

Protests erupt in Chile after police throw 16-year-old off bridge

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Protests and demonstrations erupted over the weekend in Chile after video footage surfaced showing a Carabinero Special Forces police officer pushing a 16-year-old youth off the Pio Nono Bridge in Santiago.

On late Friday afternoon, nurse technicians, who have been protesting for a month for professional recognition, improved working conditions and salary increases, were joined by a spontaneous demonstration of hundreds of youth, indigenous and other social groups in the lead-up to a referendum to discard the military dictatorship's constitution, scheduled for October 25.

By 7 p.m., the Carabineros and a squadron of Special Forces set upon the protesters with water cannon and tear gas, and made dozens of arrests. At about 7:30 p.m., as Special Forces were chasing a section of the protesters over the bridge, an officer rushed 16-year-old Anthony Araya with such force that he pushed him over bridge's railing. The youth fell head first into the shallow Mapocho River, 5 meters below. Suffering severe head trauma, he remains in critical but stable condition.

For minutes the officers looked down upon the seemingly lifeless body lying face down in the riverbed but made no attempt to lend aid to the critically injured youth. Even while the health brigade, firemen and emergency services were initiating a rescue, police continued to fire tear gas, hindering their work.

As news of the incident began to circulate online and in the media, the Carabineros issued an initial statement denying all responsibility for what they call a "lamentable accident." The national press and networks reiterated the official message claiming that the youth "lost his balance on the railing" after a police officer "tried to stop" him.

As questioning of the official line continued to spread online, Lt. Col. Rodrigo Soto of the East Santiago Prefecture issued a far more qualified denial to the press: "What the Carabineros...absolutely deny is that this person was grabbed by the feet or thrown into the river with a water cannon as witnesses on social networks invented. Fortunately there is a video that shows that this unfortunate accident occurred in a

context of intense detention of people who were causing disorders. ..."

Within minutes, video footage taken by Venezuelan state-run media Telesur, showing in slow motion the moment when the Carabineros pushed the youth off the bridge, went viral on social media, further incensing the population. *Caserolazos* (the banging of pots and pans) carried on into Friday night. Images of the bodies of victims of the military dictatorship thrown into the Mapocho river in the 1970s were placed side by side with the image of Anthony Araya's motionless, bloodied body lying in the same river.

In the following days, protests were organized in various of the capital's working-class communes, as well as in the city center. The boy's parents were greeted with a demonstration outside the hospital where he was undergoing surgery. The vigil, as with the other protests, was dispersed with water cannon.

At no point on Friday did Chile's billionaire president, Sebastian Piñera, or his interior minister, Victor Perez—who served in Augusto Pinochet's civil-military dictatorship—or Carabineros director Mario Rozas, utter a word of support to the youth or his family, or condemn the actions of the paramilitary police. The contrast between their unbridled hostility toward any expression of working class opposition, on the one hand, and their enthusiastic support for actions of the ultra-right, on the other, is as sharp as black and white.

Just over a month ago, truck owners barricaded arterial roads at strategic locations cutting the supply of goods and perishables, in an attempt to force congress to pass draconian police state measures. The truck owners' associations, with a track record for putschist activity—most infamously the CIA-backed lorry owners strike of 1972 that sought to topple the government of Salvador Allende—were aided in their seditious actions by Carabineros who regulated the flow of traffic for them. Similarly, far from repressing the small marches called in defense of Pinochet's constitution, police have provided escorts for these bands of middle-class reactionaries and outright fascists.

The center-left parties, however, have gone into overdrive,

attempting to make hay out of a looming political crisis for the ultra-right government. They began issuing demands for the resignation of Mario Rozas, director general of the Carabineros, as well as Interior Minister Perez, in a cynical attempt to curry favor with the masses.

Deputy Pablo Vidal (Democratic Revolution) called on the lower house to deny appropriations for the Carabineros' budget until Rozas and Perez resign. He was followed by a dozen others, all of whom sought to outdo each other in condemning the police actions and threatening to take the matter to the courts.

These cynical maneuvers should be treated with the contempt they deserve.

They are designed to channel growing anger into toothless calls for institutional reform. The removal of Rozas and Perez will demonstrate accountability. The courts must be seen to be functioning on the basis of the rule of law, so some "bad apples" caught committing human rights crimes need to be sacrificed. Token appeals for training police, the army and the other bodies of armed men in human rights doctrines have to be fulfilled. In other words, the primary function of the Chilean "left" is to sow illusions in parliamentary democracy and to safeguard the capitalist state lest it be threatened from below by the working class.

This has been their historical function. They are brought together by a common ideology that claims that Chile is a nation with democratic traditions and an adherence to constitutional norms. This specious theory of national exceptionalism was used throughout the 20th century, and especially by the Stalinist Communist Party (PCCh), to deny the necessity of the working class taking up a socialist and internationalist revolutionary struggle against capitalism. This issue became a crucial factor in the defeat of the masses in 1973, when Allende peddled this nationalist dogma even as the military bombarded the presidential palace.

Today all the so-called "left"—from the PCCh, the Socialist Party (PS), the Humanists and the Party for Democracy (PPD), to the student movement coalitions that arose in the 2000s such as Frente Amplio, Revolucion Democratica, Convergencia Social, to the latest electoral permutations of all of the above, such as Fuerza Comun and Nueva Mayoria—belong to a bureaucratic caste that has sought to dominate the working class in Chile with middle-class reformist politics.

In one form or another, they have for three decades since the return to civilian rule derived their privileged existence from positions in the executive apparatus or the legislature, the civil service, or the unions and other social organizations. Meanwhile the conditions of the working class and the youth have worsened to levels not seen since the darkest days of the dictatorship.

The Chilean state, nonetheless, is undergoing a genuine crisis of bourgeois rule. The cop that pushed Anthony Araya over the rails is in custody after a court of guarantee heard the case brought by state prosecutors over the weekend. This is unprecedented. In two of the most emblematic human rights violations to emerge from the unrestrained police crackdown last year, it took nine months to arrest the cop responsible for blinding Gustavo Gatica and ten months for the preventive detention of the cop that nearly killed Fabiola Campillai.

Ominously, the Santiago Court of Appeals on September 28 rejected 14 appeals for protection against the use of anti-riot weapons, upholding their use in enforcing public order. The criminal complaints wanted the courts to "declare the illegality and/or arbitrariness of the act attributable to officials of the Carabineros of Chile, consisting of arbitrarily shooting bullets and/or pellets...causing very serious injuries" and that threatened "the right to physical and psychological integrity of persons, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression."

The appeals represented more than 100 students who suffered injuries and mutilations resulting from the disproportionate and indiscriminate firing of "non-lethal" munitions by Carabineros in October and November last year.

The court dismissed the cases, arguing that the government and the police were confronted with "excessive illegal activity" of "unusual violence," and therefore the amount of restraint required was unforeseeable.

"The regrettable outcome of violent acts by some citizens cannot be a justification for preventing the use of weapons belonging to police bodies, especially when these police bodies have regulated and adjusted their protocols in accordance with international police standards, respecting the fundamental guarantees of all subjects of law," the court ruled. This ruling must be taken as a real warning.

The murderous police violence proves that all of the tensions that gave rise to mass social convulsions last October have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Chilean youth and workers are increasingly turning to militant class action against social inequality, homelessness, mass unemployment, extreme poverty, police state repression and the threat of dictatorship.



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