

Unions in Chile demand emergency aid as pandemic spreads

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Demonstrators in Valparaiso take part in a rally called by Chile's Central Union of Workers to demand better pay and working conditions [Rodrigo Garrido/Reuters]

Santiago de Chile, May 1 (RHC)-- Wearing obligatory facemasks and holding permits that allow them to circulate under lockdown, more than 20 representatives from Chile's most important trade unions tried to

convince Special Forces police to allow them to deliver a letter to President Sebastian Piñera.

Barbara Figueroa, the president of CUT (United Confederation of Workers) led the delegation to the Moneda Presidential Palace, where she was told that only she would be allowed into the building.

“We all go or none of us,” Figueroa said. “We are all representing our unions, including teachers, the metro workers, Walmart supermarkets, teachers and medical personnel. We need the president to receive our petition.”

As she spoke, police suddenly began arresting a dozen of the union leaders and putting them into vans to be driven off to the nearest police station, accused of disturbing the peace in times of a pandemic.

It was a bad start for a national strike called by the CUT, which represents nearly 9 percent of salaried workers. They were joined by 35,000 public service workers, including from state television and CODELCO, Chile’s most important mining company. Chile is the world’s largest copper producer and exporter.

The letter, which was eventually delivered by Figueroa together with those who had not been arrested, outlines three key demands. “We warn the government not to ignore them: first, a health emergency payment of 500,000 pesos (\$700) for all the unemployed; a minimum wage that is above the poverty line, and the freezing of food prices,” Figueroa said.

As she spoke, President Pinera met the leaders of both houses of Congress to discuss a new emergency aid package for Chileans. Food kitchens have spread rapidly throughout the country since the pandemic began. Unemployment has climbed to nearly 11 percent. But so far, the government’s economic aid has proven to be both inadequate and difficult to access because of excessive red tape.

“I receive less than 1,000 pesos (\$142) from my pension. I can’t pay the rent and electricity, gas or water with it so I am not paying my bills, or eating properly. And I haven’t received a penny from the government since the pandemic began,” said 78-year-old retiree Rosa Diaz, who supports the strike.

With the vast majority of the country still under obligatory confinement, the strike has had mostly a symbolic impact. Nevertheless, there were small marches and protests around the country throughout the day. And it seems to have pressured the president to reconsider calls for urgent aid.

“We applaud the government’s decision to finally meet with leaders of Congress. We have always said that state support must be for everyone, not just a select few. The economic aid package should be sufficiently robust to offer economic, health and social security so that people can stay at home under confinement, and we can overcome this pandemic,” said Deputy Raul Soto, leader of the centre-left PPD Party bench.

To help pay for more aid, the opposition has proposed a tax bill for the so-called “super-rich.” It would raise taxes just once by 2.5 percent for an estimated 1,500 Chileans who are extremely wealthy. But as expected, there has been resistance from the country’s powerful business sector. Chile’s most prominent trade union leader believes there could be worse to come.

“Yes, we have an economic emergency now, with families who have nothing to eat. But afterwards, when it comes time to reactivate the economy, when there is a huge number of people desperately looking for work, that will present a breeding ground for abusive employers,” Figueroa warned.

“They’ll want to offer even worse wages and working conditions. That is why we have to take measures now.”



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