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Chile and pandemic

Popular revolt, feminist mass strikes, and Covid-19 in Chile

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As is the case everywhere, the big news in Chile is the rapidly escalating coronavirus contagion. But just last October, Chile's neoliberal order was shaken to its core when a popular revolt exploded, detonating general strikes, occupations, and mass mobilizations. Pushed into a corner, the mainstream parties were forced to agree to hold a national referendum, scheduled for April 2020, to rewrite the Constitution, a holdover from the Pinochet dictatorship. And just two weeks ago, more than 1,000,000 women struck and took to the streets on March 8 and 9 on International Women's Day to demand social and economic equality. Now the coronavirus has forced this struggle into quarantine while the government's only bold action in the face of the pandemic is to postpone the Constitutional referendum. Perhaps nowhere on earth is the class struggle and the struggle against the Covid-19 crisis so intense as in Chile.

NBN: Describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Javier Pineda: The pandemic has spread rapidly in Chile. On March 3, we had the first infection and it has quickly reached different regions of the country. By way of comparison, we are suffering coronavirus growth rates similar to those in Spain. As of March 22 (day 19), Chile has 632 confirmed Covid-19 cases, whereas Spain had 589 infections after the equivalent time. On the afternoon of Saturday 21, the first Covid-19 death was announced. The victim was an 83-year-old woman who lived in a working-class town in the countryside and she died in a public hospital, despite the fact better-off neighborhoods have higher infection rates at this point.

However, there is a lot of disagreement about that the figures represent. The daily figures recorded by the Ministry of Health have been challenged by the Medical College, since the method by which they are recorded is not known, nor to what date they correspond. Given how the infections are tracked, it is understood that these figures are probably at least two days behind. Moreover, the population of Chile is 18 million people compared to Spain's 46.6 million.

So far, no national quarantine has been decreed. And the closure of pubs, casinos and discos was only decreed last Thursday, March 19 (day 17). The federal authorities do not want to order a quarantine so the suspension of school and university classes resulted from pressure by mayors. Likewise, the companies that have instituted quarantines, or whose workers are teleworking, did so under pressure from workers and not from the authorities. If a comprehensive quarantine is not decreed, we will see figures similar to those in Spain or Italy, or even worse. This Sunday, March 22, the Government announced a nighttime curfew between 10:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m., as if the Covid-19 does not spread during the day.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

JP: The Government was not prepared for this crisis. They have wavered and contradicted themselves. The first measure they adopted was to declare the suspension of classes on March 15 (day 13). This initiative was, in fact, declared by university administrators and mayors – who direct 30% of Chile's education system. That same day a Committee of Experts convened by the federal government recommended against suspending classes, but an hour later the president announced the suspension on national television due to pressure from the community.

This week, a “National Quarantine” has been aggressively promoted by social and union organizations to mitigate the rate of infection, however, the government still prefers to prioritize corporate profits over our lives.

On Wednesday, March 18 (day 16), the president declared a Catastrophe State of Emergency at the national level, which means that the Armed Forces assume control of public order nationally, granting them powers to limit the right of assembly, freedom of movement, and the protection of personal property. Up until now, the military has not taken any action regarding the catastrophe. Far from coming to the population’s aid, in the words of the general in charge of National Defense in the Santiago Metropolitan Region, the military’s mission is “to safeguard public order.” This health emergency cannot be solved by the military.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system’s greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

JP: Our public health system has been dismantled by neoliberal policies. The state divides financing equally between public hospitals – where more than 80% of the population is served – and private clinics, thereby financing their profits.

The health system is not prepared to face this pandemic. The number of beds available is inadequate in relation to the population, so the sustained growth of the pandemic will make it impossible for the health system, both public and private, to respond.

The system’s only strength is its professionals who are willing to confront the crisis despite the precarious conditions in which they find themselves. For example, in a hospital in the city of Talcahuano, workers began steam-sterilizing masks due to the lack of medical supplies.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

JP: The right and conservative sectors started out trying spreading fear about the pandemic, but once people began to take the issue seriously and demanded that workplaces be shut down, the right began taking reactionary position. There are only a few exceptional right-wing mayors who have come out for a total quarantine after being pressured by the people.

The liberal and social democratic sectors have hesitated, as always. They demand certain measures, but they are not willing to back a total quarantine or closedown a large part of the economy. They have contributed nothing during this emergency.

The parties of the Broad Front (Frente Amplio) and extra-parliamentary left organizations have called for a total quarantine. Left-wing organizations have mainly organized through social organizations, proposing a Preventive General Strike, which has also been called “National Quarantine” and “National Humanitarian Strike” under the slogan that the health and lives of our families is more important than corporate profits.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

JP: Education workers were the first to demand the suspension of classes, winning this goal on Sunday, March 15. Public sector workers also managed to reduce the number of shifts, cutting staffing in most institutions and limiting

work to performing only essential functions.

In the case of public health workers, they have been on the “front line,” holding back the coronavirus’ advance. They have been demanding greater participation in decision-making over how to face the pandemic, although without much success due to the government’s refusal to listen.

In general, many unions and workers have raised concerns about the pandemic, demanding the cessation of all activities that are not strictly necessary to confront the contagion. There have been several strikes in workplaces that lack hygiene and safety measures, for instance, public transportation workers and employees in several malls and shopping centers struck over such measures. In short, the unions are promoting a National Quarantine to deal with the pandemic, taking the initiative to shut down all non-essential companies.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

JP: Social movement took the initiative quickly. We had large mobilizations beginning in March, when the feminist movement took the lead after a massive General Feminist Strike on March 8 and 9. However, after the first cases of contagion, and in the face of the government’s ineffectiveness, the same popular organizations decided to call for self-care to confront the pandemic, avoiding crowds and deciding to prioritize safeguarding our lives and those of our families.

Among these measures, the “Strike for Life,” called by the March 8 Feminist Coalition (Coordinadora Feminista 8M) stands out. Unidad Social, a body that brings together trade union, student, feminist, socio-environmental, and migrant organizations, among others, has called for a “Humanitarian Strike.” All of them demand protection for our working class.

In the case of indigenous communities, some roads have been blocked to prevent tourists and infected people from entering towns that have not yet registered cases of people infected by Covid-19.

NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

JP: The popular revolt has raised programmatic demands to dismantle neoliberalism, such as guaranteeing social rights for the entire population. This is growing stronger as the pandemic spreads and the effects of a shattered public health system become more obvious. The crisis reveals the precarity of those who do not eat if they do not work and shows how the state serves employers and not its population.

Thus, the necessity of strengthening the public health system is self-evident, as are job protections and enacting a law prohibiting layoffs during quarantine. We need subsidies for informal and precarious workers and the idea of a universal basic income is slowly beginning to take hold. We must maintain basic services such as electricity and water in case of non-payment and establish a moratorium on the payment of debts, along with banning administrative judgments against those in debts while the pandemic lasts. Finally, we require state control of the entire health system and restrictions on the hoarding of basic products and health supplies such as face masks and alcohol gel.

These are concrete measures for confronting the pandemic, but the transformative horizon opened by the Popular Revolt that began in October 2019 remains alive and well.

NBN: Any final comments about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and how you think it will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

JP: In Chile, the Covid-19 contagion must be understood in the context of social and political crisis that began with the Popular Revolt last fall, twin crises that will only be aggravated by a now-inevitable economic crisis.

The government is unfit to face the crisis. Once the quarantine is over, the mobilizations will begin again, since all the problems that triggered the revolt in the first place have not been resolved. Furthermore, although the government has postponed, at least until May 2021, the national referendum on rewriting the Constitution this question cannot be suppressed.

The coming weeks will be critical for dealing with the pandemic and preventing as many deaths as possible. After the emergency passes, we will have to confront layoffs the state must be prevented from passing the cost of the crisis onto the popular sectors and the working classes. We must fight to insist that the wealthy pay for this crisis. Thus, we must continue fighting to kick out conservative President Sebastián Piñera while raising demands such as an increase in pensions and the minimum wage in order to prevent the bosses from making our lives even more precarious. The next few weeks will combine a struggle against the coronavirus with the struggle against Piñera's incompetent government.

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