
Chile: Will democracy prove to be different from dictatorship?

The so called Chilean development model is presented by neo-liberals as a paradigmatic example to be copied by Southern countries in the quest for "progress". However, the nice figures and indicators of conventional economy that Chile has shown in the last two decades cannot hide the high social and environmental costs of the model. The forestry sector is one of the most dynamic and at the same time conflictive in this regard. The Mapuche people of southern Chile have seen their ancestral territories invaded by huge plantation companies supported by the state since dictator Pinochet's times. Large areas of forests have been cut down and substituted by pine and eucalyptus monocultures. The Mapuche have been gaining in strength and organization to face an opponent -pulp and timber companies, successive Chilean governments and the military- who have used physical violence, threats, bribes, criminal proceedings, and arbitrary detentions as means to "persuade" them (see WRM Bulletins 26 and 27).

During February, March and April this year the Mapuche have carried out a number of actions: on February 29th, Mapuche people from the community of Ercilla occupied the headquarters of Bosques Arauco, denouncing that the company had usurped their ancestral lands in the region; on March 1st, Mapuche people belonging the community of Pascual Coña in the BioBio region occupied the Lleu Lleu estate, which they claim to be part of their ancestral territories; on March 7th, indigenous people of the community of Cotulmo -together with non indigenous peasants- blockaded the route to prevent the access of lorries of Forestal Mininco; on April 14th -and coinciding with Easter celebrations- a group of Mapuche, most of them women and children, occupied the Cathedral of Temuco to protest over the arbitrary detention of leaders belonging to the Arauco Malleco Mapuche Coordination.

The powerful foresters' lobby CORMA -which sees that its control on the territory and resources is being threatened- has reacted asking the authorities to apply a "zero tolerance" policy to prosecute any action of the Mapuche that could be considered a crime. Even though forestry companies try to show themselves as defenders of the law, they have continued their campaign of intimidation against the indigenous people. On April 21st a group of Deputies denounced that private guards of Bosques Arauco had attacked members of the Mapuche community of Pablo Quintriqueo Huenuman in the VIII Region, and had spread herbicide on their crops. The indigenous people have also repeatedly been victims of violence by the police, which always act to defend the companies' interests and consider the Mapuche as terrorists. This is also what the mass media is doing to influence public opinion.

A lasting solution to the Mapuche can only be achieved if a true dialogue is established, the indigenous peoples' territorial ancestral rights are recognized and the underlying causes of this long conflict are perceived and addressed. Is the new democratically-elected Chilean government ready to change the course set years ago by the old dictator now under siege? Will democracy prove -to the Mapuche- to be different from dictatorship?

