

Mass Protest Movement in Chile

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Thousands of students, labor groups and activists march in Santiago as fires and violence run rampant during citywide demonstration.

More than 100,000 gathered throughout various locations in Santiago on Wednesday afternoon to march for sweeping social changes aimed at improving education and working conditions.



More than 100,000 marched in Santiago alone in Wednesday's nationwide protest. Photo by Sam Edwards / The Santiago Times

The mobilization was part of a [nationwide strike organized by the Confederation of Chilean Students](#) (Confech), an umbrella student group, and was accompanied by other marches in key cities throughout the country as well as a massive halt to the country's port operations.

Participants in the Santiago march included university and high school students, the National Teacher's Union, port workers, copper workers and The National Confederation of

Municipal Health Workers, among others.

But despite the color and cheer of marching bands and costumed protesters, hooded vandals known as "[encapuchados](#)," wasted no time in dragging the city into violence.

Carabineros, Chile's uniformed police force, were deployed to the streets early in the morning as various barricades and garbage piles were set ablaze throughout the city just before sunrise.

Interior Minister [Andrés Chadwick](#) quickly sent out a press release labeling those starting the fires as "delinquents" and calling on student leaders to condemn the violence.

"I am calling on organizers to condemn the violence without looking for excuses, to condemn the 'encapuchados,' the subversives, the extremists involved in the march which we know are going to infiltrate it and provoke disorder," said Chadwick.

Confech member and leader of the Student Federation of Universidad de Concepción (FEC) Javier Miranda, however, remained ambivalent about the violence associated with the march.

"Today we've organized a national protest to bring together many different organizations," Miranda told The Santiago Times. "Each advances the struggle in the ways they see fit."

Carabineros tweeted that two officers were hospitalized in the process of containing the fires in Santiago, one in serious condition with a broken wrist.

The violence and injuries to Carabineros continued throughout the commencement of the march, with fires and vandalism taking place at the Universidad de Santiago de Chile (Usach) starting point.

Much of the pandemonium was quelled as attendees from the copper, health, political and education sectors marched peacefully toward the final convocation at Plaza Los Héroes.

Characteristic of previous Confech marches, various drummers, dance groups, costumed actors and musical groups came out to lighten the mood and provide diversions from the early morning violence.

Copper, ports and education

Social leaders of all sectors also took to the stage after protesters from all three of the routes united on Alameda, the capital's main thoroughfare.

Diego Vela, leader of the Student Federation of the Universidad Católica (FEUC), highlighted the diversity of the mobilization.

"Today the focus is not [just] on Santiago or education, it's on the precarious situations that continue to occur in all regions," said Vela. "[This is why] port workers are on strike and copper workers have disrupted productivity."

"It's a reminder that we're not alone and also that there is a reinvigoration of social rights and the hope for a better Chile," said Vela, noting the [different sectors of the Chilean economy which participated in the day's protest](#).

Among the various issues discussed, copper took center stage with multiple leaders mentioning the intertwining of the red metal and education sectors.

Andrés Fielbaum, Confech member and president of the Student Federation of Universidad de Chile (FECH), spoke about the necessity of nationalizing the copper industry in order to pay for education reforms.

“Recovering our natural resources is the way in which we will fund our basic human rights,” said Fielbaum.

A violent ending

Shortly after leaders cleared the stage, “encapuchados” began throwing rocks and garbage at Carabineros, prompting the first of many water cannon blasts toward protesters.

Confrontations continued down Alameda, reaching a standoff in front of the presidential palace La Moneda and [Casa Central of Universidad de Chile](#), which currently remains occupied by students, or in “toma.”

FECH claimed that at least six students received medical treatment inside Casa Central by student paramedics.

Four more Carabineros were taken to the police force’s hospital, bringing the total of injured officers to at least six.

Despite multiple fires and injuries, leaders remained pleased with the results of the nationwide strike, claiming that 90 percent of the country’s ports were brought to a standstill and 100,000 people united for the march in Santiago.

Confech members called for two “cacerolazos,” or a traditional form of protest involving the banging of pots and pans, on Wednesday evening as the final conclusion to the day’s festivities. The first was scheduled for 7 p.m. in Plaza Italia with a later one at 9 p.m. in Plaza Ñuñoa.

The march also marks the 105th anniversary of the birth of Marxist [former President Salvador Allende](#).

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