

Presidential election lays bare sharp class divisions in Chile

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In what has been described as “historic” by the corporate media, the two main victors in Sunday’s presidential election in Chile are the fascistic José Antonio Kast of the Christian Social Front, with roughly 27 percent of the vote, and Gabriel Boric of the pseudo left-Stalinist electoral front Apruebo Dignidad, with 25 percent. The two will face off in a December 19 second-round ballot. International finance capital is following closely the events as they represent a microcosm of the global development of the class struggle. Chile’s stock market soared by 9.25 percent on opening Monday based on the news of Kast’s front-runner status.

“The two men offer antithetical agendas,” *The Guardian* commented. “Kast has centered his campaign on conservative social values, security and migration, while Boric espouses an egalitarian, feminist and ecological future for Chile. While Kast proudly declares himself politically incorrect and opposes marriage equality, Boric pushes inclusivity and progressive social values.”

The overriding concern of the financial markets is not who wins the presidential election. While they clearly would prefer a victory for Kast and the far right, the leading candidates in the election all have a proven record of defending private property relations and upholding the capitalist market:

- Kast, the son of a Wehrmacht officer who fought on the Eastern Front, unashamedly declares his unwavering support for Chile’s former fascist military dictator Augusto Pinochet. He was a congressman for the extreme right Independent Democratic Union (UDI) until 2017, when he ran as an independent in the presidential elections of that year. Kast is closely aligned to Spain’s fascistic Vox party, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro and is part of the international anti-communist alliance, the “Madrid Forum.”

- Boric, a radical university student leader in the 2011 education protests, has since 2014 sat in the lower house and infamously entered into national unity talks with current right-wing government of Sebastian Piñera in 2019 to head off massive anti-capitalist demonstrations. Boric models his Social Convergence party (which is part of the Broad Front or Frente Amplio coalition) on Spain’s Podemos, which formed a bourgeois government with the Spanish Socialist Workers Party PSOE last year. Like its Spanish counterpart, this pseudo-left party speaks for so-called “progressive” upper middle class professional layers, who espouse identity politics. Its main political purpose is to thwart any independent political mobilization of the working class.

- Sebastian Sichel, from the right-wing ruling Chile Podemos Más, was one of Piñera’s cabinet ministers until early this year. A relative unknown, he attempted to posture during the year’s election cycle as moderate but has supported the violent military repression of youth

and indigenous-peasant protests. He will now call for a vote for the fascistic Kast in the second round.

- Yasna Provoste, Christian Democrat, was a minister under Michele Bachelet’s presidency who was disqualified from holding office in 2008 after a civil servant embezzled millions of dollars on her watch. From 2013 until mid-year, she was a congresswoman for the northern mining region of Atacama, whose mining sites were kept operational despite the high number of COVID-19 cases.

The candidates, from the extreme right to the pseudo-left, have moreover pledged to the business world economic stability, no matter what. Boric’s electoral partners in the Stalinist Communist Party (PC) have been at pains to assuage any fears about their role: “We believe that today voting for Boric is the only way to maintain a high level of stability in the country,” said PC president Guillermo Teillier to CNN. Teillier is desperate to win a seat in the Senate.

Last week, the head of the Chilean Confederation of Production and Commerce, Juan Sutil, said his meeting with the candidates was “of a very high standard” and made special note of “a lot of moderation in all the proposals that we heard.”

The main question that is causing so much consternation in capitalist circles is whether any of the contending political forces will be capable of delivering stability in a country undergoing extreme social polarization and political instability.

The first round result speaks for itself. Only 7 million of the 15 million eligible electorate voted in this Sunday’s presidential elections, or 46.7 percent. Of these, 1.96 million cast their ballot for Kast (13 percent of the entire eligible electorate) and 1.8 million for Boric (12.1 percent of the eligible electorate), obliging the candidates to run a second round.

Even more extraordinary is the continued electoral annihilation suffered by the old and deeply hated political caste that emerged in the transition from military to civilian rule three decades ago. Less than six percent of the eligible electorate cast their vote for Piñera’s candidate, Sebastian Sichel, and just 5.4 percent for Yasna Provoste from the center-left coalition, Constituent Unity.

Polls have shown that support for the Armed Forces and police, the courts, the executive and legislature and the right and so-called left parties has been in the low double or even single digits for three consecutive years. The state has lost all credibility and confronts a historic crisis of rule.

Chile’s changed class relations have been starkly laid bare by the criminally negligent policies in response to the coronavirus pandemic. The state’s violent repression of massive anti-capitalist protests in 2019 and its casual indifference to mass death and infection caused by the virus over the last 18 months have sparked restlessness and a

growing militancy in the working class.

In an address to Congress in September, the Central Bank governor reported that labor participation remains today lower than the last five-year average, while companies have encountered among employees a significant decrease in the willingness to work longer hours. In another study, a large share of companies have reported being unable to fill vacancies, and in some cases no candidates applied. Moreover, in the last year miners, health workers, teachers, port workers, retail staff and civil servants have staged strikes and protests over unsafe conditions and poverty wages, some in defiance of the corporatist unions and in defiance of police brutality.

Summing up this crisis, the journal of British imperialism, *The Economist*, wrote last Friday: “For most of this century Chile was a stable and predictable country, with steady economic growth and moderate politics. Outsiders saw it as a success story and a model for Latin America. But that stable Chile disappeared two years ago, in an explosion of massive and sometimes violent protests.”

The London-based markets news site *Argus* commented: “The polarized elections, which are taking place in parallel to a controversial process to rewrite the Pinochet-era constitution, are already alienating domestic and international investors. Growing nervousness over the future of a country long considered a stable economic and political bastion...”

Bloomberg newswire said: “Financial markets have swung wildly in recent months as Chile debates the future of an economic model drawn up in the 1970s and 1980s by the so-called Chicago Boys, disciples of University of Chicago professor Milton Friedman who advocated for open market policies including deregulation and privatization.”

When billionaire Sebastian Piñera became president in 2017 with the support of a mere 25 percent of the eligible electorate, social polarization caused by decades of military and civilian-imposed “free market” policies was already deeply entrenched.

That year, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) reported that Chile’s ruling 1 percent controlled more than a quarter of the country’s wealth, while the top 10 percent held two-thirds. In contrast, the bottom half of a population of roughly 18 million accounted for just 2.1 percent of the net national wealth.

Taking advantage of the insecurities of the petty bourgeoisie and the decades-long muzzling of the working class by the national reformist parliamentary pseudo-left and the corporatist trade unions, Piñera’s right-wing government sought to capitalize on the political situation.

Assisted by media consortiums which polluted the public discourse with salacious reports of migrant gangs and drug trafficking, Piñera adopted Kast’s xenophobic and authoritarian program, calling for police-state law and order to combat so-called “rising delinquency,” being tough on “illegal immigration” and dealing with indigenous “terrorism” in the south.

This backfired, however, when in October 2019, violent police repression of student civil disobedience protests provoked mass anger in the working class, youth and middle class.

This transformative experience expressed the conscious attempt by the masses to articulate grievances accumulated over decades—entrenched social inequality, poverty wages and starvation pensions, a crippled public health and education system, burgeoning student and household debt, rampant police and military violence, criminalization of social protests, suppression of indigenous demands, and nepotism, corruption and graft at all levels of the state.

Piñera’s immediate response was to resuscitate Pinochet’s phrase

declaring that he was “at war with a powerful enemy.” A state of emergency and curfew were decreed for first time since the return to civilian rule, placing the murderous Chilean military on the streets. Human rights abuses began to pile up, with thousands suffering horrible injuries and mutilations and mass arrests resulting in cases of rape, torture and murder.

This only infuriated an insurgent population. All of a sudden, anti-capitalist marches and demonstrations erupted across Chile, involving at one point half the country and lasting for months.

It was then that the beleaguered government called for the aid of the so-called opposition—the Christian Democrats, the Party for Democracy, the Socialist Party, the Progressive Party and the pseudo-left conglomeration Frente Amplio—to stage in November 2019 national unity talks.

Piñera responded to an existential threat from below, as the Chilean bourgeoisie has during other critical moments, by relying upon the corporatist trade unions and the Chilean “left” to disorient, divert and render harmless the struggles of the working class, as he beefed up the repressive state apparatus for use against the masses.

From that moment on, the parliamentary “lefts,” Frente Amplio and in particular the Stalinists, set themselves the task of redirecting the explosive mass struggles into harmless appeals to change the authoritarian constitution.

In sowing the dangerous illusion that by rewriting the republic’s charter the nature of the capitalist state can be reformed, they concealed the fact 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.

The progenitor of the theory 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 PC. They bear political responsibility for paving 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.

Today, it is they who are promoting a permutation of this theory by advancing the politics of lesser evilism. It is necessary, they argue, to vote for the opposition parties to prevent the coming to power of the right wing.

The principled position of the WSW on these elections is that none of the candidates represents the political interests of the working class. Kast and the threat of fascism cannot be defeated at the ballot box but only in the fight to build rank-and-file defense committees dedicated to protecting the working class as part of the struggle for socialist revolution.

What is today urgently required is the building of a revolutionary party of the working class based on the principles of socialist internationalism which only International Committee of the Fourth International defends.



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