia Marquez/Associated Press.

A march in support of educational reform, Santiago, August 2011.

percent of citizens believe democracy in Chile functions badly or very badly, while only 16 percent believe it works well or somewhat well.

The movement, therefore, appears to have crystallized a growing disaffection among Chileans with the political and economic system. This is exactly what Jackson

outlined when he discussed the student movement's objectives: "We demand no more cosmetic changes in the Chilean education system but structural reform that leaves behind the 'consensus politics' that characterized Chilean politics in the last 20 years." According to Jackson, the center-left's "obsession"



for the movement to lose its force. He rejected the government's tactics, such as labeling the students' demands as "radical." "The only thing truly radical" Jackson argued "is the government's defense of this segregated system." To the students, he emphasized, "the system is morally bankrupt."

Many of the students' demands have been met with skepticism, not only by government officials but also by opposition leaders and policy analysts, who argue that they are unfeasible, because the country is not prepared to increase public spending to the levels required, and also inequitable, because free education would mean transfers to the wealthiest in society. Jackson maintained that the way to make universal free education both sustainable and equitable is to obtain funding through a tax reform on corporations and the rich. This proposal has been supported by mainstream economists in Chile, and it is seen as the next "big battle" for the movement.

Describing the student movement as part of a larger effort to increase the quality of democracy in Chile, Jackson said that the current administration's refusal to bend to overwhelming public pressure is similar to governing with a "blank check" for four years. This way of understanding governance could help explain the alienation and widespread disaffection among Chileans, especially the young, with the political system. Seeing political stability as a problem, Jackson spoke about the need for increased democratic representation. He argued that direct democracy mechanisms, automatic registration and especially a reform to the binomial electoral system that has benefitted both political coalitions,

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with protecting the status quo is at the root of the current systemic failure. Students are asking for a structural change that includes ending the decentralization of education to local governments ("de-municipalization") and a radical transformation of the financing structure to reflect a true commitment to public education.

Another important demand is the end of "veiled for-profit education" with the implementation of free public education at all levels.

The politics of reform remain uncertain. Jackson described the government's unwillingness to take part in meaningful negotiations as part of a strategy aimed at waiting

while preventing smaller parties and independents from gaining representation in Congress, are key to improving the quality of governance and rebuilding Chileans' confidence in their democratic institutions.

For all the strength showed in the streets, at the close of 2011, the record of the movement was mixed. Protestors had succeeded in moving education reform to the top of the political agenda, and it is unlikely that the newly appointed minister (a technocrat with experience in education) will continue to reject all of the students' key concerns. On the other hand, the hyper-presidential Chilean political system allows the ruling coalition to control the terms of engagement and block any major change. During 2011 budget discussions, Concertación parties were unable to extract any concession from the Piñera administration, despite holding a majority in the Senate. Their opposition to the education budget, which contained no increase in funding for public education, was reduced to a symbolic stance, and the proposed bill passed without major changes.

Although protests will likely continue in 2012, without real connections to opposition parties or alternative avenues to influence policy making, students will find it hard to maintain the vigor of the 2011 protests. At a time

when the specter of former President Bachelet's possible candidacy in the 2013 elections looms large in the Chilean political landscape, much of the future of this "winter of discontent" will depend on the students' ability to institutionalize their demands by constructing coalitions with other social actors and by participating in the political arena. In January 2012, Jackson himself took the first steps in this direction by founding a new political organization called "Revolución Democrática" (Democratic Revolution) with other social actors, workers and popular leaders.

Giorgio Jackson was president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad Católica de Chile (2010-11) and one of the key leaders of the 2011 student protests. He spoke for CLAS on November 30, 2011.

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Giorgio Jackson speaks in a discussion moderated by Professor Beatriz Manz.



Photo by Megan Kang.