

Chile's health minister resigns as disastrous policies lead to explosion in coronavirus infections and deaths

By Mauricio Saavedra
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Chilean Health Minister Jaime Mañalich resigned last weekend. Only hours earlier, the deeply unpopular minister was exposed for hiding the true number of deaths caused by the highly contagious COVID-19 virus. A media investigation revealed that the government was providing the World Health Organization a coronavirus body count that was almost double that given to the general public.

The discredited minister's removal is aimed at damage control under conditions where the government and Parliament confront seething anger at the state's incompetence and opposition to dealing with a rapidly deepening health, economic and social catastrophe for the working class.

Since March 3, the rate of infection from COVID-19 has increased exponentially in the country of 19 million due to the criminally negligent policies pursued by the administration of ultra-right President Sebastian Piñera. Only 105 days after the first victim, there are today 184,449 confirmed cases, but even this number is likely just the tip of the iceberg.

This was made evident when Mañalich, responsible as health minister for implementing strategies to deal with the coronavirus, was exposed for a second time in less than two weeks as underreporting the number of fatalities. Last Friday the investigative journal *CIPER* got hold of the ministry's weekly report to the WHO from the Department of Statistics and Health Information (DEIS) that showed that over 5,000 people had died of coronavirus by June 12, a figure greatly exceeding the 2,870 deaths reported to the public.

The DEIS, which reports directly to the Health Ministry, supplies the official causes of death in Chile by processing data from the Civil Registry, which is then reviewed by the National Statistics Institute (INE). DEIS, which works off criteria established by the WHO, counts not only deaths with positive PCR tests, but also those classified as probably caused by the coronavirus but not test-confirmed.

This follows another exposé which revealed that the health ministry, in defiance of the WHO recommendations, was reporting as COVID-19 deaths only those who had received a positive PCR result, until it was forced to acknowledge that it had underreported coronavirus deaths by 653 cases on June 1.

Exiled investigative reporter Alejandra Matus—who exposed the judiciary's systematic whitewashing of the crimes committed by Augusto Pinochet's 17-year military junta—presented in May findings of her study of Civil Registry deaths for the last ten years. Matus' study suggested that Chile was massively underreporting coronavirus deaths, pointing to an excess death rate for March 2020 of more than 11 percent above the average of the previous five years and the sharpest rise in a decade. Matus explained that the government was only reporting PCR-positive fatalities at hospitals, whereas 46 percent of people die in their own homes and another 10 percent die in other places such as shelters for the elderly.

In other words, a significant number of people have died without ever knowing whether they contracted COVID-19 because they were not tested.

Matus immediately received a hostile reaction from the Chilean state. “The ministers of different authorities, not just the health minister, immediately came out to reject [my report], raise suspicions of spurious political intentions [and to accuse me] of ‘fake news’,” Matus said.

That the health ministry lied to the population is not a revelation. The entire administration has responded to the pandemic with criminal negligence and brazen lies. Valuable time afforded the government to prepare for the novel coronavirus was frittered away. When the pandemic did arrive, the government played down the threat, rejecting calls from the health community to implement strict quarantines, close non-essential services and industries and conduct mass testing and contact tracing. It repeatedly lied outright to the population so it could forestall forking out any financial aid and resources to working people.

Mañalich in particular has played a reprehensible role, first arguing that the virus would mutate into something like the regular flu, then falsely claiming that the virus had reached a plateau and Chile had survived its first peak. In May, he began playing the “herd immunity” card, insisting that everyone would unavoidably become infected and at the same time reach immunity. Just before the collapse of the Santiago hospital system at the end of May, Mañalich claimed the country had

achieved a “new normal,” meaning that it was safe to ease quarantines and resuscitate economic activity, especially in the mining sector.

He adopted a reckless “dynamic” quarantining policy, which meant letting the disease spread before reacting to the outbreak and only then placing a community in or out of quarantine on the basis of unclear criteria. He refused to place the Valparaíso region under total quarantine until the hospital system almost collapsed, and proposed to take the Antofagasta region out of quarantine until a recent massive outbreak in the Calama mining district threatened collapse of the health system there.

The public hospital system continues to be starved of critical equipment, PPE and personnel. Workers are falling ill in the thousands and, with the approval of the former minister, the concierge private hospitals have avoided spending on ICU infrastructure, which has in effect placed the entire financial burden of the health crisis on the public purse.

It would be dangerous to believe that there will be a change of course with Mañalich’s ouster. One of the first statements made by the incoming health minister, Enrique Paris, was that “this is a ministry, in a sense, of continuity.”

Paris, former president of the Medical Association, is a pediatrician who rose in the medical profession under the Pinochet dictatorship. He was an advisor to the previous centre-left coalition government, but is aligned with Piñera, having served on his health team during the 2017 presidential election and being brought onto the government’s “COVID-19 Roundtable” as the unofficial spokesman for the government line.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, he excused the government’s criminal inaction and rejected total quarantine measures, calling them a “populist solution.” Paris is equally committed to a punitive law-and-order response, arguing in March that “people who don’t comply, should go to jail.” Upon assuming office, he has sought to concretise this conviction by supporting congressional moves to impose three-year prison terms and hefty fines for infractions of health emergency guidelines.

But through Paris, the government has been able to secure a national agreement (albeit temporary and unstable) and that was the whole purpose of removing the health minister, because the entire Chilean political establishment was deeply compromised by Mañalich, rightly considered in the working class a criminally reckless, sociopathic liar and thug.

A day before his resignation, in a media stunt by the official parliamentary center and left, Maya Fernández (Socialist Party), Carmen Hertz (Stalinist Communist Party), Carmen Frei (Christian Democrat) and Beatriz Sánchez (Frente Amplio) issued a joint statement that claimed that for national unity to occur “we need a health authority that gives confidence, that listens and that brings humanity back into office.” The open letter called for a new health strategy and Mañalich’s resignation.

Paris delivered, saying that with his administration “a stage is opening in which we must receive divergent opinions” and called for dialogue “for the entire health sector to come together and work together.” It is likely, however, that his administration will be short-lived because, like Mañalich, Paris is committed to securing the needs of finance and corporate capital and that will mean only more hardship, pain and death for the working class.

It is under these conditions that the Stalinist Communist Party will be brought forward to save Chilean capitalism in its most profound crisis of rule since the revolutionary period of 1968–1973. For historical reasons associated with the belated and semi-colonial development of capitalism in Chile, Stalinism has played a preponderant role in official political life from almost its inception in the 1920s.

Originally founded as a workers’ party adhering to the revolutionary traditions of the Third International founded by Russian Bolsheviks Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, leaders of the October Revolution, the CPC was quickly co-opted into the Chilean state apparatus. By 1925 it participated in the drafting of the country’s bourgeois constitution and held ministerial posts in various coalitions during the most politically convulsive periods of the 20th century: the great depression, World War II, two decades of Cold War and the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende.

Its *raison d’être* is to defuse a revolutionary period and channel working class struggles into harmless parliamentary politics. That is the significance of the promotion of current president of the Medical Association, Izkia Siches, 34, a member of the Young Communist League while studying medicine at the University of Chile and around Frente Amplio when she became leader of the doctors’ union three years ago. Siches received a glowing bio in *Americas’ Quarterly* April 2, praising her as the “youngest-ever and first female leader” of the Medical Association committed to “a message of unity, inclusion and clear thinking.”

The Stalinists are laying a trap against the working class for the umpteenth time. There is no possibility of a parliamentary solution to the historic crisis of capitalism and the dangers of economic depression, dictatorship and war. Workers can go forward only if they break from all the parties of the nationalist and opportunist Chilean “left” and begin to construct a genuine, revolutionary internationalist socialist party that represents their independent political interests. That is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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