

New perspectives for the Chilean anticapitalist Left

Friday 21 October 2011, by [BATOU Jean](#), [FARFAN-SALINAS Sebastián](#), [TORTOSA Juan](#) (Date first published: 13 October 2011).

This interview for the Swiss fortnightly SolidaritéS was conducted on October 13 by Jean Batou and Juan Tortosa . Sebastian Farfán Salinas, 23 years old, is president of the Student Federation at the University of Valparaíso and a member of the national executive of the student movement. He belongs to the radical wing of the Confederation of Chilean students (Confech). Coming from a poor family, he is the first to go to university, where he is studying history.

SolidaritéS: What is the situation of the anticapitalist Left in Chile today?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: The Chilean anticapitalist Left of the 1960s and 1970s has largely disappeared, not only because of the repression of the dictatorship, but also, after the struggles of the 1980s, in particular those of the *Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez* [1], because of very brutal repression by the successive governments of the Concertation [2]. To that, it should be added that the social and ideological consequences of the triumphant neoliberalism of the 1990s was to the advantage of the Dialogue, which painted a glowing picture of the future. From the 1990s, the revolutionary Left was thus maintained in a kind of marginality, organizing small circles in the universities. However, since the middle of the last decade, the situation has gradually changed, with a certain accumulation of forces and an internal reorganization which enabled it to approach the “penguin revolution” of 2006 [3] in a much better position, relaunching the discussion on an anticapitalist perspective.

SolidaritéS: What relation is there between this new radical Left and previous organizations like the MIR [4] or the *Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez*?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: These organizations still exist, split into multiple currents which often argue among themselves. But the new generation which has emerged since 2006 does not have an organic relationship with these organizations, while trying to learn about and discuss their experiences, but also to rediscover their political achievements and their leading figures. This generation is developing its own forms of political organization and intervention. It was initially organized in a dispersed fashion, at the regional level, before starting to converge in the course of several experiences of struggle, in particular of the forest and copper workers in 2007, and especially the student movement this year. Some of us then started to aspire to positions of responsibility within the movement, occupied up to now by the forces of the Concertation or by the Chilean CP. That has enabled us to develop radical demands with a mass audience in the heart of these mobilizations, demands which interested neither the Concertation nor the CP, such as free education at all levels, the renationalization of copper, or changing the Constitution. It is on the basis of this extremely rich experience that the Chilean anticapitalist Left of the new generation is reorganizing.

SolidaritéS: What are the political references of this new anticapitalist Left?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: The collectives which are developing at present are marked by different political references. Overall, we can distinguish an autonomous sector, influenced by Toni Negri, and a Marxist sector, in which I situate myself. But our Marxist, Leninist or Guevarist references do not lead us to constitute small ideological organizations, but to try to build a mass anticapitalist party. This same process has been repeated in several regions of Chile independently: for example, we in Valparaíso have discovered collectives of the same type as ours throughout the country, with which we did not have any organic link. Between now and next year, we would like to unify this revolutionary student Left at the national level in a single organization of a Marxist character: the *Union nacional estudiantil* (National Student Union). We are discussing actively among ourselves, learning to know each other better, but we do not want to take on board the phantasms of the past, with its quarrels and its factions, repeated ad infinitum, which have their roots in the defeats of previous decades, but constitute so many obstacles to recommencing a process of organization. Through the experience of this student movement, we have followed a real crash course on the workings of the institutions and of the ruling class of our country, on repression and how to confront it, on the democratic organization of a mass movement. We can stand on our own two feet.

SolidaritéS: What does the anticapitalist Left represent within the present leadership of the movement?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: We have succeeded in forming an independent bloc within Confech (the Confederation of Chilean Students), starting from the anticapitalist collectives. And this year, whereas its leadership was traditionally dominated by the CP, there remains only one member of the Communist Youth among the eight representatives of the national executive, Camila Vallejo, and one representative of the forces of the Concertation, Giorgio Jackson. The six others belong to the independent bloc; three belong to the revolutionary Left and three are in contact with it, in other words we are trying to win them to our project of the *Union nacional estudiantil*. Our relations are quite tense with the Communist Party, which sees us as dangerous competition which is continuously progressing, with an orientation much more radical than it. It suffers from the discredit of the Concertation, on which it is politically and electorally dependent. However, for us, whoever works with the Concertation is working with the enemy. They justify themselves by explaining that it is a question of a tactical choice. For the bourgeois press, the moderate and rational wing of the student movement is clearly identified with Giorgio Jackson and Camila Vallejo, while the “extremists” are identified with the representative of the University of Concepción, Guillermo Petersen, with myself and some others, who are constantly stigmatized by the dominant media ([5]).

SolidaritéS: Where are you with the process of organizing a unified anticapitalist Left today in Chile?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: We are engaged in a process of constitution. It is a question of bringing together groups which all have a general reference to Marxism. They may read Che Guevara, like us in Valparaíso, Miguel Enriquez [6], like those in Concepción, or Lenin like those in the North, etc. In any case, the collectives concerned are quite broad and numerous. And we all defend an anticapitalist orientation and a revolutionary perspective of social transformation for today. However, in order to go forward, we must develop a political project which is addressed to the whole country, which goes beyond the framework of student youth and is aimed at the workers, the populations of the poor neighbourhoods, etc. We must define an orientation, develop a programme and make tactical choices.

SolidaritéS: In the framework of the present movement, have you established ongoing relations

with combative trade-union sectors in the work places. And if so, of what kind?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: We have come into contact with trade unions whose leaderships are combative, and indeed even revolutionary. We have thus succeeded in linking the demand for free education at all the levels with the objective of the renationalization of the copper mines. By taking back control of our natural resources to satisfy the needs of the population and by expelling the multinational corporations, we could finance free education and health in Chile. Around this demand we organized a mobilization with the SITECO trade union of El Teniente, one of the principal copper mines of the country [7], whose leader is a young and very combative trade unionist, Jorge Peña. On June 15, we marched shoulder to shoulder, copper workers and students, in Santiago. This junction is very important for us, because Chile is an economically dominated country, exporting raw materials, and when the copper workers go on strike, the Chilean economy stops. Trade unions like SITECO - and it is not the only one - blame the bureaucratic orientation of the leaders of the CUT (United Workers' Confederation), linked to the leading layers of the Concertation.

SolidaritéS: What are the essential debates that you will have to conduct in order to advance towards the formation of a revolutionary anticapitalist organization in Chile?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: Very recently, Chile had the unhappy experience of the *Movimiento de los pueblos y los trabajadores* (MPT, Workers' and People's Movement), which appeared in 2009, and which brought together many currents of the anticapitalist Left and the most varied kinds of association. The problem was that it imported the old arguments coming from these formations. So we think that it is necessary to take up again the project of establishing an organization of the anticapitalist Left at the national level, starting from the youth which has mobilized, even if that takes a little more time. This new political generation must be formed theoretically, work out a coherent programme and develop the bonds of confidence that are necessary between the many groups which comprise it. Our task resembles that of Luis Emilio Recabarren, who was the first organizer of the Chilean labour movement, socialist then communist, at the beginning of the twentieth century. The discussions which we are having are comparable to those that are taking place on an international level on the present crisis of capitalism, on the socialism of the twenty-first century, on the role of elections - because we are being solicited by electoral forces, Concertation and the CP.

What we want is to position our organization in building, developing and organizing real mass movements. We read the classics of Marxism, we discuss and we think, but we also want to contest all the spaces of leadership of the mass movement with those who support compromise with the capitalist order. For that, the anticapitalist organization that we want to build will have to fulfil these two roles, of theoretical and ethical education of its members, but also of social intervention. We want to go beyond the phase of marginality of the radical Left of the 1990s, when its collectives spent most of their time discussing among themselves. Personally, I fought to bring together all the student collectives of Valparaíso within our Federation, and it is on this basis that I represent our city within Confech at the national level. Our student collectives are numerous: for example, we can count on an about sixty well-organized activists in University of Valparaíso alone.

SolidaritéS: What are your relations with the activists of the Mapuche people?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: They are very important. A Federation of Mapuche Students has been accepted within Confech - even though there is no Mapuche university as such, the Mapuche students fight for the recognition of their rights, in particular their cultural rights. In spite of the opposition of the Concertation and the CP, this integration of the Federation of Mapuche Students has resulted on the institutional level in the automatic attribution of one place out of eight for this federation on the national executive of Confech.

SolidaritéS: What is the role of women within your movement and its leaderships?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: Chile is a very conservative, traditionalist country with regard to the place of the women in society. As in other Latin American countries, men continue to have a dominant position in all aspects of social life. When Michelle Bachelet came to power, there was much talk about equality, but few things changed for the large majority of women: according to certain studies, in Chile, women earn less than half as much as men. Having said that, within the student movement, we have experienced a very important process of transformation: women assume a role equivalent to that of the men. In my university, several women are leaders, even though the question of parity is not discussed formally. Before me, it was Jimena Muñoz who led the Federation of the University of Valparaíso (at present, she is leading the development of the Popular University in our region); at the Catholic University of Valparaíso, it is also a woman, Carla Amtmann, who has been at the head of the movement.

SolidaritéS: What place do you give your thinking and in your struggles to ecological issues, in particular concerning Patagonia?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: In Chile, it is the hydroelectric project of Aysen, in the south of Chile, which has polarized the debate for some time. It is a gigantic project for several dams, financed in particular by Spanish capital, which is meant to provide the whole country with electricity. It is a major ecological disaster, but also an extremely important economic and social question. In fact, the dimensions of these dams are not designed to produce electricity for the basic needs for the Chilean people, but for the big transnational mining companies, which plunder our resources and destroy our environment for the profit of the big shareholders of the dominant countries. It should be said that this mobilization largely contributed politically to preparing the emergence of the present student movement pol. Beyond HydroAysen, the project of Isla Riesco (more than a hundred kilometres to the west of Punta Arenas), which aims at starting up coal mining again to reduce energy costs - and thus production costs - no matter what the cost for the environment, is also giving rise to strong opposition.

Solidarités: Which relations are there between your movement in Chile and the forces contesting the established order in Latin America?

Sebastian Farfán Salinas: On the basis of our struggle, we have succeeded in establishing contacts with other organizations in Latin America. Recently, with the *Frente Popular Darío Santillán* in Argentina (an anticapitalist and anti-imperialist movement, founded in 2004, and which already has several thousand members). In a broader sense, with the most radicalized political and social sectors, around the ALBA (*Allianza bolivariana para las Américas*), in particular in Venezuela. They have the project of forming a movement capable of bringing together a new generation of revolutionaries on a continental scale: *América en pie* (America upright), which should be in Porto Alegre next November. It is important for us to think about institutional successes, of a reformist character, which have been won in Venezuela, in Bolivia, in Ecuador etc, and which however represent important advances, in spite of their contradictions. On the international level, our movement has been very attentive to the revolutions of the "Arab Spring", with the movement of the *indignados* in Spain, and more recently with the movement of occupations, which began in Wall Street, in the United States. In Chile, we have understood that the battle over education challenges the essential logics of capitalism and that we can really confront them only on an international level. The question of the revolution is being posed again for the new generations which have turned their backs on the debates of the 1990s on "the end of history", even though the way towards victory is long and sown with obstacles.

P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint.

Footnotes

[1] an armed organization of the Chilean Communist Party under the military dictatorship, which became autonomous.

[2] A political alliance of the centre-left, involving the Party for Democracy (PD), the Socialist Party (PS), the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and the Radical Social Democratic Party (PRSD). It was formed in 1998 at the time of the referendum on the maintenance of Pinochet in power, during which 57.8 per cent of the votes cast put an end to his dictatorship. From 1990 to 2010 the four successive presidents of Chile came from the Concertation: Patricio Aylwin (PDC, 1990-1994), Edouardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle (PDC, 1994-2000), Ricardo Lagos (PD, 2000-2006) and Michelle Bachelet (PS, 2006-2010).

[3] A national movement of the high-school students against the government of the Socialist Michelle Bachelet, called “the penguin revolution” because of the uniform they wore.

[4] Movement of the Revolutionary Left, the main organization of the Chilean far left before the coup d’état of September 11, 1973.

[5] On this subject, see in particular the report published on October 8 by *La Tercera*, entitled: *Quiénes son los duros que controlan Confech?* (“Who are the hardliners who control Confech?”), <http://diario.latercera.com>.

[6] Historic leader of the MIR, assassinated by the dictatorship in 1974.

[7] In Rancagua, 120 km to the south of Santiago.