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Chile

# In the depths of a Chilean winter: the promises of a social and political spring

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**Courtesy of the harsh southern winter, it is in the cold and rain that Chilean students have been fighting for their demands for nearly three months now.**

**They are nonetheless planting seeds – as the mobilizations of civil society continue to grow – that offer the promise of a formidable social and political spring; a spring which could give us plenty to think about, here in Quebec. Because observing the echoes of this social effervescence which led on 23 and 24 August, 2011 to a general strike called by the trade union movement, you cannot help but be struck by the inescapable dead ends of the neoliberal model and by the means that a society must deploy to try and oppose it successfully.**

Chile as a country has always been a barometer, a kind of social and political laboratory that enables us to see more clearly what is happening elsewhere, on a world scale. That was the case in the 1960s and 70s, with the Popular Unity of Salvador Allende, an expression of that “hour of the furnaces” which had, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, set the continent ablaze with its aspirations for social change. It was in the 1970s and 80s, with the dictatorship of national security of General Pinochet, a symbol of that ferocious repression and of the imposition by force of a neoliberal economic model which would soon become standard all over the world. It was also an example in the 1990s and the 2000 decade, with the return to democracy, but to a “restricted democracy”, with the armed forces continuing to rule behind the throne. And perhaps it is an example today with this strike which has such absolutely unprecedented features?

## A strike without precedent

Because it is not only a question of a large-scale student strike, involving secondary school pupils as well as university students. It is a movement which has managed, as the weeks passed, to win the support, not only of teachers’ unions and parents’ associations, but also of broad sectors of civil society. As if the students had been able to make it understood that their cause was everyone’s cause. For this reason the movement snowballed, overcoming all the obstacles that were placed in its way: since April 28, 2011, date of the first important student demonstration (8,000 people) until the general strike of today, via the marches of June 30 (300,000) and August 9 (500,000), there have been a multitude of demonstrations, occupations, hunger strikes, huge rallies. Furthermore, all this led to the revival of a series of other social demands which had remained unanswered: those of the Mapuches in the south, of the ecologists in connection with the HidroAysen project in Patagonia, and finally those of the trade union movement, in particular the aspirations for a better redistribution of social wealth.

## High stakes

It should be said that important issues were at stake: in Chile, under the regime of General Pinochet, education was hit head-on by the steamroller of the logic of neoliberalism, without the various successive democratic governments (including that of Michele Bachelet) changing anything substantial. Education thus became a “commodity”, a pure question of money and business, a source of enticing profits for the banks and the profit-hungry contractors. Whereas until 1973, Chilean public education was known for its quality and its free character, the economic principles preached by the Chicago boys and the dictatorship literally, as recalled by Victor de la Fuente of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, turned things upside down: “Private schools, which were rare in 1973, now cater for 60 per cent of pupils in primary and secondary education. Less than 25 per cent of the education system is financed by the

state and school budgets depend, on average, on registration fees for 75 per cent of their income. Moreover, the Chilean state devotes only 4.4 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to education, much less than the 7 per cent recommended by UNESCO". In addition, the level of student debt has taken on considerable proportions. In a country where, according to the statistics of the Department of Economy of the University of Chile, the minimum wage is the equivalent of less than 340 Canadian dollars [1] and the average wage is the equivalent of approximately 1,000 Canadian dollars, young people spend on average the equivalent of between 300 and 800 Canadian dollars a month to follow a university course. Consequently, "70 per cent of students are in debt, and 65 per cent of the poorest among them stop their studies for financial reasons".

## A democratic break

But what is most remarkable goes well beyond all these impressive figures. It is the way in which the students are conducting their struggle against the government of President Piñera. Even though everyone knows that their leaders – including the very charismatic Camilla Vallejos, president of the Confech student union - are members of left-wing parties, they have been able to organize their movement on a broad, democratic and non-partisan basis, and to give it at the same time an absolutely new course, demanding, far from any sectoral concerns, nothing less than "the end of profit in education" and "a free and quality education" conceived of as a genuine "public service", thus pointing the finger not only at the whole of the neoliberal model of which Chile was made the champion, but also at the vast majority of the Chilean political world which has in recent years made itself the more or less acknowledged accomplice of neoliberalism. The result has been that these structural demands have ended up by attracting growing support from public opinion (80 per cent of the population support their demands), and on the other hand putting the government (representing the hard Right of the past) on the defensive, finding itself with less than 20 per cent of support in recent opinion polls. As if galvanised by the vivifying audacity of the students, the whole of society has started to understand all the perverse and profoundly unequal aspects of this model inherited from the dictatorship, thus liberating democratic aspirations and growing hopes of change. This explains why the threats and repressive acts which President Piñera seems at present to rely on have so little effect. It is also why the ideas of a plebiscitary referendum (on the student proposals) and even of a Constituent Assembly are beginning to circulate more and more widely, like a call for a real "democratic break". And even if it is quite difficult today to make any prediction as to what will happen in the future, what we can say without fear of contradiction is that Chile is discovering in its own way - beyond all the terrors bequeathed by the dictatorship - that for it too "another world is possible". At the moment of the Arab Spring, of the revolt of the European "indignant ones" and of the turbulences that we can, ourselves, experience on the provincial political scene, should that not invite us to think about what, here, a real Québécois autumn might be like?

This article was first published, in French, on the website of Gauche Socialiste, the Quebec section of the Fourth International. [La Gauche](#).

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[1] a Canadian dollar is approximately equivalent to an American dollar