

Chile's government deploys troops in the streets as coronavirus cases soar

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The government of Chile's ultra-right President Sebastian Piñera has responded to the explosion of the pandemic and signs of growing popular resistance by fast tracking laws normalising the deployment of the military in the streets. No less than a dozen laws beefing up the repressive agencies of the state have been drafted by both the executive and Congress in the last six months. They are already being put to use as the coronavirus spreads rapidly in working class districts in Santiago and regional cities.

Today, Santiago's entire Metropolitan Region of almost seven million is under quarantine, with more than 2,500 new cases being reported daily. The total number of confirmed infections has risen to roughly 40,000, and the number of deaths to close to 400. As elsewhere in Latin America and internationally, the real toll is vastly higher.

With the deadly virus hitting hardest in the most densely populated working class boroughs of Santiago, its spread is a damning indictment of the criminally negligent and reckless policies of the government, further inflaming anger towards the entire political establishment.

As of May 14, 14,000 members of the Armed Forces, the paramilitary Carabineros, the PDI police, along with detachments of the Army's elite Lautaro Special Operations Brigade, or black berets, Air Force special forces, the Marines, as well as the Carabineros special forces, riot police and tactical units began patrolling the streets of metropolitan Santiago.

More than 74,450 military and police personnel have been dispatched across the country, and the military brass has been placed in charge of the 16 regional zones since Piñera declared a State of Catastrophe in March. To date, these patrols have detained 6,888 for violating curfew, 969 for committing crimes during the curfew

and 1,255 for violating the total quarantine. In other words, with COVID-19 as a cover, the military is being used to suppress the working class.

Minister of Defence Alberto Espina, explained that the Metropolitan Region's 52 mayors—including those from the Chilean Communist Party (PCCh), Chilean Socialist Party (PSCh), Frente Amplio as well as the right—will have officers assigned to them so they can contribute “suggestions and opinions” to improve the patrols of the military, who will be in charge.

“Among the actions that are being carried out is the safeguarding of critical infrastructure that includes more than 22 food and health distribution centres” in the Metropolitan Region that provide resources to the rest of the country, Espina said, adding what can only be characterised as a threat: “collaboration of the citizens is fundamental.”

These actions were foreshadowed by a bill passed in the Senate allowing the president to call out the military to protect electricity, communications, transportation, hospitals, supplies etc., without having to declare a State of Exception, which requires congressional approval. The military will also be permitted to “protect” the branches of government or place these political institutions under military supervision.

On May 8, Francisco Chauan senator for the extreme right Renovacion Nacional presented in Congress a bill that will not just criminalise demonstrations, mass strikes and protests, but will allow the police and the military to carry out mass round-ups. They have borrowed this law from the German “Landfriedensbruch,” or “breach of peace” statute. It allows for the mass arrest of individuals present at “violent demonstrations” and carries prison sentences of up to three years.

“Our Chilean Criminal Code lacks a legal figure that

would allow for the punishment of those who participate in a violent agglomeration if they are not caught directly committing a crime...” Chauan stated.

A week earlier, on April 28, Defence Minister Espina addressed the House Defence Committee—an 11-member committee that includes Guillermo Tellier (PCCh), and Jaime Toha (PSCh)—urging it to pass a bill giving far-reaching powers to military and police intelligence services. The bill was passed unanimously in January by the 43-member Senate, 16 of whom are from Nueva Mayoría (PSCh, PDC, PPD, PCCh), and one from Frente Amplio.

The danger of this bill cannot be overstated. A revamped intelligence system will be made up of the National Intelligence Agency, which includes the intelligence directorates of the Armed Forces, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Carabineros, the investigative police, gendarmerie and customs. Internal Revenue Service and the Financial Analysis Unit will be involved in the provision of information.

This vast intelligence gathering operation, ostensibly created to deal with “drug trafficking, corruption, money laundering, child prostitution and paedophilia”, has all the powers that Latin American dictatorships and US imperialism have employed in the past against mass revolutionary struggles, as with Operation Condor in the 1970s and 80s.

The repressive legislation is the response of the bourgeoisie to the mass protests initially triggered by public transport fare hikes in October of last year that developed under the slogan of “it’s not 30 pesos, it’s 30 years” into demonstrations that brought millions into the streets against decades of privatization and transfer of wealth to the top that have led to obscene levels of social inequality.

Chile is undergoing a profound crisis of bourgeois rule. Historically reactionary, weak and venal, the ruling elite rested in the 20th Century on the services of the economic nationalist policies of the anti-Marxist Socialist Party (PSCh) and the Stalinist Communist Party (PCCh). These parties sought subordinate the working class to the capitalist state by sowing illusions in the myth of Chile’s parliamentary democratic tradition, as the bourgeoisie prepared to unleash mass repression in the bloody military coup of September 11, 1973.

Today the institutions of bourgeois rule lack all

credibility. Support for the ultra-right government that came to power in 2018 oscillates between 5 and 20 percent. The legislature, however, has single digit approval, while the parties within it—the PCCh, the Greens, the PSCh, Frente Amplio, Christian Democrats, as well as the extreme right—have registered single digit support, according to polls taken at the height of the demonstrations. The judiciary is seen as merely a corrupt bastion of entrenched power.

The Chilean left is attempting to foist a new political trap on the working class with the purpose of channeling mass social unrest back into parliamentarism, while concealing the extremely ominous dictatorial measures being prepared under Piñera. The way forward, they say, is to hold a Constituent Assembly, as though drafting a new charter will change the nature of the capitalist state. Every single so-called left organization is promoting this perspective, not least the misnamed Workers Revolutionary Party (PTR) which is ideologically tied to the late Argentine Pabloite, Nahuel Moreno.

The bourgeoisie and its servants are using the coronavirus pandemic as a means of preparing for the next stage of the class struggle with mass arrests, mass torture and mass disappearances. That is a legacy etched in blood in the annals of capitalist Chile.

The only answer to this threat is the independent mobilization of the working class in the fight for revolutionary international socialism and the overthrow capitalism. This requires, above all, the building of a Chilean section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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