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Chile

The student movement and the reconstruction of the radical left.

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Interview with Sebastián Farfán Salinas, a former member of the executive of Confech, the Confederation of Chilean Students, and Carla Amtmann Fecci, former president of the student federation at the Catholic University of Valparaiso. Both participated in the presidential campaign of the “Todos a la Moneda” (“All to the Moneda”, the latter being the name of Chile’s presidential palace). The interview was conducted by Franck Gaudichaud.

What's your assessment of the candidacy and results of Marcel Claude and the movement “Todos a la Moneda”?

The movement “Todos a la Moneda” has been a big political apprenticeship. The conditions of this project were special since it arose at a time when the social movements were beginning to raise their profile and with a program and content of a break with the neoliberal model installed in our country. In this context there was the possibility of putting forward our political references with the purpose of projecting a left of combat in view of the new scenario that was taking shape with the new government from 2014. Our objectives were therefore very concrete especially if it is considered that this project is being conducted without the Communist Party after its turn to the Concertacion.

First, we have sought to make visible a program of profound social transformations which highlights the fact that what was expressed in recent years in the streets was in rupture with the system. Secondly, we wanted to show an alternative on the national political scene. Thirdly, we sought a space of construction for the Chilean revolutionary left which allows us to strengthen links and projects.

As a political process, we believe that the objectives have been met to the extent that it has meant a great apprenticeship, the construction of a program, the possibility of developing leaderships and so on. Nevertheless, these advances have been obscured by the electoral results which in our view have been a failure. 2.8 per cent was a harsh confrontation with the reality, especially if we consider that the expectations of all political sectors, the media, and ourselves were much higher.

In all this there is an important process of evaluation that we must achieve to understand the causes of such a low percentage. For us, it is essential not to focus on external responsibilities - the objective conditions will always be unfavourable in relation to the candidacies of the dominant bloc - and above all, we must look at what we have done wrong. We still have a lot to learn about the electoral level, this project having been established by organizations without electoral experience or with results well below those achieved today.

That leaves us the difficult task of seeking to build a left of combat, especially in the light of the social struggles to come. We have now acquired a quantity of experiences, as well as new leaders like our comrade Sebastian Farfan or Luis Soto (a water activist) who, in the parliamentary elections, have obtained good percentages.

After the intense cycle of student struggles in 2011-2012, how do you see the program of “deep” educational reform promised by Bachelet and the arrival in parliament of

several leaders of the movement?

As to the reforms of Bachelet, we believe that the new government of the Concertacion, today called the New Majority, represents an attempt to co-opt the social movements by a part of the elite. Basically what they are seeking is to put the social movements "in the pocket", isolate the left and reduce the levels of social conflict in the country. In conclusion the main objective of Bachelet is to recover the consensus of the elite. For this reason also, the government of the New Majority matches the expectations of the large employers and it is for this reason that many of them have supported it. The proposals of Bachelet are full of eye-catching headlines but are without content, something that the Confech has already denounced. We have no illusions about the government of Bachelet and we are saying clearly that the government of the New Majority is not our government.

It is for this reason that in particular the reform of education is mainly a slogan which in its content does not attack the central problem that we denounced from the student movement, which is the prevalence of a private profit-making system over a public system. We can achieve a certain percentage of free education but if this is not accompanied by a policy of strengthening the public system with the allocation of necessary resources to these public institutions without leakage to the private system, the free sector will eventually be a formality and a new mode of transfer of money to the private sector. The program of Bachelet will then be an ill-intentioned distortion of the demands from the street and the universities.

As to the arrival of several ex-student leaders in Parliament, this is not the guarantee of advance, given that Camila Vallejo and Giorgio Jackson have been elected to a parliament held by the New Majority, with an explicit support for Bachelet. Only Gabriel Boric was elected independently to parliament but his solitude will be hard and his role will be especially essential for the link with the student movement. In this sense, to speak of a "student wave" is an illusion - and the CP itself has closed the door to this possible articulation - given that it depends on their respective groups. If today everything is going well for them, tomorrow they will have to pay the bill. Even with this critical vision, we believe that their arrival in parliament and the support that they have obtained is a sign of a new wind blowing in Chile. Implicitly, the people voted for them in the illusion of change, it is therefore also a political sign.

What role could the student movement play in reactivating anti-capitalist social struggles in the coming months?

Inevitably in 2013 the electoral battle "swallowed up" the political agenda, and we had predicted that this would happen in a country such as Chile, making it even more important and necessary to participate in this battle by raising our flags from the left, circumstances that we could not understand without the cycle of previous mobilizations. In 2011 we were able to change the focus of debate in our country and, after the recomposition of forces in the higher spheres with the arrival of the Bachelet government, it is time for the social movements to resume. And for this the student movement will be essential.

Now we again have the prospect that in the next few years the social movements and the workers resume their struggle. We will have to raise a higher the flag of education as a right, by seeking to be the ones to decide the political agenda and not leave it to the government. There is also a need to have a better relationship with various social movements that are developing in the country and which will begin to go out on the streets with force. The movement around water access, under the impetus of Rodrigo Mundaca, has announced a first mobilization in April 2014. The student movement must be present. The copper workers and dockers have constituted themselves into a political force with a large level of organization and ability to put pressure on the bosses. The students will have to be with them.

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Finally the relationship of internal forces for 2014 in the main student organization - the Confech – indicates that an orientation of struggle against the government of President Bachelet is ensured. In this task, the National Students' Union will play an important role in the Confech. We must put all our forces into the struggles of students and thus strengthen the popular struggle, which will facilitate the construction of a more consolidated anti-capitalist alternative at the centre of the political scene in Chile.