

Chilean government mobilizes police and military on anniversary of social revolt

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Massive demonstrations are expected in Chile this week in the lead-up to an October 25 referendum to reform the country's constitution. This week also marks a year since the eruption of massive protests and strikes against decades of free market policies that have produced only social inequality, police violence and poverty for the vast majority of the population. Without a doubt, the social unrest that extended into March of this year would have continued unabated absent the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the country's working class.

The renewed protests are expected to be large precisely because of the criminal mishandling of the pandemic: the ultra-right government of billionaire president Sebastian Piñera has proven to be as indifferent to human life as it is to the livelihoods of students, youth, workers and the most vulnerable sectors. In a nation of only 19 million, the number of COVID-19 infections is reaching close to half a million people, and confirmed and suspected deaths have surpassed 18,170—3,500 of whom died without receiving hospital care.

Mass poverty hit levels last seen during the 1981-82 depression, with the official unemployment rate reaching 13 percent. If inactive workers are added to the unemployed, the figure increases to 29 percent, or almost 3 million people. The super-exploited informal sector, meanwhile, now accounts for 22.6 percent of the total workforce. Another 680,000 workers have been forced to eat into their social security due to a government directive permitting employers to furlough staff for months on end without pay. To top this off, some 40 percent of families who received an "Emergency Family Income" got a maximum of US\$205 for three months, less than a third of the US\$654 poverty line.

In response to the planned marches and demonstrations, Interior Minister Victor Pérez is preparing to deploy tens of thousands of militarized Carabineros police and Special Forces. The Minister of Defense, Mario Desbordes, announced the deployment of the military throughout the country in order to protect critical infrastructure from supposed "looting and attacks." He is putting into effect a law passed early this year with support from the parliamentary "lefts" in the Senate—the Socialist Party, the Party for Democracy (PPD), Frente Amplio—that allows for the use of the armed forces for

domestic purposes without decreeing a state of emergency, which requires congressional approval.

This was already put into practice four days ago in the working class southern Santiago commune of Puente Alto, where military personnel were stationed at strategic points and patrolled major arteries.

"They will be in a position to move if necessary to repel attempts to destroy critical infrastructure; they will be deployed in this respect..." Defense Minister Desbordes told Radio Pauta. "We are prepared to confront violent groups and we are not going to allow destruction" he said, adding chillingly, "anyone who goes there with that intention should assume the costs."

The precedent was established earlier this year in La Araucanía, a major hotspot for unemployment, deep-seated poverty and now the uncontrolled spread of coronavirus among the indigenous Mapuche population. Under the pretext of combating so-called "terrorist activity," Piñera militarized this southern region, and the people today live under virtual martial law. Ultra-right and fascistic UDI deputies, mayors and governors do the bidding of forestry multinationals, mining companies and power plants, with Carabineros Special Forces offering their services as a private security force. Mapuches are claiming land traditionally tended by indigenous communities but usurped under the 17-year military dictatorship.

Also, in recent weeks, the Carabineros police, Special Forces and the military have used indiscriminate and overwhelming force to repel spontaneous rallies. A fortnight ago, as protests against police repression were being dispersed with water cannon and tear gas, sixteen year-old Anthony Araya fell head-first seven meters into the shallow Mapocho River after he was pushed over the railings of the Pio Nono Bridge in the city centre by a Special Forces officer.

Unbridled police state repression against the working class has only intensified. Striking health workers and miners have also been dispersed with water cannon and faced arrest, while port workers were set upon by Carabineros and the Navy riot squad after picketing a container operator in Iquique. Union delegate and port worker from San Antonio José Ibarra was brutally attacked by cops, who claimed they mistook the worker for a burglar.

In the working class commune of Lo Hermida, in the

southeastern Santiago district of Peñalolén, Carabineros Cpl. Oscar Cifuentes was exposed by neighbors as an agent provocateur. Cifuentes, who went by the name of “Giovanly Arévalo,” infiltrated community groups to draw up lists of activists who were then followed by police outside their homes and with drones. The provocateur raised suspicions because he was constantly inciting youth to attack the local Carabineros headquarters—early morning raids were conducted in Lo Hermida, with ten people arrested on charges of attacking the police station.

Investigative news site *CIPER* reported that Cifuentes was operating under the auspices of an Orwellian intelligence law which empowers Carabineros to use infiltrated agents without judicial authorization, so no civil authority supervises their actions, which are financed with reserved funds. The Civil Registry provides Carabineros an undisclosed number of false or stolen identities for use by possibly hundreds or even thousands of agents, who are set loose in working class communities to prepare black lists, entrap workers, facilitate mass arrests and, most ominously, to round up political opponents as the military junta did in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 military coup. In the case of Cifuentes, the cop was given the stolen identity of a young man from Alto Hospicio in Northern Chile.

Interior Minister Pérez, however, insisted that the cop had not committed any crime by inciting the population. “He was in a context and acted within that context (...) He was fulfilling a task and a mission,” said the former Pinochet minister.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Over the last year, the executive has built up a raft of laws criminalizing all social protest and beefing up the repressive forces of the state. This authoritarian, police state response is being carried out by a government that is deeply hated by the masses and finds itself besieged on all sides. Piñera and his band of extreme-right and fascistic ministers are mimicking their counterparts in the United States, Brazil and elsewhere. They are turning a blind eye to violence committed by fascistic layers in the police, the armed forces and among middle class reactionaries, and will sooner or later turn to putschist methods to stave off the threat of a working class revolt.

It falls on the parliamentary left and the pseudo-left organizations to desensitize students, youth and workers to this real danger by sowing illusions in the supposedly “democratic” and “parliamentary” traditions of Chile. They are promoting a referendum calling for constitutional reform set for October 25, which they claim will permit the “people” to decide on the nature of the constitution, and, ipso facto, on the character of the state itself. The “people” will have the option of voting for a constitutional convention that will allow for the overturning of Augusto Pinochet’s 1980 Constitution.

The constitution may indeed be redrafted, but on the very next day, when they come forward to demand social equality and their rights, the working class and youth will be brutally

repressed because the class character of the Chilean capitalist state will not have changed. It did not change when Salvador Allende, on a crest of revolutionary struggles, came to power in the 1970s. At that time, he and the Stalinist Communist Party promoted Chile’s purported adherence to democracy and constitutionality right up to the point when his defense minister and chief military commander Gen. Augusto Pinochet toppled the Popular Unity government in a US-backed coup d’état.

The past must serve as a warning. The bloodstained Chilean bourgeoisie is ruthless, venal and utterly subordinate to imperialist financial and corporate interests. It has demonstrated before that it will not hesitate to drown an incipient revolutionary struggle in blood. The Chilean capitalist state will not change.

What must be prepared is the fight to establish a workers’ government where delegations of factory committees, neighborhood committees, production and distribution committees, communications and civil-defense committees composed of workers and youth take the lead.

This battle can be waged successfully only by throwing off the political caste of fake left organizations that sit in the parliament and dominate the trade union apparatus and social organizations. They represent the interests of an upper middle class layer that is hostile to the working class and seek only to position themselves in the bourgeois state and on the corporate and financial boards of directors themselves.

Chilean workers must turn to their international class brothers and sisters who are their true allies, adopting a program of world socialist revolution and building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the party founded by Leon Trotsky.



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