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Chile

# The long month of October - the class struggle returns

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**Chilean president Sebastián Piñera declared on television on 8 October 2019 that “Chile is a real oasis in a convulsed Latin America”. In fact, Chile has been presented to the world for almost thirty years as a model to be exported and an example of neoliberal stability. The key to “success” was the commitment of all parties, whether for or against Pinochet, to the management of the institutions and the economic model set up during the dictatorship (1973-1990). This “oasis”, based on a programme of crushing and super-exploitation of the working class, exploded ten days later, dramatically highlighting the increasingly unbearable living conditions of large sections of the population. The immediate result of this uprising was to break the conspiracy of the democratic transition, supported by the left and the right, against the class struggle. The class struggle came back to the fore in earthshaking force of which October was only the first attempt.**

## Review of the uprising

The cathartic outbreak of Friday, 18 October 2019 is the way in which the Chilean working class has started to make its historical assessment of the post-dictatorial model, a record in which immediate living conditions and the not so recent past of the country are mixed, still in effect through generational and institutional threads. This is a balance sheet which cannot be translated and does not immediately translate into a specific demand or set of claims. It's a transversal challenge. This is a balance sheet that has just started, because there is too much to say when the people have just found their own way of speaking.

The announcement of an increase in the fare for the Santiago metro, an ordinary occurrence, paved the way for the extraordinary. High school students collectively dodged paying fares on 18 October, to be joined unexpectedly the day after by thousands of people. The daily scenario became an epic. In each metro station, there were gatherings where people encouraged others to engage in sabotage which they would no doubt have condemned the day before. The moments that led to this moment are as innumerable as the biographies that gave birth to them.

Eight hours later, the government declared a state of constitutional emergency and deployed the army on the streets for the first time since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1990. [1] Eight hours was enough to dismantle the hegemonic narrative of “never again” of the democratic transition. But no one seemed to care too much, because the government was reluctant to do so and because the people were not afraid. “Never again” has acquired the meaning that it has always had for each social class: for some “never again” refers to the army and its abuses, for others “never again” refers to the class struggle. Thus was inaugurated the most important political moment in the recent history of Chile.

On Saturday 19 October, President Sebastián Piñera announced the suspension of the metro price increase and at the same time a curfew in the capital. An incendiary combination. By then, other parts of the country had already joined the uprising, and both commerce and transport were paralyzed. On Sunday 20 October, the paralysis became total. Large shopping malls closed and, with the military in front, protected themselves from those who, until recently, were their customers. It was chaos. The first lady of the country attributed the events to an extra-terrestrial origin ... literally! Speaking on national television, Piñera declared war and the soldiers he deployed fired to kill.

At an extraordinary meeting held this same Saturday, 19 October, between social movements and union leaders grouped within *Unidad Social*, the only people proposing a call for a general strike from Monday were feminists,

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supported by environmentalists and high school students. And although these same union leaderships are not precisely distinguished by their democratic nature and have never called a general strike in three decades of democracy, they clarified that they could not call one without consulting their rank and file, characterising the feminist proposal as irresponsible because of the curfew.

Finally, on Sunday 20 October, feminist, student and high school organizations as well as environmentalists, among others, called a general strike for the next day at a press conference. This call coincided with the impetus given by the dockers and by certain sectors in the large private copper sector, who effectively went on strike on Monday 21 October. The initiative and the facts put an end to the episode of the deliberations, and the main union leaderships decided that same Sunday, after the press conference in which they did not participate, to call a general strike for 23 and 24 October.

On 22 October, Piñera announced a social plan, proposing to subsidize with state money health, pensions and even wages - all privatized. Piñera, as a good entrepreneur, saw the crisis as an excellent opportunity to do business. Of course, no one accepted this proposal. Chile continued to be a hotbed of fire, and the media began to report on terror. Suddenly you could see everywhere videos of soldiers: the official recognition of the dead and wounded for the first time, denunciations of the policy of sexual violence as well as clandestine detention and torture centres were presented massively. But neither the curfew nor the terror succeeded in defusing the mobilizations or in imposing fear. For the first time in decades, the working class in Chile has felt a sense of power. It will not be easy to erase this.

For months feminists, who were working at the molecular level to call for a general strike on 8 March, had felt the diverse expressions of the living pulsation that has now appeared. They then perceived that there was a will to fight, wide and deep. With a few limited exceptions, the union leaderships proposed a “demonstration” for 24 October, “clearing the streets”, in other words, everyone stays at home for one day under a curfew. The next day, more than a million people marched in Santiago, and the National Congress, located in the city of Valparaiso, had to be evacuated. No one was ready to obey the orders of repression. The disconnection of certain union leaderships was evident.

Large marches took place in all regions of the country on 25 October and throughout the weekend, calling for the resignation of Piñera. Anti-military sentiment was undoubtedly one of the mobilizing elements. On 28 October, the state of emergency ended, the soldiers returned to their barracks and there was a change of cabinet and the departure of the Minister of the Interior Andrés Chadwick - all these measures were announced two days previously. The eight new ministers took office in a Moneda Palace surrounded by protesters. On 30 October, the President announced the suspension of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and COP25 meetings in Chile. The first twelve days of the unbroken uprising were thus sealed.

On 1 November, the traditional union leaderships (public sector and professional unions) as well as unions in strategic sectors of the economy (ports, mines and construction) formed the National Strike Committee, calling again for a general strike on 12 November. The convening of a constituent assembly and the implementation of a set of urgent demands were required. Between these two dates, three major national protest days took place – on 4, 5 and 8 November - marked by a repressive offensive, this time by the police, with very high human costs.

A high point was 12 November. This was the first day that the demand for a Constituent Assembly was expressed. The general strike on that day was the largest and most massive in over four decades. Organized sectors and many sectors which had joined political life only recently were among them. It is true that the latter neither follow nor obey the former, but the organized sectors have succeeded in articulating dispersed ideas or proposals in a demand. More than 10% of the country's population participated in various ways in the day of 12 November, which the government called “the most violent of all”.

## A deal nobody wanted

While 18 October had the merit of ending the government's programmatic agenda, 12 November left little room for doubt. Either the Constituent Assembly (or any constitutional change) will be imposed by them, on their terms, or it will be imposed by the people, without them. On 15 November, the government and opposition parties signed an "Agreement for Peace and the New Constitution" paving the way for the end of the Pinochet constitution ... on their terms.

The first of these terms aims to protect the government, according to a logic eloquently expressed by Alejandro Guillier, senator and former presidential candidate of the then coalition between the Socialist, Communist, Radical and Christian Democratic parties: "If the president falls, Congress falls. So, we will all go home. The legitimacy crisis is also reaching us." Imitating the "grand pacts" of the transition, they all committed to signing the agreement - a dangerous formula for the new situation. For these elites, it was 15 November, while for the rest of the Chileans it was 46 October. [2] And in the logic of this calendar, the transition was already buried.

Despite the signatories' efforts to present this agreement as a victory for all, it has been impossible to hide the fact that Chile is facing an agreement that no one wants. The right does not want it, having already announced for the most part that it will campaign for a "no" in the first referendum, thus dividing the government bloc. Indeed, of the three parties in the bloc, two - Evopoli and Renovación Nacional (from which Piñera emerged) - have so far been divided and the third, Unión Demócrata Independiente, has announced it will vote against. Alongside them, the far-right fascist Republican Party has already started its "no" campaign.

The Frente Amplio didn't want it either. Of the nine organizations in the bloc, three have signed the agreement. Two weeks later, the "law against rampage" was adopted with the support of FA elected officials. It is a law which aims to punish any form of demonstration and protest with imprisonment. These two acts provoked the departure from the Front of the five founding organizations. The remaining four parties - Revolución Democrática, Comunes, Partido Liberal and Convergencia Social - oppose several clause of the agreement that was signed. In addition, one of them was completely disrupted by massive resignations at all levels, from the base to the top. In fact, these four parties are incorporated into the social-liberal wing of the existing administration.

This puts an end to the Frente Amplio as a project of an alternative force to institutional alternation. You have to trust the system unconditionally to bind your fate to its administrators at the worst time. From now on, we will see the forces of Frente Amplio playing the sad role of a left face for the Socialist, Radical and Christian Democratic parties. We will also see them lament and proclaim their bitter disappointment each time Christian Democracy breaks its commitments to them in favour of the right. All of these parties will vote for a new constitution and go through the constitutional process. They will try to give an institutional translation "as far as possible" to the political demands that the people will defend in the process. It will be a poor translation, constructed on the basis of the juggling necessary to maintain the new bipolar equilibrium. And, above all, to preserve the political and economic system, of which they are a congenital part and whose profits allow them to survive.

Finally, and most importantly, it was impossible to hide the fact that the agreement fell far short of people's expectations. It was rejected by organized sectors of the working class, and although polls showed the Agreement was well received by the majority of the population, the organized and unorganized masses continued to mobilize. This mixture of rejection, positive evaluation and mobilization is not surprising. In our opinion, this is an agreement by which the parties have protected Piñera, whose support does not exceed 10% and whose resignation has been a transversal demand of the "street". The constituent process was designed in such a way that Piñera comes to the end of his term and the possible new constitution bears his signature. It is a way of ensuring his impunity in the area of political responsibility for human rights violations.

In fact, on the day the agreement was signed a protester was killed by the police during a march in downtown Santiago. By the time the signing took place, the death toll was over 25, the number of wounded and blinded more than 300, and the number of political prisoners more than 2,000. International organizations report a systematic violation of human rights and state violence continues to increase. What kind of constitutional process favourable to citizens could result from such a context?

It is indeed an agreement signed behind four walls by parties contested by the revolt. And it is packaged by those parties.. However, it was the mobilization, which began against rising transport prices, that made it possible to amend Pinochet's constitution in three weeks. If a large part of the population perceives this as a breakthrough, it is because this agreement takes into account the strength of the uprising, that is to say their own forces, even if it aims to subdue them, because they were excluded from political decision making. The social scenario has thus become a vivid display of power and impotence confronting each other at every step.

## Two aspects of a same policy, two moments of a same fightback

Through this "Agreement for Peace and the New Constitution", the establishment parties agreed on a two-step policy: repression-impunity and a constituent process. The goal is to deactivate the social uprising by combining the police and the ballot boxes, using a broader participatory key. The expected result is to guarantee their immediate governance and to present a constitution which is democratically developed, a quality the current one lacks, thereby seeking to guarantee their future governance.

According to the schedule agreed by these parties, a referendum must take place on 26 April 2020. The people will then decide whether or not they want a new constitution and on the body that should draft it, choosing one of the following two alternatives: either a mixed constitutional convention (made up of 50% current parliamentarians and 50% Convention members elected for this purpose) or a constitutional assembly elected entirely by universal suffrage.

Until recently, it was more or less predictable that the right wing majority would bet on a respectable percentage of "no" votes and on a majority of elected officials, in the hope of being able to torpedo the process in the phase of drafting or ratifying the new constitution. To this end, it can use the minority veto power established by the agreement, whereby a third of votes at the convention can block everything when there is no agreement on an issue. According to this plan, they could count on the vote of most social-liberal parties to block the most vital questions for the working class. The wager would be that the new constitution would end up being a kind of Frankenstein's monster, and that therefore the population would reject it during the ratification referendum, in which case the Pinochet constitution - this time legitimized, according to their strange understanding - would continue to apply. Although its realization is unlikely, this plan allows a hard-line sector, which sees itself as "the authentic right", to assert itself.

Recently, these forecasts have been changed to reveal what could be a breach of the agreement before the referendum. The right agreed the constitutional process in exchange for achieving "social peace", but the opposition parties cannot offer this "peace" since they do not control the masses engaged in the uprising. They only influence certain organized sectors, but these are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the events. Andres Allamand, one of the most important figures of the Chilean right, who until recently was committed to vote in favour of the changing of the constitution, said on 8 January 2020: "The constitutional change must be done in a democratic, safe and institutional way. Today, the agreement is subject to uncertainty and instability and this makes us start from scratch, throwing everything we have built overboard". He is leaning towards **an opposed position** and it is to be expected that this will permeate other sectors of his party, especially senators.

Considered initially as a lifeline in the face of the state of emergency, this agreement appears today less and less as a predictable and controlled event, becoming rather a Pandora's box, which far from remaining closed, seems more open at every step. However, getting rid of it is not such an easy option for the bourgeoisie. It must still support this government, which has two very difficult years ahead of it, for the time being. So far, the social-liberal parties, as well as a minority sector of the right, remain attached to the agreement and to a "yes" vote. They will strive to draft a new constitution that maintains the heart of the model, while "correcting" the lack of legitimacy that the current constitution suffers from.

A series of events indicates that the people will not abandon the street and will not neglect the constituent process. It will continue to challenge during these two moments, within the framework of the same policy. It will do it by all means at its disposal and create new ones, because it understands that just as its action brought about an agreement whose elaboration was foreign to it, its mobilization also allows it to reverse the terms of a very unstable present whose end is not pre-established.

This dynamic was verified during the non-binding consultation carried out by 225 municipalities on 15 December:

- a self-convened vote on options previously deliberated by territorial assemblies, which emerged in October.
- participation in the institutional consultation, despite its limits, convened by the Chilean Association of Municipalities and which aimed to register the majority will in favour of a new constitution.
- support for the demonstration and protest coordinated by the territorial assemblies in the municipalities.

Between 26 April and 25 October, 2020, the date on which the members of the Convention or the Constituent Assembly should be elected, the possibility of a programmatic debate opens, and with it, a moment of politicization of a historic scale, probably the largest since Salvador Allende's election campaign (1970) - the last time that the working class mobilized in elections for a program and not just for a candidate.

The ongoing politicization transcends the constitutional debate. Under a shared concept – "the Constituent" - the classes express different contents. The People's debates on the constituent process are about how they want to live. The new constitution seems to be understood as a container in which all the social demands accumulated for decades will have their place. It is not a question of a unicameral or bicameral parliament, nor of the advantages and disadvantages of presidential or semi-presidential systems, but of social security, the socio-environmental crisis, sexual and reproductive rights, the right to health, free public education, nationalization of natural resources, the right to housing and so on. All these emergencies take programmatic forms in spaces of popular deliberation, but none of them will be materially conquered by the writing of a new Magna Carta.

It is essential to give a central place to these debates while taking care not to reduce the forms of organization which appeared in revolt, nor to refocus the imagination and the desire which has appeared, only with the constitutional institutions. On the contrary, it is necessary to place at the centre of the debate the political conditions and the strength which will make it possible to concretize the prefigurations that the working class has discovered by coming together and which are based on its experience. This vital building block must be nurtured by actions that affirm people's confidence in their own abilities.

## Subverting the agreement

The bourgeoisie aspires, with less and less self-confidence, to frame the permanent challenge by what it portrays as a colossal concession: the constituent process. The subordination of the people to the itinerary and the conditions of the agreement is not excluded, for the sole reason that nothing is excluded at the moment. But in the field of

probability, two major rationales run counter to this aspiration of the bourgeoisie:

– The first and most important is that this uprising is not based on the demand for the constituent assembly, but on the fact that the living conditions are unbearable. None of the reasons that pushed people onto the street has been mitigated, even to a small extent. These conditions remain intact, not a single concession was made, the intransigence in the face of the emergency was total and deadly.

– The second is that during this long month of October, the working class began to know its collective dimension, experience its strength, place expectations in itself. It decided to respect itself and demand respect. The notion of dignity is a break from the long silent endurance of countless humiliations. The generations are united, the young want to help the old, the old are sorry not to have conquered a better present for the young. They all say: "This time we have to win", "We are not isolated, we can count on each other, we will not be fooled". This dimension of the collective "spirit" - debased by neoliberal individualism, which is beginning to fall apart today - carries a new meaning. This is part of this vision of the constituent assembly which is deviating from the path which had been mapped out and moves forward.

It is a key element in nurturing and affirming the trust that people have placed in their own strength. In this regard, certain tasks are central. Firstly, constituting a "front line" against state terrorism and impunity. The freeing of political prisoners, the creation of an independent and permanent commission of Truth and Justice which can determine the political responsibilities of the crimes perpetrated against those who struggle, the resignation of Sebastián Piñera, that they stop killing, raping, mutilating and imprisoning us, are essential conditions for widening the path that the uprising has opened.

Secondly, the task of better organising and coordinating self-defence, understood as the task of confining the repressive forces to more secure areas away from the demonstrators, is inseparable from the above. While the "front line" of the demonstrations has shown impressive courage, the confinement is often located in the same area where the mobilisations are taking place. By widening the perimeter prohibited to the repressive forces, if only by a little, high and irreparable human costs can be avoided. These types of measures, which require modest degrees of coordination, have been difficult due to the lack of experience and the lack of centrality that many organized sectors give to the problem. On the other hand, the tendency to centralize the convocation points allows the repressive forces to concentrate their actions, unlike the first days of the uprising, when the simultaneity of hundreds of protest points exceeded the capacity of coverage of the police.

Thirdly, deliberately encouraging the flow of popular imagination in constitutional debates. Since the signing of the agreement, an army of intellectuals, academics and professionals have felt entitled to speak in basic discussion spaces, imposing in the name of their "authorized truths" a limitation on contents deployed during previous discussions on the constitution. There can be no more servile attitude to the limits imposed by the agreement. If these kind of people seek to help from their profession, their task is to affirm and not to weaken the confidence of those who begin to express themselves and to politicize, it should be to support by translating, by presenting as "possible" the "impossible" choices that emerge from these voices. Not to replace them, nor to limit or disown them.

Fourthly, weakening the confidence of the bourgeoisie by affirming the general sense of the protest. The revolt gave birth to this general sense, but the fragmentation of the working class, and especially the trade union consciousness of the best organized sectors, allows a corporatist approach, which widens the scope of manoeuvre of the bourgeoisie. This is the most difficult problem to overcome, because the organizations which most assert their corporatist character think that they are carriers of the universal, as well as their demands, making extremely difficult the articulations within the social world, which is diverse and very broad. The general political content that the parties should embody cannot be formulated by a working class which struggles, but which does not have its own parties.

# The paths of unity

This political moment brought about reconfigurations and rearrangements within social classes. Political parties, business associations and almost all of the social fabric involved in political life are also being realigned. Existing political formations are changing, experiencing tensions, falling apart. New ones, which challenge the old ones, appear and regroup. It goes from the far right to left groups, but it is also the case with a new social capillarity of the working class which is emerging, expressing what is new and reinventing the old.

The keys to these reconfigurations indicate a growing polarization of society, linked to the legitimacy of the constituent process. Sectors of the bourgeoisie are starting to argue that this process was imposed by a minority of violent demonstrators who hijacked democracy. Sectors of the working class maintain that the constitutive process is diverted by the conditions imposed by a minority which owns the country. These readings will become more and more acute and will enter into open and large-scale conflict.

In this scenario, the anti-capitalist left is entrusted with certain fundamental tasks:

1. Program. Clarifying that the content of this confrontation stems from the denunciation of the bourgeoisie, from its inability to offer a broad democratic framework for the political participation of the people, denouncing its crimes whether they are protected by law or not. Defending a transversal program which sediments in a unitary and concrete way feminist, ecosocialist and resolutely anti-capitalist contents which are already germinating and are more advanced than in the previous periods. This program, while projecting a horizon, must contain elements for the immediate improvement of the situation of the working class.

2. Alliances. In the course of this conflict, the powerful can count on the press, repressive forces, government institutions as well as their corporations and their parties. The people are more numerous; today they have self confidence, they challenge their current situation of oppression and are getting stronger, but they have no big organizations or parties and those that exist are more or less dispersed. To win the immediate demands and a popular, democratic, multinational, feminist, sovereign and free constituent assembly, broad alliances between the organized sectors will be necessary, alliances whose task is to coordinate efforts so that broad and dynamic sectors of the people take ownership, promote and deepen the content of such a program.

3. This cycle, which is still in its infancy, has shown that existing political instruments have been unable to establish a link with the power of the mobilized working class, which constitutes a strategic task. This raises the question of what type of organization should be built for this new political cycle. There were major ruptures on the left, such as that of the Frente Amplio. There is no point in explaining them in terms of personalities or apparatus logic, although this undoubtedly has an influence. The organizations to the left of Frente Amplio are also divided and often very marginal. In this sense, one has to wonder how they grasp the situation and maintain their vitality in the activity of the working class. These issues must be deliberately put on the table to open debates on strategic theses in the light of alliances and coordinated actions, to analyse the nature of this political moment, the tasks ahead, the possibilities of radicalization of the current dynamic and what can guide us in the face of given and possible scenarios. A first task consists of developing these theses, then putting them forward for debate and discussion among the political expressions of the left and also in each neighbourhood, in each social organization, in each place where people are struggling. Paths of unity which do not place the discussion of strategic directions at the centre of the debate will be doomed to wander into tactical fetishism without historical perspective or radicalism. Today, when history is in front of, it is impossible to avoid this debate.

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[1] It is true that after the 2010 earthquake the soldiers came onto the streets. But that has nothing in common with what happened in October 2019.

[2] That is the 46th day of the revolt - IV