

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6411>



Chile

Chile: The fissures of neoliberalism and the return of an “explosive” class struggle

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV541 - February 2020 -

Publication date: Tuesday 18 February 2020

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

For months now, Chile has been at the centre of world news: the multifaceted popular revolt that erupted on 18 October, 2019 around an increase in the price of metro tickets has become one of the major events of the last thirty years for this country which is often described as one of the "laboratories" of neoliberal capitalism in "Latin" America.

It must be said that the Chilean ruling classes have really sold the image of a “Chilean Jaguar”, a model of economic growth and stability. Sebastián Piñera, the billionaire president of the country, even spoke of an “oasis” country: less than a week after these declarations, we were witnessing the start of an unprecedented social mobilization and he declared on television that the “country [was] at war”!

Behind the window of “modern” and neoliberal Chile, we find the most significant inequalities on the planet, and considerable levels of exploitation of labour and destruction of nature. Let us recall the violence of capitalism applied since 1973 with the Pinochet dictatorship, then in 1975 with the neoliberal “turning point” of the “Chicago boys” and continued from the 1990s under the different civilian governments.

The “democratic transition” pact between the centre, the right and the military, praised as “successful” by the advocates of “consensus”, in fact made it possible to legitimize the defeat of the popular camp of 1973 (with the crushing of the “Chilean road to socialism” and the death of Allende), but also that of the sectors of the radical left which sought in the 1980s to bring down Pinochet by arms and mass mobilization. The “democracy” born in 1990 - under the tutelage of the military - is led by a political class which ended up agreeing to keep (with some reforms) the constitution drawn up in 1980. And even if extreme poverty has largely decreased for thirty years, strong social inequalities have been maintained, as has a violently extractivist and predatory development model, in which almost all social activities (health, education, transport, pensions) have been opened up to capital. This is what makes the country's economy today dominated by a handful of bourgeois families while half of the workers earn less than 480 euros per month (while the price of a metro trip to Santiago is one euro).

It is this whole edifice that is in crisis, under the blows of the social explosion of October and a formidable revival of popular struggles. This massive revolt is linked to an accumulation of previous experiences of resistance, those of the struggles of the Mapuche people, of large workers’ mobilizations (from 2006-2007), but also of high school students and students (we think of the “student spring” of 2011). We should also underline the multiplication of eco-territorial struggles in the face of the ecological ravages of big companies. Finally, we can cite the mobilizations around the question of a pension system entirely in the hands of pension funds (capitalization put in place by the brother of the current president, José Piñera, a minister under the dictatorship).

However, the traditional organized labour movement (very weak since the dictatorship) did not play a key role in triggering this social explosion. What emerges first are the struggles of precarious youth, who began jumping over the turnstiles of the metro in Santiago, collectively. Then with the repression and militarization of public space, we are witnessing the widening of struggling social spaces and demands in terms of critiques of neoliberalism. It was at this point that sectors of the workers’ movement, and in particular those of the most politicized strategic trade unionism, started to move.

This is particularly true in the case of the dockers of the *Unión Portuaria*, who from Monday 21 October called for a strike while the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) remained paralyzed for a long time. [1] The workers’ movement therefore started with two major national strikes (not renewed however), but quite late and with the brakes of some of the leaderships in place. The reactivation of a broad unitary initiative, Unidad Social, in which we find the

Chile: The fissures of neoliberalism and the return of an “explosive” class struggle

CUT, the No+AFP movement against pension funds, the feminist March 8 Coordination, and political ecology sectors, has played an important role in shifting the balance of power and making the government back down, particularly on the issue of the state of emergency. Yet here again, procrastinations were numerous and the massive calls for the dismissal of Piñera – by the movement – were not taken up, and nor were those for a general strike, which could have radically changed the situation and called into question the hegemony of the dominant classes.

If the mobilization continues and should grow again in March (with the end of the summer holidays), state repression also continues: according to the National Institute of Human Rights of Chile, an official body, there are about thirty dead, 3,649 injured, including almost 2,000 by firearms and more than 400 people wounded. For three months, and almost every week, there has been a death on the streets of Santiago.

The strength of the movement is based on the multiple experiences of territorial self-organization, the hundreds of neighbourhood assemblies and *cabildos* (councils) that continue to collectively develop, organize and envisage a Chile without the Pinochet constitution, truly democratic, feminist, ecosocial, post-neoliberal (without the anti-capitalist perspectives being on the agenda at this stage). While parliament and the government try to control the street and tame class conflict with an “Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution”, the problem – unresolved – remains that of building a clear ecosocialist perspective, independent of the institutions inherited from the dictatorship, inserted in the struggles, undogmatic – and to establish - finally – a Constituent Assembly, truly resulting from the power of the people, that is to say free, sovereign, joint and plurinational. At a minimum, constitutional change must be articulated with a program of deep post-neoliberal social reforms and the setting up of an independent commission to judge and dismiss all those responsible for state repression. The challenges are enormous, the potential for transformation too, but the political organizations that could carry out such a project are still very weak and in the minority, while the Frente Amplio (born in 2017) has shown throughout the conflict how much it is already largely integrated into the bourgeois order and incapable of embodying a real alternative.

3 February 2020

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] The CUT is a largely bureaucratized union federation, in the hands of parties of the former “Concertation”, namely the Socialist Party, the Christian Democracy, and the Communist Party.