

Chilean government seizes on COVID-19 pandemic to declare state of catastrophe

Mauricio Saavedra
25 March 2020

The ultra-right government of billionaire Sebastian Piñera has seized on the COVID-19 pandemic to put the Armed Forces on to the streets of Chile and place the country under curfew. With the support of Congress, the government has imposed a State of Catastrophe charging the military brass with dispensing supplies and provisions and maintaining “public order.” Far from motivated by the fight against the coronavirus, it is part of a string of laws put into force to militarise the country, which has been rocked by mass anti-capitalist demonstrations, wildcat strikes and student rebellions since late last year.

Drastic measures are required to defeat the highly contagious COVID-19. As of Tuesday, the virus had claimed the lives of more than 17,000 of 400,000 confirmed cases across the planet, and it continues to rise unabated. Scientific studies show that an effective response to a pandemic demands rapid implementation of universal testing along with strict quarantining to slow its spread. Yet virtually no nation has implemented such measures, and least of all Chile.

Long paraded by “free market” charlatans as the country to emulate, Chile is so starved of medical infrastructure and resources that every public hospital lacks the rudimentary equipment and beds to deal with this pandemic, let alone the ventilators and more specialized equipment to save lives.

As the virus has risen exponentially in Chile, with 746 confirmed cases since March 3 and the second fatality reported yesterday, a stream of whistleblowers are exposing a catastrophe in the making. At risk of dismissal or reprimand, distressed health professionals have turned to social media to reveal just how criminally negligent the present administration has been.

One hospital in Punta Arenas has not a single ICU bed. At several other hospitals, nurses and doctors, short of testing kits, gloves and masks are having to make do with improvised personal protective equipment. For example, at San Jose Hospital in the Metropolitan Region medical staff are constructing eye shields because, according to one post, they are not supplied by the government.

A nurse from Guillermo Grant Benavente hospital in the southern regional city of Concepcion anonymously reported that at a briefing she was informed that her hospital was being transformed into an ICU hospital with 1,000 beds to treat critical cases of COVID-19.

“I felt a fear that chilled my soul,” she said “because the only people being tested are critical cases who need to be hospitalised. So that means that we are underreporting. Even the doctors are scared because we don’t have sufficient beds ... The epidemiological curve that the ministry is projecting is horrific. In fact, the military head that is in charge of (Concepcion) arrived. The whole hospital is being transformed and they are purchasing (mortuary) bags and with the sanitary authority considering mass graves. This is not auspicious.”

Protecting lives is not in the calculations of the ruling elites, having closed schools and universities only last week but keeping the working class working. Piñera and his asinine Health Minister Jaime Mañalich have stridently rejected calls from thousands of scientists, medics, academics and professionals to implement national quarantining measures and conduct mass testing. Mañalich has gone so far as to defy the theory of natural selection, declaring that the coronavirus “could mutate into a benign virus similar to the common cold.” In other words, nothing to fear here, go back to sleep. Such is the grotesque level of incompetence, indifference and negligence.

Thousands have been laid off in every area including mining due to falling demand from China, Chile’s main buyer. Those workers who remain are forced to work with minimal or no personal protection. One miner posted “What’s to happen to those who work in the mines, where we share toilets, showers and change rooms, where up to 1,000 men eat in the same canteen...? Enough of the abuse! We also have families. We can also take the virus home and infect those around us. Please share (the post) so we close the mines in Chile for 15 days.”

The country’s major airline LATAM has halved employee salaries for three months, ostensibly due to travel

restrictions, but in reality, to lay the burden of falling profits on its workforce.

The purpose of the State of Catastrophe is to place the military on the streets and to hand them extraordinary powers that suspend basic rights under conditions where an already radicalized working class and youth have begun to strike to demand measures that will protect its health, safety, security, jobs and ultimately lives. The state is preparing itself for the revolutionary upheavals that will inevitably emerge due to the shock of the catastrophic loss of life. The Chilean ruling class has ample experience in this department.

In the months following the largest demonstrations in its history, the Chilean state unleashed a wave of terror that harkened back to the days of Gen. Augusto Pinochet's military junta. This was ratcheted up in January when Piñera introduced the "anti-barricade" and "anti-looting" laws to criminalise protests, while at the same time the headquarters of the UDI, the ruling pro-Pinochet party, has been opened to ultra-right and fascist dregs from Revolutionary Capitalism to manufacture weapons. They are then protected by the police when they parade on the streets brandishing these weapons.

Such is the level of state lawlessness that is impossible to differentiate police from fascists. Five cops are now awaiting trial in Puente Alto, a mining town in northern Chile, after security footage caught them brutally bashing an 18-year-old to the point of causing several fractures and puncturing a lung.

The Chilean National Institute of Human Rights confirmed last week that 11,389 demonstrators had been arrested since October 2019, including 1,580 minors and adolescents. Of that total, some 2,146 reported some type of human rights violation including: sexual violence (257), torture or other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment (617) or excessive use of force (1,272). Some have been held in custody without trial for over four months.

The NIHR reported that it had filed 1,465 legal actions that included 1,234 victims of torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, 282 victims of torture with sexual violence and 34 victims of frustrated homicide at the hands of state agents. The NIHR also confirmed that 3,838 demonstrators had received serious injuries, the most of whom suffered bullet wounds to their eyes and limbs from trigger-happy cops.

The State of Exception—a subsection of the State of Catastrophe—stems from the Pinochet dictatorship's constitution and has remained intact under the so-called left fronts and coalitions that have either formed governments or sat in parliament for over 30 years—the Socialist Party, the Stalinist Communist Party (PC), the Concertacion, the

Frente Amplia, the Nueva Mayoría. In fact, PC head Guillermo Teillier tweeted on March 19 when the law came into effect, "I hope that with the Decree of the State of Catastrophe the improvisation will end and that clear, effective and timely measures will be adopted".

To be clear, the military junta introduced the State of Exception in 1985 in the midst of a wave of social explosions that shook the country following the economic depression of the early 1980s. Based on theories of Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, power is delegated "totally or partially" to designated heads of the National Defense who assume command of the Armed Forces, Order and Public Safety to ensure "public order and to repair or prevent damage or danger to national security."

The 13 military heads running the 13 regional zones of the country assume administrative powers of the institutional authorities placed under its jurisdiction. They control entry and exit points and all transit within. They dictate the measures for the protection of the public utility services, and mining industrial and other centres. They order the collection, storage or production of reserves of food, articles or merchandise and determine their distribution.

The military heads determine movement and meetings in public spaces. They "directly give instructions to all officials of the State, its companies or municipalities... with the sole purpose of remedying the effects of the public calamity." They "disseminate through social media the information necessary to give peace of mind to the population" and "dictate the necessary guidelines and instructions for the maintenance of order in the area."

The State of Catastrophe is enacted for 90 days, but can be extended indefinitely or decreed indefinitely "if the circumstances that caused" the law to be enacted continue.

This must serve as a warning to the working class. The bourgeoisie and its servants in the so-called left as well as the right, are preparing class war against the working class. The working class must itself prepare by learning the strategic lessons of the past and take matters into its own hands.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact