

To understand the Mapuche conflict

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Contents

- [What do the mapuches want?](#)
- [History of the struggle](#)
- [Three fronts of struggle](#)
- [The criminalisation of the](#)
- [An ecological anticapitalist](#)

The purpose of the struggle which started in the South of Chile in mid-July is not only a struggle to recover their lands and their right to exist as a nation. It is also a struggle to protect their environment, devastated by an outrageous capitalist development which promotes the replacement of the native flora by forests of pines and eucalyptus—which deplete the water reservoirs— and the construction of roads and luxury tourist resorts and hydroelectric power houses which imply the eradication of whole communities and the destruction of nature.

What do the mapuches want?

The mapuches demand autonomy. In a blatant violation of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 13th September 2007, the Chilean state rejects this demand.

Their excuse is the fact that the mapuches represent only 6% of the population of Chile. When asked about the size of the mapuche population, the answers given by the Chilean state are surprising, not to say contradictory. In 1992, a national census stated that there were a million mapuches above 14 years of age. Unexpectedly, the census that took place ten years later, in 2002, when the mapuche movement for reconstruction started to get organised, stated that there were only 650,000. There has never been any attempt on the part of the Chilean government to give an explanation to the fact that 350,000 mapuches have “disappeared” in ten years. On their side, mapuche organisations put their population to one and a half million people, half of whom live in cities. It is thought that half a million mapuches live in the capital, Santiago de Chile. These urban mapuches have fraternal links with those who live in the countryside in the South of Chile, as the demonstrations in support of the occupations which took place in Santiago and other cities, showed.

History of the struggle

The relationship of the mapuches with the Spanish conquistadores, and then with the Chilean state has never been easy. However, at the beginning of the 19th Century, agreements establishing the independence of the Mapuche Nation were signed between the Mapuche Parliament and the government of the Republic of Chile. The Biobío River was agreed on as “The Frontier” between the two nations.

In 1861, the Chilean state decides to expand capitalist development to the whole of the territory. To

do that, it was necessary to launch the colonisation of the mapuche territory. The government declared that those inhabitants of Araucania who had proof of the property of their lands could keep them. The rest of the lands would be allocated to national and foreign colonisers, in plots of 500 hectares and at a very low price. Given that the concept of individual property of the land in the western capitalist sense does not exist in mapuche culture, very few of them, had any deeds.

To confront the indigenous people's resistance to this policy, the government launched a military campaign known as the "Pacification". Dozens of thousands of mapuches died fighting to defend their lands. Mapuche economy was shattered. Some of those who survived managed to escape to pehuenche territory. Those who did not, were placed in "reductions"(reservations), where they were forced to raise cattle to survive. These reductions represented only 5% of their old territory. Some of them still exist in the present day, and it is from there that some of the present occupations were launched.

From the "Pacification" onwards , and in order to continue giving away mapuche land to national and foreign colonisers, different governments have applied policies leading to the subdivision of the reductions in small plots. Thus, some 100,000 hectares, one fifth of the original territory allotted to the reservations, were given away to non indigenous people. This forced many mapuches to emigrate. The 1992 census stated that 80% of the mapuches live in cities. In most of the cases, they have become part of the poor who live in the slums in the outskirts of the large cities.

Between 1960 and 1970 there was an Agrarian Reform, a process which deepened under Salvador Allende. This favoured the re-appropriation by the mapuches of some of their ancestral lands. However, the fact that no deeds of property were given to the mapuches under Allende's government made it easier for Pinochet's dictatorship to return them to their "lawful owners". All those lands which could be used to grow trees were expropriated and sold at auctions at ridiculously low prices. This is one of the bases for the present struggle.

Three fronts of struggle

The mapuche movement has opened three fronts of struggle against the multinationals that raise and commercialise timber, the developers of luxury touristic resorts and the government's infrastructure projects.

After the fall of the military dictatorship, the Chilean state decreed that it would honour the property rights of all foresting and timber companies that had bought those mapuche lands auctioned by the Pinochet's government.

Mapuche communities were then encircled by colossal plantations of pine and eucalyptus which depleted their water resources, contaminated and exhausted their lands and deprived them of their subsistence forcing them, once again, to sell their lands and emigrate. Those lands were, in turn, occupied by new foresting and timber companies. The problem seemed to have no solution.

It was at that moment, in 1997, that the movement to resist the occupation and to reconstruct mapuche culture started. There was suddenly the realisation that while they only had 700,000 hectares to survive, Mininco SA, Bosques Araucolas and the companies Volterra, Cautín and Millalemu had 2 million hectares on which to plant trees.

The struggle has already given fruit: in Arauco, the mapuches have recovered 20,000 hectares which were in the hands of the foresting and timber companies. So far, they have obtained deeds of property for only 5,000 hectares. This means that there is still danger that a violent eviction might take place. However, in those lands the trees have disappeared and have been replaced by potatoes

and wheat.

The struggle against the forestry Mininco SA in the region of Traiguén, where they had 1,200 hectares covered by trees, is exemplary. The mapuches occupied this plantation several times and were evicted each time. However, each time they occupied it they uprooted all the trees. Finally, Mininco decided to give up the exploitation. The mapuches now raise cattle and grow crops in this land.

The second front is the struggle against the developers of luxury touristic resorts. Chile has beautiful lakes in the South, which are in mapuche territory. The large touristic multinationals want to set up there luxury hotels, golf courses, runways, etc. The existence of mapuche communities which can provide cheap labour and the “exotic” element is an extra bonus. This proposal is promoted by Osvaldo Carvajal, whose lands have already been occupied for some time by the mapuches, preventing him to carry it out. Carvajal is a key element in the repression against the mapuches. He supports the Comando Hernán Trizano, a paramilitary group organised by the entrepreneurs of the region with the connivance of the police. This Comando has threatened to use their explosives to blow up the leaders and members of the mapuche community.

The third front is the struggle against the government’s infrastructure projects such as the Highway of the Coast. This project, which implies changing the course of rivers, razing mountains and evicting whole mapuche communities, has as objectives to give a quick and easy way to transport and commercialise timber, to develop tourism and to pillage natural resources, since along this coast there is a reservoir of pearls. This highway, which will go from Tirúa in the North of Chile to Puerto Montt in the South, right through three mapuche communities, should have been finished five years ago. It is only the staunch resistance of the mapuches that has prevented it.

The criminalisation of the conflict

The Council of all the Lands (Consejo de todas las tierras) is a mapuche organisation founded in 1990. At the time, it carried out several symbolic recuperations of their ancestral lands which were in private hands. The response of the then president, Patricio Aylwin, was to apply a law inherited from Pinochet’s dictatorship: the Law of Internal Security of the State. This law treats these activities as acts of terrorism. As a result 141 mapuches were imprisoned and their political rights were suspended.

Using the laws of the dictatorship to criminalise the protests of the mapuches was a practise that has been applied by successive socialist governments. The present Bachelet government is not an exception. There are nine mapuches in prison in the South and around 15 fugitives, while several have already been killed by the police. Those who have been imprisoned have been accused of illegal association and terrorism, but the searches found no weapons in their possession, they have not killed or hurt anybody and there are no witnesses to their having done anything wrong. On top of it, communities have been harassed by the police with the purpose of frightening people and stopping their organisation.

Different Chilean governments have faced repeated protests from Amnesty International and the Committee of Human Rights. The latter—in charge of the control of the application of the 1966 International Pact of Civil and Political Rights—, in their observations to the report on Chile in 2007, denounced once again the criminalisation of the mapuche conflict. The denunciation of the imprisonment of mapuche leaders is, at the moment, under consideration by the Interamerican Committee of Human Rights of the OAS (Organisation of American States).

An ecological anticapitalist struggle

The mapuche movement is very diverse. Some of its organisations have links with the Chilean government, others with left-wing parties. There are those which are independent and autonomous. It is precisely the autonomous organisations which are right now at the receiving end of the repression and those which have more staunchly taken up the ideas of resistance and autonomous reconstruction of the mapuche nation.

Regardless of where these organisations place themselves ideologically, their struggle is against the Chilean bourgeois state and its capitalist productivist way of development. In that sense, their struggle is profoundly ecological and anticapitalist.