

Behind the right-wing, anti-immigrant marches in Chile

Mauricio Saavedra
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The recent series of violent marches in Chile against economic refugees, mainly from Venezuela, is the end product of a four-year anti-immigrant campaign whipped up by the right-wing government of the country's billionaire president, Sebastian Piñera. The most serious incidents occurred September 25 when a mob of 5,000 marched through the northern port city of Iquique. By the end of the day, the mob lit a large bonfire in the middle of a square and burnt the Venezuelans' documents, prams, toys, clothes, tents and whatever other little possessions they had.

Based on reports, not one arrest was made even though there was a real danger of asylum seekers being lynched. The events indict the capitalist state, which has sanctioned and fostered the expressions of national chauvinism and xenophobia for electoral purposes.

That at a certain point fascist and ultra-nationalist dregs took the lead is obvious. Yet in the throng were also state officials. It has come to light that involved in the march were figures such as the mayor of Colchane, the director of a private school, and the government-appointed director of the Iquique Free Trade Zone, Felipe Hübner Valdivieso. More were surely lurking in the crowd.

Earlier in September, the government announced it would start expelling so-called "illegal migrants" on the basis of a new Migration Law enacted in April that facilitates deportations.

The Piñera administration had already deported 321 refugees this year and intended to carry out 1,500 more deportations before the United Nations intervened to urge their suspension. This is because human rights and migration advocates revealed that Department of Immigration and the PDI carried out mass raids on immigrants, launched mass arrests without warrants, held them incommunicado, denied them legal

representation and proceeded to expel them en masse disregarding constitutional norms and guarantees, including due process.

"The Chilean government must immediately stop these collective expulsions of immigrants, as they have the right to an individual assessment of their cases," the UN office for Human Rights in South America stated.

"Deportations cannot be carried out in a summary manner, but require an individual assessment, taking into account the humanitarian considerations," added Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, Felipe González Morales.

Only the day before the march, Carabinero officers violently evicted 100 refugee families from Plaza Brasil, a public square in Iquique, on the grounds that their makeshift camp represented a health risk.

In announcing the reactivation of evictions, Interior Minister Rodrigo Delgado cynically remarked that it was "not permitted to use public spaces for leisure and recreational purposes to set up temporary housing."

Several thousand undocumented Venezuelans, Haitians, Colombians, Peruvians and Bolivians who have entered through Chile's increasingly militarized borders have been stranded in Iquique and Arica—the northernmost town bordering Peru—for months. Homeless, destitute and denied government assistance, they've had to set up donated tents on public squares, on the beach or on barricaded streets without the most rudimentary amenities. The camp in Plaza Brasil had been occupied since 2020.

On Friday September 24, cops "started to tear down our tents and here we were, standing on a corner, looking to see what we could grab, where we could spend the night with our children. Because we really have nowhere to sleep, we have nowhere to stay," Venezuelan refugee Mariana Contreras told *El*

Ciudadano.

“We witnessed the beating of minors and pregnant women,” wrote social and human rights groups in a communiqué that called for the guarantee of refugee rights that the Piñera government has brazenly trampled underfoot. In contrast to the Carabineros’ velvet glove approach towards Saturday’s marchers, up to 14 asylum seekers were detained.

Aided by the media monopolies *Grupo Copesa* and *El Mercurio*, with their inflated and salacious reports of supposed migrant crime waves, drug trafficking and delinquency, the Piñera government is attempting to recreate the same foul political atmosphere that brought it to power with the support of the extreme right in 2018. Piñera has calculated that by dehumanizing migrants—the poorest and most vulnerable section of the working class and oppressed—he may be able to increase his diminishing chances of winning the November presidential election.

During the last election cycle, right-wing and parliamentary left candidates ran on a platform calling for restrictions on migrant intakes, particularly excluding nationals from poverty-stricken Haiti and Venezuela. Piñera accused migrants of “importing evils like delinquency, drug trafficking and organized crime.”

The outgoing government of Socialist Party president Michelle Bachelet set the stage for this anti-immigrant crackdown with a draft immigration bill that purportedly sought to update Chile’s decades-old migration law, but in reality focused on strengthening border security.

The fact is that the Haitian migrants and refugees detoured into Chile in 2016 and 2017—an estimated 150,000 Haitians arrived during this period—because their destination of choice, the US, was closed off by the resumption of mass deportations by the Obama administration, which only escalated under Trump.

Once in power, Piñera put his program into practice with two executive decrees that particularly targeted Venezuelans and Haitians who were confronting a worsening economic and political situation caused primarily by Washington’s decades-long imperialist meddling.

The first decree ended the system that had previously allowed Haitians to go from being “tourists” to regular migrants once they obtained a job, and then to seek

family reunifications. Now Haitians had to obtain a maximum 90-day tourist visa before entering the country and show bank statements, a criminal record check and a hotel reservation or notarized letter of invitation. Family reunification applications were limited to 10,000 and had a duration of 12 months, making a mockery of the concept. The calculated objective was to make conditions so unbearable and discriminatory that Haitians would leave.

The second decree affected the Venezuelan exodus. Piñera unveiled his “Democratic Responsibility Visa” with anti-communist rhetoric directed against the bourgeois nationalist regime of President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas. Yet the purpose of this visa was also to stem the influx of Venezuelans by requiring a visa before entry for a 12-month stay, renewable once.

To put the issue into perspective, there were an estimated 489,000 migrants in 2017, increasing to 1.3 million in 2018; 1.45 million in 2019 and 1.46 million in 2020. In four years, migrants went from 2.65 percent of the population to roughly seven percent, but their numbers have remained stagnant since. Along with the anti-immigration policies, the 2019 mass anti-capitalist movement and the pandemic ground regular migration to a halt.

Migration nonetheless continued but through precarious and vulnerable irregular entries. Between January 2018 and January 2021, there were over 35,400 entries through unauthorized crossing points. In the first six months of this year this number increased to 23,675.

It is these desperate people, many of whom have travelled thousands of miles through the Amazon jungle and Andean plateau just to reach irregular border crossings into Chile, who are targeted in this cynical political exercise.



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