

Class tensions mount in wake of rejection of Chile's draft constitution

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Early last month, Chileans voted overwhelmingly against a newly drafted constitution touted by sections of the international corporate media as the “most progressive” charter ever written. Amid the skyrocketing cost of living and rising poverty, the rejection represents a popular rebuke to the pseudo-left coalition government headed by President Gabriel Boric and its acquiescence to every demand of international finance capital six months after taking office.

On September 4, more than 13 million people, or 85 percent of the eligible electorate, turned out to vote in the referendum, which asked whether they approved or rejected a draft constitution to replace the one drawn up by the military dictatorship in 1980. The unusually high turnout was due to voting being made mandatory for the first time since 2012.

In what has been described as a stunning defeat for the Apruebo Dignidad (I Support Dignity) ruling coalition, only 38.1 percent of the electorate backed the draft, while more than 61 percent rejected it. So sweeping was the defeat that the Reject option won in all 16 regions of Chile.

The narrowest result between Reject and Approve votes took place in the capital Santiago, which has the highest concentration of people. Yet only five of its 52 municipalities approved the draft constitution. The only other municipality in the whole country to approve the proposed draft was the port city of San Antonio in the Valparaíso region, and there only by the slightest of margins.

The gap between Reject and Approve votes widened the further away from the capital. In the mining regions to the north—Tarapacá, Antofagasta, Atacama and Coquimbo—not one municipality approved the new constitution, while to the rural south the margins were even more pronounced. In Araucanía, where the impoverished indigenous Mapuche communities are concentrated, the draft charter was rejected by 73 percent of voters.

Almost from the beginning of the process, major national and international newspapers gave voice to the right and ultra-right opposition to the constitutional convention. Their main concern was the expectations raised in the population by a plethora of pseudo-left elements who claimed they would end the military dictatorship's free market charter that imposed the super-exploitation of labor and super-profiteering in all areas of the economy.

It came as no surprise that the mouthpieces for imperialist interests reveled in the result.

“Chile's decision in a referendum on Sunday to reject decisively an impossibly utopian constitution stands out as a remarkable example of civic maturity,” the *Financial Times* declared the day after the vote. “What is likely to come next is a fresh attempt to rewrite the constitution. This will correct past mistakes by ensuring that delegates to a new constituent assembly are more representative of a country that is broadly divided between left and right.”

Time magazine stated that “Some Chileans argue that the delegates were not representative of Chilean society—the majority came from left-wing

political blocs or independents with a similar political bend” and “the draft document—comprising 388 articles—went too far, enshrining a long list of unworkable rights and equalities in law that would scare off investors and lead to chaos.”

The *Wall Street Journal* commented, “Chileans...rejected a new constitution that would have empowered the left to restrict property rights and individual liberty... If (Gabriel Boric) hopes to salvage his Presidency, he will have to respond to the public's needs by moving to the center and recognizing interests beyond his base of left-wing urban elites.”

The referendum to replace the military dictatorship-era charter and draft a new constitution was borne out of a desperate attempt to dissipate a revolutionary situation.

Popular opposition to Chile's obscene levels of social inequality and against an increasingly despised civilian political caste surfaced initially in 2006 and again in 2011 with massive student protests demanding an end to the market-based education system. Progressively, teachers, port workers, miners, health professionals and pensioners entered the fray demanding sweeping changes in bitter protests that emerged between the second administration of Socialist Party President Michele Bachelet (2014-2018) and the second administration of right-wing billionaire President Sebastian Piñera (2018-2022).

A turning point was reached in late 2019, when, after years of bubbling tensions, opposition to capitalism and its servants erupted en masse. The largest demonstrations in the country's history were held over several months with millions coming onto the streets despite the imposition of a state of emergency, with the Armed Forces and Carabineros special forces killing 36 people, mutilating hundreds and detaining thousands in the ensuing mass sweeps.

A real crisis of bourgeois rule opened up. Piñera's beleaguered government convoked “national unity” discussions to bring an end to the massive anti-capitalist demonstrations at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. He had a problem though: the center-left parties, having governed for 24 of the 30 years since the return to civilian rule in 1990, were a spent force.

Resuscitated in the 1980s with the funding and assistance of US and European imperialism, the Chilean Socialist Party, Party for Democracy, Christian Democrats and Radical Party formed a center-left ruling coalition that reformed only some of the more authoritarian aspects of Gen. Augusto Pinochet's constitution, and only after the dictator was issued an arrest warrant by a Spanish magistrate in 1998.

However, they intensified the dictatorship's extreme capitalist free market policies, leading to obscene levels of social inequality, the sprouting of shantytowns, dilapidated schools and hospitals, rising household and student debt and, ultimately, to the social explosion.

The bourgeoisie responded to an existential threat from below as it has during other critical moments, relying upon the corporatist trade unions and the Chilean pseudo-left—in this case the Stalinist Communist Party and the Frente Amplio [Broad Front]—to disorient and divert anti-capitalist

sentiment behind appeals to change the authoritarian constitution. They were aided by a plethora of Pabloite organizations whose chief function historically has been to prevent workers and youth from turning towards revolutionary socialism by subordinating them to the bankrupt national reformist politics of the trade unions and Stalinism or to equally reactionary petty-bourgeois guerrillism.

How was this achieved this time? Firstly, the pseudo-left parties claimed to oppose Piñera's national unity pact. Gabriel Boric was the only representative of the Frente Amplio coalition to enter into unity talks. But through their control of the unions, these parties called off strike action following the agreement to isolate the demonstrators from broader sectors of the working class that had previously been involved in the anti-capitalist protests.

At the same time, the Communist Party and Frente Amplio parliamentarians rubber stamped a series of police state laws. These laws enhanced the powers of the intelligence agencies and beefed up the police and military apparatus while other laws criminalized all social protests. Now, the pseudo-left Boric administration is using all of this against student protests and striking workers.

Secondly, with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, these same forces embraced a militarized response to the health crisis by voting in favor of declaring a State of Catastrophe that placed national defense chiefs in charge of the 16 regions of the country. The overriding concern was to put an end to social protest. Days before the State of Catastrophe decree, between one and two million people marched on International Women's Day, putting paid to claims that the infamous national unity discussions had popular support.

Also, as the pseudo-left parliamentarians voted to furlough hundreds of thousands of workers, forcing them to eat into their own savings just to survive, the Stalinist-dominated Central Workers Union, the CUT, corralled workers back into unsafe workplaces in the export-oriented industries that had been classified as "essential." While mining giants registered record profits in 2021, workers in the northern mining regions continue to suffer to this day high levels of COVID-19 infections and deaths.

The virus rapidly spread in densely populated working class neighborhoods and shantytowns, especially among informal workers who lacked any savings and were forced to continue working in order to eke out an existence. When hunger riots erupted in impoverished neighborhoods, Piñera cracked down with the anti-demonstration laws approved by the pseudo-left.

By October 2020, the pseudo-left, through the unions and the protest and community organizations they control, had successfully dissipated a revolutionary situation and channeled left-wing sentiment into parliamentary channels. That month, an overwhelming 78 percent of the electorate voted in favor of drafting a new constitution to replace Pinochet's hated charter.

For the next seven months, their focus was almost exclusively on the election of delegates to the constitutional convention, even as bodies piled up due to the criminally negligent official response to the pandemic. During that period, the country registered 1.5 million COVID-19 cases and 35,000 deaths, while the richest families doubled their wealth from \$21 billion to \$42.7 billion.

The May 2021 elections for the 155 seats in the constitutional convention saw a crushing defeat for the right-wing and old center-left parties. While only 40 percent of the eligible electorate voted, those who did overwhelmingly sought candidates who promised to inscribe in the nation's new charter guarantees to public health, public education, a decent pension, an end to social inequality, the redistribution of wealth, environmental protections, as well as indigenous and other democratic rights.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, no capitalist

constitution could guarantee such demands because such documents fundamentally exist to protect a system based on the accumulation of private profit, the source of social inequality and exploitation. Any illusions in reactionary reformist myths are even more dangerous today as governments, both in the powerful imperialist nations as and the semi-colonial countries, respond to all social, health and environmental crisis by "letting it rip."

It was at this stage that the Pabloites fulfilled their traditional role. Maria Rivera of the International Workers Movement (MIT), the Chilean section of the Morenoite International Workers League-Fourth International (LIT-CI), was elected to the constitutional convention along with a gamut of academics, professionals and "activists" linked in one way or another with the Stalinists and the pseudo-left.

Over the ensuing year, these political charlatans postured as revolutionaries, making calls for the nationalization of mining and the abolition of privatized education and health care, even as this entire exercise was given the imprimatur by imperialist mouthpieces like the *Economist* magazine and the US think tank Council of Foreign Relations. That the *Economist* later shifted its tune had to do with concerns about expectations that were being created by the draft constitution's "fiscally irresponsible left-wing wish list."

While the anti-communist scaremongering and disinformation campaign by the mainstream media and on social media definitely played a role in shaping opinion, especially among the more politically backward layers in the population, what secured the constitution's defeat in the working class was the actions of the Boric administration since coming into office.

Identity politics was a centerpiece of the pseudo-left's campaign from the beginning of both the constitutional convention and the presidential election at the end of last year. Touted as the most "progressive" constitution by swathes of the pseudo-left internationally and sections of the professional middle class and academia, its central thrust was to increase the size of the state, creating a new indigenous bureaucracy and guaranteeing gender parity in the civil service and the state.

After winning the runoff against José Antonio Kast of the fascist Republican Party, Boric highly touted his selection of 14 women for his cabinet of 24 ministers.

Since coming to office, the pseudo-left government has turned to the same police state methods of previous governments. Over the last seven months, it has sent the riot police against protesting students and jailed striking workers. Indigenous communities to the south are under a State of Emergency with the military deployed to control the highways and thoroughfares. It has increased both the funding and size of the Carabineros police, infamous for its human rights violations, and purchased military-grade armored vehicles for their use.

The pseudo-left administration has also complied with finance capital's demands by further integrating the old center-left political caste into his government and by implementing a fiscally tight monetary policy, ending stimulus programs to aid working and middle class families as inflation reaches levels not seen since 1992.

On Boric's watch, the Central Bank has progressively increased its interest rate to 10.75 percent. Meanwhile, real incomes dropped 3 percent, while the cost of essential household items rose 15 percent annually up to August, pushing more than half of all working families into poverty.

The political role played by the Stalinists, Broad Front, and Pabloite outfits has only emboldened the most right-wing and fascist forces, who feel they have the upper hand. While Boric makes feeble calls for dialogue, the right is pushing for more police state measures, including more police and soldiers on the streets and an expansion of the use of states of exception.

Far from being resolved, the crisis of bourgeois rule has only deepened. Amid a global resurgence of strikes and mass protests against inflation and inequality, the class struggle will burst to the surface sooner rather

than later in Chile because all the same social and political issues remain.

The current impasse can only be overcome progressively by the working class, which must establish its political independence from the Chilean pseudo-left and trade union bureaucracy. This requires both rank-and-file committees to link up their struggles with workers across industries and internationally and the building of a new political leadership in the working class based on an international and socialist program.



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