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Chile

Chile: under the pandemic, the class struggle

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Recently, the economist Pierre Salama emphasized how the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Latin American subcontinent is acting to reveal social and political fractures, while being fraught with dangers in highly unequal societies. It is thus very clearly the Latin American families at the "bottom of the ladder" who are being subjected to a "double punishment"; that of the health crisis in a context of dilapidated health systems and that of an economic crisis which is affecting the entire continent.

Chile has experienced since last October a huge social and popular revolt, with mass demonstrations challenging the political regime, neoliberalism and the strong social inequalities affecting the country [1]. This process of collective rebellion notably resulted in what could be seen as a concession on the part of the government of the multi-millionaire Sebastián Piñera, at the same time as a way for the ruling government to take back control of the situation: namely the convening of a referendum for April 26 on a possible change in the Constitution (inherited, it must be remembered, from the Pinochet dictatorship). With the spread of the pandemic, the referendum has just been postponed until the end of October, and as in the rest of the world, containment measures and the dangers of contagion have largely paralyzed the demonstrations and other acts of resistance.

Epidemic, resistance from below and class struggle

The coronavirus arrived in Santiago transmitted in particular by the wealthiest people, those who were returning from European countries, China or from cruise trips. With more than 18,000 officially infected people and 250 dead (as of May 3, 2020), Chile is not the country most affected by the epidemic in Latin America, with a much lower mortality rate than Ecuador (proportionally the most affected country in the region). But the progression of the contagion has seen a dangerously ascending curve since the end of April. And over the last several weeks there have been multiple cases of non-compliance with quarantine, in particular on the part of well-to-do families circulating between their main and second homes. This even led to forms of protest and direct action, by means of barricades: inhabitants of coastal villages are thus trying to prevent the arrival of members of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes of the capital in their holiday homes. During the Easter weekend, some major employers in the region even pushed the avoidance of confinement to the absurd by going to their seaside residences ... by helicopter, in order to avoid police checks!

The numerous territorial assemblies which have arisen during the revolt since last October have nevertheless made it possible to organise a certain popular response faced with the present health crisis and to continue the fight against Piñera and his world. These self-organized spaces played

a key practical role during the revolt: ensuring supplies while the shops were closed, ensuring security and vigilance in the face of human rights violations by the police, and strengthening the organization of the protest. These assemblies were then converted into spaces for deliberation and political debate "from below".

"With the pandemic, neighbourhood assemblies quickly made it possible to draw up lists of the elderly, people in economic need, vulnerable or isolated people in order to be able to help them. However, we must not imagine that there are neighbourhood networks that make possible, at this stage, a general organization parallel to the state with a significant social impact", says Karina Nohales, member of the [Feminist Coordination of 8 March](#).

“The fear that had disappeared is coming back with the epidemic”

On the government side, the health crisis has been the opportunity for a relative regaining of control of the political situation, after months of paralysis and contestation. This is summed up, symbolically, by the sight of Sebastian Piñera strolling around and posing arrogantly in the "Plaza de la Dignidad", epicentre of demonstrations and clashes with the police since October, in the centre of Santiago.

"During the months of revolt, everything the government could say threw fuel on the fire and angered the mobilized people," recalls Karina Nohales. Today, faced with the pandemic, the country is more or less obliged to obey government orders. This does not mean that decisions are accepted without criticism, but we obviously do not have the opportunity to demonstrate. The government is not staying calm, however. This is expressed by the deepening of repressive measures and by the strengthening of the state of emergency already considerably present since October. Piñera knows that he can only govern thanks to this exceptional moment”.

Indeed, the pandemic arises as a moment breaking with normality in an already exceptional situation. According to various opinion polls, the approval rate of the incumbent president is less than 8 per cent, the lowest rate since the end of the dictatorship in 1990. It must be said that the management of the pandemic itself is catastrophic, with erratic confinement measures, varying from one city to another, from one district to another and from one street to another, and above all dictated by the imperative of maintaining economic activity, under pressure from local employers. Morning and evening, the Santiago metro is crowded with poor and precarious workers, and the streets are populated by workers in the informal sector who have no choice but to go to work for a few pesos.

The Minister of Health multiplied victorious declarations, while the epidemic was just beginning and the public health system is incapable of absorbing a large influx of those infected by Covid-19. More generally, the health service is extremely segmented, largely left to the logic of the market logic and private insurance, while the working classes must be content with crowded and less well-equipped hospitals.

"So, the fear that had disappeared is making a comeback in the face of the epidemic, faced with the massive layoffs of the past few weeks," says Karina Nohales. "Our political challenge is therefore to make the link between the protest accumulated over the last few months and the way in which the pandemic brutally reveals everything that was already in crisis. This mass politicization is difficult," explains the feminist activist.

Workers pay for the crisis

The articulation between the health crisis and the economic crisis is leading to a catastrophic situation for the majority of Chileans. The Administrations of pension funds (AFP), which manages pensions, all privatized since the 1980s (with the exception of that of the military!), have already lost 20 per cent of their funds. And this is just the beginning. In 2008, during the entire period of the economic crisis, the loss was 40 per cent. The economic measures put in place by the executive are essentially of three types and, here again, aligned with the demands of big business (the Luksics, Matte, Angelini and others, who dominate the entire economy):

- aid to businesses, by facilitating access to credit at low interest rates;
- aid to the informal sector, to self-entrepreneurs, but with ridiculously low sums and only for a minority of these workers;
- for workers, the possibility of suspending the contract of employment, but without receiving a salary! The sole obligation of employers is to contribute to AFP, the National Health Fund and unemployment insurance, but at 50 per cent of the normal rate. It is therefore the workers who are paying for the crisis, since their only income can be their

unemployment insurance financed by their own means, and while the amount received depends on what has been saved, in the logic of capitalization and individualization which reigns in all aspects of social life in Chile. 23,000 companies have already taken advantage of this measure, affecting 350,000 workers, the majority of whom will therefore only receive half of a minimum wage.

This suspension of contract is already being practised in fast food chains (Starbucks, Burger King). Finally, there is currently a dynamic of massive layoffs in several sectors, including hotels, restaurants and commerce. When containment was put in place in the wealthy neighbourhoods of Santiago, there was also a wave of mass layoffs of construction workers, as all construction sites in these neighbourhoods were stopped.

Unions not up to the challenge

The trade-union movement, on the other hand, clearly did not respond to the challenge. The centrality of its intervention was essentially to try to maintain the number of workstations, without requiring the right of withdrawal, and without always thinking about the means of ensuring a dignified and safe quarantine for millions of people. Many unions have remained in a logic where the requirement of confinement is thought to endanger employment... However, other union organizations have fortunately taken legal action to protect fundamental rights and the immediate health of their affiliates. The labour courts have issued decisions which authorize workers not to go to work anymore, without losing their salary, if the health and safety conditions are not met (a form of right of withdrawal). However, to date, many unions have not taken it up and these actions are very minority. The Unitary Labour Confederation (CUT) appears once again as paralyzed, unable to make a critical voice heard while the country has been in rebellion for months, and stuck in a logic of "tripartite" negotiation which does not lead to any concrete progress.

This deafening silence is further reinforced by the pandemic and this May 1, 2020 will have been "one of the saddest in the history of Chile" unable to make a critical voice heard while the country has been in rebellion for months and stuck in logics of "tripartite" negotiation which does not lead to any concrete progress. This deafening silence is further reinforced by the pandemic and this May 1, 2020 will have been "one of the saddest in the history of Chile" [\[2\]](#)

However, other sectors are on the offensive and very active. This is particularly the case with feminist struggles. The March 8 Feminist Coordination, in collaboration with other organizations, launched a campaign to respond to macho and gender-based violence in the context of confinement. This unitary feminist space that brought together millions of people on March 8 last year also sparked off the "strike for life", that is to say a strike to demand the establishment of a social emergency plan and to cope with the pandemic and its consequences. The activists also took advantage of this May to advance their slogans and analyses based on a feminist reading of the current crisis and the general precariousness of life, with the slogan: "Work and care to support life, not for their profits! "

Critical weeks

Undoubtedly, in Chile as in France, the end of confinement will also be marked by the return of demonstrations, strikes and the social movement. The Chilean ruling classes intend, for their part, to take advantage of the pandemic to advance their own agenda, organize a general recovery of control that allows them to channel and neutralize the deep political crisis that exists, while continuing the repression. And every occasion will be good for them.

An example of this is the struggle of many families and activists for the liberation of the hundreds of political prisoners

(perhaps more than 2,000!) from the October revolt who are still languishing in prison, in a situation where the prisons represent an imminent danger of contagion. Finally, the government accepted that some of the detainees in the country considered as "of low danger" would have their sentences commuted to house arrest for reason of "health emergency", but no answer was given to those awaiting judgment and those who are considered prisoners for their participation in the social movement. And taking advantage of this situation, several right-wing members of parliament have tried to convince the government to release also, from the de luxe prisons where they are incarcerated, those responsible for systematic violations of human rights under the dictatorship ... Faced with a the uproar this provoked, and despite the approval of some judges, the government had to retreat.

Thus, the next few weeks will undoubtedly be decisive both from the point of view of public health in the country and of the capacities of the popular movement to continue to advance the demands resulting from the October revolt, to roll back the right and the far right nostalgia for the dictatorship, while demanding an emergency plan to resolutely confront the Covid-19 and its consequences, both economic and health. The other challenge remains to be able to use this time of "transition", still unstable, to begin to weave forms of political organization "from below" which can give a clear, democratic and radical perspective to the force of the struggles which have been taking place on the streets for months against a decaying political regime and the authoritarian neoliberal economic model. [3]

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[1] According to the latest statistics available, one per cent of the population controls 33 per cent of the national wealth, while four upper-middle-class families have a combined wealth equivalent to around 15 per cent of GDP (or \$45 billion!)

[2] Arturo Alejandro Muñoz, 1 May 2020 "[The CUT y este primero de mayo: un día triste para las y los trabajadores](#)".

[3] Rapports de force, 11 March 2020 "[Regardons le Chili pour comprendre dans quelle monde on veut nous faire vivre](#)".