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# The Role of CONFECH in the Fight for Education in Chile

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## Introduction

In recent years, in Chilean society there have been various social demonstrations that question the prevailing neoliberalism and seek to change it. In these mobilizations, the role that students have played to push the state and the political system to legislate laws that guarantee the right to education stands out.

In order to position itself against the challenges of higher education in Chile, the Confederation of Students of Chile (CONFECH) was founded in 1984 during the National Congress of University Students between October 26 and 28. CONFECH is made up of student federations from every part of the country that have carried out confederation processes (Statutes of the Confederation of Students of Chile, 2018). The Confederation engages in informal bargaining with the Government of Chile on educational policy, and its members, that allow its functioning, are involved in decision-making and management of campuses in formal or informal ways and with different institutional frameworks in each university.

The CONFECH has been the backbone of student mobilization against neoliberal policies in Chile, in the educational sector, and in other social spheres, such as demands for pensions, access to health, among others. The confederation is conceived as a space of confluence between students, of organization, linkage, and political voice of young students.

For the purposes of this study, our central question is: What is the role of CONFECH in the fight against neoliberalism in educational policies in Chile? For this reason, this chapter aims to make a brief recount of the trajectory of the struggle against neoliberalism and to present the organizational structure of CONFECH, based on information obtained through interviews with leaders of the Chilean student movement.

CONFECH has mainly mobilized for better financing of higher education; access, universal gratuity, and a new educational model; effective measures to guarantee equity in access to education in the context of the Covid-19 health emergency; student mental health and an education free of violence (24 hours, 2022). Advances in these areas are key to understanding the political, articulating, and linking role that CONFECH has had in the fight against neoliberalism in education.

For this reason, in the data collection for the construction of this chapter, a form was made following the model structured by SIHEG, Chile (2021), in addition to meetings with leaders

of CONFECH itself, allowing us to know from the point of view of its members the political and articulating role that the organization has played. In relation to the ethical conduct and positionality used here, the data provided is for the exclusive use of the investigation, the interviewees being informed of the nature of the investigation and their confirmation or not of the linking of this information and subsequent publication of the information. same. The authors are student leaders with direct experience in CONFECH and scholars from other countries with a background in the student movement. Considering its positionality, the authors practiced a transparent data collection process to describe the Chilean situation reliably.

The chapter is composed of three main parts. The first section analyzes the context of higher education in Chile, with a focus on laws, regulations, and services that allow an understanding of the student condition in the country, to get concluded with a resume of political standings of CONFECH with this regard. The second section describes the structure of the organization and explains its recent mobilizations, defining the peculiar Chilean systems of student representation and intermediation, and considering the involvement of CONFECH in nonsectoral mobilizations as well. The third section enters the local level, looking at the student unions that compose CONFECH, trying to give an idea of the variety of its membership and of how student voice is articulated in Chilean universities.

## Context of Higher Education Policies in Chile and Student Protests

### The Educational System and Neoliberalism in Focus

Universities work with contracts from external companies to carry out tasks and activities related to teaching and the other basic needs of the institution (food, maintenance, security, etc.). When externalization is in place, it is more difficult to address the university for the lack of quality of for the violation of students and workers' rights, given the separation between institution and service providers. The types of contracts with teachers and other employees of the education system are usually precarious and there are various forms of contracting that do not allow these professionals to organize in unions. Today, there are a large number of these contracts that prevent the reorganization and the fight for their labor rights.

This implies avoiding all kinds of benefits, the tenders are quite strict and end up being precarious for public universities, since they do not seek quality. In the case of Catholic universities, it is the churches that receive the State subsidy, for example, at the Catholic University of Temuco only 20 percent of the students pay tuition while the rest are financed with scholarships or credits. There are also differences in the monthly fee. In Chile, the difference in fees between private and public universities is considerable. The case of a career can vary between 4 million pesos per year in a public university and 6 million pesos per year in a private university.

Regarding the reservation of vacancies by the well-known "social quotas," these do not exist in Chile. There are ways to enter through other modalities, such as the so-called "PACE Program for Access to Higher Education." Universities are also seeking to implement gender quotas in courses such as engineering, math, and other historically male majors. Unfortunately, the government does not have a direct participation in these measures; they are initiatives of the universities.

Students who are without scholarships can apply for so-called “universal scholarships” which are classified by socioeconomic level. There are also scholarships offered by the State itself and others offered by the university itself.

In 2019, all the problems that led to the so-called “social outbreak” came from many years ago and CONFECH has always remained mobilized, calling on the population to fight for the flags defended until then. The entity actively participated in the construction of long days of struggle in Chile (Limón, 2021); the political context was also crossed by neoliberalism, represented in the figure of former President Sebastián Piñera, former member of the National Renovation Party (RN). Regarding his government, he also witnessed permanent mobilizations such as the “popular revolt,” large demonstrations of rejection of the economic model implemented in the country, which occurred between 2019 and 2020 (Limón, 2021).

The pandemic made the organization of the student movement more complex because it was online, since there were health restrictions by the government, so mobilizing was complex. “In 2020 there was a great mobilization around issues related to education, since many students did not have internet, a computer and therefore a call was made for them to have access to education, which is essential in the resumption of education. previous fights” (El Mostrador, 2022).

Regarding the fight against neoliberalism, CONFECH fights against market education and seeks to make it a social good. That is why they were against the creation of universities without any type of regulation by private capital, which according to them is only interested in making profits. That is why one of its flags is the fight for the regulation of private education in the country, with a request of radical reform of tuition fees and student grants that stayed central in different waves of student mobilization in the country (Penaglia and Mejías, 2019).

In perspective, the historical demands of CONFECH are related to the constitutional changes implemented in the Military Dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973–90). Before the coup, the student organizations—student federations—had a presence and influence in the university councils and binding participation through the vote in the Rector elections. This situation changed with the 1980 constitution relegating student participation, reducing their participation in councils and denying participation in the Rector elections. This is considered a setback in university democracy and is sought to be reversed by CONFECH. Although the new Law on State Universities is currently in force, which seeks to reverse this situation, this has not been achieved because the participation of the student community—teachers, officials, and students—is restricted to the elections of directors and deans, without being able to participate in the rector elections.

Although in this research we focus on Chilean education, it is worth mentioning that neoliberalism is implemented in the 1980 Constitution; it permeates and structures social areas such as health, pensions, housing, and education. The main characteristic is that it reduces the presence of the state and establishes it as a subsidiary. Over the years it has generated a precariousness of life and that its solvency is through credit. Therefore, returning to the study of education, the CONFECH and the student mobilizations are against, in repudiation of neoliberalism and its authoritarian character in the country. For this reason, one of the most relevant historical demands is the fight for education to be enshrined as a constitutional right, this being a way of directly combating neoliberalism and the educational market that it has generated. One of CONFECH’s other proposals is to freeze tariffs so that they do not continue to rise until there is free education for all in Chile (Cooperativa.cl 10/07/2011).

## For a Universal Free Policy in Higher Education: A Brief Review of the Struggles of the Chilean Student Movement

Reviewing the moments in which the Chilean student movement has had the greatest strength to combat neoliberalism, we identify that the mobilizations given in the years 2006, 2011, 2018, and 2019 have been key to advancing the historical demands. Next, we discuss the particularities of each one.

In Chile, the great mobilizations of secondary school students in 2006 became known as “the revolt of the penguins.” The name was related to the student uniform, which consists of the “jumper or blue blazer with white shirt.” Among the reasons for this mobilization were the demands for improvements in the educational system (Romancini, 2019), which translates into demanding an end to the Constitutional Organic Law (LOCE) that, among other things, regulates education centers for high school students. This demand is accompanied by the requirement of free admission to the University Selection Test (PSU), school pass, and differentiated rate for students on public transport, among others.

The Chilean student movement, after the mobilizations against the increase in public transport ticket prices, through the actions “backpacking” and the “Rise of the Penguins,” made President Michelle Bachelet of the Socialist Party of Chile, back down on several policies of which the students were critical, as was the case of the mobilizations against the Constitutional Organic Law of Education—LOCE and the Full School Day—JEC (Campos-Martínez and Olavarría, 2020, pp. 102–4, Library of Congress, 2019, Romero Reyes 2021, p. 93, Somma and Donoso, 2021, pp. 250–2).

In 2011, during the first government of Sebastián Piñera, the mobilizations led by university and high school students were a milestone that challenged the heart of the Chilean education system. “Free and quality education” was the slogan that was raised on banners and chants of the massive marches throughout the country. Camila Vallejo Dowling, a militant of the communist party, stands out. At that time, she served as president of the Federation of Students of the University of Chile (2010–11) and CONFECH spokesperson for the same period; currently, she is Minister Secretary General of Government. Giorgio Jackson Drago, member of the Democratic Revolution party, served as president of the student federation of the Catholic University of Chile (2010–11) and CONFECH spokesperson for the same period. He currently serves as Minister Secretary General of the Presidency. Gabriel Boric Font, who was president of the student federation of the University of Chile (2011–12) and spokesperson for CONFECH for the same period, is currently the President of the Republic of Chile.

Regarding demands, higher education students demanded a reform of the university access system to ensure equal opportunities, an increase in the state’s contribution to state universities, among others. Meanwhile, the high schools raised the need for a constitutional reform to guarantee the right to education over the freedom of education and that it be: egalitarian, secular, free, and of quality. The demands are positioned against the given market in education and, in turn, against neoliberalism. This is what Leonora Reyes, an academic from the Department of Pedagogical Studies of the University of Chile, points out in her reflection on ten years of the 2011 student movement. state subsidy, “(...) is the focus of the questioning of a crucial aspect of the Constitution of ‘80, which is that the right to education is subject to freedom of education, understood as this possibility of trading with education” (Jara, 2021). Thus, the students mobilized for more than eight months for changes in the country’s education; one of the slogans was “Free

and quality education” for which classes were systematically suspended, leading many students to being unable to complete high school that year, which delayed the completion of their studies and weakened the student movement for the following years (Jara, 2021).

In relation to the progress made in higher education policy as a result of this mobilization, we can cite the law that guarantees that higher education is for everyone, called the “State University Law,” which was approved in Chile only in 2018, which seeks to democratize state universities after years of student struggle, beginning in 2011, until today (Somma and Donoso, 2021, p. 254). However, over the years some of the demands of the students have been answered.

During 2015, the student movements resurfaced, giving way to 2016, the beginning of gratuity, which, although not universal, is a great advance for the historical demands of the student movement (Somma and Donoso, 2021, p. 261).

It is then, in the second term of President Bachelet with the entry of the Communist Party of Chile into her coalition, that an attempt will be made to approve some of the demands that until now had not been approved, but that are important for the Chilean people. In this same discussion, a way was proposed for the State to implement higher education for all. Until that moment, the way in which financing was delivered in higher education for those who could not pay the fee in the public universities of the country proposed a benefit for the formal period of the career, which lasts approximately five years, in which you receive a scholarship to finance your university degree during the school years of professional training, where it raises the current demand that “there is no universal gratuity,” because it does not guarantee the fundamental right to universal access to Higher Education. That is, it is for a single sector understanding the socioeconomic level; however, a large part of the population is middle class and this benefit should not discriminate against the ability to pay. Even in the university management voices were raised for the gratuity of education for all, in particular the Rector of the University of Bio-Bio claimed the end of discrimination based on students’ ability to pay, underlining the centrality of the public in the university system (UBB News, 2015).

In the same year that the “State University Law” was approved, which briefly responds to the student demands of 2011, demonstrations began throughout the country during the months of April–May 2018 on behalf of high school students and higher education denouncing sexual harassment and abuse in the classroom. This mobilization was recognized by the media as “the feminist May” or “the new feminist wave” (Montes, 2018).

In the petition of the students there is a criticism of the patriarchy of Chilean universities and the houses of study are challenged to combat it through the creation and implementation of protocols against harassment and generation of a nonsexist education (Ponce, 2020). This meant a moment of vindication and visibility for the role of women in the different disciplines of knowledge, arts, and sciences, with claims for training on equality, creation of gender units or offices in the student houses, and parity in the teaching bodies.

The social mobilizations of 2019 begin with the strike of teachers who mobilized for more than fifty days. Among their demands, the following stand out: Infrastructure of educational establishments, Curriculum Modification, Historical Debt Payment, among others (Romero, 2019). This mobilization, given during the winter of the second government of Sebastián Piñera, was questioned and sought to promote a constitutional accusation of Marcela Cubillos, who served as minister of education. She resigns after blocking the dialogue with the teachers’ college.

As for higher education students, they are mobilized in support of teachers. Once the teaching stoppage is over, the mobilization decreases, leaving some schools paralyzed due to internal

issues and others returning to classes. Until October 18, the day on which the public transport fare hike is applied, it is the high school students who organize themselves and begin a wave of ticket evasion (Tallardà, 2019). The government of Sebastián Piñera withdraws the measure but the boredom in the population is such that the demonstrations spread during the day to other regions and the government's response is to decree a state of emergency and repress the demonstrations with the military.

On October 18, a period of citizen mobilization begins without precedent in terms of the magnitude of the call. In the marches, banners are read against the pension system, the demand for a decent health system, an end to the waiting lists for operations, access to housing, cancellation of the credit debt with the guarantee of the State, free, and universal education, assembly constituent, among others. The mobilization recognizes itself without leaders and challenges the 1980 constitution. "On November 15, the government and various parties called for a national agreement, which establishes, among other things, a pact between different political forces and that begins a process for a new constitution" (Universidad, 2021).

The facts that we reviewed before are part of the main events in the history of Chile that impacted the reforms of higher education or other social changes in the country. Although progress is identified in the student struggle against neoliberalism, such as the implementation of partial gratuity and changes in income through a new model, which is reflected in the transfer of the "PSU" Selection Test University to "PDT" University Transition Test, no response has been given to the historical demands of the student movement. The main barrier to being able to advance in guaranteeing the right to education and in turn making transcendental changes in equality, such as the implementation of universal gratuity, is the 1980 constitution.

Among the current challenges of the student movement is the approval of the constitution drafted by the Constitutional Convention during 2021 and which will be voted on through a referendum on September 4, 2022. The confederation points out through a statement published on its social networks, among other things, that "this proposal for a New Constitution opens the door for unprecedented transformations in our social and political history." Since it establishes "the right to education, governed by the principles of cooperation, non-discrimination, inclusion, justice, participation, solidarity, interculturality, gender approach, pluralism, imparted free of charge and equitably, ensuring its quality (...)" (CONDATE, 2022). They close the statement, committing beyond the plebiscite, seeking to strengthen democracy and promoting spaces for participation in the social and student bases, which allow the implementation of this new constitution. From this latest statement, we understand that it is in the new constitution and its implementation that CONFECH contemplates achieving universal gratuity.

## Mobilizations and Organizational Structures of the Chilean Student Movement

In the process of reviewing the mobilizations of the CONFECH in the present, we identify the following demands: increase in the food scholarship and end student loans with the guarantee of the State. Another key element is the support to the approval of the new Constitution on September 4, 2022.

The increase in the food grants is another concern. Food grants have not been readjusted for ten years. The amount that is granted monthly to the most vulnerable students is not enough to meet the minimum requirements of the basic food basket. The spokeswoman Verónica Parra explains in the education commission of the Chamber of Deputies:

In 2012, when the BAES was readjusted to 32 thousand pesos, the basic basket had a value of 31,029 pesos. In August 2021, the basic basket is 48,260 pesos according to information from the Ministry of Social Development.

(Mostrador, 2021)

For this reason, the confederation calls for the first mobilization of the year 2022 for March 25 under the government of President Gabriel Boric, with the motto “it’s not 32 lucas, it’s 32 years” and “pure bread, pure tea, that’s how Junaeb has us” (El Mostrador, 2022). In relation to the demand for the term of the credit with the guarantee of the State (CAE), from the confederation they hope that the construction of the mechanism and the deadlines to respond to indebted students will be built in conjunction with the Ministry of Education (Martinez, 2022) and is included in the discussion of this year’s budget law.

After a follow-up to the process and discussions carried out for more than three months, the confederation informed through a statement that they decided on July 2, 2022, “Support the option of approval in the exit plebiscite this September 4” (CONFECH, 2022). They pointed out that the proposal opens the doors for social and political transformations that allow the right to education to be consecrated.

These demands are accompanied by the challenge of rearticulating the student movement. This is what Maite Estay, CONFECH spokeswoman and president of the student federation of the Catholic University of Chile, points out in an interview with a digital newspaper:

This year we proposed rearticulating the student movement and taking care of the immediate and basic needs of the student body, with a view to achieving a rearticulation that transcends those needs, and that focuses on what is fundamental, which is the transformation of education.

(Arriagada, 2022)

## Mobilizations and Organizational Structures of the Coordinadora Nacional de Estudiantes Lucha BAES (National Student Coordinating Committee BAES Struggle)

The National Student Coordinating Committee BAES Struggle (formerly Lucha BAES), which emerged in 2021 in the Chilean context, has as its main objective to advocate for improvements in the Beca de Alimentación para la Educación Superior (Higher education food scholarship) (BAES). It proposes an increase in the amount of the scholarship to \$64,000 per month, equivalent to two Unidades de Fomento in Chile. This movement, composed of students from various universities and careers, originated in the social outburst of 2019, although it was formalized in 2021. Initially, it had the support of the Confederation of Students of Chile (CONFECH); however, after disagreements, both



organizations took separate courses at the end of 2021. Among the main demands of the Coordinadora are the increase in the amount of the BAES, its readjustment, extension, and improvement in aspects of transportation and food focusing on the accessibility of education by students. It has also taken some flags, such as the CAE Condonation. In relation to this, Osvaldo Azócar, spokesman for Lucha Baes and former president of the Student Federation of the University of Concepción (FeUdeC) Los Angeles in the period 2020-2021, expressed his dissatisfaction with the priorities of President Boric, mentioning that the CAE condonation was a key proposal during the presidential campaign and criticized that it is now relegated to the background (Bobadilla González, 2023).

During 2022, two significant demonstrations were held, one in March in collaboration with CONFECH, and another in May, both focused on making visible the demands related to BAES and other educational issues. As a result of these mobilizations, Lucha BAES achieved several increases in the amount of the BAES in a period of less than two years: in June 2022, the amount increased from \$32,000 to \$37,000; in March 2023, it was increased to \$40,000; in July 2023, it was raised to \$42,000; and in September 2023, a future increase of \$3,000 was announced, setting the amount of the BAES at \$45,000 by the beginning of 2024.

In a meeting on March 25, 2022, the Undersecretary of Higher Education, Verónica Figueroa Huencho, together with the Ministry of Education team, received spokespersons from CONFECH and the Lucha BAES movement at the Palace of La Moneda. During this meeting, the Undersecretary expressed, “On this occasion we have received their petition, their demands, their concerns, we have been able to talk about the agenda that we have underway ... we understand that the way to move forward in improving not only the quality of student life, but to deliver dignity to our students in the higher education system is through dialogue, putting all issues on the table, listening to us and that has been the mandate we have been given” (Ministry of Education, 2022). Osvaldo Azócar, spokesman of Lucha BAES, thanked the authorities for receiving them and allowing the delivery of the petition that had been built and worked for a considerable time.

The National Coordinator of Students Lucha BAES has been represented by various spokespersons, among them, Osvaldo Antonio Azocar, Cresente Lizarbe Luna, Gary Diaz, Nicolas Henriquez, Alexander, Maria Jesus and Karla Escalante, who represents the Professional Institutes in Chile. This multifaceted representation shows a notable difference with CONFECH, where the Coordinadora leans more towards mobilization, protest and more effective and innovative negotiation, which has yielded significant results in a relatively short time.

In a session in the Education Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, the spokespersons of Lucha BAES, Osvaldo Azócar and Cresente Lizarbe, underlined the insufficiency of the current amount of the Higher Education Food Scholarships (BAES) and proposed a calculation in Unidades de Fomento (UF) to reflect the real cost of food, in addition to an extended annual coverage (Press Center of the Chamber of Deputies, 2022). Later, in an interview with ADN Hoy, Cresente Lizarbe detailed the students’ demands, focusing on an increase of the BAES to “\$63 thousand, equivalent to two UF”, and an extension and expansion of the benefit, including coverage in the months of January and February, and a diversification in the places and types of food covered by the scholarship (Bravo, 2022). Despite the dissatisfaction with governmental responses, especially regarding the monetary readjustments of the BAES, the Coordinadora, with the growing support of the student community, continues to be a prominent voice in discussions about higher education in Chile. This is evidence of the persistent student struggle in an increasingly costly higher education scenario, reaffirming the need to effectively and equitably address student concerns and needs.

## The Organizational Structure of CONFECH

In relation to its organizational structure, the Confederation of Students of Chile during the last ten years is made up of forty-six federations and represents around 1.2 million students (MINEDUC, 2021). All Chilean student federations, democratically elected, belonging or not to the Council of Rectors, are members of the confederation, in compliance with the requirements indicated in their statute.

The declaration of principles states that CONFECH “is the social expression of the struggle of students and their families in search of a different educational model for the country, which consecrates education as a social right for all” (Statutes de la CONFECH, 2018, p. 1).

This confederation recognizes itself as belonging to the social movements, therefore “(...) it subordinates its actions to the citizenry and does not submit to any external political agenda or representation institutional” (Statutes of the CONFECH, 2018, 1). It currently does not have a legal personality. CONFECH is neither financed by the Chilean State nor by its agencies, and it does not have stable national offices. The organization of events and assemblies happens through the direct involvement of local university federations that are coordinated both at regional and national levels.

In relation to its internal organization, it has national spokespersons, whose tasks are “[...] to express the will of CONFECH before the corresponding media on the agreements established in the plenary sessions, as well as to relate to the educational authorities and maintain a direct contact with the other entities that are part of the social movement” (Statutes of the CONFECH, 2018, p. 4). The spokespersons are elected in each zone according to their statutes.

The “zonales” are coordination spaces for student federations based on the geographical area where they are located. Its objective is “[...] to deepen the specific problems and obtain a methodological and decentralized work” (Statutes of the CONFECH, 2018, p. 4). The confederation was subdivided into four zones: North (whose federations and their study houses are located between the regions of Arica and Parinacota up to the Region of Coquimbo); Metropolitan (federations and houses of studies that are located in the Metropolitan region); Fifth (federations and study houses that are located in the fifth region); and South (federations and study houses that are located between the sixth to the twelfth region and fourteenth).

The CONFECH management is represented in the Executive Board, “body in charge of executing the will of the confederation and ensuring compliance with the objectives set in the plenary sessions” (Statutes of CONFECH, 2018, p. 5). This executive body is made up of the spokespersons of each zone.

## CONFECH, the Relationship with the Ministry of Education of Chile, and the Student Intermediation and Representation Systems

The student representation system has specific characteristics due to the presence of a primarily representative organization (the CONFECH), with its internal plurality, in a potentially plural context that saw the emergence of parallel structures in moments of great mobilization and political conflict (Ancelovici and Guzmán-Concha, 2019, p. 986; Somma and Donoso, 2021, pp. 256–7). CONFECH can be described as an umbrella organization, a “confederation of federations” with an independent structure and entirely organized by the same activists that compose it, without

a national office or a ministerial financing system (Ancelovici and Guzmán-Concha, 2019, p. 983). It is possible to define CONFECH as a “social movement organization” (Klemenčič, 2012, pp. 7–8), with a political agenda that is not exclusively sectoral and a perfect structure to favor noninstitutional forms of representation.

Currently in Chile there is no direct relationship between the Ministry and CONFECH or any student organization; however, it is possible to establish communication with this entity from any social (guilds, unions, etc.) or student organization by gathering information; according to whatever the context, a request is drawn up in the form of a letter and sent to the Ministry to make the need or request visible, as appropriate. Entities such as the National Accreditation Commission (CNA) maintain a link from the ministry to the study houses, but it does not consider the federations but rather the university itself; however, since CONFECH is the body with the greatest representation at the student level, it has greater visibility when making requests or showing demands. Negotiation with the government and institutions is a “political” and “unregulated” practice (Bellei et al., 2014, p. 433).

The distance between the student organization and the institutions places CONFECH in an informal intermediation system, as theorized by Manja Klemenčič (2012, p. 12). Conflict and mobilization are essential instruments of student vindication in Chile, and the media relevance of the protests is connected to the influence of the student movement on decision-making processes. The student movement can represent a serious threat to the popularity of government leaders, also reaching “appeasement” operations, concessions, and contrary to repression (Somma and Donoso, 2021, pp. 257–8; Yuan, 2016, p. 12, 57–60). The partisan youth have a role in CONFECH, thanks to the correspondence of leaders of the student movement and of these organizations connected to the political parties. This double function of some leaders had specific relevance in the individual stories, with leaders of the student movement accessing electoral politics immediately after finishing their positions, as in the emblematic case of Camila Vallejo, of the Communist Party of Chile (McSherry and Mejia, 2011, p. 4; Palacios-Valladares, 2017, p. 607). The proximity to the partisan “polities” allowed faster access and an intensification of informal relations with political leaders, but since 2008 a detachment began, characterizing the student movement in a different way and strengthening its conflictive position and alternative to traditional power.

## CONFECH and the Struggles of the Chilean People

The mobilizations that CONFECH has given in recent years have also been the struggles of the Chilean people and vice versa. We recognize the first great demonstration, the penguin revolution of 2006 followed by the student mobilization of 2011, where high school and university students confronted the government and parliamentarians demanding that it is the duty of the State to guarantee the right to education. In this mobilization, CONFECH played a role of spokesperson, coordination, and linking the mobilized students with institutions and the media.

Between the years 2012 and 2017, the confederation mobilized, pushing the historical demands of the student movement, but it did not achieve such a call as what happened during the year 2011. In turn, the organization joins various social demands by participating in the coordination of demonstrations with the “no more AFP” movement, which seeks to put an end to

the system of individual capitalization of pensions, and calls for the right to health, environmental justice, among others.

It is until 2018, when the streets of Chile overflow with women demonstrating, called by the Chilean feminist movement. The marches and interventions in the public space took place throughout the national territory, lasting the entire year. The demonstration was motivated by the reports of abuse and harassment that existed in university spaces and the few safeguards by the institutions. CONFECH supported these mobilizations; it also played a linking and coordinating role between the different universities. A national petition is made whose centrality aims to demand a nonsexist education, which is accompanied by various marches and interventions in the public space. The main events were on campus through the feminist marches. The results were protocols for the prevention of harassment and abuse on university campuses and sanctions for these cases (Somma and Donoso, 2021, p. 262).

In 2018, the aforementioned mobilization entitled “Feminist May” was carried out, in which all universities (traditional, private, and public) saw the feminist movement against abuses (sexist comments, education and division of careers between men and women) and these abuses happened in all the departments and levels of the university (oppression of the men who make up the teaching, civil servant, or student classes against the women of the university community); after that, the protocols against mistreatment, harassment, abuse, and discrimination. The student movement fights for nonsexist education and safe spaces for all (Sola and Quiroz, 2021).

The protocols are different with respect to the demand of each university. For example, some universities are trying to streamline complaints and sanctions since it took years, often more than five years, and there was no response, so this protocol sought to streamline and implement victim care centers, not only students but the entire community in general; in the year 2021 Law 21,369 is enacted that regulates sexual harassment, violence, and gender discrimination in the field of higher education (Biblioteca del Congreso, 2021).

During the year 2019, there were important mobilizations in the Valparaíso region. The first was called by the “8M” coordination on March 8 for the commemoration of the international day of working women, seeing the participation of more than one million of people to the protest. The second, the mobilization against climate change, called by “Fridays for Future,” which called on the government to take an active role in the organization of COP 25, to be held that same year in the region (Diario Sustentable, 03/10/2019).

In October of the same year—2019—high school students are called to “jump the turnstiles” of the Santiago metro, as a form of protest against the repeated increases in the public locomotion ticket. The call was so massive that the students managed to paralyze the country’s capital, to which President Sebastian Piñera reacted with strong repression and decreed that same day a state of emergency, leaving the governance and security of the metropolitan region in charge to the armed forces. The level of repression suffered by young people was such that the next day massive protests began throughout the country. Although the mobilization is initiated by high school students, both university students and all citizens join them, paralyzing the universities and organizing interventions in each territory.

Regarding the role of CONFECH, its struggles, and coordination with student organizations in Latin America, we highlight its link with the Continental Organization of Latin American and Caribbean Students Organization (OCLAE). OCLAE has as one of its main objectives to build

educational cooperation, as a key step in the social and cultural development of the countries of the region and in the advance of the Latin American integration project (Summary 2021; Borges des Santos, Lipari and Romero 2024).

In this way, it was possible to perceive the relevance of this construction to understand the Integration of Latin America, from the formation of the educational policies present in the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), as well as to analyze the relationship of these movements with the flags of the anti-imperialist struggles, against machismo, racism, homophobia, and neoliberalism in the region.

## CONFECH's Members/Local Branches Organization, Mobilizations, and Interactions in Governance of Universities

The student federations have dynamic structures; there is no general statute of the operation of each of the federations that are in the CONFECH, beyond a general framework that does not conflict with its general guidelines. Each federation has a different organization, and under the material conditions of their respective houses of study, we can find that these dynamics are not very different from each other. This is evidenced in its form of organization that is mainly located in the assembly.

It is possible to show that the federations are the instance of maximum student representation, but also in most of the houses of studies they are followed by the student centers, which are organizations that carry out a much more specific job, attending to the student demands regarding careers that they attend. This same work is fundamental for the organization of the federations, since the student centers are the ones in charge of generating the political discussions, taking into account the national situations as well as the university ones, and once the synthesis of these discussions has been generated, they are taken to an instance of assemblies, meetings where—mainly—the presidencies of the student centers meet and dialogue in a general way to find points in common and points of discussion. These points can lead to internal work at the university or territorial level, or they can be taken to national bodies such as CONFECH.

This is just one example, since there are universities that have advanced in recognizing delegations or representatives by faculties, or a figure attached to the federation but elected by a different process such as the Superior Councils. These bodies have a specific relevance in the stakeholding and sometimes in the management at faculty level that is different in each university and not uniformed across the country.

For the qualitative analysis carried out, a survey was applied to sixteen higher education institutions, which were answered by their respective representative student bodies. First, it is important to point out that all student bodies belong to CONFECH; in addition to this, there is territorial representation since they are divided among eight of the sixteen Chilean regions. The Santiago metropolitan region is the most representative, including the national capital and a greater concentration of Higher Education Institutions.

There are seven universities dedicated to research as part of the academic training that students receive, five only to teaching and four are defined as another type of higher education institution. In addition to this, six of these institutions are public, nine private nonprofit, and one is traditionally private.

The number of students, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, is also a relevant fact to analyze and from this we can highlight that four universities have approximately between 500 and 5,000 students, of which there is an average of 3,300, and of these most are associated with the association student being their automatic membership to be enrolled in the institution and governed by internal regulations. On the other hand, universities with 5,000–10,000 students have voluntary membership and participation ranges from 85 percent to 100 percent. In addition to this, the universities that have between 10,000 and 20,000 students also have a voluntary system where the partition is symbolic and of these four universities, one of them has automatic or compulsory membership, which shows the difference in participation since this institution has a participation of 15,000 students and another volunteer lowered the participation to 2,500.

There are only two universities with more than 20,000 students and it just so happens that they are private nonprofit, one of them with 100 percent participation and the other with 70 percent.

Regarding the status of the organization, six of them are not registered as a legal entity and the other ten are administrative units. They all have a budget, be it in the form of grants or project financing, which is around 24,200 USD, none of them own real estate; however, only two of them do not have a work office.

It is important to note that there is a unanimous response that the work carried out by the leaders is not compensated monetarily; everything is voluntary. The internal organization decisions are totally in the hands of students in 50 percent of the universities and 68 percent have an independent bank account.

Regarding the composition of the student organization, it is possible to find that nine of the sixteen organizations have a composition marked by diversity, among which gender parity and dissidence stand out. There is no formal link between political parties and the organization, but those who make it up do have personal ties. The political agenda is decided autonomously in twelve of the sixteen study houses, three remain neutral in the face of events and only one disagrees.

They all disagree or remain neutral, having close ties to political parties. However, more than 50 percent have union ties. The political agenda of the year 2021 was marked by the return to classes, Covid protocols, mental health, and feminism.

The form of organization or struggle adopted is diverse and is based on two great facts, representation in institutional spaces and protest.

The level of participation in the last elections borders between 50 percent and 13 percent in most organizations and most of them maintain that participation has been decreasing within the last five years.

We can know that the student federations throughout the country have undergone various changes over time, but of all of them the CONFECH has been able to bring together, during the history of the student movement, the variety of public, private, and traditional universities, forms of organizations within the study houses, a wide spectrum of political thoughts, and even different ways in which they move. But within all this we can know that something in common

is that all the federations that make up CONFECH itself are totally voluntary and they give part of their life to the service of the students. Finally, the CONFECH is independent of any political party or political agenda and functions more as an intermediary entity between the student body and government institutions.

## Conclusions

In the study presented above, we have confirmed that the Chilean student movement has actively supported the political events called by student organizations and other social movements in the country. This has led the confederation to be part of great social transformations. An example of this is the recent consolidation of the construction process of the new Constitution in the country, which defeated the authoritarianism of the previous Constitution created in 1980 and implemented in the dictatorial regime of Pinochet. However, it is necessary to indicate that this process is the result of the critical social mobilizations that took place in 2019, which was characterized by being transversal and not having a leader in front, where social and political organizations supported the citizen calls. This great mobilization raised demands that have been historically ignored by the political class, including educational related ones. The broad support earned by students led to phases of intense political participation of citizens, questioning neoliberal education and even the broader constitutional asset of the country.

It is evident that the validity of the neoliberal values still present in the Chilean Constitution had a direct impact on the country's educational system; the collection of monthly fees even in public institutions of higher education, added to the nonexistence of universal gratuity, demonstrates deeply rooted values of the commodification of higher education.

However, the organization of the student movement through its organizations and leaders contributed to the fact that in a short span of time the country suffered significant changes in these policies, and at the same time the possibility of building other paths toward popularization and universal access to education based on the Constitutional Convention.

The change from the policy of acquiring scholarships to the fight for education as a universal good is one of the main flags of the organization and is directly related to the participation of CONFECH in the construction of the new constitution. The participation of the organization was fundamental because beforehand they were already building a Constituent Assembly. However, through an agreement between the aforementioned political parties, CONFECH supported another solution due to their principle of the importance of defending free education, always fighting against the vision of education as a market good.

Answering our question, what is the role of CONFECH in the fight against neoliberalism in educational policies in Chile? The confederation has played a role of articulation at the national level, as a spokesperson for students and as a link with social movements.

Support for the election of Gabriel Boric, a former student leader and president of the FECH, as president of Chile, was initially highly criticized for his "peace" agreement, which was agreed behind closed doors for the construction of the Constitutional Convention given that a majority sought the installation of a Constituent Assembly; therefore, there was criticism for the form of said agreements, these being not defined by the citizenry but by the political parties of the

majority coalitions in Chile. Currently with him elected and the last months of the campaign, this movement was seen as something favorable and showed that it can have articulations for a greater good. After the result of the first round, CONFECH positioned itself, probably for the first time in its history, in such an assertive manner, supporting a presidential candidate, in which case Gabriel Boric would be the candidate and then elected president of Chile (Martínez and Moreno, 2021).

Thus, the Chilean student movement and its main coordinator CONFECH are among the main actors in national politics, contributing to the development of ideas with approaches based on equity, leading mobilizations on relevant issues in the area of education and the selection of the new political leadership in the country. If the years of government of the Socialist Party meant a change in strategies and a more open stance than in the years of the right-wing government, it will be interesting to see what the decisions of the student movement will be in the face of a left-wing government led by people from direct origin from the CONFECH and the student associations.

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