

Letter from “Valinferno”

17 April 2014

The following was sent to the World Socialist Web Site from a resident of the fire-ravaged city of Valparaiso, Chile.

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In the course of its history, the port of Valparaiso has seen its steep hills, on the banks of an endless ocean scenery, become populated.

Yesterday and today, Valparaiso has formed a natural gray horseshoe. The port natives travel up the hills and down the plains. The smoke gets lost far away into the sea, away in the horizon. From the hills of Viña del Mar “beautiful city” and from the tall buildings that adorn the postcard scenery of Valparaiso. Infernal Valparaiso. Reddish Valparaiso.

Its houses barely clinging to the earth, its mazes and alleys. Its steps, its spine, all is fire.

Tourists and tenants of the Cerro Alegre (Happy Mountain) walk down the street dodging the ashes of the poor households that are crumbling like mushrooms in the dissimilar soils and slopes.

Fire is an entity that is extended to all sides among hills that change their names because it is never known where they begin and where they end. Where the poor die and where the rich can start again. In any case, Valparaiso eats its children and holds them in its arms made of burning tin.

Valparaiso, “Valparaíso my love.” What constitutes the pride of the coast of Chile?

I wonder, in the middle of the crowd, overlooking the bleak and nightmarish catastrophe on top of the hills—La Cruz, Merced, and Ramaditas—how that pride is conceived, where it comes from, and where it leads. Homes on top of homes, people on top of people. Lack of access. Ignorance of prevention.

It’s easy to compare the regulations of the small houses perched on the hills facing the new condos and touristy hills. Among the poorest hills, the most affected forest site is at the mercy of the sun and the electrical wiring in disrepair—all the right conditions to

be devoured by the fire. Overcrowding and trash polish the image of a port that we fail to see while traveling from the city by taxi or from a cruise ship on the waterfront.

But this corpse “tightens like hunger.” Valparaiso’s streets are a sea of people coming and going; the hills are a sea of fire that leaves only dark clouds. In the corners and supplies collection centers, the military straighten their solemn figures with rifles in hand. An image that speaks of old times. In Valparaiso, old stories are retold in the midst of catastrophe.

Help is felt. It breathes in through the smoke. The chaotic and improvised unity of people has its own organization. The plazas, schools and individual premises work as aid centers. Quickly the streets of Valparaiso are filling with trucks, fire trucks, military jeeps, ambulances and detectives.

The old locals die in the flames. Letters and family memories disappear before the advancing flames, thanks to the wind direction. Hot spots reactivate one another. Until now, the fire is not controlled. The firefighters look stunned at the sea of fire and start getting ready like soldiers to fight another battle.

On February 14, 2013, Valentine’s Day, the victim was the Cerro Rodelillo. Two-hundred-fifty poor houses burned. On April 12, 2014, Palm Sunday, more than 2,000 homes have been consumed by fire. Who is listening to whom?

Today, the newly elected president of the Republic, Michelle Bachelet, traveled to the scene. Instead of listening to people, she halfheartedly defended the indefensible, making rather a weak political propaganda than an act of support and containment.

Fire personnel traveling from other provinces and regions have to pay tolls. What good is done, for the coastal inhabitants of the hills by 100 tanks, 1,000 guns, and a million rounds of ammunition? Not many rescue helicopters are in the skies trying to put out the fire. For whom is the Congress, facing Plaza

O'Higgins, open where the people from the destroyed hills are gathered in crowds?

The press has no criticism or reflection. They can sell tragedy and devastation.

Today, we visited the Holy Family of Nazareth School, an individually subsidized small hotel situated in the affected hills, Las Cañas and Merced. So far, 150 families with 300 children have left their homes, escaping the fire.

With teary eyes, they say, "All we are left with is what we are wearing, but the most important thing is: we are alive."

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