

Chile: "It's not 30 pesos, it's 30 years!"

LINX; CC-BY-4.0, Story-telling: Dario Azzellini and Adriana Yee Meyberg;
Illustration: Carina Crenshaw

In 2019, Chile was swept by the largest revolt in its history. The uprising fundamentally changed the political situation. The right-wing government under billionaire Sebastián Piñera responded with military repression. At the height of the protests, there was a massive general strike that paved the way for a constitutional referendum.

After two years of work by the constitutional convention, the new draft constitution was rejected in a referendum.



Chile, the neoliberal model student

Introduced by a military coup and far-right dictatorship in 1973-1989, neoliberalism deepened in an authoritarian democracy from 1990. Social inequality remained high. In 2017, 77.5% of the population was considered poor or at risk of poverty.



At the beginning of October 2019, students in the capital Santiago protested against a fare increase of 30 pesos (approx. 0.032 euros) and called for people not to pay for public transport. A mass movement emerged, which was increasingly joined by workers.

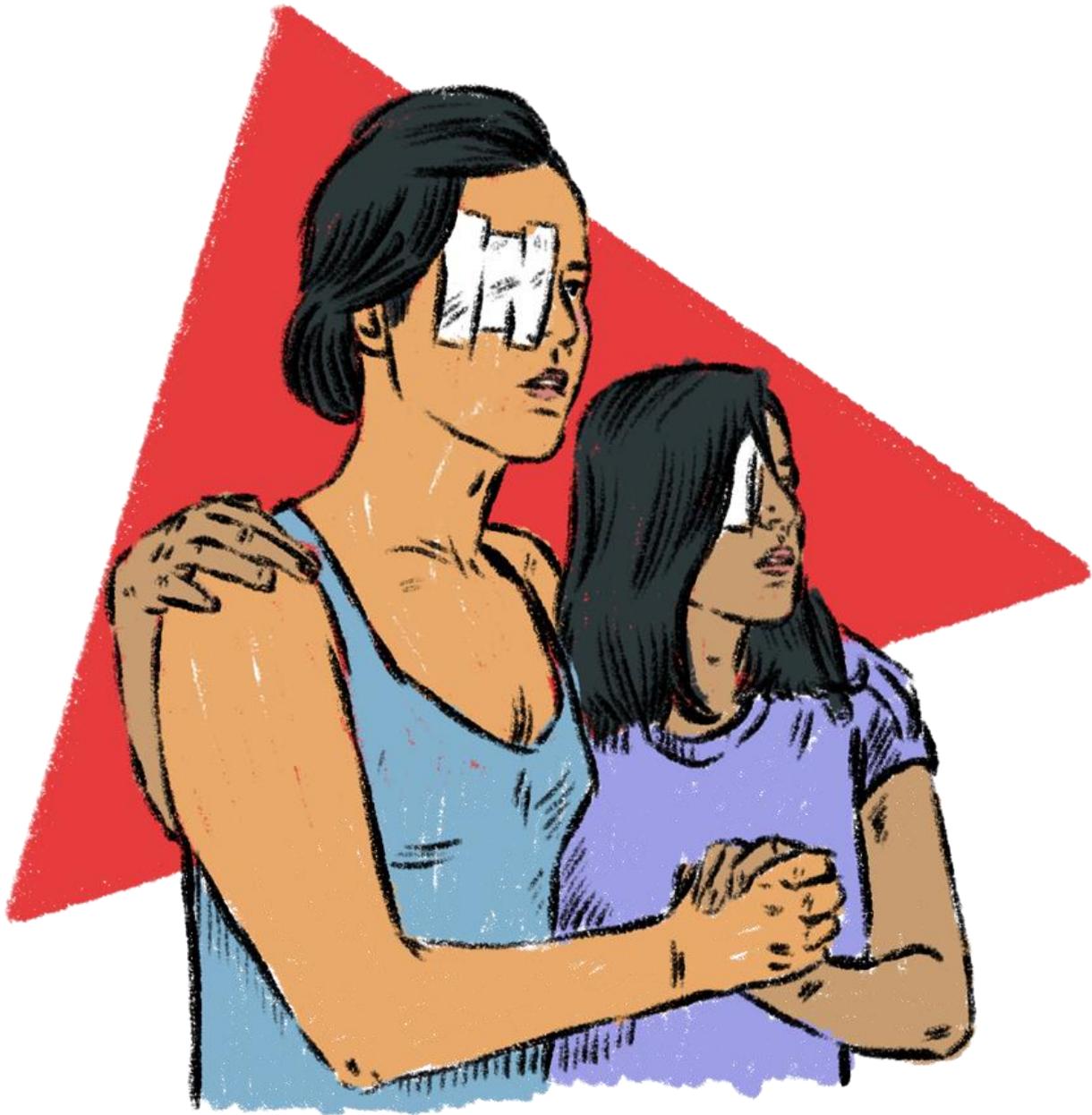
During protests on October 18, 20 subway stations were set on fire. The president declared a state of emergency and deployed armed military. This further fueled the revolt, which had already spread across the country. The repression of the first weeks resulted in 20,000 arrests, 3,000 injured and 34 dead. The scale of the violence, the size of the movement and the initially decentralized organization of the protests were new for the post-dictatorship era.

The previously formed MUS (Round Table of Social Unity) directed part of the protests without leading them. It included the moderate anti-neoliberal union confederation CUT, and radical organizations capable of mobilization, such as the feminist Coordinadora "8 de Marzo" and the student's association ACES.



The moderate MUS wing called the first general strike on October 23 and 24, which was followed by dockworkers, miners and teachers. On October 25, 800.000 to 1.500.000 people took to the streets in Santiago and others in all large and medium-sized cities. The union block called a general strike for November 12. It became the most effective since the end of the dictatorship. The entire union movement mobilized the population.

Neighborhood initiatives and territorial strike committees set up roadblocks. The mobilization of the non-unionized working class deepened the crisis. The government declared a state of emergency and deployed the military.



Curfews, the militarization of cities, and widespread human rights violations not seen since the Pinochet dictatorship returned.

On November 15, the government proposed a referendum on a new constitution. This weakened another general strike. The Covid 19 pandemic beginning in March 2020 further weakened the protests.

Four features of the revolt and general strike stand out:

- Decentralized mobilizations sometimes led to several days of disruption of the economy.
- Unions did not lead, but were an important link. Their bundled actions had a great impact. They proved their relevance beyond labor disputes.
- The population was not intimidated by repression.

- General strikes are a consequence of revolts and uprisings, not the other way around.



On October 25, 2020, 79% of Chileans voted in favor of direct elections to conform a constituent assembly. This was elected on July 4, 2021. Leftists from parties and movements, grassroots independents and indigenous people received the majority. In the parliamentary and presidential elections in November 2021, socialist and communist leftists as well as rightists made gains. The leftist Gabriel Boric became president.

Two years later, after intensive work by the Constitutional Convention, the proposed constitution was submitted to the people for a vote. The proposed constitution not only aimed to overcome the subsidiary state and replace it with a social state, but also introduced public ownership of water, promoted sexual and reproductive rights and environmental rights, and recognized plurinationality in Chilean territory.

It was a constitutional process that was the result of pact among different political parties that, unfortunately, structurally lacked effective mechanisms for participation and ownership by the majority regarding the whole process and its outcomes.

It was also a process carried out in very little time and, which was also massively attacked by the major economic powers and the political right. A media war that led to a tragic rejection of the Constitution.

After the defeat, a feeling of exhaustion and disappointment prevails in the country. The right has emerged stronger. But it is not all in vain. The social movement and the

workers' movement are continuing their work in the territories, reorganizing them and preparing to continue the transformation process from the basis. For the moment, the Pinochet Constitution is still in effect, and the outlook is not encouraging, given the recent approval of the TPP11 free trade agreement, which further limits the country's sovereignty and its ability to make changes in public policy, not to mention unthinkable changes in the ownership and management of such basic natural resources as water in this current context.

Hope lies in the social and individual progress achieved against all odds with the creation of a proposal for a new constitution based on values and principles of social justice, multiculturalism and ecofeminism. Values that are becoming increasingly important in Chilean society and throughout the region. The struggle continues!