

Deadly storms strike central Chile: A political and social indictment of capitalism

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A frontal system of extraordinary intensity has battered central Chile since Thursday, July 17, leaving a trail of death, destruction, and mass displacement across 10 of the country's 16 regions. The regions of Coquimbo, Atacama, Valparaíso, the Metropolitan Region, O'Higgins, Maule, Ñuble, Biobío, and La Araucanía have all been impacted, with Coquimbo and Huasco province in Atacama bearing the brunt.

By Monday, July 20, the official toll—a significant underestimate—stood at 10 dead, four missing, 17 injured, 2,205 people affected, 1,179 sheltered, and 99,316 people cut off from basic services. Thirty-five homes have been destroyed, 1,154 have sustained major damage, 14,454 minor damage, and another 1,495 remain under evaluation. In the Coquimbo Region, the magnitude of the rainfall was such that what normally falls in an entire month descended in a single hour on Sunday with 19.6 mm falling between 8:00–9:00 p.m. alone.

In La Serena, families were forced onto the roofs of their homes as the Elqui River overflowed its banks and turned valleys into rushing waterways. Raw sewage mixed with floodwaters moving through residential areas, creating a public health emergency layered atop the physical destruction. The mayor of La Serena, Daniela Norambuena, reported 11 people missing and approximately 120 families isolated. In Ovalle, Mayor Héctor Vega described his municipality as “practically an island,” with rural communities in Chalinga, Punitaqui, La Calera, Los Canelos and Cerro Blanco completely cut off.

Roads and bridges have been washed away across the region—the Ministry of Public Works reported some 42 road cuts in Coquimbo alone. The Hospital de La Serena suffered water ingress and partial roof collapse, requiring the Army to deploy a modular field hospital.

The social character of this disaster is unmistakable. The hills of Valparaíso are areas where drainage is inadequate, where informal and semi-formal housing predominates, where the terrain is steep and the risk of landslides endemic. The storm activated at least 12 sites identified as potential landslide zones in Valparaíso alone, involving 600 families. Meanwhile, the wealthy have never suffered flooding. This is not an accident of geography but a product of the capitalist organization of urban space. The same families evacuated from the Ribera del Río camp in Talagante, the same communities in Quilpué still recovering from the massive wildfire of 2024, are paying the highest price for a precariousness that did not begin with the rain.

From the outset of the emergency, mayors across the political spectrum voiced sharp criticisms of the government's response. In Monte Patria, one of the hardest-hit municipalities, a request for emergency support was sent at 11:30 a.m. on Saturday; by the same time on Sunday, no response had been received from National Service

for Disaster Prevention and Response (SENAPRED). A crucial window without rainfall, which could have allowed road repairs and preventive deployments, was lost.

Coquimbo Mayor Alí Manouchehri accused the national authorities of “a terrible response,” lamenting that “we are beginning to count the dead.” The mayor of Ovalle stated bluntly: “not a single resource has arrived here, nothing from SENAPRED.”

The electricity outages exposed the full fragility of the infrastructure upon which millions depend. At the peak of the emergency, over 658,000 households were without power nationwide. Valparaíso alone registered 221,349 customers without electricity on Saturday night. La Araucanía, Biobío, and Maule also suffered massive outages. By Monday, four days after the initial blackouts, tens of thousands of homes remained without power.

In the Santa Inés sector of Viña del Mar, residents took to the streets with barricades after nearly three days without electricity. Neighborhood leader Dafne Barrera pointed to electro-dependent residents and the elderly who urgently needed power. Protests with roadblocks and barricades erupted in Rancagua and Rengo in O'Higgins, in San Esteban, Putaendo, and Panquehue in Valparaíso and in Panguipulli in Los Ríos.

The anger in the streets was not merely about an inconvenience, but about the exposure of a system in which the provision of a basic necessity is subordinated entirely to the profit calculations of private monopolies. While ordinary outages have a legal two-hour restoration deadline, power cuts caused by climate events have no legally mandated maximum restoration time, leaving the private utility companies free to take as long as they please.

On Monday, July 20, President José Antonio Kast declared a Constitutional State of Emergency due to Catastrophe for the Coquimbo Region and the province of Huasco.

This measure is far more than logistical assistance. Under the State of Catastrophe, a provision inherited directly from the Pinochet dictatorship's 1980 Constitution, power is delegated to appointed Chiefs of National Defense, in this case Army Brigadier Generals Claudio Paredes and Eugenio Ribba. These military commanders assume control of the Armed Forces and the forces of public order, restrict freedom of movement and assembly, order the requisition of property, establish limitations on the exercise of property rights, control entry into and exit from the declared zone, determine the distribution of food and goods and issue direct instructions to all state officials and municipal employees.

This State of Exception is rooted in the theories of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, who provided the juridical framework for the suspension of constitutional order in the name of emergency. What the military is

protecting is not the population but “critical infrastructure” and the conditions for the uninterrupted accumulation of capital. Its presence is directed at preventing the desperate from looting, disbanding popular assemblies, and ensuring that the social grievances unleashed by the disaster do not find organized political expression.

This is the reflexive response of the Chilean ruling class to every social crisis, from the 2010 earthquake to the 2019-2020 mass uprising to the COVID-19 pandemic, a militarized clampdown that reveals the state for what it is: an instrument of class rule that cannot meet human need because it exists to defend private property.

The irrationality of the market system is laid bare by the fact that many of the areas now submerged under floodwaters have been suffering from a protracted megadrought for over 15 years. As recently as early 2024, all three of Coquimbo’s major basin systems, Elqui, Limarí and Choapa, were at a combined 6 percent of total storage capacity. The La Paloma reservoir, with a capacity of 750 million cubic meters, sat at just 5 percent.

Then, in a single hour on Sunday, a month’s worth of rain fell on saturated terrain and ran off rapidly to the sea as destructive floodwater, because the infrastructure to capture and store it does not exist. This is a natural disaster compounded by the capitalist organization of society, in which no foresight is applied to infrastructure or urban planning for the masses because such planning does not yield a profit.

Privatization of water

The same institutional framework that allowed water rights to be privatized and hoarded during the drought is the framework that prevents the state from capturing and storing excess water now. The two phenomena, the drought crisis and the flood crisis, are products of the same failure to assert public control over an indispensable resource that was privatized under a dictatorship and never reclaimed.

At the root of this failure lies the 1981 Water Code, one of the most radical experiments in water commodification ever attempted, imposed by the Pinochet dictatorship and enshrined in the 1980 Constitution. Under this code, water rights were transformed from state concessions into fully private property, separated from land title, granted in perpetuity, and subject to no beneficial use requirement.

Rights could be hoarded indefinitely by mining companies, agribusiness and hydroelectric firms. The result has been the creation of what are known in Chile as “Zones of Sacrifice.” Entire communities, such as Petorca in Valparaíso, where avocado plantations holding legally valid water rights accumulated over decades effectively dried out the population’s access to water.

Gabriel Boric’s 2022 reform, Law 21.435, was touted as a breakthrough: it declared access to drinking water a human right, established a hierarchy prioritizing human consumption, and introduced time-limited concessions for new rights.

But the Constitutional Court struck down the provision that would have imposed forfeiture on existing rights for non-use, declaring it a violation of constitutionally protected property rights. The vast accumulated stock of water rights (80 percent of which are controlled by corporate interests in agribusiness, mining and energy) remains untouched. The constitutional lock installed by the dictatorship held firm, as it was designed to do.

No faith can be placed in the fascistic Kast government to address this crisis. Kast, the son of a Wehrmacht Nazi officer, came to power heading a “government of emergency” committed to deepening the very free-market policies that produced this catastrophe: corporate tax cuts, public sector austerity, deregulation and the defense of private property at all costs. His administration has already slashed health and education budgets, militarized schools and criminalized migrants. It is utterly indifferent to the suffering of the masses.

Nor can any faith be placed in the Chilean “left,” the Socialist Party, the Stalinist Communist Party, the Broad Front, which under Boric erected the most expansive police state since the return to civilian rule, defended capitalist property relations and normalized relations with the defenders of Pinochet. It was these very parties that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, used a State of Exception to regiment the country through curfews and military deployment, demonstrating that the “left” is as committed as the right to the defense of bourgeois order.

The working class and communities must establish their own rank-and-file committees to begin the reorganization of society to meet social needs. The resources and scientific know-how exist to carry out this work. What is lacking is not technical capacity but political power.

Chilean workers have the historic experience of the Cordones Industriales, the rank-and-file industrial and neighborhood organs established in 1972-73, in the midst of a putschist attempt by the ruling class to destabilize the country. Amid a profound crisis, these bodies set themselves the task of running production, distributing goods and services and defending the needs of their class.

That experience, written in blood by the heroic Chilean proletariat, points the way forward. The task of securing the conditions for the socialist planning of the world’s economic resources and the reorganization of society on a rational basis falls on the shoulders of the international working class, which must first wrest power from the bourgeoisie and overthrow its state, ending the subordination of economic life to private profit and the division of the world into rival nation-states.



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