

Chile's former president set to win second-round election

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Chile's former president Michele Bachelet is overwhelmingly favored to win a second round presidential election set for December 15.

In the election's first round, held on November 18, Bachelet came in first with 3,070,012 votes, 46.7 percent of the ballots, while the candidate of the right-wing Alliance Coalition (*Alianza*), Evelyn Matthei, received 1,645,271 votes, or 25.2 percent. Under Chile's electoral system, in the absence of any candidate winning a majority of 50 percent plus one, a run-off election between the top two candidates is required.

In the first round of the Chilean elections, in which for the first time voting is not compulsory, over half of the 13.6 million eligible voters failed to cast ballots.

Bachelet and her electoral coalition, New Majority (*Nueva Mayoría*), campaigned on the promise to eliminate the social and economic structures established by the Pinochet military-fascist dictatorship that ruled the country from 1973 until 1990.

Nueva Mayoría promised changes to the Chilean constitution, giving proportional representation to smaller political parties and diminishing the role of the armed forces. It also called for an end to the voucher system that has gutted public education while enriching private and religious schools, tuition-free university education paid for by increased corporate taxes, improved health and social programs, and "reforms" to the privatized, profit-based retirement pension system.

While Nueva Mayoría won narrow majorities in both houses of the Chilean legislature, it did not secure the votes needed to amend the constitution.

As for other proposed reforms, were they to go beyond the cosmetic, they would face opposition from entrenched material interests including the military, the Catholic Church and the banks and insurance companies.

In addition to enjoying an "advisory" role under the constitution, the Chilean armed forces enjoy considerable material privileges that come from the wealth pumped into the military in Chile (as a percentage of GDP the military budget is more than twice the South American average, three times that of Brazil and nearly four times that of Chile's eastern neighbor, Argentina.)

The privatization of education has become a source of wealth for the Catholic Church. Santiago, a city of 7.3 million, has 272 Catholic schools, including some of the most expensive in the country. By way of comparison, with a large Catholic population, Los Angeles County in California, with a population that is twice as large as Santiago, boasts less than 60. The expansion and enrichment of Catholic and other private schools came as a consequence of Chile's voucher education system that Bachelet now promises to reform.

Financial institutions that handle workers' pensions profit twice, first from the fees that go along with "managing" these funds, second from the annuities that workers are forced to buy with their savings once they do retire. The nationalization of pensions would end this massive transfer of resources to the financial sector.

As it transitioned away from Pinochet, and as a way of managing the class struggle, the Chilean bourgeoisie established *Concertación*, an alliance between Chile's Socialist Party and Christian Democracy. That coalition ruled continuously from 1990 until 2010. As Concertación's candidate, Bachelet took office as president 2006 and left the presidency in 2010. Chile's constitution allows presidents only one term.

The succession of Concertación governments that followed Pinochet avoided making meaningful changes to the system they had inherited. During her tenure, Bachelet herself vigorously opposed students' demands for free public universities and transportation subsidies even though these demands had the support of eight out of every ten Chileans.

Her government also left untouched the free-market-based "Chilean model," based on low wages, and labor laws that favored big business and transnational capital to the detriment of the vast majority of Chilean workers and middle classes. In the present campaign, her advisers are arguing that her proposed policies are needed to save this "model."

Her opponent for the second round, Evelyn Matthei, is a member of incumbent President Sebastian Piñera's UDI (Independent Democratic Union) party, and like Piñera, a direct political heir to *pinochetismo*. She also has family connections with that regime. Her father was an air force general who participated in the Pinochet government and was complicit in its crimes.

In July, Matthei resigned her post as Labor minister, which she had held since 2011, in order to run for president. Her appointment to the ministry came on the heels of the Copiapó mine disaster that trapped 33 miners underground for 69 days, yet she made no attempt to strengthen the notoriously weak mine safety regulations responsible for that and other mine collapses. On the contrary, during her tenure, oversight was weakened and penalties reduced. While professing sympathy for workers, she oversaw the continuing deterioration of working conditions and wages.

Earlier this year, Nueva Mayoría adopted the slogan "A Chile for everyone," a back-handed recognition that social inequality created under the so-called "economic miracle" ushered in by Pinochet has become a powder keg that can explode at any moment. "In Chile, nobody is on the scrapheap," said Bachelet.

In fact, each day, millions of Chileans are excluded, marginalized,

treated as social refuse. On Saturday the Argentine business daily *Ámbito Financiero*, summarized a University of Chile study that describes Chile as a nation with virtually no middle class. *Ámbito* presents as “collateral damage” of “the Chilean economic miracle” the economic misery that confronts Chileans on a daily basis.

At US\$19,000, Chile’s yearly per capita income is the highest in South America. This figure hides the fact that fully one third of the nation’s yearly income goes to the top one percent which, says the study, “makes this country the most unequal in the world.” Fully 50 percent of Chileans make do with less than US\$500 a month.

Santiago residents interviewed by *Ámbito* described a decrepit public transit system, where workers spend hours getting to work. Families report that it is nearly impossible to give their children a decent education or adequate medical care.

Taxi driver Marcelo Bustos described how his family of four lives on US\$1,200 a month: “Everything goes for bills; nothing is left for extras. Between rent, school costs for the children, and health care, every cent is used up.” Despite paying \$60 a month for health insurance, the out-of-pocket costs are high, so that “if anyone in the family gets sick, it means chaos for the budget,” said Bustos.

The article gives examples of a public health care system (National Health Fund, FONASA) starved of resources and used by 90 percent of the population: At the Sotero Hospital in Puente Alto, people wait for days to be seen, even for emergencies. “The system is for the rich, who knows how long I will have to wait to be seen,” declared Cristobal Ortiz, a 23-year-old Catholic University student, who was doubled up in pain and barely able to speak.

Ortiz described how he had had to borrow US\$12,000 to attend the University, which will “turn into \$30,000,” by the time he begins paying.

The sham of Bachelet’s slogans was made evident in the last weeks of her first administration, when a powerful earthquake struck Chile, affecting Concepción, Chile’s second largest city, Curicó and Taica. The responses by Bachelet and the incoming right-wing administration of Sebastián Piñera were identical: a heavy handed military occupation of coastal Chile to guard against “looters” (i.e., desperate working people) coupled with a media campaign against the victims and a general indifference to the plight of tens of thousands.

The earthquake exposed an inadequate infrastructure, a lack of medical resources, and shoddily built housing for the poor, many of whose homes were washed out to sea following the quake. Over half a million homes were destroyed, victimizing millions.

Underlying the Bachelet vote and the large number of abstentions is deep-seated anger, a social explosion that is waiting to erupt, not only among the working class and poor, but also among those like the student protesters who participated in massive demonstrations last April, who have been denied social mobility.

Recovered from the defeats of the 1970s and 1980s, the Chilean working class has engaged in militant strikes and protests since 2010. This year alone, there were walkouts and protests by public health workers in January and August over dire conditions in hospitals, mine workers strikes beginning in April and continuing throughout the year, a march of 100,000 in the streets of Santiago on May 1 denouncing social inequality, May strikes by vineyard workers, massive July protests for improved working conditions across Chile, and struggles by supermarket employees in July over wages.

In addition, there were hundreds of strikes and struggles over wages and working conditions by public employees, postal workers, workers in Chile’s lumber industry, retail employees and transit workers.

Virtually every section of the Chilean working class was thrown into struggle throughout the year.

Among students, there has been a continuing struggle over the social right to quality public education, including a university education. There were mass protests in April. Chilean students pay among the highest tuitions in the world and are forced to go heavily into debt with student loans. On the eve of Sunday’s election in Chile, protesting students carried out a “symbolic” occupation of Bachelet’s campaign headquarters in Santiago.

A statement issued by the organizers of the protest, the Coordinating Assembly of Secondary Students (*Asamblea Coordinadora de Estudiantes Secundarios*, ACES), included the following paragraph denouncing Bachelet and her coalition:

“Nueva Mayoría is the old Concertación in disguise. It has appropriated our demands and incorporated them into a program that we know will not be carried out, deforming them, turning them into big business proposals, and moving them far away from their origins: the movement of social forces.”

The Nueva Mayoría coalition includes most of the parties of Concertación plus the Stalinist Communist Party. The Chilean Communist Party, at one time a mass party, has historically been a tool of social control. It was the CP in Chile, also in alliance with the Socialist Party and the Christian Democracy, that was an essential element in the establishment of President Salvador Allende’s Popular Unity Government, which disarmed the working class, created illusions in the armed forces and paved the way for the Pinochet military coup in 1973 and the bloodbath that followed.

These three political parties once again come together as the left face of the Chilean ruling class.

By including the Chilean Communist Party in their coalition, Bachelet and Nueva Mayoría aimed to bring the student movement under their control and use elements of its leadership to lend this bourgeois electoral front a “left” face. In charge of her “youth team” is former student leader and Communist Party member Camilo Ballesteros, who began co-opting the student protests even before the votes were counted, claiming that the CP presence will insure that Bachelet will keep her promises and “solidarizing” himself with the November 17 occupation of the campaign office.

Stalinist student leader Camila Vallejo, who became internationally known during the mass protests in 2011, had vowed then that she would never support or campaign for Michelle Bachelet. She reversed her position in time for the election, however, winning a seat in Congress on the Nueva Mayoría slate.

With the intensification of the global economic crisis, a second Bachelet administration will not be a replay of the first. The Chilean government will face escalating working class struggles in addition to student protests. To the extent that Nueva Mayoría’s campaign rhetoric creates rising expectations on the issues of jobs, education and living standards, the confrontation will be all the more explosive.



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