

Valparaiso mayor declares Chilean city bankrupt

César Uco
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Valparaiso, the Chilean seaport whose hills were consumed by a ferocious fire that lasted two weeks, is bankrupt, according to its mayor, Jorge Castro. The city has no money even to meet teachers' pension contributions, he said. The city owes the teachers US\$45 million.

"The municipal budget is not even enough to pay the electrical bills," declared the mayor. According to the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio*, "the city is virtually bankrupt."

Valparaiso is vital to Chile's economic and political life. It is not only the country's main port, but also the home of the National Congress, the headquarters of the Chilean Navy and other public services and state institutions such as the National Council of Culture and the Arts and the National Fisheries and Aquaculture. However, "there are hardly any new businesses," notes *El Mercurio*.

The city, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was ravaged by the fire, which began on April 12. "The poverty of [the city's] inhabitants, and the inability to plan and manage the territory of a municipality without resources is what is behind the tragedy," reports *El Mercurio*.

The worst fire in the city's history consumed the hills of Valparaiso, where most residents are working class and poor. The fire left 15 dead, 2,900 homes destroyed, 12,500 homeless families and a burned area of over 1,070 hectares.

Moreover, the government admits the fire danger still persists. The military chief of the disaster area of Valparaiso, Admiral July Leiva, stated that the fire, while "contained, is not completely extinguished, because there could still be some hot spots, so we are going to keep working on this." Several outbreaks of fire remain active, affecting the community of Santo

Domingo, in the Region of Valparaíso.

There are indications that the initial wave of volunteers—mostly students—has left the city. The daily paper *La Estrella de Valparaiso* quoted volunteer Myriam Schalchli from Viña del Mar University, who is trying to organize help in the hills of La Cruz, as saying that 80 percent of the volunteers have left. She blames Mayor Castro for declaring, after thanking the volunteers arriving from all corners of Chile, that the city couldn't take care of them and asserting that "a good way of helping was by not going to Valparaiso."

"I think that this was a very unfortunate statement," Myriam told the newspaper. "A call must be made to the youth not to listen to the mayor and that those who want to go up [to help] should go up." She added that residents of the area "are very angry with the mayor and prefer that he not appear there because they do not know how they will react."

Also, she charged that the government has been of little help. "It is not possible that for a house where six people live you deliver a box of merchandise with a pack of noodles, or provide them with a single shovel to clean up their land; and even then they have to take down your ID card to ensure you will give it back," said the student.

Another problem that has arisen is bands of delinquents which are stealing the little the people have been left, mainly clothes and food. They have assaulted the collection centers of La Cruz hill as well as private homes and stores. Most assaults are carried on in the early hours of the morning.

These reports coming out of Valparaiso expose as lies the government's claims that it has all the necessary equipment to control the fire and attend to the victims.

"There are more than 100 vehicles and dump trucks that are pulling and removing waste material, and we

can say that to date over 11,000 tons of material have been removed,” the regional authority reported.

It continued, by pointing to a training scheme for 250 people in construction skills, psychological care facilities and the gathering of some 14,000 boxes of food for delivery to victims.

It is also true that the government has established a vaccination plan for influenza and tetanus. Undersecretary of Health Care Networks Angelica Verdugo said “shelters are delivering medicines for chronic patients.”

The lack of personnel and management is beginning to affect the original massive outpouring of help in the form of merchandise, mainly food and clothes, sent by the Chilean people from all over the country. It is reported that many perishable goods are rotting, and thousands of clothes have been spoiled due to the high humidity in the region.

The truth is that in spite of the government’s claims of assistance, it is not enough. The problems of Valparaiso and its hills have deeper roots. The rich and the government bureaucrats—beginning with members of the National Congress—live well and are unaffected by the continuous fires that the hills of Valparaiso have suffered during decades of neglect and indifference by the Chilean government. It is the working class and the poor that are most vulnerable to Chile’s myriad natural disasters, including not only these huge forest fires, but also earthquakes and tsunamis.

The neglect of the working class and the poor has deep roots in the 17 years of ruthless repression under the dictatorial rule of General Augusto Pinochet, but it continues under the Socialist Party-led Nueva Mayoria coalition of President Michelle Bachelet.

Government spokesman Alvaro Elizalde declared on the national state TVN program: “The president has said something very clear, which is that *this tragedy must be an opportunity* [emphasis added] to plan, and plan means that the solutions given to cities that have been affected must be better and ensure not only quality housing but safe housing and that means possibly consider relocation.” He added that “in the case of Valparaiso it was literally as if someone had dropped a bomb in the middle of the city.”

For the working class residents of Valparaiso, this means that after suffering a cataclysmic natural catastrophe, which has been immensely exacerbated by

the social conditions created by capitalism, they will probably be driven from their homes and neighborhoods.

In contrast to the government and the major parties—from Pinochet heirs in the Union Democristiana Independiente (UDI) to Bachelet’s Nueva Mayoria, including the Socialist and the Chilean Communist party—stands the response of the millions of Chileans and youth who genuinely and spontaneously mobilized to help the victims of the Valparaiso mega-fire.



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