

Chilean government violently represses demonstrations against hunger

By Mauricio Saavedra
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Los hambrientos piden pan, Plomo les da la milicia
(The hungry ask for bread, The militia gives them lead)
—“*La Carta*,” Violeta Parra, 1964

The ultra-right government of Chile’s President Sebastian Piñera has responded to a nationwide outbreak of protests against hunger with tear gas, water cannon and mass arrests. With goading from the fascistic Independent Democratic Union (UDI), recently enacted draconian laws are being applied to repress and intimidate an inflamed population as the coronavirus pandemic breaks new records in the country and the continent.

As of May 20, there were 53,617 confirmed coronavirus infections in Chile and 544 deaths. The day saw an all-time high of more than 4,000 new cases, and 35 more deaths. As elsewhere in Latin America and internationally, these figures are unquestionably a vast underestimation of the extent of the virus’s real spread and toll.

Only this month did Piñera announce an emergency package to aid the 4.9 million informal sector workers who have recently struck against hunger. The Emergency Family Income delivers a miserable maximum payment of 65,000 pesos (US\$80) for each member with a maximum of 500,000 pesos (US\$620) per family group per month for up to three months. The government, meanwhile, has boasted that in a 24-hour period, its militarized police, the Carabineros, arrested 2,026 people nationwide, mainly for violating quarantines and curfews, while 1,088 were arrested for violating article 318 of the Criminal Code, endangering public health.

Thirty-seven protesters from greater Santiago’s El Bosque commune were arrested on May 18. Fifteen face serious charges for rioting against hunger and the lack of provisions after receiving no state financial assistance, despite being under lockdown since mid-April due to the pandemic.

Undersecretary of the Interior Juan Francisco Galli filed suits against 10 under the “anti-looting” law for stealing gas cylinders from an unattended distribution company. Three were charged under the “anti-barricade” law for obstructing a public thoroughfare. Two were accused of allegedly carrying incendiary devices for making Molotov cocktails. All were charged for violating the quarantine and Article 318 for putting the “health of the population at risk.”

UDI politicians have sought to go further, with Deputy María José Hoffmann accusing the demonstrators of harbouring drug traffickers in their midst and calling for the Carabineros to “do their part,” while the UDI mayor, Rodolfo Carter, on the show “Mucho Gusto” let slip a call for “repression” and for the protesters to be “shot at.”

Some sections of the ultra-right sought to claim that the protests was due to “premeditated political action” conducted by the Chilean left, to which the president of the Communist Party and House deputy, Guillermo Teillier truthfully responded: “It is very serious because we did not do anything. The reality is the reality. The reality is that the people are protesting. What can we do?” Teillier then pleaded with the government to work constructively with his party.

What provoked the riot? On Monday, May 18, with a 10,000-strong military deployment enforcing the shutdown of the Metropolitan Region of 7 million inhabitants, hundreds of residents of El Bosque commune in Santiago Province rioted after Carabinero police suppressed an earlier protest of senior adults demanding financial aid, assistance with utility payments and basic support.

“It was caused in large part by the repression against the elderly, who were protesting in the morning and that led to the anger of the young people who came out to defend their grandparents and parents,” Hector Perez, a resident of El Bosque, told the *Desconcierto*.

As news of the violent repression was transmitted over social media, demonstrations spread to other impoverished working-class communes in the capital, known for their historic resistance against the 17-year military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Demonstrations also emerged in the regional cities of San Antonio, Antofagasta, Arica, Concepción and Valparaíso. Pots and pans were banged during the night.

By Wednesday, the residents of Villa San Francisco from La Pintana commune set up barricades and cut off traffic to protest the same social hardships. One Pintana resident explained to *Teletrece* “We are the ones who move the country ... build the companies because without workers the companies would not exist. Many of my neighbours have had their contracts suspended without pay ... we can’t quarantine like the eastern sector does because the eastern sector can lock themselves in.

They've got their refrigerators full. We don't. We live from day to day."

Like so many other outer parts of the capital, sections of Pintana and El Bosque, are "campamentos," squatter settlements that subsist in extreme poverty and overcrowding amidst gentrified condominiums and apartments. El Bosque commune suffers from multidimensional poverty at almost double the national average; overcrowding affects 18 percent of households and income poverty is the highest in the Metropolitan Region at 14.5 percent.

Historically, the settlement movement began in the 1950s in land takeovers and collective purchases by organized "homeless" as many thousands of rural families moved to the capital city in search of work.

Today there are 882 squatter settlements that house tens of thousands of families in squalid, overcrowded conditions. Seventy-five percent of the settlements have poor access to electricity, only 10 percent have regular access to drinking water, and 81 percent have poor access to sewage services. Squatter settlements have been on the rise since the 2008 global financial crisis and under Socialist Party and ultra-right governments alike. In 2007, 28,578 families were living in campamentos. By 2016 the number of families had increased to 38,570, and by 2019 it had almost doubled to 46,423, a significant fraction of whom are immigrants who receive no state assistance under conditions of an economic slowdown.

That was before the pandemic. *El Mostrador* early this month revealed that 16 of the poorest working-class communes in the Metropolitan Region had among the largest numbers of coronavirus infections with a growth rate of over 40 percent. Infections are doubling every two days and hospitals, running at 90 percent occupancy, are saturated, without sufficient resources, beds or personnel.

Only two weeks ago, a fire ravaged a settlement located in La Pincoya in the commune of Huechuraba that destroyed 24 homes and left 100 families utterly destitute. Like the other working-class neighbourhoods that resisted the military dictatorship, La Pincoya has suffered a disproportionate amount of police violence and state neglect.

An open letter submitted to social media by Pincoyano residents explained the since the massive social explosion last October, "we have had to face serious and systematic violations of our human rights by state agents just for demonstrating and fighting for a better future for our community and our families."

The letter condemned the state repression, the major media conglomerates for deliberately maligning the community as criminals and drug traffickers and human rights organisations for abandoning their plight.

In the last six months the community has faced the police and the military tear-gassing and shooting with pellets of demonstrators, passers-by and children. Communal areas have been pepper-sprayed to prevent people from congregating.

Homes have been raided at gunpoint in search of demonstrators, while detainees have been beaten and dumped in remote places. Tear gas canisters have been intentionally fired at roofs, causing fires. Drones and helicopters have hovered over the commune. Primary and high schools have been tear-gassed; children and adolescents harassed. Even the local primary care health centre has been repeatedly tear-gassed while attending to medical and public health emergencies.

The letter concluded: "Abandoned by the state, the municipality and the institutions in general, the inhabitants of La Pincoya will resist and continue in the streets fighting for our rights ... Neither their bullets nor their repression will be able to silence the voice of the people! We will continue to resist!"

Communal assemblies have formed in La Pincoya to oppose this state repression. These popular social and political assemblies have also been established in many other working-class communities.

The economic crisis, exacerbated by the health crisis and the complete lack of substantive assistance to millions, has in fact given rise to many working-class initiatives on a level not seen since the revolutionary period of 1968 to 1973.

These include the "olla común," or communal kitchens, which have cropped up across the country as workers come together to purchase, distribute and package food hampers to deal with the exponential growth of want and misery. Trucks are collectively hired to pick up and distribute rations to women involved in the production of foodstuffs which are then distributed to the poor, elderly, frail and sick.

Desconcierto interviewed another El Bosque resident, Patricia Coñoman, who lives with nine other people in a single apartment. She said, "Here the right to health, the right to equal housing and now the right to eat is a laugh. We are living in very difficult times.

"People are now setting up fires again to cook, at the fair they are selling an oil quart in plastic bottles and in the shops people buy individual tea bags. It's like going back in time, something I never thought I would experience again. It's like the '80s, because it's not only hunger but also repression."

The working class requires a clearly worked out program and perspective that transforms its initiatives into weapons for the conquest of state power. This is possible only when it mobilises independently in the fight for revolutionary international socialism and the overthrow of capitalism. This requires, above all, the building of a Chilean section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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