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Chile and Haiti after the earthquakes

So different yet so similar...

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Retrieved on 22nd December 2021 from www.anarkismo.net
Translation by FdCA – International Relations Office

theanarchistlibrary.org

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Contents

I	5
II	6
III	7
IV	9
V	11

Messages like this remind me that solidarity is the peoples' tenderness.

The consequences that this earthquake will have for the Chilean people are frightening. It is estimated that at present 2,000,000 people have lost their homes and are literally on the streets. We're talking of more than 10% of the total population, which gives you an idea of the daunting task of reconstruction ahead.

I.

Chile has again been hit by an earthquake of apocalyptic magnitude, like in the earthquakes of 1938, 1960 and 1985. With the precision of a Swiss watch, the centre and south of the country is hit every 25 years by a seismic movement that puts the country in a state of deep shock. The earthquake we saw on 27 February was one of the strongest recorded in history — 8.8 degrees on the Richter scale, 9 on the Mercalli scale.

The anguish of not knowing anything about our loved ones, of not being able to communicate with them, has followed the destruction, the isolation and death or disappearance of a great many people. Impotence is a shadow hanging over the heart. The death toll is now at about 700 — some are saying that they expect a final figure of about 2,000 when we eventually get the full picture of the devastation. Nothing is known yet about many in the affected provinces in the regions of Maule and Bío Bío. When people were still talking of about 300 killed, we learnt that the Constitución tsunami had swallowed up around 350 inhabitants, doubling the death toll. And we now know there were other places hit by tsunamis, though the extent of the damage is still unknown.

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II.

Much has been said about the differences between Chile and Haiti — the earthquake in our brothers' Caribbean republic produced a far higher death toll (300,000) and much greater damage, both in absolute and relative terms. There has been talk about the geological and seismological reasons, such as greater depth of the epicentre and the area where it happened, and they certainly did play very clear a role. But above all we must be looked at is the political, social and economic explanation of why an earthquake of greater magnitude in Chile had a much smaller impact.

Chile, indeed, can hardly be compared to Haiti: it has a much better infrastructure, a far less dependent and stunted economy than Haiti's (whereas Haiti is an extreme case within the context of Latin America, Chile has enjoyed half a century of national developmentalist regimes that has left its mark to this day) and a much, much better response capacity to natural disasters by its institutions. Poverty in Chile does not reach such sordid levels as it does in Haiti, where the population in the capital's suburbs has to resort to eating mud cookies to trick the hunger. Obviously none of this is due to some sort of Chilean "superiority", of the sort that local chauvinists have been spouting with comparisons that are as wrong as they are hateful (such as "Chileans work harder, they are more resourceful, more this, more that..."), but is mainly due to the different histories of the two republics — histories that have diverged even since colonial times, as well as the fact that Chile was never turned into a plantation country, a maquiladora country, nor was it ever directly occupied or looted by the USA. Chile is

It is in times of crisis when the system shows its real face. And Concepción, like Port-au-Prince, shows it off in all its cruelty — the property of the capitalists is more important than the lives and welfare of hundreds of thousands of people in desperate need. It is no coincidence that capitalism is often described as "wild".

V.

But Haiti and Chile are nonetheless similar, because need brings out that essential instinct of mutual aid that allows people to survive, move forward and become rightful players in history. It is up to the popular sectors to encourage and develop these trends towards popular organization and solidarity, so that they can develop beyond the level of mere survival. So that they can contribute towards the creation of a new society, a caring society, a libertarian society, that can shed the heavy burden of individualism forced on us by the fierce neoliberal model implemented by the dictatorship and further entrenched at the hands of the "controlled democracy".

Among the many messages of support I have received from friends and comrades in these distressing hours, I would like to note in particular the not inconsiderable number of solidarity messages I received from Haitian brothers and sisters. Through their own pain, they are still able to take the time to show their solidarity with the Chilean people. We feel their pain, and now they feel ours.

One comrade from Grandans (Grand'Anse) wrote to me immediately on Saturday: "*Dear José Antonio, I appreciate your solidarity efforts with the Haitian people. Today I feel very touched by the violent, massive earthquake in Chile. I hope your family come out of this earthquake alive and well, and that your country recovers quickly. We are ready to share the little we have with you, if necessary. So long, Maxime Roumer*".

“Looters!” cried the authorities, demonizing the just demand of the right to live, to eat, to quench one’s thirst, to look after one’s children. They are distorting the story to the point of saying that there is no need for “looting”, that people were stealing only luxury items, electrical goods or CDs and DVDs, when the truth is otherwise. All it needed in the end was for a couple of banks to be targetted and there was absolute hysteria. “Scum”, they shouted, to dehumanize hungry and needy people, a flexible word always ready to be used to justify police murder. In the Pinochet era they were called “humanoids” — the term changes, the repressive political idea is the same.

The same “scum” in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince were now appearing on the streets of Concepción, and from the very first, president-elect Sebastián Piñera, along with his cronies in local governments like Dr. [Jacqueline] Van Rysselberghe in Concepción, took offence at how little these ruined people respected the property of the big supermarket chains. And while aid was slow in coming, it was no problem to mobilize a few thousand soldiers to enforce martial law in Concepción. While no water was reaching thirsty mouths, it cost them nothing to fill the tanks of the water cannon to suppress the “scum” who were “plundering” “honest” businesses like Lider (Wal Mart) and Santa Isabel. The government decreed a State of Siege and Curfew, echoing the political Right and the big entrepreneurs and businessmen who, while babbling about “solidarity”, are not willing even to offer the people a few packets of rice in their supermarkets. Resorting to this type of behaviour has not done since 1987 — in other words, for those who have a short memory, since the time of the dictatorship. This shows that certain authoritarian habits have not died, even after two decades of “controlled democracy”.

Good citizens are now being asked to queue, to go hungry and thirsty and put up with their children’s crying. Order has been restored again thanks to the jackboot. Private property is once again untouchable.

also a country with a long history of earthquakes, a fact which gave it “an advantage” over Haiti.

III.

Even so, there has been little debate about the similarities. The most obvious is the fact that those who are suffering most are the poor. Even though an earthquake hits everyone equally, some are better prepared than others to deal with the quake and the difficulties that follow. Chile has not been an exception to this rule and the worst-hit sectors are the poor neighborhoods, with houses made of adobe. Besides, we know from reliable witnesses that aid to the townships is too late in coming and inadequate — these areas are not a priority for anyone, even though they are the sectors where aid should be concentrated due to the precarious conditions of their inhabitants.

Secondly, much of the devastation is due to inadequate infrastructure. With the country having a good deal of earthquake experience and after the big quake that hit half the country in 1985, there was some awareness of the need to create infrastructure that can withstand the shocks of such a tectonically-active area as Chile. However, in the mid-’90s, the Concertación¹, which has continued the disastrous neo-liberal model inherited from the dictatorship, began with the privatization and outsourcing of public works companies (many of which are multinationals), which will never answer for the bridges, motorways and roads whose destruction has immobilized the country, leaving thousands abandoned and isolated on their journeys. It is noteworthy that many of the projects carried out by the Department of Public Works several decades ago are still standing, whereas expensive roads built only a few years ago have crumbled like biscuits,

¹ The “Concert of Parties for Democracy” is the coalition that has governed Chile since military rule ended in 1990.

despite their enormous cost. I can personally testify to the reason for the fragility of these roadworks: at the beginning of 2003 I was working on the Rancagua by-pass in Doñihue. When the geologist recommended clearing 1.80 metres, 2 metres in some sections due to unstable ground, in order to save costs, the JCB operator was ordered to dig no deeper than 30 centimetres. We knew that those roads would not last more than 10 years. Now the earthquake will provide a handy excuse to explain their destruction, but the fact that public infrastructure remains standing, while privatized infrastructure has collapsed, is an undeniable fact.

The same is true of housing. From the late '90s, with the scandal of the COPEVA houses², which after only a few months began to crack and leak, with owners having to wrap them in plastic sheeting for the winter (and with many simply being demolished shortly after), it is clear that the (anti)social housing policy in the country — and housing in general — is just a business for real estate capitalists. A business, moreover, facilitated by all sorts of corruption and negligence by the Concertación governments themselves, some of whose members were directly involved in this lucrative business. Remember that the COPEVA scandal was linked to the name of Christian Democrat interior minister, Pérez Yoma. Today we see many modern buildings, many housing projects of people who with great sacrifice had managed to attain their “dream of owning a home” now at rock bottom, with serious structural damage making their houses uninhabitable. The most dramatic was the 15-storey building that collapsed in Concepción with about a hundred people inside. A new building, still with apartments for sale. It is true that such a powerful earthquake will always cause damage and enough can never be done to avoid casual-

² In 1997, houses built by the government's largest contractor, COPEVA, in Villa Los Puertos collapsed after heavy rain and left 1,000 people homeless.

ties, but how on earth can we justify the most recent constructions being the ones which suffer most damage?

As in Haiti, it is likely that no capitalist will ever be held accountable for such criminal acts. It is therefore necessary that the people mobilize and demand justice, since the privatization policy of public works, property and roads is an overtly criminal policy, as this earthquake shows. Some officials are responsible for this and if the people do not demand a response from them, they will never be held responsible.

IV.

Another similarity with Haiti is the repressive response and the militarization of humanitarian aid. Although both cases are obviously different (in Haiti the humanitarian militarization has served to entrench the country's occupation and delivered an important geostrategic enclave to the USA, something that makes perfect sense given its plan to militarize the Caribbean region and restructure its hegemony in Latin America), in both cases hysteria over “looters” has been used to justify the presence of armed forces to protect the interests of the elite.

In Concepción, many people have seen no help of any kind for a day and a half. This is especially true in the working-class neighbourhoods where so far little or nothing has arrived. Out of desperation, people simply resort to the most basic impulse of human beings — survive! The people went to supermarkets, gas stations and pharmacies to get the most basic elements, something to feed their families with. Or should we have expected people to lie idle, put up with fatigue, hunger and thirst, while the supermarkets were full of goods? These were ordinary people, the common people — mothers, fathers, young people who ran off with cartons of milk, rice, whatever they could find.