

From Chile to Lebanon: Working class offensive sweeps the globe

Bill Van Auken
25 October 2019

The past week has seen a new stage in the eruption of the global class struggle, with mass protests bringing two seemingly disparate countries to a halt over what are undeniably similar grievances that are rooted in the historic and systemic crisis of the global capitalist system.

In Chile, the announcement by the right-wing government of President Sebastián Piñera of a 4 percent rise in mass transit fares ignited an uncontrollable wave of mass protests that have created a crisis of capitalist rule. The government's response, reflecting the fears of the Chilean bourgeoisie, has been to impose a state of emergency and curfew, deploying 20,000 troops in the streets of Santiago and thousands more across the country. According to official figures, 18 people have been killed since the protests began, hundreds wounded and at least 5,000 arrested. The criminal methods of the US-backed Pinochet dictatorship have been resurrected, with reports of disappearances, torture of prisoners and sexual assaults against women detained in the protests.

This naked repression has only succeeded in swelling the protests. According to figures from the Chilean Interior Ministry, 424,000 people participated in 68 separate marches and demonstrations across the country Wednesday. Undoubtedly, the real figure is far higher. A general strike continued into its second day on Thursday, with hundreds of thousands more taking to the streets.

Meanwhile, Lebanon has also been rocked by mass protests over the past week, bringing an estimated one quarter of the country's 6 million people into the streets. The immediate trigger was the government's attempt to impose yet another gouging austerity measure aimed at making the country's working class pay for its deep economic crisis—a \$6-a-month tax on WhatsApp messages. As in Chile, attempts to use the army to break up protests have only inflamed popular anger.

Both Piñera in Chile and his Lebanese counterparts, Prime Minister Saad Hariri and President Michel Aoun, attempted to allay the popular upheavals with statements of contrition and offers of minimal economic relief measures. In both

countries, the masses in the streets dismissed these cynical gestures as too little, too late, and are demanding the downfall of the regimes.

In both countries, the driving force behind the mass protests is the ceaseless and malignant growth of social inequality. The richest 1 percent monopolize 58 percent of the wealth, while the poorest 50 percent own less than 1 percent, in Lebanon, long-considered the region's "free enterprise" haven for capitalist investment. In Chile, recently touted by Piñera as a regional "oasis" for finance capital, the richest 1 percent gobble up 33 percent of national income, according to World Bank data from 2017.

The *New York Times*, a principal voice of the US ruling elite, has taken note of the eruption of mass protests in Chile, Lebanon and other countries, commenting in a front-page article that "experts discern a pattern: a louder-than-usual howl against elites in countries where democracy is a source of disappointment, corruption is seen as brazen, and a tiny political class lives large while the younger generation struggles to get by."

Strangely missing from this review of what the article's headline describes as "popular fury across the globe" is what is happening in the United States itself. It quotes one of the "experts", Vali Nasr, who recently left his post as dean of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, as commenting: "In countries where elections are decisive, like the United States and Britain, skepticism about the old political order has produced populist, nationalist and anti-immigrant results at the polls. In other countries, where people don't have a voice, you have massive protests erupting."

Are the *Times* editors genuinely oblivious to what is happening in the US, or are they just whistling past the graveyard? They publish this as 48,000 autoworkers have been on strike against General Motors for 40 days and 32,000 teachers and school workers in Chicago are entering the second week of a walkout that has shut down the country's third-largest school district. The number of workers in the US on strike last year—over half a

million—was the highest in more than three decades.

All the conditions that the *Times* describes in other countries—profound social inequality, corruption and a political system that is utterly indifferent to the interests of masses of working people—find stark expression in the US, the center of world capitalism, where the top 1 percent hoards roughly 40 percent of total wealth, and a social explosion is also on the agenda.

Thursday's *Times* also carried an editorial titled "Chile Learns the Price of Economic Inequality". Noting that Chile's "protesters' rage is born of the frustrations of everyday life," it goes on to state: "Chileans live in a society of extraordinary economic disparities ... Santiago's prosperity is undeniable. Viewed from the top of the tallest building in South America, which stands in the middle of a financial district called 'Sanhattan,' neighborhoods with luxury apartments, private hospitals and private schools stretch as far as the eye can see.

"But Santiago's poverty also is striking: crumbling public hospitals, overcrowded schools, shantytowns that sit on the outskirts of the metropolis.

"And farther from Santiago are cities untouched by the recent boom."

Substitute United States for Chile, and Manhattan for "Sanhattan" and little of this depiction of a country dominated by social inequality would need to be changed.

The Gini coefficient, the most commonly used statistical measure of income inequality, places the United States, at 41.5 barely less unequal than Chile, at 47.7.

The *Times* editorial attributes Chile's crisis to the government's "unsustainably narrow conception of its obligations to its citizens," which it in turn blames upon the Pinochet dictatorship, which ruled the country from 1973 to 1990, for dictating policies based upon "free-market competition". What it neglects to mention is that these policies were drafted by the so-called "Chicago Boys", bourgeois economists trained by the University of Chicago's "free market" godfather, Milton Friedman.

The same essential policies have been introduced by successive US governments—Democratic and Republican alike—depriving millions of essential social services ranging from health care to food stamps and retirement income, while leaving 40 million people living below the absurdly low official poverty rate of \$25,000 for a family of four.

A striking feature of the protests in both Chile and Lebanon are the statements by demonstrators in both countries that the latest austerity measures are merely the straw that broke the camel's back, and that they are fighting against an unequal social order that has been built up over the past 30 years. In Chile, these three decades began with the end of the military dictatorship, and in Lebanon, with the

end of the civil war.

This also is an expression of a global shift. The social relations created over the past 30 years, began with the Stalinist bureaucracy's restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union. They have been based upon the suppression of the class struggle, the uninterrupted growth of social inequality and financial parasitism and the vast transfer of wealth from masses of working people the world over to a tiny wealthy elite. Today, this social order is rapidly unraveling under the weight of a resurgence of struggle by the international working class.

Objective events are exposing the complete political bankruptcy of the pseudo-left organizations and so-called "left" academics who wrote off the working class and the struggle for socialism. Nothing in their perspective, based on nationalism and identity politics, foresaw the emerging global eruption of class struggle.

These events, however, were substantially anticipated by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International in both their theoretical analysis and practice.

In its 1988 perspectives document "The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International," the ICFI explained why the class struggle would inevitably assume a global character, based upon the "massive development of transnational corporations and the resulting global integration of capitalist production have produced an unprecedented uniformity in the conditions confronting the workers of the world."

The document stated: "It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the form of the class struggle must assume an international character. Even the most elemental struggles of the working class pose the necessity of coordinating its actions on an international scale."

This now becomes the most urgent and concrete political question. The current mass social protests and strikes are the initial expression of a growing revolutionary struggle of the international working class to put an end to capitalism and reorganize the world economy to meet social needs, not private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact