

Chilean president praises armed forces amid new convictions of military assassins

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Chile's right-wing President Sebastián Piñera hailed the role of the country's armed forces in a speech delivered to some 9,000 massed troops and Carabinero military police on September 18, the country's independence day.

The speech came just one week after thousands marched through Santiago, the Chilean capital, to mark the 45th anniversary of the US-backed coup that brought the fascist military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet to power, leading to the murder, disappearance, torture, imprisonment and exile of tens of thousands of Chilean workers, students and leftists.

As in previous years, the march wound its way through central Santiago to the city's General Cemetery, ending at the foot of a memorial inscribed with the names of the dictatorship's victims.

The crowds carried photographs of the murdered and disappeared and chanted "No to impunity!" The demand has taken on renewed force after the Supreme Court last July approved a request for the provisional release of seven former officials of the dictatorship convicted of crimes against humanity, including a former colonel convicted for the murder of three Uruguayan leftists.

Piñera subsequently welcomed the Supreme Court justices who granted the release of the military assassins to the La Moneda palace, signaling his support for those convicted of the dictatorship's crimes.

This followed the pardon granted in April by President Piñera to former colonel René Cardemil, who was serving a 10-year sentence for the murder of six people in 1973, one of them an IMF official. Cardemil died of cancer shortly after the pardon was issued.

The September 11 demonstration saw clashes in which riot police attacked protesters with tear gas and batons.

Chile is still sharply polarized, including along class lines, in relation to the coup of 45 years ago. A poll by the Cadem agency found that 95 percent of the population believes that the country is still divided by the coup that

overthrew and killed the elected Socialist Party president, Salvador Allende.

The same poll found that 85 percent of those polled believed that the military maintained vows of silence to cover up evidence of those involved in the crimes of the dictatorship, while 66 percent said that justice has still not been done in relation to these crimes.

There are still more than 1,300 human rights violation cases before the Chilean courts stemming from the dictatorship.

Just two months ago, nine soldiers were convicted in connection with the brutal murder and torture of the popular singer-songwriter—the leading representative of Chile's "Nueva Canción" movement and member of the Chilean Communist Party (PCCh in Spanish)—Victor Jara, and the director of prisons under the Allende government, Littré Quiroga, in September of 1973.

Eight soldiers were given 15-year prison sentences for the murders, and their officer more than five years, for covering up the abduction and murder of the two men.

Soldiers first smashed Jara's fingers with their rifle butts and then shot him 44 times, while Quiroga received 23 bullet wounds. Afterwards, their bodies were taken from the Chile Stadium and dumped on a public highway, along with the bodies of others executed there.

In his September 18 speech to the massed troops, Piñera glossed over this hideous record, declaring: "These are your Armed Forces, of each and every one of our compatriots, whatever your political ideas, your religious beliefs, your social condition and your ethnic origin. Chileans, these are your soldiers."

Piñera, a multimillionaire who made his fortune during the 1970s as the dictatorship plunged the working class and the Chilean people into poverty and terror for almost two decades, has gone further, attempting to justify the bloody 1973 coup.

In a September 11 speech at La Moneda, which had

been bombed by the military exactly 45 years earlier, Piñera declared that Chilean democracy had been “very sick and for a long time” before the coup, adding that it “did not die suddenly.” He pointedly referred to Pinochet’s junta as a “government” and “regime”—not as a dictatorship.

According to Piñera, “democratic values” had begun to “erode” in the late 1960s under the impact of “intolerant, dogmatic and confrontational attitudes” and “ideological projects.”

His historical reference was to the rise of a militant mass movement of the Chilean working class, which led to the election in 1970 of the Popular Unity (UP or Unidad Popular) government, a coalition that included Allende’s Socialist Party, the Stalinist PCCh and the Christian Democrats.

Washington responded to the limited reforms and nationalizations enacted by Allende with a CIA campaign to destabilize his government and a series of measures designed, as then President Richard Nixon put it, to “make the economy scream.”

The movement of the Chilean working class had assumed revolutionary proportions, with workers seizing factories and seeking to arm themselves. Their leadership, however, particularly the Stalinist Communist Party, aided by Pabloite revisionist groups, worked to keep the working class subordinated to the UP government of Allende. It, in turn, sought, in close collaboration with the Chilean officer corps, to create “social peace,” restoring the factories to their capitalist owners and forcibly disarming the workers.

Allende went so far as to bring Pinochet into his cabinet to better coordinate the suppression of the workers, thereby creating conditions for the horrific defeat of 1973 and the 17 years of killing and repression that followed.

If Piñera is now seeking to refurbish the image of Chile’s bloodstained military and justify the coup of 1973 and Pinochet’s dictatorship, it is out of fear within the Chilean ruling class that the global economic crisis is creating the conditions for a resurgence of revolutionary struggle in which the armed forces may be called out once again.

Despite the much-touted Chilean “economic miracle,” the country’s economy remains dependent upon a single mineral, copper, which makes up 52 percent of its exports, leaving it dependent upon the increasingly volatile fluctuations of the commodities markets.

There have been continuous mass protests over what Chileans refer to as a form of social “apartheid” in the

country’s education system, as well as the failure of the country’s private pension funds (AFPs), developed as the main engine of domestic private investment, to provide a livable income for retirees—60 percent of them receive monthly payments of \$292 or less, that is, less than the minimum wage.

The return to power of Piñera and the Chilean right was prepared by the reactionary policies pursued by the former ruling coalition, the “Nueva Mayoría,” led by Michelle Bachelet of Chile’s Socialist Party, who defended the interests of domestic and foreign capital, and left office in the midst of a family corruption scandal involving millions of dollars and a dismal 23 percent approval rating.

The attempt by Piñera to rehabilitate and cultivate the Chilean military is of a piece with developments across Latin America. In Argentina, the armed forces have been given the power to carry out domestic law enforcement for the first time since the dictatorship, while in Brazil, the generals are advancing the military as the arbiter of political and social stability in the run-up to next month’s crisis-ridden national elections.

In each case, the return of Latin America’s military to the center of political life, with its record of mass killings, torture and criminality, is a harbinger of an eruption of class struggle throughout the continent.

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