

Former Chilean Health Minister charged with falsifying COVID-19 figures

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Charges that Chile's former health minister, Jaime Mañalich, manipulated the data on coronavirus infections and deaths have deepened the profound crisis of political rule that has gripped the country since the end of last year. They further confirm that the ultra-right government of billionaire President Sebastian Piñera criminally mishandled the pandemic, inflicting disproportionate suffering upon the most oppressed layers, including the working class, the elderly and the indigenous population.

This criminal negligence is graphically illustrated by a recent report revealing that one quarter of those who have died from COVID-19 did so without ever being hospitalized. A total of 3,491 mainly elderly citizens who, although developing serious conditions due to COVID-19, were never admitted to hospital, and died outside the health system.

Investigative news site *CIPER* published last week a detailed account of affidavits submitted to public prosecutors by Health Ministry employees at the end of September. In damning testimony, Johanna Acevedo, the head of the ministry's Health Planning Division (known as DIPLAS) and Andrea Albagli from the Department of Epidemiology, substantiated accusations that Mañalich consciously and deliberately manipulated figures and lied to the public. They also affirmed that his cabinet advisors—Paula Daza, the present under-secretary of public health, and Itziar Linazasoro, former Health Ministry chief of staff—were aware of the alterations.

Acevedo told public prosecutors that, at the request of the ministry, her department's epidemiological reports had to be "adjusted" to match those reported daily by Mañalich who had his own parallel tallying system.

"I had to... adjust the data from the epidemiological reports to what (the ministry) announced," Acevedo told the prosecutors. DIPLAS's public reports "had to be consistent with what was reported by the authority. I always reported everything to the authority, internally, but the published epidemiological reports had to be consistent with the information that the minister announced in the public account."

Acevedo explained that DIPLAS records are based on *EpiVigila*—the health ministry's software that records infections reported by doctors and that of the country's regional ministerial health secretariats—and the databases of the

laboratories reporting positive PCR tests. DIPLAS works on the basis of criteria set down by international bodies such the Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization, whereas the former minister used an unknown and unrecognized tallying system.

On April 29, two months into the pandemic in Chile, Acevedo emailed Linazasoro and Daza about the discrepancy between her department's records and the parallel count by Mañalich. Chile recorded its first case of coronavirus on March 3. On April 29, total cases recorded by DIPLAS reached 9,060 cases. Yet Mañalich had publicly reported that morning that Chile had a total of 8,869 coronavirus cases, a difference of 91.

By May 26, when total cases recorded by DIPLAS had reached 99,302, Mañalich reported in his daily address to the nation only 82,289 cases and on the eve of his resignation two weeks later, the gap had widened to a massive 30,000 cases. Acevedo again brought up the discrepancies with the ministry, but her reports fell on deaf ears. On June 7, however, Mañalich was obliged to publicly acknowledge that 653 deaths had not been accounted for in the official figures. Five days later he resigned.

Serious accusations of concealment of figures, lies and manipulation were brought up in testimony given to public prosecutors by Andrea Albagli, who during Mañalich's tenure worked in the Department of Epidemiology, responsible for submitting reports on the progress of COVID-19.

Albagli is politically associated with the pseudo left parliamentary group *Comunes*, a permutation of *Revolución Democrática* (RD) which itself came out of the *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front) coalition. She worked in the RD's health commission for the 2017 presidential election and entered the health ministry under Piñera's presidency. She is closely aligned to the *Mix* siblings who belong to *Comunes*: Claudia *Mix* is one of the co-sponsors of the constitutional accusation raised against Mañalich in September and Thomas *Mix* is a union bureaucrat of the health ministry employees' association of civil servants (*Afuminsal*).

The Chilean "left" that sits in the legislature and dominates the trade union apparatus initiated the criminal investigation against Piñera and his former Health Minister, Mañalich.

The Stalinist Communist Party and *Progresistas* and the

pseudo left organizations Frente Amplio, Revolución Democrática and Comunes have spearheaded the investigation with a two-pronged goal in mind. Firstly, it is a cynical attempt to curry favor from the working class in the lead up to a referendum on the country's constitution at the end of this month. Since last year's explosive social convulsions revealed the extent to which Chile's "left" political caste has lost all credibility and has suffered record low approval ratings, it is today desperate to retain its ideological stranglehold over the working class and the youth.

More significantly, as a longstanding essential prop of capitalist property relations and the nation-state system, the chief historic mission of the Chilean "left" has been to check the working class from turning to a revolutionary socialist alternative by channeling mass opposition back into the safe parameters of parliamentary politics. This is a case in point with Albagli and the Stalinists and pseudo left in general, who, far from using her damning evidence to educate the working class in the class nature of the capitalist state, is sowing further illusions in the state's institutions and keeping the masses tied to them.

On September 30, Albagli told prosecutors she was, in several instances, given instructions on what to incorporate or what to take out of the epidemiological reports, to paint a "more favorable situation." The deliberate obfuscation of information severely impacted working class communes. This is made clear in the following points that Albagli raised in testimony before public prosecutors:

- On April 24, her superiors asked her department to delete 30 records so her epidemiological report "matched" the minister's. When they refused, they were then instructed to submit another report with the cutoff point "adjusted" so DEIS figures would be equal to or less than the Ministry's tally. This continued during the following months as her department was obliged to shift the cutoff point by up to two days. Albagli stopped working on the epidemiological reports in June.

- In internal correspondence dated April 10, Albagli objected to the government's deceptive characterization of "recovered" cases that did "not follow any indication from international bodies." She warned that the "implications are not harmless: we are wrongly reporting that all the people who have been diagnosed a fortnight ago are no longer contagious and therefore are not "active cases" and, as this definition is not precise, we contribute to the spread of the virus in those people who continue to be contagious after the 14-day period."

- In internal correspondence dated April 6, Albagli raised differences with the ministry in their use of incomplete data when reporting outbreaks at the regional and communal level. At the national level, two databases (Epivigila and the PCR test) were used while at the regional and local levels only the PCR tests were used. The PCR tests were giving significantly lower incidence rates especially in the working class and poor communes in Valparaíso, Santiago and the south, areas that

suffered massive outbreaks due to tardiness in calling quarantining measures and lockdowns.

Perhaps the most significant evidence presented to the court was modeling which demonstrated that within the totality of confirmed cases, the probability of dying from COVID-19 is 86 percent higher in people assigned to the public health system as opposed to private health clinics, once adjusted for sex, age and presence of chronic diseases.

The current minister, Enrique Paris, was quick to dispute the evidence, stating that "the truth is that the more poverty there is, the greater the possibility of contagion, but not the greater the possibility of fatality. There is no relationship between fatality and poverty, as this would mean that patients are treated in a discriminatory manner." This last point can in fact be demonstrated to be due in so many ways to Chile's two-tiered health system. The almost 3,500 people who died outside the hospital system most likely experienced an agonizing death—COVID-19 attacks the respiratory system prompting a severe immune system reaction that wreaks havoc on the lungs and other organs and inflaming blood vessels.

The government's response has been to stonewall the investigation. The request by the Public Prosecutor's Office and police investigators for a warrant to search and seize documents and emails belonging to the former health minister was denied by Enrique Paris, the current Health Minister, citing special protection of the department's communications and claiming that "national security" was at stake. His stonewalling has been defended by Piñera even after the Supreme Court ordered the release of the emails.

The conflict within the political establishment for control over the state will only intensify as the campaign for the referendum on changing the military-era constitution draws near. Much is at stake for the deeply discredited Chilean "left," which, after almost a century of existence, finds that its grip over the masses is steadily weakening.

If there is a central lesson to be learned from this recent experience, it is that students, youth and workers need to take another step and break from the political, ideological and theoretical perspective of the national opportunists that make up the parliamentary and pseudo-left organizations and their promotion of the national reformism. The state cannot be reformed and must be overthrown by the working class and establish a genuinely democratic workers' government as part of the fight for world socialist revolution.



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