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Feed-in marchers join ongoing mass protests against the Piñera government demanding a new Chilean constitution, Santiago, Chile, December 2019.

Can the Chilean Uprising Survive the Pandemic?

New Labor Forum

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The popular rebellion that erupted in Chile in October–November 2019 was unprecedented in its scale and intensity. It mobilized broad sectors of Chilean poor, workers, and radicalized students along with revitalized feminist groups. Its fury was relentless: as rioting expanded from the capital and central cities to the forgotten towns of the periphery, popular rage targeted businesses and public and private infrastructure. The non-stop looting, arson, and destruction, staring down police repression, was the costliest and most disruptive collective action by Chilean poor and working people since re-democratization in 1988–1990.

Although popular mobilization has risen steadily since students began fighting for radical education reform in 2011, Chile had never experienced the type of spontaneous mass upheaval that punctuated other Latin American countries over the last several decades. Now, the region's wealthiest and heretofore most stable country was rocked by its own belated *Caracazo* ("Caracas smash"). Although, as in 1989 Venezuela, a 30-peso transit fare hike detonated people's rage, what precipitated the generalized revolt was "not 30 pesos, but 30 years" of merciless liberalization and rampant inequality.

The rebellion reflected mass repudiation of a free-market model managed and defended not only by the current right-wing administration but more importantly by the so-called progressive center-left coalitions that have dominated the state since the end of the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. By December, it appeared that the government of Sebastián Piñera, the first right-wing president since Pinochet, had had to grant a host of far-reaching demands for change, including a constitutional referendum.

Then in March 2020, the Covid-19 crisis and the dramatic economic contraction it triggered halted the rebellion's momentum. With unemployment soaring and hunger returning to poor neighborhoods, and most workers concerned only with securing immediate basic needs, Chile seems to be drifting toward the uneasy equilibrium of the status quo ante. This abrupt weakening of Chile's promising rebellion reflects long-term problems of its working-class movements along with recent impacts of the Covid-19 crisis. The former has deep roots in the structural and organizational fragmentation of labor and the left, whereas the latter has thrown the teetering regime an unexpected lifeline.

The question in coming months will be whether Chile's new mass movement can regroup and win the reforms it forced onto the national agenda or whether neoliberal elites will succeed in reviving the developed world's least representative and most unequal political system.

The Pinochet Regime and a Neoliberal "Return to Democracy"

In 1973, a military coup, engineered by the Chilean ruling class and backed by the United States, violently toppled the elected Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende. Allende's vision of a democratic road to socialism embraced accelerated land redistribution and nationalization of major industries, including copper—Chile's chief

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export commodity, along with a dramatic expansion of labor rights and provision of public goods. The Pinochet junta, in addition to murdering or disappearing thousands of Allende supporters, mostly workers but also political activists, artists and left intellectuals, imposed a form of economic shock therapy predicated on deregulating labor markets, crushing unions, and privatizing social security, health care, and K-through-college education. To complete its extreme market liberalization, the Pinochet junta dismantled national industry and opened trade and financial flows. Chile thus became the first country to implement a radical anti-statist model proposed by the likes of U.S. economist Milton Friedman. Its core features were enshrined in a 1980 constitution, imposed by the military in a context of repression and systematic violation of civil liberties.

When a return to democracy was negotiated at the end of the 1980s, Chile's new political class pledged to adopt Pinochet's constitution and core legislation governing production, employment, and welfare provision. Along with continued deregulation and commodification of social services, Chile's Socialist-Christian Democratic *Concertación* coalition (1990-2010) avoided reinstating meaningful labor rights, maintained the expansion of informal and subcontracted work, and championed privatized pensions and health coverage. Critical to the center-left's post-authoritarian dominance was its embrace of the authoritarian constitution's exclusionary system of representation. For decades, it protected electoral rules which guaranteed it and its center-right rivals parliamentary monopolies and placed rising power brokers in lucrative positions for cutting deals with business and partisan elites—reflecting the same interests and vision for society that overthrew Allende!

With scant safety nets, ordinary Chileans were exposed to the whims of employers and the hazards of the market. Between two-fifths and three-fifths of Chileans were poor at the end of the dictatorship. This catastrophe was undeniably mitigated over the next three decades as economic expansion generated jobs and revenues for targeted welfare spending. By 2010, public social expenditures rose by over two-thirds, reaching 15 percent of gross

domestic product (GDP). But four consecutive *Concertación* administrations, despite reducing poverty to 18 percent, did little to tame grotesque levels of inequality. Currently, Chile tops the developed country inequality charts¹ and boasts the most ineffective state welfare interventions. Credible research suggests that hidden poverty hovers somewhere between 25 and 30 percent.²

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The basis for unrelenting inequality and persistent *real* destitution is employers' overwhelming power over workers, seen in the prevalence of precarious labor markets and the size of informality (see Figure 1). By some counts, over two-fifths of the working population still toiled in the informal sector in 2010.³ More rigorous survey-based measures indicate that over half of all Chileans rely on informal employment.⁴ Yet, even when employed under formal contracts, large fractions of the workforce lack adequate protections and bargaining rights. In 2010, a full two-thirds of Chileans toiled in service industry workplaces notorious for flouting labor law.⁵ While *Concertación* governments enacted minor labor reforms over the decades, these have not meaningfully improved workers' ability to negotiate better conditions, wages, and benefits. Results for most workers have been catastrophic: In a wealthy society where per capita income reached US\$16,000, half of all Chileans subsisted on less than 70 percent of the US\$375 minimum wage that does not even cover a basic food basket.⁶

Retired workers are perhaps most vulnerable, as center-left governments did little to reverse the 1980 pension privatization, obligating workers to switch from a defined benefit system to individual defined-contribution plans administered by the so-called "Pension Fund Administrators." Because these rely on individual contributions, workers without formal jobs or without steady employment fall behind with their retirement savings or forego saving

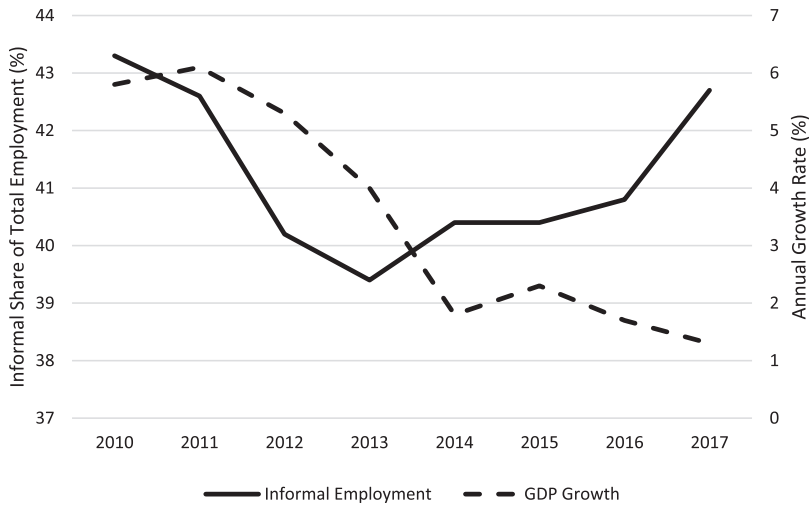


Figure 1. Economic stagnation and the resurgence of informal employment in Chile.
Source: ILO and ECLAC.

altogether. Meanwhile, inordinate administrative fees guarantee returns for fund managers.

Twenty years of center-left rule so inadequately protected domestic workers that four-fifths of them were wholly unable to save for retirement.

Because only 60 percent of workers had put aside any savings since the 1980s, pension coverage for those aged over sixty-five years declined from three-quarters in 1990 to just over half in 2008.⁷ As President Michelle Bachelet finished her second term in 2018, nearly half a million retirees survived on miniscule pensions or lacked them altogether. Destitute retirement is magnified among women, either because they were employed fewer years or because they were disproportionately shunted into domestic or other forms of informal work. Twenty years of center-left rule so inadequately protected domestic workers that four-fifths of them were wholly unable to save for retirement. Of course, saving for retirement is not a guarantee for escaping old-age poverty. Average pensions fell well under the (inadequate) minimum wage, and today, 75 percent fail to reach a third of that!⁸ The “solidarity” relief pensions that Bachelet instituted in 2008

offered a sliver of what could be considered retirement security.

Class Basis of the Rebellion

The inability of retirees to attain material security via integration into Chile’s extreme market-dependent system for work, income, social provision, and consumption reflects the deep forms of social domination and hierarchy that center-left ruling coalitions managed for thirty years. Over the past decade, students, retirees, slum residents, rural communities, and some branches of labor found ways to organize and push back. As protests against the denial of basic livelihoods grew, governing alliances made some concessions, including the aforementioned piecemeal pension reforms and even a slight shift to proportional representation in elections. But these measures were late and insufficient to contain the fury building among Chile’s masses.

When the rebellion first broke out on October 18, 2020, its foundation was undeniably the vast sectors of the poor and working class surviving in the margins of the informal sector, in the irregular and often illegal world of petty traders, bootlegged merchandise, and underground activities. Without the sacrifice and courage of these workers, who for months confronted authorities and scorned civic, market, and property rules for days, the movement

would never have found a platform for other forms of collective action. Seeking to delegitimize these marginalized sectors and drive a wedge between them and those voicing more “legitimate” complaints, President Piñera invoked the specter of seditious outside forces. Besides attempting to isolate and criminalize rioters, the president’s fabrications sought to obscure how far the lower strata of the working class have been driven to desperation.

As marginalized sector protests continued, they were joined by impoverished middle layers, key labor sectors, and a revitalized women’s movement, helping to formulate a coherent set of demands. Very quickly, coordinated demonstrations began to be held in middle-class and central public squares, as tens of thousands of downwardly mobile university graduates gathered to bang pots and pans, and coined the slogan “*Chile Despertó!*” or “Chile Has Awakened!” These *Cacerolazos* maintained and broadened the movement’s defiance by disobeying curfew after the president declared a state of emergency and sent troops into the streets, warning “We are at war.”

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Immiserated workers, students, and lower level professionals, many drowning in debt, were soon barricading the capital’s main avenues, occupying its key nodes of transit and commerce, and cutting off segments of Chile’s main north–south highway. More than an outburst of mounting outrage and frustration or a call for the president to resign, mobilized groups now demanded deep social democratic reform: higher wages, dignified public pensions, quality universal health care, and robust and well-funded public education for all. The pent-up grievances of the student, retiree, and labor movements began cohering into a unified program. Behind it were calls for increased taxation on the wealthy and a constituent assembly to codify social and economic rights into new basic legislation.

On October 25, one week after the initial protests, over a million people—more than one-sixth of the capital’s population—poured into Plaza Italia, Santiago’s epicenter.⁹ Hundreds of thousands more marched in other cities and towns. Meanwhile, the unorganized rioting continued. While small and medium-sized businesses suffered, multinational chains took the brunt of the looting. Walmart supermarkets were especially targeted: in the first couple of days alone, 125 of its superstores were looted, 10 of which were scorched.¹⁰ As policymakers grasped the magnitude of the instability and the massive losses it provoked, Piñera announced measures for worker assistance and public relief, pledging US\$1.2 billion to boost pensions, raise wages to a guaranteed minimum, and reduce health care and utility expenses. Given the size of the mobilization, these were seen as woefully insufficient:¹¹ four-fifths of Chileans rejected them offhand,¹² while the same proportion reported intentions to participate in ongoing protests.¹³

As battle lines hardened, a coalition of unions and grassroots networks, the *Mesa Social* (roughly “Social Movement Council”) formed, capturing the “feeling of indignation, trouble and rage at the growing injustices, inequality and impunity haunting” the country.¹⁴ Headed by the largest national labor confederation, the Workers’ United Center of Chile (CUT), the *Mesa* comprised Chile’s most active mass and working-class formations: the National Coordinator of Workers Against Privatized Pensions (*No Más AFP*), university and high school student federations, teachers and other public unions, copper miners, longshoremen, forestry workers, and women’s assemblies. Some eight hundred thousand feminists had marched in March 2019, followed by one million elderly that August. When the movement exploded in the fall, the *Mesa* was positioned to coordinate mobilizations and push its program.

After endorsing the semi-spontaneous October 25 march, the *Mesa* began calling for regular mass rallies, a compressed version of the mid-1980s monthly days of action that accelerated the military regime’s end. An October 30 march was followed by an explicitly working-class mobilization on November 4 led by public employee unions.¹⁵ With much of

transit paralyzed, schools shut down, retail in ruins, and miners in the midst of their own contract-related stoppages, the general strike became a feasible weapon for Chile's workers and poor. The movement now enjoyed coordinated social power behind its demands.

Following a month of non-stop upheaval (and deadly state counterblows), two-thirds of Chileans continued to back the movement. Alongside guaranteed, dignified income, health care, education, and retirement, they overwhelmingly converged around the need to bury the reigning legal framework. A full 82 percent—including 55 percent of right-wingers—backed a new constitution. Some two-thirds preferred a radical constitutional overhaul drafted by popularly elected delegates, explicitly excluding current parliamentarians.¹⁶

The Balance

By mid-November, Chile's workers' upheaval had accomplished what twenty-five years of formal center-left rule had failed to advance. Even Piñera's social agenda, inadequate as it was, surpassed the improvements of three Socialist-led *Concertación* administrations. But in the context of a nationwide insurgency, Piñera's militarized response stood out.

Reminiscent of the Pinochet era, Piñera declared a state emergency on October 19, sending in the military to guarantee public order.¹⁷ Along with the *Carabineros*, Chile's militarized police, soldiers came down brutally on protestors. Nearly 4,500 arrests were reported in the first two weeks, one-tenth of them children, with some 1,700 serious injuries.¹⁸ In three months, over 10,000 Chileans had been detained, over 3,740 were wounded, and around 1,600 were tortured or beaten. Sexual abuse returned as a standard form of torture against detainees, alongside deliberate maiming. As *Carabineros* trained shotguns and tear gas canisters at protestors, a systematic pattern of aiming above the shoulders became evident: by February 2020, almost 450 had been seriously wounded in the face, and 35 had lost one or both eyes.¹⁹

Yet more noteworthy than the scale and cruelty of the repression was its ineffectiveness.

Reflecting the choice of most elites, violence and criminalization was the go-to option for center-left governments when confronting non-elite collective action.²⁰ This time, neither succeeded. Strikes, marches, barricades, and rioting raged on, often descending into mass disorder, while million-people rallies brought cities to a standstill. A week into the upheaval, the rebellion had cost big retail alone US\$1.5 billion. Revenue from tourism fell by over a third. According to official counts, damage to public infrastructure alone reached US\$4.5 billion, while turmoil within and beyond the gates of workplaces cost the economy three hundred thousand jobs.

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As the rebellion continued, the legitimacy of the country's political class evaporated: by mid-November, Piñera's approval hit a record low of 12 percent, remaining at or below that mark until March 2020. Repudiation spared no figure or party, with cabinet disapproval approaching single digits and the sharpest declines hitting oligarchic figures of the country's bipartisan power-sharing model.

This situation opened alarming cracks in the ruling party system, under intensified pressure since 2013, when insurgents from the 2011 student protests broke into parliamentary politics. Communist student leaders joined the *Concertación*, now dubbed *Nueva Mayoría* (New Majority), after Bachelet, up for a second term, pledged to address issues long neglected by her coalition. Others became the first elected representatives of a new radical left. In 2017, they formed the *Frente Amplio*, winning twenty-one seats and running a close third in presidential elections.²¹

In the interim and since, Chile's two main alliances, particularly the center-left, have fragmented and, with the *Frente Amplio*'s emergence, opened possibilities for substantial partisan reconfigurations. The *Concertación*'s

incorporation in 2013 of the Communist Party, historically representative of the working class, initiated the process. First, Communist backing of Bachelet's candidacy shortly after the 2011 student movement gave an enormous boost to the independent anti-neoliberal left. Second, Communist incorporation helped fracture Bachelet's Christian Democratic coalition partners, pushing a faction toward the center-right.²² Socialists have also splintered, most recently following the resignation of a parliamentarian who has been central to the party's pro-market governance model.²³ Although Piñera's coalition had more successfully maintained unity, the protests exposed deep fissures as the alliance alienated ordinary backers and, unable to handle the upheaval, frustrated many business constituents.

These divisions opened opportunities for the movement to coalesce around its most far-reaching demands. Signs of consolidation of a new left forged in the unity of radical reform parties and newly mobilized working-class organizations appeared as promising game changers in Chilean politics.²⁴ Toward mid-November, the route to just such a profound reconfiguration appeared to materialize.

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Protest still raging, and governing parties and institutions losing control, the movement won the concession that could finally overhaul and re-democratize the state. On November 15, Congress signed an agreement with the executive, paving the way for a constituent assembly. The agreement called for an April plebiscite first asking Chileans whether they wanted a new constitution, as they had demanded for months, and then asking them to choose a fully elected Assembly or a Mixed Convention (including current legislators) to draft the charter.²⁵

By December, only one-tenth of Chileans endorsed Parliament, a mere 15 percent favored

the former center-left, while just over one-fifth sanctioned the ruling alliance. The left fared no better, as the Communist Party recorded 11 percent approval, while even the new radical *Frente Amplio* coalition lost almost half of its support.²⁶ Popular revulsion was not limited to parties and politicians, extending to state institutions and civil society groups. The judiciary, the justice department, business associations, and even the church, all saw their favorability drop to one-quarter or lower. Even *Carabineros*, which, although loathed by labor, student, and community activists, generally manages to preserve a law-and-order legitimacy, saw their approval cut by half to 35 percent.

Labor: Rebuilding from Scratch

The rebellion's horizons are ultimately tied to the strength of Chile's labor movement, which has been slowly regrouping after being shattered by the dictatorship's brutal repression and industrial restructuring. In the first two years of democratic rule, strikes increased by over 40 percent, from 175 in 1990 to 250 in 1992. Significantly, larger numbers participated, and in 1991 nearly 46,000 workers engaged in industrial actions, resulting in almost 750,000 lost production days. Of the 866 stoppages conducted in the first four years after transition, over half hit manufacturing, while under one-twentieth targeted mining.²⁷ Union density appeared to corroborate the upswing. From its nadir, at around 10 percent in the early 1980s, unionization rates picked up sharply after 1989, nearly doubling to 18 percent by 1991.²⁸

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Industrial action and organizing, however, reversed abruptly in the mid-1990s, as the center-left government avoided meaningful labor reform and entrenched the neoliberal model. By 2001, a decade into the democratic period, yearly strikes dipped to a mere eighty-nine. Worse still, the number of workers involved and the disruptive costs they imposed on employers also sank to historic lows. By the end of the first

post-dictatorship decade, only 10,500 Chilean workers participated in strikes, fewer than a quarter of those who did so in 1991. By 2005, a scarce thirty strikes hit manufacturing, two in construction and nine in transport. Workers all but lost the capacity for collective action.

Workers' powerlessness reflected center-left authorities' commitment to maintaining flexibilized labor relations, granting employers overwhelming power to hire, fire, and reorganize work in ways that disregard basic protections and rights and undermine employees' ability to organize. When the *Concertación* finally passed 2001 labor legislation over business objections, it did nothing to enhance employees' ability to strike and negotiate beyond individual firms,²⁹ leaving employers' subcontracting prerogatives intact. The result was intensified fragmentation and hollowed-out bargaining, with plant-level units proliferating by nearly a third and even inter-firm units doubling by 2010.³⁰ Unsurprisingly, fewer and fewer workers put effort into joining and building unions. By 2001, official union membership dropped by one-sixth and density plummeted to 11 percent, lows from which labor has yet to recover. Most severely impacted was manufacturing, where membership contracted by two-fifths.³¹ The ruling coalition's commitment to an open market economy predicated on natural commodity exports exacerbated labor's powerlessness.

In one swoop, the pandemic snatched from the movement its crucial weapon for securing concessions—its capacity for disruption.

Trapped in decline, the labor movement became ensnared in its own crisis of legitimacy. Tied to the center-left parties, the leadership of the largest traditional unions increasingly lost touch with the rank and file. The most damaging crisis came to a head in 2016, as Communist leaders, now allied to Bachelet's second government, sought to consolidate their hold on the CUT. Under pressure from new insurgent sectors that gained influence following a series of wildcat waves in copper, ports, and education, Communist slates engaged in widespread fraud, mostly staged on inflated membership totals,

resulting in the need for new elections.³² More importantly, they further fragmented working-class organization, just as insurgency among often-excluded contract workers revitalized in a number of critical industries.³³

Despite upturns in working-class insurgency and quick coalescence behind the *Mesa Social*, divisions emerged immediately after the pact for the constitutional plebiscite, dubbed the *acuerdo por la paz nueva constitución*. The first splits occurred within the *Frente Amplio*, as members denounced key parliamentarians, all former student leaders, for participating in the negotiations. Then came fights between the *Frente* and Communists, as the latter used their leading *Mesa* presence to promote alternative, locally based town halls for constitutional reform and to attack the former's parliamentary strategy.

Eclipsed by the Pandemic?

As the insurgency set about to resolve its differences and confront inevitable exhaustion, the arrival of the coronavirus and its recent surge have placed mobilizations on hold, threatening to restore the fragile balance of the pre-rebellion order. In one swoop, the pandemic snatched from the movement its crucial weapon for securing concessions—its capacity for disruption.

When the first Covid-19 case was recorded in early March, Chile's protests had dwindled. As holdouts symbolically resisted in Santiago's central square and the parliamentary left pressed Piñera to expand relief, the government hoped to ride out the storm. The dynamic shifted drastically as dread of the virus and its economic consequences set in. With plummeting global demand for copper and other natural exports contracting the economy and state revenues, Chileans have turned their attention to holding on to whatever work and income they might secure. In a country where public health care is lethally precarious and tens of thousands of poor die each year waiting for basic medical treatment, the heightened risks quickly dampened worker willingness to mobilize around the system's deep inequality.

Near miraculously, the president's approval doubled to 22 percent the month following the pandemic's appearance. With two-thirds of Chileans reporting fear of contagion, his cabinet's ratings similarly "recovered."³⁴ This gave

cover for the administration to postpone virtually unchallenged the constitutional plebiscite until October 25. Emboldened, the right wing has begun floating an indefinite suspension because of the rapidly deteriorating economic reality.³⁵

Amid disappointing efforts to resuscitate the movement, some developments indicate that as the pandemic reveals the inadequacy of official relief measures and re-exposes deep inequalities at the heart of the Chilean governing model, mass mobilization might retake center stage. After months of protest decline and fragmentation, and a week into the pandemic, Chile's women's networks led the largest day of protest in the country's history. On March 8 this year, two million feminists claimed the streets of Santiago and towns throughout the country. They formed the *Coordinadora 8M* to coordinate their growing network, pledged to continue fighting gender oppression, and pressed for a popularly elected constituent assembly. In May, as hunger and destitution began outweighing fears of contagion, intensified food and income insecurity, the underlying causes of the explosion, appeared to give new life to the movement's stalled momentum.

... [T]he Chilean government and ancient-regime elite's newfound stability may be more reprieve than restoration.

The historic feminist *8M* mobilization along with pockets of industrial and neighborhood rebellion by unprotected and abandoned workers suggest that the Chilean government and ancient-regime elite's newfound stability may be more reprieve than restoration. After over forty years of being crushed politically and scattered structurally, it will take more than one *Chilenazo* to rebuild working-class power. But we should recall that when the working class first ran Allende for president in 1952, he garnered 5 percent of votes. Less than twenty years later, Chile's workers and popular sectors had put him into power.

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