

The constitutional referendum and class struggle in Chile

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Chileans voted by an overwhelming 78 percent majority Sunday in favor of a new constitution to replace the charter imposed by means of a rigged plebiscite in 1980 by the hated military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet. Turnout in the referendum was the highest seen since the adoption of voluntary voting in 2012.

Sunday's referendum was the outcome of a year-long operation by the country's parliamentary "left," the trade union apparatus and pseudo-left groups to divert the explosive development of mass struggles by Chile's workers and youth against capitalism into a futile electoral campaign. The aim is to dissipate a revolutionary situation amid a growing danger of authoritarian rule and dictatorship.

The developments in Chile are part of an international eruption of the class struggle over soaring poverty and economic insecurity fueling broad-based anti-capitalist sentiment. Since the 2008 financial crisis in which governments ransacked the public purse to save global financial and corporate elites, working class living standards have plummeted.

Like their counterparts internationally, Chilean capitalism, and its state institutions, have lost all credibility and are confronting a historic crisis of rule. They are responding to this existential threat from below, as they did during other critical points in the 20th century, by calling upon the services of the bureaucratic labor organizations and the opportunistic economic nationalists that make up the Chilean "left." They count upon these political parties and unions to disorient, divert and render harmless the struggles of the working class. At the same time, they are preparing the forces of state repression to unleash against the masses.

In October 2019, student civil disobedience triggered by a hike in public transport was transformed almost overnight as millions of workers, layers of the middle class and youth joined protests, strikes and demonstrations across the country. A mass movement opened up against decades of extreme social inequality, police violence, and in opposition to a deeply hated political caste that emerged in the transition from military to civilian rule.

President Sebastian Piñera responded to the protests by decreeing a state of emergency and curfew, and by deploying

the Armed Forces for the first time in decades. Flanked by Gen. Javier Iturriaga and ex-Defense Minister Alberto Espina, Piñera broadcast on live television on October 20, 2019: "We are at war with a powerful, ruthless enemy, who respects nothing and no one, who is willing to use violence and crime without any limits."

By November 12, Piñera's "war" resulted in countless human rights abuses by Carabineros, Special Forces, black berets, and the military: two dozen had been killed or disappeared, hundreds had suffered severe injuries and mutilations caused by munitions and thousands who were rounded up suffered beatings, sexual abuse, rape, and torture.

The ultra-right government also brought forward a series of police state and dictatorial measures later passed by the Senate and that are now in operation. One bill criminalizes social protests with long prison terms. More than 2,000 political prisoners—mostly juveniles and young people arrested for protesting—languish in custody without being sentenced for any crime. Another bill allows the president to call out the military to protect "strategic infrastructure" and to place the branches of government under military supervision without declaring a State of Exception. Yet another revamps the National Intelligence Agency to combine military, security and public order divisions, permitting vast intelligence gathering operations like those employed by Latin American dictatorships and US imperialism with Operation Condor in the 1970s and 80s.

But, as these measures only further incensed and radicalized the protests and amid the second general strike, Piñera in mid-November turned to the parliamentary "left," to join national unity talks, which all of them—the Socialist Party (PS), the Party for Democracy (PPD), the Radicals, the Liberals, the Humanists, the Greens, the pseudo-left Broad Front (Frente Amplio) coalition and the Stalinist coalition around the Communist Party—accepted.

Piñera, in referring to the "Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution," explained: "I had to decide between two paths: the path of force through the establishment of a new state of emergency or the path of reason...we chose the path of reason to give a new opportunity for peace."

From that moment on, the parliamentary "left" set itself the

task of redirecting the explosive mass struggles into the safe parameters of parliamentary politics by promoting the referendum that they claim will permit the “people” to decide the constitution, and, ergo, the character of the state itself. It took one year and a pandemic to push this agenda through.

This sowing of national exceptionalism—that Chile rests on a supposedly “democratic” and “parliamentary” tradition and that its institutions and repressive apparatus adhere to “constitutional” norms—is the *raison d’être* of the Chilean fake left, which in almost a century of existence and through incalculable permutations has advanced this theory as it has sat in the Congress and the executive, dominated the trade union apparatus and social organizations.

This theory, promoted most forcefully by Chile’s Stalinist Communist Party (PCCh), paved the way to the 1973 military overthrow of the Popular Unity coalition government of Salvador Allende and the violent repression of the Chilean working class.

Now they attempt to sow the illusion that the state is an independent arbiter that can be controlled by the people. In doing so they demonstrate their rejection of the Marxist theory of the class nature of the state: that it is an instrument that upholds the political dictatorship of the capitalist class, who, when threatened by revolution, sweep aside parliament and constitutional norms and rule by force.

That in a nutshell is what the Stalinists concealed from workers and youth during the 1968-73 revolutionary period when they claimed that Carabineros and the military were “the people in uniform.” That is what they are attempting today with the promotion of the Constitutional referendum.

Without a doubt, Augusto Pinochet’s 1980 Constitution is an authoritarian instrument used against the working class. Its author, Jaime Guzman, founder of the Independent Democratic Union (UDI), drew inspiration from Nazi German jurist Carl Schmitt and reactionary Spanish clericalism.

But what the left leaves out is that in his 2005 “democratizing reforms” of the existing constitution, ex-Socialist Party president Ricardo Lagos maintained the most anti-working class provisions such as Article 9, Chapter 1 on terrorism. This article has been used to protect forestry, energy and mining corporate interests in La Araucania from the oppressed indigenous population with a massive military buildup.

A critical role in the promotion of illusions in constitutional reform has been played by the Chilean Communist Party (PCCh). This is in line with its entire history. Founded in 1922 under the leadership of Luis Emilio Recabarren (1876-1924), the party came under the influence of the rightward shift that accompanied the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union—with the regression to the nationalist theory of “Socialism in a Single Country” and the resuscitation of the Menshevik “two-stage” theory of revolution.

Following a political conflict with its founder Recabarren, a young layer of the PCCh leadership was co-opted into the state.

Six members participated in the drafting of the 1925 bourgeois constitution, written as the country, in the middle of a deep economic crisis provoked by the collapse of saltpeter exports and declining British imperialist interests, was in the throes of explosive labor struggles and a military revolt.

This constitution was a counterrevolutionary document imposed by the populist regime of Arturo Alessandri to circumvent the development of a revolutionary socialist movement. Unlike the French and American revolutionary documents that derived their authority from a sovereign people, in the 1925 constitution “sovereignty resides essentially in the nation” and “delegates its exercise in the authorities.”

This is because by the turn of the 20th century, Chile—like many other semi-colonial countries under the domination of imperialism—had created powerful battalions of the working class whose many social grievances and demands came into conflict with the profit interests of the saltpeter and copper mining barons. From 1905 to 1925, the deeply anti-communist Prussian-trained Chilean army had put down hundreds of strikes, massacring between 5,300 and 6,800 workers.

The development of the PCCh was in line with the sharp rightward shifts of Soviet Stalinism, adopting in the 1930s the policy of the Popular Front, which it has maintained until this day.

Ostensibly devised to fight fascism, with its adoption of the Popular Front Stalinism renounced the objective of proletarian socialist revolution and openly defended capitalist property relations by calling for an alliance with the “liberal,” “democratic” and “republican” sections of the bourgeoisie. This was the basis of Stalinism’s betrayal of the Spanish Revolution in the 1930s, and it is what the PCCh advanced in the 1970s when it betrayed the Chilean Revolution.

Rewriting the constitution will not bring an end to the capitalist crisis, the class struggle or the threat of dictatorship in Chile. The critical question confronting the Chilean working class and youth is that of revolutionary leadership. A new party must be built based upon the genuine program of revolutionary international socialism fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International. Founded by Leon Trotsky, only this international party has defended the political continuity of Marxism through its implacable fight against Stalinism, Social Democracy, Pabloite revisionism and every other form of nationalist anti-Marxism. To take the revolutionary fight forward in Chile youth and workers must study these strategic political and theoretical experiences and draw the necessary conclusions.



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