

Chile prison inmates on hunger strike

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Prison inmates in the city of Calama, in northern Chile's Atacama Desert, have initiated a hunger strike in solidarity with the families of the 81 prisoners who died in Santiago's San Miguel Prison Fire on December 8. The prisoners are protesting against the national prison crisis that was revealed by the deadly fire, the worst in the country's history.

Some 500 inmates participated in the hunger strike that began last Saturday. In a statement the strikers declared that the purpose of the action is to show their solidarity with the relatives of the dead and injured San Miguel inmates and to condemn overcrowding in Chile's penal system, including the Calama Prison. The latter was built to house only 200 inmates, but now holds 600.

Many of the San Miguel inmates are also on hunger strike. A hunger strike at the Santiago women's prison also appears imminent.

The San Miguel fire was not the first prison tragedy in recent times. In 2001, 26 prisoners were burned to death in Iquique in northern Chile. In 2007, 10 youth died in the Puerto Mott Juvenile Prison fire in Southern Chile.

The December 8 fire appears to have been sparked by a fight between inmates in the third floor of the facility. Heavy smoke billowed out of the building as frantic relatives attempted to rescue their loved ones. Interior Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter reported that the fire achieved maximum intensity barely three minutes after it began. Pedro Hernandez, who represents prison employees, suggested that hotplates and personal stoves, used by inmates to prepare their own meals, might have played a role in the fire.

It took more than a week to identify all the dead.

Prisoners' relatives are protesting by stopping at the gates of the San Miguel prison during their trips to the cemetery, displaying the coffins and stoning the prison.

Since the fire, officials of the Piñera administration

have openly admitted that prison conditions are deplorable.

Last Monday, Justice Minister Felipe Bulnes appeared on television and said that prisoners suffer under "subhuman conditions" in Chile's penal system. Like President Piñera, Bulnes blamed past administrations, particularly that of former President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), for not building enough prisons to house the expanding population.

President Lagos was the first to preside over a justice system that had undergone significant reforms in 1999. The purpose of these reforms was to make the system more efficient and cost effective. One result, however, was a dramatic increase in the number of prison inmates. Since 1999, the prison population has swelled from an already high figure of 33,000 to 53,000 today.

By separating investigation, prosecution and sentencing, the new system was ostensibly more democratic and less hierarchical. However, critics have pointed out that under conditions of growing social and economic inequality in Chile, the working class, the peasantry, and native communities were more and more shut out of equitable justice.

This process of increasingly unequal class justice has been amply catalogued by the Chilean online journal *Archivo Chile*.

In addition to paltry rehabilitation funds (less than 1 percent of the current prison budget), reports describe the lack of auxiliary public judicial services for the working class and poor. They also expose a culture of corruption, in which prison guards are on the take, and the common use of torture to control and terrorize prison inmates.

Alongside this increase in the number of prisoners made possible by the 1999 "reform legislation," prison time for minor crimes was reduced, and in some cases eliminated. This raised an alarm with political conservatives and reactionaries, who used their

influence over media outlets to launch a campaign for harsher justice, by publicizing particularly heinous crimes as part of a law-and-order campaign.

During the presidential campaign, current President Sebastián Piñera seized on this fact to campaign for more repressive sentencing, promising to put a “lock” on what he called a “revolving door.”

Hinzpeter rejected calls from Catholic officials for the granting of humanitarian amnesty of less dangerous prisoners. President Piñera is proposing an emergency program to install prefabricated modular prisons to house 10,000 minimum-security inmates to relieve overcrowding.

In a TV interview, Ingrid Reyes, who heads the union of non-uniformed prison employees, condemned Piñera’s plan. “Building more prisons is not a solution for crime. This service is obsessed with security, with no perspective for the human rights of inmates and has no regard for the reintegration of prisoners to society. For many of the poor there are no opportunities inside or outside of prison. Parallel to the terrible conditions that exist in the penal system is the way the government treats us as public employees.”

“On the night of the fire, there was only one paramedic in San Miguel, to serve nearly 2,000 prisoners, in a prison with a capacity for 600 prisoners,” said Reyes. “As non-uniformed employees, we demand better conditions for prisoners and we demand better conditions for the workers that attend to their needs.”

Over two decades have passed since the collapse of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. The restoration of democratic institutions, however, continued the neo-liberal policies of defense of the profit system that values human beings only as a source of surplus value. Those who run afoul of the law, or from whom no profits can be extracted, are thrown into prisons and condemned to poverty.



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