

More killed as poll shows half of Chile has joined protests

By Andrea Lobo
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Three demonstrators have died so far this year in Chile as four months of mass protests against social inequality and the entire capitalist establishment continue.

The killing of a 37-year-old soccer fan run over at high speed by an armored police vehicle led to major new demonstrations over the past week, particularly among the most impoverished and oppressed areas of the country's capital, Santiago.

After a first division game on January 28, fans remained in the vicinity of the Colo-Colo stadium in Santiago peacefully chanting protest slogans when "the Carabineros [militarized police] of Chile deployed a completely disproportionate operation... provoking incidents that have ended the life of a fan of our Club," as described in a complaint letter by the Colo-Colo board of directors. The driver has been arrested.

The nights since have been marked by barricades, demonstrations, the burning of buses, police stations and stores across Santiago. The police responded with brutal repression, including random beatings of bystanders, inundating neighborhoods with tear gas for three or four continuous hours and police charges with vehicles.

On Wednesday, a 22-year-old manning a barricade in the San Ramón neighborhood was killed when a hooded driver ran him over with a bus. In the same suburb of southern Santiago, a man was found dead in a looted and burned supermarket at a location where police attacked a demonstration. At least 124 demonstrators were arrested last week.

In December, the National Human Rights Institute (INDH) reported that the repression by the police and military had resulted in 29 dead, 8,812 arrests, 3,449 injuries, 544 lawsuits over torture and four alleged rapes by state officials.

In the face of such state violence, the protests and strikes only radicalized and grew, slowing the Chilean economy to 1.2 percent growth for 2019, the lowest since the Great Recession. The demonstrations last week, as well as the widespread and ongoing walkouts at high schools during the university placement exams to protest inequality in the educational system, signal a still potent social explosion.

However, the absence in the working class of a revolutionary leadership and a program to unite Chilean workers with the millions of workers entering the class struggle globally pose the lethal danger that social opposition will remain subordinated to bourgeois politics. The ruling class in Chile and internationally has responded with a shift toward dictatorship, offering workers nothing but further cuts and greater exploitation.

The January 2020 Barómetro del Trabajo poll provides valuable data on the definitive question of leadership. Fully half of the Chileans polled (adults) have participated in the protests since October, while another 19 percent said they haven't but would like to participate. The privatized pension system, "abuses and inequalities," public education, wage increases and health care were the top issues raised by protesters, in that order.

The poll exposes the absurdity of the claims made by the Trump administration and the Chilean right that "Russian trolls" on the internet provoked the upheaval, which included concentrations of over 1 million people and plunged the approval rating of president Sebastián Piñera to an unprecedented 6 percent.

More essentially, however, the demands of protesters in Chile are the same ones being raised by strikers and protesters across the world, proving that the discontent is the result of social conditions rooted in the global

capitalist system and cannot be resolved under a nationalist program. Despite its natural wealth and significant industries, Chile's economy is entirely dependent on global production chains and markets and remains under the yoke of US and European imperialism.

Class tensions are truly on a hair trigger. Only 2 percent of demonstrators polled raised the issue of public transportation fares, even though the incident that unleashed the recent wave of protests was a relatively minor fare hike in the Santiago Metro last October.

At the same time, only 2 percent of protestors mentioned "changing the constitution" as a demand. From the right-wing billionaire Piñera to the pseudo-left Workers Revolutionary Party (PTR), the entire political establishment and corporate media have forcefully promoted the question of a new constitution as a means to restore trust in the bourgeois political setup.

In April, a plebiscite will ask Chileans if they want a new constitution and whether the entire constituent body should be elected or half of should be composed of current legislators. Just like the "democratic transition" after the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, the constituent farce will be a means to maintain the power and profit interests of the local oligarchy and transnational corporations that installed and backed Pinochet.

Even though a majority is expected to vote "yes" on the referendum, the demands of the largest upswing in protests in half a century cannot be resolved through the constitutional project.

According to the Barómetro del Trabajo poll, 83 percent are "dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in Chile," and the same percentage indicate the country is "ruled by self-interested, powerful groups." Only 7 percent "trust" political parties to draft a new constitution, while only 24 percent trust trade union leaders for this task. Finally, the disapproval rating is higher than 68 percent for all parties.

The bulk of the working class sees the establishment for what it is: an instrument of the 20 economic groups that control more than half of the country's production and their patrons on Wall Street and in Europe. During the past 30 years, all parties have upheld the social austerity and privatizations carried out under the

Pinochet dictatorship and betrayed every strike and other form of mass resistance.

Given how discredited they are, the Stalinist Communist Party of Chile (PCCh), which controls the main trade union confederation CUT, and the pseudo-left Broad Front have struggled to keep control of the protests through the Roundtable of Social Unity, a coalition of protest groups and trade unions. In turn, they used intermittent strikes to weaken their effect, isolated workers from their international counterparts and supported Piñera's plebiscite, albeit claiming to oppose the president's "roadmap."

During the revolutionary strikes, occupations and protests in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the PCCh also worked to chain the opposition to bourgeois politics in the form of the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende, politically and physically disarming the working class despite in the face of the open preparations by Washington and the Chilean ruling class to overthrow Allende and install a right-wing dictatorship.

The ruling class also depended on petty-bourgeois apologists for the PCCh and its defense of capitalist rule for the success of its counterrevolution, namely the Pabloite forces that had long abandoned Trotskyism and operated in the trade unions and the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR).

Today, with the capitalist parties in an even more tenuous position, the same role is being played by the Morenoite Workers Revolutionary Party (PTR), which publishes *La Izquierda Diario* and reflects the interests of upper-middle class layers centered in the trade unions and academia.

While claiming to oppose the plebiscite, it has based its perspective on a pressure campaign directed to the PCCh and the Broad Front to demand a more radical Constituent Assembly within the same capitalist setup.

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