

Workers and students from Chile speak out at protest in Sydney, Australia

Our reporters

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More than 800 supporters of the mass protests in Chile gathered near the Sydney Opera House in Australia's most populous city last Sunday, to show solidarity with the millions of workers rallying for their social and democratic rights and to condemn the vicious repression of the military and the police.

Attendees included Chilean refugees who fled the country to escape brutal persecution under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, who was brought to power in a US-backed coup in 1973. Hundreds of younger Chilean expatriates, international students and temporary workers also took part.

Underscoring the global character of the emerging movement of the working class, contingents from other South American countries, including Uruguay and Colombia, were present, as were a number of Australian workers and youth.

The speakers, from Chilean community organisations and South American solidarity groups, condemned the state persecution, which has seen peaceful protesters gunned-down by heavily armed soldiers and thousands of detentions. They drew parallels with the actions of the Pinochet regime.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party distributed hundreds of copies of the WSWS perspective, "From Chile to Lebanon: Working class offensive sweeps the globe ." Protesters expressed interest in the call for an international movement of the working class directed against the capitalist system.

WSWS reporters spoke to a number of those in attendance.

Jemma, an international student, explained that she is half-Palestinian and half-Chilean. She responded enthusiastically to the headline of the WSWS perspective drawing parallels between the mass protests in Chile and Lebanon.

"I really support the popular movement that is taking place in Lebanon," she said. "It is very similar to what is happening in Chile. I hope people power will keep rising. We need a peaceful struggle to establish a fair society for everyone.

"Everyone in power in Chile is so corrupt. It is a haven for international finance from the US, Spain, Canada and other foreign countries.

"Chile is important for neo-liberalism throughout South America. It has been their model for the rest of the region since the 1970s. Pinochet just started this project. Then all of the 'democratic governments' since have continued it. They have even kept his constitution. Now Chile is in a revolution, but not by weapons, by the growing knowledge of ordinary people. We need to establish the people's power, not industrial power, the power of the companies and the military."

Carlos, a musician, stated: "I'm in Australia because my grandfather came here in the 1970s to escape Pinochet. I was born here. I'm lucky to live here. I have family in Chile who don't have the same opportunities that I have.

"There are some politicians who are on the side of the people but at the same time, there are people with money and power who have influence and want things their way, unlike people who have nothing or very little. It's very easy to take advantage of people without power or privilege. There have to be systemic changes.

"It has always been a class war in Chile. The battle between the rich and poor has always been a huge feature of Chilean struggle. We are seeing again what was happening 30 years ago with Pinochet. My family came here and they have told me everything that happened, but we all need to know the history of what happened in Chile to prevent it taking place again."

Andrey, a 28-year-old filmmaker, said: "Thirty years of life conditions in Chile have started these protests. The people in Chile are tired. The transport fare increases were just the straw that broke the camel's back. It's not just students, it's elderly and children. It is no longer possible for people to live."

Gabriela, an actress, added: "In Chile you have to choose, do you want education? Or do you want healthcare? Or do you want public transport? This is the problem. Old people can't live on \$400 a month. Now it's not about the left or

the right, because it's a problem for everyone. They can't just ignore people.

"We need a revolution because things have to change right now. The problem with the president, Sebastián Piñera, is that he can't understand what is happening. When you're wealthy like him, you don't understand how poor people live. We've been waiting a long time, 10, 15 years. It has been very slow. We need change right now. Last week, we were fighting in the streets, Piñera responded by going and talking to the corporate executives."

An international student, who did not wish to provide his details for fear of reprisals, explained: "This situation is not just about the fare increases. This goes much further back. It is about the age pension. It is about the high cost of living.

"The minimum wage is extremely low compared to other countries. There are huge divisions in the social classes. The rich earn so much more than those on low wages. Chile is one of the most unequal countries in the world. And now everything has just exploded.

"It was wrong for the government to bring out the military against the protestors. It is like 30 years ago under Pinochet. Piñera is another dictator. He is manipulating the flow of information and controlling the media, so the truth is not getting out. It is difficult being in another country and knowing that this is happening in one's own country. Without accurate information, we have no idea if our friends and families are safe."

A worker from Chile, who also wished to remain anonymous, said: "It inspires me to see my people protesting peacefully in Chile and here. Finally, after so many years of so much injustice, there is a ray of hope that the system of government can change, that a new constitution is possible. We need to put an end to the tremendous level of social inequality.

"At the same time, I am extremely saddened by the extent of human rights' abuses. To see and hear about how they have been rounded up or chased when they have attempted to greet the military peacefully. They are illegally arresting people who have committed no crimes. They are torturing people.

"It pains me greatly that all that took place in the past could happen, is happening again, because my mum lived through the Pinochet dictatorship. A friend of mine was shot in the face two days ago at a peaceful protest. It hurts me that there are assassins in power."

Fernanda, a stay-at-home mother, said: "To me what's happening now is the same thing as 1973. The military are coming into people's houses, taking people and we don't know where they've gone. People have been tortured, women have been raped, it's ridiculous.

"I knew what Piñera stood for. He's been elected twice.

But the thing that annoys me the most is that opposition politicians haven't done anything. Michelle Bachelet didn't talk. Where are the other people? Where's Camila Vallejo-Dowling, the Communist Party member in parliament?

"Last time I went to Chile, I realised that food is as expensive as in Australia, but people don't have the same wage. They have to work all day to be able to pay for things. Another example was the health system. When I got sick there, I was taken to a clinic where everyone is in the same room. People waited for hours.

"The lesson for workers everywhere is that you can't stay quiet. Enough is enough. We are standing up in Chile and now we've got the people of Lebanon fighting for their rights."

Claudio, a hospital worker, stated: "People are struggling in Chile because of the last 30 years of non-progress which has put the people in a difficult financial situation. The difference between rich and poor is now historic.

"The economy is supposed to be good and thriving, the best in Latin America, but that isn't showing in terms of health and education and basic needs. Now the army and military have been sent out to repress the civil rights of the people. Officially around forty people have been killed, hundreds are 'disappeared.'

"This is not an isolated situation in Chile, it's something that's happening everywhere. Maybe the Chileans had too much patience for a long time. Now the elderly are on the streets, the workers and the students.

"In '73, our parents didn't have social media, the whole movement was prepared underground. The military were able to make people disappear, take them on planes and drop them in the ocean. Now we can use technology, like a mobile phone, to protect ourselves. Back in the day they closed down newspapers and closed radio stations. They did everything they could to stop people from learning.

"Now in Chile, mobile coverage has also been affected. You can ring but can't send a media file. It hasn't worked everywhere, but they're trying to stop people sharing things."

Asked about the way forward, Claudio said: "A workers' government would be ideal. Most common people, they want to get rid of the current government. It's an important first step in consciousness."



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