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Chile paralyzed by third national strike amid mounting threats of dictatorship

With the mass protest movement in Chile in its sixth week, the country's economy was brought to a virtual halt by a two-day national strike, complemented by mass marches that filled the streets of Santiago and other major cities, as well as by widespread roadblocks.

Even though the trade unions sought to lessen the effect by convoking a "gradual" strike, beginning with dockworkers and state employees Monday and adding other sectors yesterday, the action had an enormous impact.

Similarly to the previous national strikes on October 23 and November 12, hundreds of thousands of workers participated on Tuesday, especially in the strategic sectors of mining, docks, education and transportation.



A protestor holds a sign depicting Chile's President Sebastian Pinera during a march near to La Moneda presidential palace in Santiago, Chile. (AP Photo/Esteban Felix)

A particularly large contingent of protesters marched through downtown Santiago behind the Roundtable for Social Unity, which groups trade unions and protest organizations led by the Stalinist Communist Party (PCCh), the Broad Front and some Socialist Party officials.

The mobilization reflected the enormous opposition to the empty social and democratic promises made by the Sebastián Piñera administration, which the Roundtable has claimed to oppose; however, these political forces are seeking to channel workers and youth behind a ruling elite whose use of torture and military repression has made clear that it will concede nothing.

On the other hand, the Roundtable has agreed to meet with the Ministry of Interior, while claiming that they are “not negotiations.” The only other possibility is a session to plot the defeat of the protests. This was indicated by one of their key spokespeople, Mario Aguilar, leader of the teachers’ union Colegio de Profesores: “The conditions are there,” he declared. “It’s imperious that social demands are taken up, and that is the responsibility of the Government and the political class.”

In fact, the trade unions are using the intermittent strikes to try to wear down the social upsurge, just as they have done in betraying every major class action since the Pinochet dictatorship.

Above all, these pro-capitalist organizations have enforced the continued nationalist isolation of the protests from workers internationally facing similar policies and turns to authoritarianism. The social explosion, triggered in Chile by a tariff hike in public transportation, is part of a global resurgence of working class struggles against a global enemy—capitalism, which demands, through whatever means necessary, endless social austerity and attacks on jobs and working conditions, in order to continue meeting the globalized profit requirements of corporate and finance capital.

Meanwhile, five weeks after the first deployment of the military against protesters since the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), the ruling class and its imperialist patrons are again discussing the permanent presence of soldiers on the streets and the imposition of dictatorial rule.

On Sunday, Piñera announced that 4,354 new Carabinero police will be sent into the streets within the next 60 days, from among those recently retired or fresh from the academy, bringing the total to about 55,000. The following day, his ruling coalition began fast-tracking a set of bills—giving Congress six days to decide—that would allow the deployment of the armed forces without needing to declare a state of exception, and further equip the intelligence agencies and institute new penalties on “looting.”

“It’s fundamental to count on the collaboration of the Armed Forces to protect critical infrastructure,” Piñera declared.

Despite tactical differences over timing, the entire ruling class sees military repression and rule as inevitable. On Saturday, Juan Gabriel Valdés (Socialist Party), who developed the closest ties to imperialist agencies as ambassador to the US from 2014-2018 and earlier as a Ph.D graduate in political science from Princeton University, admitted as much in an open letter:

“It’s not enough to condemn or even verbally match the violence of the Carabineros and delinquents burning hospitals, churches and museums. What is required is that those with leading positions act with urgency, before the insanity of the vandals and the nostalgic fascism of Pinochet take over the scene... each day that passes, Chile nears a total collapse of the public order that can only end in a military coup or at least in power falling to the military, even if they don’t want it.”

Amid the continued authoritarian drive by Piñera, this statement is a urgent warning to workers that there is no “democratic” faction of the ruling establishment.

All efforts by the leaders in the trade unions and political establishment to suppress the protests with democratic and social illusions in the capitalist framework correspond to a mere division of labor in preventing workers from preparing to act independently against the threat of dictatorship.

A separate document, signed by over 80 Socialist Party leaders defending the roadmap, agreed with Piñera’s hysterical charges blaming “minorities where lumpen and marginalized sectors coexist with criminal bands linked chiefly to drug trafficking and extremist and anti-system groups, highly ideologized and organized” for the destruction of “Chilean democracy” by provoking “the installation through arms of a dictatorial regime to ‘pacify’” the country.

Referring to the November 12 national strike and major clashes entirely provoked by the police efforts to block peaceful marchers, *El País* —tied to the ruling Socialist Party in

Spain—similarly declared, “that was one of the most delicate moments for Chilean democracy in the last decades.”

However, the emboldening of the fascists in the ruling class and armed forces is a campaign waged from the top, with the billionaire president Piñera claiming in late October, “We are at war with a powerful enemy which is prepared to use violence without limit.”

Prosecutors in Chile have reported 26 deaths, over 6,000 detentions, 1,100 claims of torture and 70 reports of sexual abuse—including against minors as young as 14—by state forces.

Human Rights Watch published a report detailing the “brutal beatings and sexual abuse” and calling for investigations and “an urgent police reform.” While these policy suggestions have been reproduced uncritically by the corporate media and pseudo-left, a stark warning must be made that there is no “reform” of the state forces, whose objective purpose is to defend bourgeois rule and capitalist property, that will lessen the repression.

Recognizing it as a potential fig leaf, the Piñera administration declared that it “appreciated the HRW report and recommendations, including the call to incorporate deep reforms among the Carabineros and a greater effective control on police actions during unrest and arrests.”

After Amnesty International published a report concluding that the Chilean security forces systematically and intentionally committed abuses and crimes, the AI head in Chile, Ana Piquer, received threats that “if I keep doing what I’m doing, I could end up in a casket.”

The minority threatening democracy is the handful of billionaires and multi-millionaires who control the entire political establishment, media and trade unions, while all signs show that the vast masses of workers and youth support the protests and the banners for social equality and democratic rights being raised. A new poll by the firm Cadem found that only 9 percent of those polled approve of the Piñera administration, a new historic low for the country. Several polls in recent days show that between 67 and 85 percent of Chileans back the continued protests.

Facing this crucial junction, the Chilean working class must break decisively with the Roundtable for Social Unity, the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists, forming rank-and-file committees in every workplace, school, and neighborhood to take forward the struggle against the threat of dictatorship.