

***Fifth Estate* interview with Chilean anarchists**

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Despite years of dictatorship and no-holds-barred neoliberal economics, Chile has proved to be fertile ground for anarchism in recent years. What has emerged is a socially-engaged class-conscious movement, active in both student and worker struggles that is determined to remake society from below.

Two members of this movement recently visited Detroit to talk about the current situation in their home country. Gabriel Ascuai is a biology student involved with the Libertarian Student Front (FEL in Spanish). Pablo Abufom is a translator and philosophy researcher who works with the bookstore Librería Proyección and the newspaper, Solidaridad in Santiago.

The *Fifth Estate* spoke with them on Jan. 20 at Cafe Con Leche, a Detroit coffeehouse, to gain a better understanding of the conditions people are facing in Chile and how anarchists are pushing back and organizing to create a new society.

Fifth Estate: For those who might not be familiar with anarchism in Chile, can you give us an historical background?

Pablo Abufom: As in many countries in Latin America, anarchism was big in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Anarchist movements were crucial to organizing the first labor movement in the early days of the movement in Chile. They had a huge influence before the 1930s after the rise of the hegemony of the Marxist-Leninist groups especially the Communist Party and Socialist Party and also the first labor laws which integrated the working class into the state.

Anarchists and anarcho-sindicalists took part in the foundation of one of the largest federation of unions in Chile in 1953 and were part of one of the most important political and military organizations of the revolutionary left which was crucial during the period of the Salvador Allende government 1970–73 and during the Pinochet dictatorship resistance. They took part in the foundation of the organization but split off because of differences with the Marxist Leninists.

Right before the dictatorship, anarchist influence had decreased a lot. So, we didn't have any real organization in the 1960s or 1970s. During the dictatorship, when they were forced to leave Chile or went underground, they didn't have any political organization, just solidarity from abroad.

In the 90s, after the dictatorship, anarchism started to reorganize with small group initiatives mostly devoted to propaganda and street protests in the universities and some neighborhoods. In the late 1990s, a new organization was formed, the Congress of Anarcho-Communist Unification, which was crucial to re-organizing anarchism in Chile from a revolutionary perspective and not just a lifestyle, counter-cultural perspective.

It is from that moment a new anarchism was born in Chile and this is also a similar process in other Latin American countries which are influenced by the revolutionary class struggle tradition within anarchism; the idea of organized anarchism that is necessary to have a real influence in the mass struggles of people.

FE: Where are anarchists in Chile currently putting their energies?

Gabriel Ascuai: I'm part of Libertarian Student Front, a group of anarchists formed in 2003 that works with students that has been growing in influence and militancy. We ask what should anarchists do within social move-

ments to popularize the idea of insurgence as part of the class, as students, workers, and neighbors in communities? We decided that the student movement was something very important to be part of and are now the second most powerful tendency within it. At the same time, we make a lot of effort to relate students to the labor movement and community organizing.

We try to create an anarchist perspective, practices, and principles within all of the movements and not only with people who define themselves as anarchists. We promote the idea of horizontal organization and direct action.

We also make efforts within the labor movement where you can see the influence of anarchists among construction workers that have been trying to build a new type of revolutionary syndicalism that pushes forward with a direct action strategy.

We have muralist brigades that have a presence in all of Chile's major cities which do murals at cultural events in the context of different struggles.

There are new efforts to consolidate a feminist organization, Azalda, that has been growing in Chile since 2012. They're working within unions that have a minority of women and with communities trying to establish women's leadership.

They're also dealing with the problem of gender in general within social movements and analyzing what's happening within the gay and lesbian movements.

FE: What impact do you think student anarchism has on the larger Chilean society?

GA: In 2011, the students erupted and confronted the myth that we are living in an advanced country, living in this miracle of South America. Really what was occurring was that we were studying in schools that didn't have windows, or bathrooms or even ceilings in some cases.

This made students organize a movement that had more and more power and began to have workers and other movements on our side and impact the national agenda. As anarchists, we are always trying to push further into the economic sphere.

FE: Wasn't there a Chilean education minister who driven from office?

GA: Some Communist Party student leaders from the 2011 movement took part in congressional elections. Right now, there are four ex-student leaders who are part of the Chilean congress. In our perspective, this is interesting, but at the same time isn't something that suggests the need for students to go to congress to resolve their problems. As students, they need to demand executive power over their decisions.

The Chilean constitution was written by the Pinochet dictatorship. All of the institutions of the state are the legacy of what the dictatorship left us, so, there are very closed spaces in which to act. As anarchists, we know that participation within the state for popular movements is not possible because of the closed nature of the system.

FE: What are anarchists fighting for in Chile?

PA: Our main objective is social revolution and to abolish capital and the state and create a new society from below, a democratic society where equality and freedom are real for everyone. We realize this is going to take a while, so we need to prepare the popular forces, basically the working class in all its expression which for us is students, workers, and people in the poor and working class neighborhoods. Those are the agents of revolution in Chile.

That means that the struggle of the people and of anarchists begins with the material needs of the people. So, you have to fight for reforms or better conditions in the workplace and in the neighborhoods and schools because that's the way the people organize themselves and feel empowered to change bigger things.

However, the independence of the working class is fundamental, so we don't try to go into the congress and negotiate with the state or collaborate with other political parties that are defending the bourgeois interests in order to make small reforms that keeps everything basically the same.

The idea of popular power is essentially linked to the concept of class independence and direct action and horizontal type of organization in those social spaces in mass organizations.

FE: Tell us about the collaboration between anarchists, the student movement and workers in the docks and the mines.

PA: We realized some years ago that we needed to look at what was going on with the economy. For instance, in 2011, the students occupied their schools, colleges and universities for almost nine months, but nothing really changed in the educational system and that showed that students don't have enough power to change things. We

knew we needed to unify that movement with the workers and we've been trying to do that by promoting a direct action perspective among them.

For instance, the dock workers, who are very important to the Chilean economy because it is based on the export of natural resources. Organizing the port workers is basic for a real impact on the economy and the class structure of the Chilean society. We, as anarchists, have been promoting a national militant, horizontal organization which has been crucial for recent mobilizations.

In 2013, we had massive strikes that stopped work in every port in Chile. This national union was able to mobilize every worker in 25 ports for a solidarity strike with just one port that was having a conflict with its employer.

FE: What have these struggles meant for you on a personal level?"

PA: We're common people organizing ourselves. Maybe we're different from other workers or students because we've had experience, we've read things, we have some consciousness of what's going on. Just being in the U.S. for a couple of weeks has been an amazing learning experience and not just about how things work in the U.S. but also the way things work in our country.

By seeing the differences you have to understand with a fresh perspective what's going on in your own country. Taking part in social movements as anarchists means challenging yourself, trying to find the best way to not struggle just for yourself, but to help other people empower themselves for liberation.

FE: Anything else you'd like to add?

PA: Although things are harsh in the U.S. and individualism is huge and the non-profit industry and the bureaucratic unions crush the popular initiatives all the time, I think there is hope for the U.S. We have a common enemy, which is imperialism and capitalism.

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