

Class war rages across South America

written by Greg Butterfield
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Students in Santiago defy subway fare hike.

On Oct. 20, Sebastián Piñera, the right-wing president of Chile, declared: “We are at war with a powerful, relentless enemy that does not respect anything, or anyone, and that is willing to use violence and crime without limits.”

Piñera said these words to slander the popular uprising in Santiago, sparked by students righteously protesting in mass defiance of subway fare hikes, as he [enacted a state of emergency](#) to increase repression. The price hike was the last straw in the heavy burden of austerity measures imposed on the exploited masses of Chile by the U.S.-backed government. The pressure was too much, and the dam burst.

Although he is on the wrong side of history, Piñera was right about two things. There is a war—a class war—raging today, not just in Chile but across the South American continent, from the rainforests of Brazil to the Ayacucho mountains of Peru. And one side of that war—Piñera’s side, that of the capitalist oligarchy, repressive police and military forces, and the imperialist bosses and bankers who call the shots from Wall Street and Washington—“does not respect anything, or anyone, and ... is willing to use violence and crime without limits.”



The port workers union strikes and joins the protests against austerity, Oct. 21.
Photo: Unión Portuaria del Centro

At least [15 people had been killed](#) by the Piñera regime by Oct. 23. Tens of thousands are in the streets of Santiago in defiance of emergency decrees. The country's main union federation, which includes economically critical miners and port workers, has [called for a general strike](#) on Oct. 23-24. But there were no calls in the U.S. Congress to sanction Piñera's government or ban weapons sales to the military, whose structure and ideology is descended from the Pinochet dictatorship.

What a contrast to the anti-China, pro-imperialist protests in Hong Kong! Democrats

and Republicans alike have bent over backward to fawn over violent demonstrators who frequently target workers and symbols of national independence and socialism.

And that story is being repeated by U.S. officials and the corporate media in their attitude toward South America. Protests fueled by popular movements against cutbacks, poverty and imperialist domination—in Ecuador, Colombia, Chile—are largely ignored, and if they can't be ignored, condemned; their powerful and vicious enemies are treated with kid gloves. Meanwhile, popular governments struggling to protect the gains of workers and oppressed people, like that of President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, are sanctioned, threatened with war and denounced as “dictatorships.”

Take Bolivia. In national elections on Oct. 20, President Evo Morales, the country's first Indigenous president and leader of the Movement Toward Socialism, who has overseen vast social programs to reduce poverty, provide health care and eliminate illiteracy, was re-elected with over 46 percent of the vote. He scored more than 10 points above his nearest opponent, right-winger Carlos Mesa, ruling out the need for a second round of voting. But even before the first vote was cast, the right-wing opposition had declared it [would not recognize the results](#) if Morales won.

And sure enough, [violent opposition protests](#) broke out in at least nine Bolivian cities after the results were announced. Vote counting centers were burned. While [international election observers](#) said the vote was free and fair, the U.S. State Department dutifully [declared the results in doubt](#) and Western media claimed Bolivia's democracy was endangered by Morales' re-election.

The litmus test: U.S. imperialism

In moments like this, it is important for workers and oppressed people, students and youth here in the U.S. to be able to distinguish friend from foe. Not every protest is good, and not every government is bad.

What decides is the class criterion. Does a movement strive to represent the interests of the working class, peasant farmers and all the exploited sectors of society for social justice, independence and equality? Or does it represent the interests of the wealthy and privileged sectors of society and of the imperialist powers seeking to continue their domination?

In the case of today's class battles raging in Latin America, there is an easy litmus test: where does the protest movement or government stand in relation to U.S. imperialism? Is it struggling to lift the boot of Washington off the people's necks, or seeking to give Trump & Co. free reign?

For several years, the U.S. imperialists and South American oligarchs have been trying to roll back the social gains and moves toward independence won by the people during the years of the "red tide" of the early 2000s, inspired by the advances of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez as well as socialist Cuba's tenacious will to survive.

But enough rollback is enough. Now the people are fighting back. [Students and teachers in Colombia](#) are defying repression to challenge tuition hikes and unchecked assassinations of movement leaders and community activists. Peruvian workers [pushed back a coup attempt](#) by the ultraright in Congress. Powerful class forces are testing their strength. Workers, farmers, Indigenous communities and students are learning valuable lessons every day in the streets.

Here in the U.S., we must come down unambiguously and firmly on the side of the workers and oppressed of South America. Our job is to tie the hands of U.S. imperialism by building the movement of solidarity, against sanctions and war, by educating our class, our communities and co-workers about the reality of developments in Latin America and the Caribbean, to make it too dangerous for the U.S. bankers and bosses and their political stooges to impose their will.

Victory to the popular uprisings in Chile and Ecuador!

Solidarity with the peoples' movements in Brazil, Colombia and Peru!

Long live the popular governments of Bolivia and Venezuela!

In the words of Comandante Che Guevara: ¡Hasta la victoria siempre!

