**Chile – from Pinochet’s neoliberal counter-revolution**

**to the 2019-20 anti-neoliberal revolt[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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Over the last four decades, Chile has experienced the longest economic expansion in its history but simultaneously suffered the persistence of high levels of inequality, precarity and social exclusion. Mainstream interpretations of this apparent good news–bad news paradox, that is, removed from a consideration of the broader political economy which produces it and reproduces it, typically point to an alleged ‘failure’ of the neoliberal model to deliver growth with equity. In contrast, this chapter argues that this supposed paradox demonstrates the ‘success’ of Chile’s neoliberal model to deliver growth at the expense of equity, clear evidence of which is provided by industrial relations institutions deliberately designed to re-commodify and discipline labour by undermining its structural and associational power. That workers and their representative organisations have been severely weakened as a result, a fact typically construed by ‘workerless’ post-industrial perspectives as evidence of a predictable and inevitable decline in worker collectivism, does not mean that they have become ineffectual social actors. On the contrary, this chapter contends that working classes have played a significant role in building organised resistance against neoliberalism since the early 1980s, through a combination of rising labour militancy and social conflict, of which ‘rupturist’ forms of unionism by precarious workers, and broader ‘Polanyian’ struggles with an important proletarian component, have been of special significance (after Silver, 2003).

**Keywords:** Chile, neoliberalism, precarity, precarious workers, trade unionism, labour movement

**1. Introduction**

On 18 October 2019, merely ten days after President Sebastián Piñera described Chile as ‘a genuine oasis, with a stable democracy and a growing economy in the midst of a convulsed Latin America’ (CNN, 2019), what began as a coordinated evasion campaign against a minor fare increase in the Santiago metro by thousands of secondary school students, escalated into open confrontations with police and the vandalising of more than 80 metro stations, including 17 burned down, and triggered the country’s most severe socio-political crisis since the *coup d’état* of 1973. As the government declared state of emergency and deployed the army to reinstate order, mass demonstrations, protests and riots spread across the country and were met, as ever, with brutal repression. A few days later, on 25 October, more than 1.2 million people marched defiantly through the capital protesting against social inequality and demanding Piñera’s resignation. On 12 November, a general strike called by unions and other social organisations led to negotiations among the government, Congress, and the opposition that culminated on 15 November with the unprecedented ‘Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution’ (BCN, 2019). Two years on, after 36 dead and thousands injured and imprisoned, an unambiguously anti-neoliberal Constituent Assembly has been elected, a ‘millennial socialist’ has been voted into the presidency, and Chile’s image as ‘one of the great economic miracles of our time’ (Hayek, 1981 cited in Ebenstein, 2003: 598), ‘only success story of Latin American development’ (Castells, 2007), and ‘blueprint for emerging economies’ (Columbia Business School, 2019) lies in tatters.

How did the poster child of neoliberal globalisation end up like this? While the initial narratives of the government talked about a largely spontaneous, unjustified and unprecedented ‘social outbreak’ (*estallido social*), and even of a nation ‘at war against a powerful, implacable enemy, who does not respect anything or anybody’ (S. Piñera quoted in BBC, 2019); the accounts shared by those at the bottom pointed at a long-overdue reaction against decades of repression, precarity, and lack of dignity: ‘it’s not 30 pesos, it’s 30 years’ became one of the most repeated slogans of the protests.

The emerging literature on what we prefer to call ‘anti-neoliberal revolt’has offered more elaborate accounts. The most influential of these have been put forward by mainstream progressive commentators who, for all their differences, have generally explained it as a sudden ‘awakening of the masses’ after years of mounting discomfort with the multiple tensions created by the neoliberal model (e.g., Araujo, 2020; Peña, 2020; Tironi, 2020). These accounts have undoubtedly made an important contribution to our understanding of the crisis but, in our view, remain partial and incomplete. Indeed, and in line with ‘workerless’ mainstream analyses of the recent evolution of Chilean capitalism (e.g., Moulián, 1997; Lechner and Güell, 1998; Tironi, 1999; León y Martínez, 2001; Garretón, 2011; Ruiz and Boccardo, 2014), these explanations have consistently neglected or generally understated, the centrality for the neoliberal project of the thorough domination of labour by capital, the significance of industrial relations institutions for its production and reproduction, and the critical role that working classes have played in the construction of organised resistance against it.

Our purpose in this chapter is to contribute to the understanding of contemporary developments from a perspective that places class actors and class conflict at the centre of the political economy, emphasises the significance of industrial relations institutions, and recognises the tensions and contradictions of historical capitalism (Hyman, 1975; Howell, 2003; Silver, 2003; Kotz, 2015). In so doing, we aim to make a modest contribution to alternative explanations of the crisis (e.g., Link *et al*., 2019; Stecher and Sisto, 2020; Pérez and Osorio, 2021) and alternative accounts of the evolution of Chilean capitalism more generally (e.g., Agacino *et al*., 1998; Rojas and Aravena, 1999; Agacino, 2001; 2007; Pinto and Salazar, 2002; Salazar, 2003; Winn, 2004; Abarzúa, 2008; Aravena and Núñez, 2009; Echeverría, 2010; Atzeni *et al*., 2011; Ponce *et al*., 2017; Campusano *et al*., 2017).

In a nutshell, we contend that the events of 2019-20 and their aftermath represent not only the most critical socio-political juncture in the model’s long-drawn-out structural crisis, but also the highwater mark of a broad, prolonged, and complex countermovement for the protection of society, the origins of which can be traced back to the early 1980s, and whose main protagonists have been working classes through a combination of rising labour militancy and social conflict, of which ‘rupturist’ forms of unionism by precarious workers, and broader ‘Polanyian’ struggles with an important proletarian component, have been of special significance (after Silver, 2003).

This chapter is in three sections. First, we briefly review some of the key socio-economic developments that have come to define the last few decades - including impressive economic growth, high income inequality, low and very low wages, and declining union representation - and argue that, rather than demonstrating the failure of neoliberal institutions to deliver growth with equity, they show the model’s successful re-shaping of labour exploitation to deliver growth *at the expense* of equity. Next, we concisely examine the origins and some of the main features of Chilean neoliberalism understood as a particular social structure of accumulation based on the expansion of the self-regulating market and on the thorough domination of labour by capital (Kotz, 2015). We show how neoliberal institutions, particularly the industrial relations legal framework, were deliberately re-constructed to re-commodify and discipline labour by undermining its structural and associational power, and explain current developments as their intended outcomes. Last, we present a preliminary analysis, explanation, and interpretation of the manner in which labour responses have developed during the neoliberal era. In contrast to ‘workerless’ mainstream narratives, we argue that working classes have played a critical role in the construction of organised resistance against neoliberalism. A brief conclusion will follow.

**2. What are they shouting about?[[4]](#footnote-4)**

Chile has experienced undeniable economic progress over the past four decades. Until entering recession because of the Covid pandemic, the size of the economy as measured by GDP increased tenfold from US$ 28.8 bn to 297.4 bn between 1980 and 2018 (OECD, 2021). Per capita income more than quadrupled between the same years -from US$ 3,441 to 15,862 PPP- and is currently the highest in Latin America (OECD, 2021). Poverty was reduced from 38.6% of the population in 1990 to 8.5% in 2017, and extreme poverty from 13% to 1.5% (PNUD, 2020: 63-64). After becoming the first South American country to join the OECD in 2010, Chile is considered today a high-income economy as defined by the World Bank (2021), a country with ‘very high’ human development according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021), and the top Latin American country in terms of competitiveness (World Economic Forum, 2020), ‘ease of doing business’ (World Bank, 2019), and ‘economic freedom’ (Heritage Foundation, 2022).

Impressive as these figures and accolades might be, they do not tell the whole story. Rather than a genuine model of socio-economic development - understood as involving social progress for the great majority of the population, a structural transformation of productive capacities, and a sustainable relationship with the environment (Matus, 2022) – the Chilean model remains unequal, dependent, and predatory. For the purposes of this chapter, we will focus only on the first element. Despite its numerous achievements, Chile stands today as one of the most unequal countries in Latin America, a region notorious for its long history of social exclusion and profound inequalities of income, wealth, and privilege (Saad-Filho, 2005). Sehnbruch (2019) has eloquently described the ‘everyday inequalities and everyday indignities’ that Chileans face as permeating all aspects of social life: deep and multidimensional as well as material and intangible.

A key dimension is income. Although income inequality as measured by the Gini index has fallen from 0.572 in 1990 to 0.466 in 2017, the richest 1% and 20% of households concentrate an astonishing 33% and 52.9% of total income respectively, while the poorest 20% earn a mere 5.1% (Fundación Sol, 2018; OECD, 2021). More importantly, most Chileans struggle to make ends meet despite decades of remarkable economic growth because of low and very low wages. 50% of all workers earn less than 1.28 times an already low minimum wage (set below the extreme poverty line for a 4-person household), and 80% earn less than 2.6 times the minimum wage (Durán and Kremerman, 2021). Even though real wages have risen continuously since the mid-1970s, they only recovered their 1968 value in 2009, and increased only slightly in the last decade (Matus, 2022).

Low and very low wages are insufficient to cover essential living costs, let alone access expensive privatised social services such as healthcare and higher education, which has pushed millions into debt and bad debt: 80% of adults are in debt and 40% of them have defaulted on their loans, the repayments of which represented 71.5% of a household annual income in 2018 (Stecher and Sisto, 2020). Low wages have obvious implications for pensions, especially in private individual account systems like the Chilean one. Workers are retiring on 20% to 30% of their wages. In 2018, 80% of pensioners received a pension below the minimum wage, the average pension paid to men was less than half the minimum wage, and, for women, it was a mere third (Heine, 2020). Predictably, more than half of working Chileans are considered ‘economically vulnerable’, or at risk of falling (back) into poverty ‘if they forgo three months of their income’ (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, if poverty is measured using relative instead of absolute methodologies, then it affected 16.5% of the population in 2017 instead of the 8.5% quoted above. In sum, more than 77% of the population of ‘one of the great economic miracles of our time’ remains either poor or economically vulnerable (OECD, 2021; PNUD, 2020).

But low and very low wages do not capture fully the variety of ways in which millions of workers experience inequality and precarity in their working lives. In addition to the perennial class, gender, and racial inequalities that have always characterised the Chilean workplace, a broadening gap between a declining core employed in stable, secure, and protected ‘good jobs’ and an ever growing, and increasingly diverse, periphery of ‘precarious’ workers employed in atypical, unstable, and insecure ‘bad jobs’ has become the new normal. Though not necessarily conterminous, good and bad jobs are usually correlated with standard and non-standard contracts and employment regimes. According to the latest National Labour Survey, the percentage of employees on standard employment contracts reached a historical low of 65.7% in 2018 (ENCLA, 2019). Between 2010 and 2018, 61.5% of all new jobs were either outsourced (27.5%) or own-account jobs (33%), and only 36% were standard jobs. In the same period, the percentage of outsourced workers (subcontracting, labour supply, and *enganche*), increased from 11.5% to 16.7% of all workers (Fundación Sol, 2018). More broadly, 29% of workers were employed in the informal sector in 2018 (ILO, 2019), and 40.4% were not considered employees (e.g., own account workers, independent contractors), hence not covered by labour legislation (Fundación Sol, 2018).

The last few decades have also normalised what Gordon (1996) refers to as ‘stick strategy’ to managing employees, all too evident in the squeeze of workers’ wages, but also in employers’ harsh employment practices (see Stecher and Sisto, 2020), and aggressive approach to unions and collective bargaining. Indeed, ‘representation insecurity’, or the lack of an effective collective voice through independent union representation with collective bargaining and strike rights (Standing, 2011), has become a defining feature of Chile’s precarious world of work. From its historical peak of 30% in 1973, and post-dictatorship peak of 18.2% in 1991, union density bottomed at about 12% around the year 2000, remained around that figure until 2006, at which point began to recover and stands today at about 17% (Pérez Ahumada, 2020). However, this figure can be misleading, in part because no unions exist in 93.7% of all companies, and no unions have ever existed in 95.3% of the latter, making union representation an almost exclusively large-firm phenomenon (ENCLA, 2019). Collective bargaining coverage has followed a similar trajectory and is currently just under 20% (Pérez Ahumada, 2020), but adjusted methodologies put actual coverage at a mere 9.1% (Durán and Gamonal, 2019). Last, industrial conflict as measured by the incidence of legal strikes in the private sector has remained consistently low for decades (Pérez *et al.*, 2017), but the argument that these figures reflect the cooperative nature of modern Chilean industrial relations crumbles when illegal strikes are taken into consideration. Though shorter and less frequent that legal strikes, illegal strikes have mobilised considerably more workers and caused significantly more disruption during the same period (Armstrong and Águila, 2002; Pérez *et al*., 2017).

Unsurprisingly, mainstream accounts of Chile’s socio-economic development regularly describe it as involving seemingly contradictory, positive and negative, trends. Narrow interpretations of this apparent good news–bad news paradox, that is, removed from a consideration of the broader social structure of accumulation which produces it and reproduces it, typically point to the ‘failure’ of policy to deliver growth *with* equity. But simultaneous positive and negative trends do not necessarily imply logical contradiction or policy failure. On the contrary, these trends should be viewed as evidence of the ‘successful’ workings of neoliberal institutions purposedly designed to deliver growth *at the expense* of equity: transferring wealth from the poor to the rich, and risk from the rich to the poor. It is our contention that the current crisis has been caused by the progressive exhaustion of this particular form of capitalist accumulation and its unfulfilled promises (e.g., ‘trickle-down economics’). Therefore, before advancing any further, it is necessary to examine the origins of the Chilean model, its main features, and the manner in which it has reshaped the exploitation of labour.

**3. Pinochet’s neoliberal counter-revolution**

The history of neoliberalism is indissolubly associated with General Pinochet and the military junta that ruled Chile between 1973 and 1990. Brought to power by a threatened ruling class in a CIA-backed *coup* against Salvador Allende - the world’s first democratically-elected Marxist head of state – the junta’s immediate and brutal repression of the left, the political and union labour movement, and other subordinate groups, demonstrated not only their deep-rooted Cold War anti-communism but also, their visceral rejection the political, economic and social adjustments that had evolved during Chile’s own short twentieth century (Remmer, 1980). Indeed, for many on the right, the model of *inward-oriented development* (1930s-1970s) - centred around the 1925 Constitution, import-substitution industrialisation, and the industrial relations system crafted since the 1920s - had incentivised the ‘mass mobilisation of the lower classes and attempts to reform or even revolutionise Chile’s traditional structures of land holding, and economic, social and political organisation’ (Sznajder, 1996: 729), and had ultimately led to the collapse of Chilean democracy and the destruction of its economy (Junta de Gobierno, 1974: 7-10).

A year after the *coup*, the junta formally announced that it was taking upon itself ‘the historic mission’ of giving Chile ‘new institutions that embody the profound changes occurring in modern times’ (Junta de Gobierno, 1974: 7-10). By 1975, a peculiar civic-military coalition between the military, Catholic-conservatives (the *gremialistas*) and neoliberal market fundamentalists (the ‘Chicago boys’) gradually began to take control of the state and turn their shared rejection of the past into building what has come to be seen as one of the boldest, most comprehensive, and internally consistent neoliberal models in the world (Agacino, 2007; Kurtz, 1999).

Although commonly associated with policies that encourage free trade, fiscal austerity, privatisation, and deregulation among others, neoliberalism should not be viewed as a mere set of free-market economic ideas. As Harvey (2007) and many others have convincingly showed, neoliberalism is also a political project, the ultimate end of which is the restoration of class power, and its real target the power of the working-class, in particular, the power of organised labour. Following Kotz (2015), neoliberalism is thus better understood as a particular institutional form of capitalism, or social structure of accumulation, which is defined by ideas, institutions, and practices of economic policy, the unifying principle of which is the greatly expanded role for market relations and market forces, and which is *based on a thorough domination of labour by capital.*

Viewed in this way, it is unsurprising that neoliberal ideas offered the military and the right an appealing ‘regime change’ solution to every perceived problem of *inward-oriented development*. Not only free markets, private initiative and comparative advantage trade would replace protectionism, statism, and industrialisation, but also individualism, accommodation, and policy would take the place of collectivism, social mobilisation, and politics. Crucially, while Chile’s version of ‘organised capitalism’ was based on a (often idealised) cross-class compromise, neoliberal capitalism would be based on the thorough domination of labour by capital.

A detailed examination of Pinochet’s counter-neoliberal revolution is, however, beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that, by the end of the 1970s, Chile’s industrialising economy was well on its way to being transformed into an open economy based on commodity exports; market logic and state subsidiarity had made profound inroads into most spheres of social life including work, pensions, taxation, education, healthcare, and finance; and marketisation and authoritarianism had achieved constitutional status in the 1980 ‘Protected Democracy’ Constitution (Durán-Palma *et al.*, 2005). After a short period of uncertainty driven by the economic crisis of the early 1980s, free market orthodoxy was turned down, reforms were resumed and, with the return of democracy in 1990, adopted, legitimised, and reproduced by the democratic administrations that have been in power since.

Naturally, the transformation of employment relations institutions was fundamental to advancing the neoliberal project, clear evidence of which is provided by the imposition of a legal framework deliberately designed to re-commodify and discipline labour by undermining its structural and associational power. We focus on the legal framework because, historically, legal choices made at an early stage of the construction or re-construction of Chilean industrial relations systems have shaped, among other things, the contours of working-class action and organisation, and thus a brief review of some of its key features is necessary to contextualise the argument presented in the next section.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The area of individual labour law was revamped in 1978. Traditional protective regulations were replaced by rules designed to cheapen and control labour by encouraging ‘labour market flexibility’ narrowly understood as an employer’s capacity for downward adjustment of terms of employment, quantitatively through wage cutting and substandard contracts, and qualitatively through the restoration of managerial authority (Streeck, 1987). New regulations lifted restrictions to hiring and firing, introduced non- and sub-substandard contracts (part-time, temporary, apprenticeship, etc), and atypical employment regimes (subcontracting, labour supply, etc), incentivising employers to deconstruct, cheapen, and remain in control of the employment relationship.

Complementarily, the 1979 Labour Plan reintroduced fundamental labour rights but sought to weaken them in practice through market and freedom of choice mechanisms (Fischer, 2009). The regime’s ‘market-containment strategy for union control’ is typically described in terms of four pillars (Valenzuela, 1989; Narbona, 2015). First, the Plan encouraged union fragmentation and competition through statutory recognition with very low quora, and by allowing any number of employees to form a ‘bargaining group’ (*grupo negociador*) with the sole purpose of bargaining collectively, even in firms with recognised unions. It also sanctioned four types of unions with unequal rights (firm-level, inter-firm, of temporary workers, and of independent workers, out of which only firm-level unions were granted automatic recognition for collective bargaining and the right to strike). Second, the Plan redefined collective bargaining as ‘a mechanism for adjusting wages and labour productivity, which is functional to a market economy, (and not) as a mechanism for redistributing income’ (Piñera, 1990: 49). Consequently, it restricted it to the level of the firm or lower; limited the subjects of negotiation to wages only; and originally sanctioned two types of collective bargaining with unequal rights (regulated and non-regulated, out of which only the former permitted the right to strike).

Third, strike action was restricted to firm-level unions negotiating a new contract under the regulated collective bargaining format, and only after a series of procedural provisions are met. All other forms of industrial action were criminalised. Furthermore, the Plan redefined the right to strike as the ‘right to refuse to work without being fired,’ but not as one that necessarily involves the halting of productive activities i.e., as a ‘non-monopolistic’ labour right which does not ‘suspend managerial prerogative or property rights’ (Piñera, 1990: 51) and, consequently, allowed strike-breakers and lockouts. Last, the Plan explicitly sought to replace ‘class struggle’ (workers against employers) with ‘competition between firms’ (workers and employers together against competitors) (Piñera, 1990: 108), by encouraging the ‘depoliticisation of union leaders’ and ‘restoring workers’ control over the leadership’ through mandating secret ballots for numerous decisions (Piñera, 1990: 70). The Plan did not forbid union leaders’ political activity directly, but the 1980 Constitution did, sanctioning leaders and unions that ‘abuse their autonomy by engaging in activities ‘far removed’ from their lawful role’ (Ugarte *et al*., 2021: 8).

Four decades after its imposition, three decades after returning to democratic rule, and despite several rounds of labour reform (1990-92, 2001, 2015), the bulk of the Plan remains firmly in place (e.g., Caamaño-Rojo, 2016; Durán-Palma *et al*., 2005; Durán and Gamonal, 2019; Pérez Ahumada, 2020). Partly because of formidable conservative opposition and partly due to their own ideological convergence with neoliberal thought, centre-left governments have consistently, yet unconvincingly, pushed for labour reform and used eventual cosmetic labour law changes ‘as a tool for signalling policy change and legitimate democratic rule, but at the same time leaving the neoliberal model intact’ (Haagh, 2002: 86).

Viewing Pinochet’s neoliberal counter-revolution as a social structure of accumulation based on the thorough domination of labour goes a long way in explaining the developments of the last four decades and the current crisis. It is not our objective to present such an account here but an indication of what we mean should suffice. Drawing liberally on Kotz (2015), it could be argued that the model was able to promote rising profitability by keeping labour costs down (especially wages) largely through union busting and the decimation of collective bargaining, thereby fuelling inequality, while solving for some time the resulting ‘conflict at work problem’ mainly through the restoration of managerial authority, the ‘demand/livelihood problem’ through debt-financed consumer spending and government subsidies, and the wider ‘social discontent problem’ through a shallow democratic political system which, it should not be forgotten, represented a significant improvement over 16 years of military dictatorship. Since the latter part of the 2000s however, the ‘successful’ operation of neoliberal institutions has become increasingly ineffective at dealing with capitalism’s fundamental contradiction between the pursuit of profitability and the maintenance of social legitimacy (Silver, 2003). Although the model was able to withstand social challenges for some time thanks to state intervention and a booming international economy, its current crisis is structural because it cannot be resolved by ‘more of the same’ i.e., within the current structural form (Kotz, 2015; Gaudichaud, 2015).

**4. Four decades of working-class resistance**

Mainstream narratives on the 2019-20 anti-neoliberal revoltgenerally explain it as a sudden ‘awakening’ of the masses after years of mounting ‘discomfort’ with the countless ‘tensions’ created by the neoliberal model (e.g., Araujo, 2020; Peña, 2020; Tironi, 2020). Alternative explanations, in contrast, talk of a broad, prolonged, and escalating process of working-class resistance against the model (e.g., Link *et al*., 2019; Stecher and Sisto, 2020; Pérez and Osorio, 2021). These conflicting accounts of the current crisis are based, in turn, upon opposing understandings of the recent evolution of Chilean capitalism, and divergent assessments of the nature, development, and impact of labour responses during the neoliberal era. Indeed, while mainstream narratives argue that ‘inevitable’ neoliberal transformations have caused profound structural and sociological changes in unions’ constituencies, weakened organised labour’s power and influence, and led to the ‘fading away’ of the labour movement ‘as a major source of social cohesion and workers’ representation’ (Castells, 2010: 419) (e.g., Moulián, 1997; Lechner and Güell, 1998; Tironi, 1999; León y Martínez, 2001; Garretón, 2011; Ruiz and Boccardo, 2014), alternative accounts view neoliberal transformations as challenging but also as contradictory i.e., not necessarily as labour weakening, and talk about scarred but resilient working classes who have played an important role in building resistance against neoliberalism (e.g., Agacino *et al*., 1998; Rojas and Aravena, 1999; Agacino, 2001; 2007; Pinto and Salazar, 2002; Salazar, 2003; Winn, 2004; Abarzúa, 2008; Aravena and Núñez, 2009; Echeverría, 2010; Atzeni *et al*., 2011; Ponce *et al*., 2017; Campusano *et al*., 2017). In what follows, we explore this admittedly oversimplified analytical distinction and argue that alternative accounts offer a necessary corrective to mainstream narratives.

Mainstream narratives go something like this. During the dictatorship (1973-1989), the ‘traditional’ labour movement (*sindicalismo histórico* or *clásico*) suffered harsh political repression and early responses were overwhelmingly oriented to survival. Following an important process of political rearticulation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the labour movement went on to lead a vast popular protest movement against the dictatorship between 1983 and 1986. Although the 43 ‘National Days of Protest’, initially called by copper workers (CTC) and subsequently by the CNT (National Workers’ Command), seriously threatened the continuity of Pinochet in power, the labour movement demobilised at the end of the decade to facilitate a peaceful transition to democracy. Simultaneously, the pragmatic but not necessarily uncontested acceptance of the 1979 Labour Plan by firm-level unions, that is, including the ‘heroic defeats’ of historic metal, copper and textile workers, not only helped to legitimise the ‘model’ in practice, but also led to the development of contained, market-oriented, and apolitical, forms of ‘enterprise unionism’ (‘*sindicalismo de empresa*’) (Álvarez, 2012).

Demobilisation and accommodation trends consolidated during the period of transition to democracy (1990-2006). While the traditional labour movement (CUT) engaged in social concertation with employers (CPC) and the government in exchange for meagre labour reform, enterprise unionism continued to consolidate at firm level. The iconic strikes of the mid-1990s by public sector workers - teachers, coal miners, and healthcare workers – though strictly speaking illegal, were *de facto* tolerated within the system, further legitimising the apparent capacity of the model to placate industrial conflict. These narratives go on to argue that the late April-early June 2006 mass mobilisations of secondary students (the ‘Penguin Revolution’) inaugurated a qualitatively different cycle of protest (2006-2019) characterised by a general revival of social movements and, since 2011, a ‘third-generation’ of anti-neoliberal protest against the marketisation of education, pensions, and the environment among other issues (e.g., Roberts, 2017; Donoso and von Bülow, 2017). Mainstream narratives recognise that there has been a revival of labour in recent years, particularly since the ‘unprecedented’ 2006 mass mobilisations of hitherto ‘invisible’ subcontracted workers in strategic export sectors (e.g., copper mining, forestry and timber, and salmon farming workers) but tend to subsume it within the context of an increasingly mobilised society and view it as playing no distinctive role in the lead-up to the 2019-20 revolt.

In our view, these narratives are partial and incomplete. Alternative accounts, in contrast, conceive of labour and labour action in much broader terms. First, they do not narrowly equate labour with unions as mainstream narratives tend to do, but conceive of labour as denoting the working class as a whole. Second, they go beyond contained contention to include transgressive contention, that is to say, ‘episodes of conflict in which at least some parties are newly self-identified actors who define and seek to advance their goals outside the existing system employing innovative collective action’ (McAdam *et al*., 2001: 8). Alternative accounts are thus able to recognise the facts underscored by mainstream narratives and integrate them with a variety of largely overlooked and/or misunderstood struggles by all manner of working classes exposed to the vagaries of the market, out of which two kinds have been of special significance: ‘rupturist’ forms of unionism by workers on the rough ends of labour markets, and broader ‘Polanyian’ struggles with an important proletarian component (after Silver, 2003). In what follows, our brief and selective account of the former will be biased towards the past in order to highlight the origins of the pivotal 2006 mobilisations of subcontracted workers, whilst our narrative of the latter will be biased towards the present so as to emphasise events that foreshadowed the 2019-20 anti-neoliberal revolt.

***Rupturist unionism***

Rather than conforming to the designs of the 1979 Labour Plan, hundreds of subcontracted and temporary construction workers employed in the building of the Colbún-Machicura hydro-electric dam went on a major three-month illegal strike against low wages and management abuse in 1982-83 (Álvarez, 2012). Although ultimately defeated, the strike was hailed at the time as a symbol of a labour movement ‘starting to break its legal chains’ (*El Coordinador*, 1982); a headline that, for all intents and purposes, would not have been out of place 25 years later in relation to the 2006 mass mobilisations of subcontracted workers. Although the 1983-86 National Days of Protest that came shortly after certainly stole the limelight, over the next 40 years, remarkable groups of ‘precarious’ workers have made sure that the ‘kamikaze’ experience of Colbún-Machicura did not go to waste.

Chief among them were industrial engineering workers. Led by remarkable Communist activists who had cut their organising teeth during the harsh repression of the 1970s, their union, SINAMI, pioneered an innovative form of action and organisation that would allow them to obtain what the law did not provide for i.e., to bargain with their actual employer from a position of strength, while staying, for the most part, on the right side of the law. SINAMI ‘played on the outfield of the law’ by organising lawfully across legal employers as *inter-firm union*, but mobilising ‘extra-legally’ to disrupt the labour process at key choke points and *force* actual and legal employers to engage in *multi-employer* collective bargaining. In this way, SINAMI broke with every pillar of the Labour Plan, achieved remarkable gains and, more importantly, unwittingly set in motion the development of what would become known as ‘subcontracted unionism’ (e.g., Agacino 2007; Abarzúa, 2008; Echeverría, 2010) or, as we prefer to call it, ‘*rupturist unionism*’ (Durán-Palma and Urrutia, 2020; Durán-Palma *et al*., *in preparation*).

As most industrial engineering projects of the 1980s took place in the newly ‘liberalised’ mining sector, it did not take long for subcontracted workers in copper mining to try to organise and mobilise along the same lines. SINAMI leaders established SITECO in 1988 to cater for subcontracted workers of state giant CODELCO’s El Teniente division but initial results were disappointing: low-skill local workers in roll-on contracts did not have the leverage of high-skill, itinerant, industrial engineering workers (Durán-Palma, 2011). In parallel, precarious workers in other flagship export sectors organised with more or less success, including forestry and timber (Klubock, 2004), seafood processing (Schurman, 2004), and women agricultural workers (Tinsman, 2004). The latter were particularly notable. *Temporeras*, an icon of labour exploitation, assumed unprecedented leadership in activist struggles against employers, petitioning and carrying out illegal strikes at peak times, and successfully forcing them to give in. By the late 1980s, they had established the first union of temporary and permanent fruit workers in Chile with women comprising half of the union’s membership and executive (Tinsman, 2004; Falabella, 1993).

During the 1990s, these and other organisations went through a protracted period of strategic adaptation, organisational articulation, and generational renewal. SITECO, for example, led the establishment of sister unions across CODELCO divisions in a bid to bargain at holding rather than divisional level but results were, at best, erratic (Agacino *et al.*, 1998). After more than a decade of frustrating ‘toothless’ organisation, forestry workers grouped in the CTF ‘understood that only extra-legal forms of organisation’ would allow them to rebuild their movement and looked at the *Sindicato Araucaria*, a regional union of temporary workers, as a model of action and organisation that ‘bypassed the limitations of the labour code by operating at sectoral and regional level and by placing pressure on the state (rather than on individual employers)’ (Klubock, 2004: 378). More broadly, Chile’s long tradition of autonomist, classist, and direct-action unionism (*corriente autonomista*) received a new impetus through the founding of a number of autonomist higher-level organisations to dispute the grip of traditional unions at national and sectoral level (Rojas and Aravena, 1999), e.g., the establishment of independent FETRACOMA in 1997 to represent construction workers disgruntled with their politically subordinated CNTC (Salazar and Salinas, 2021).

The new millennium started with mass mobilisations of dockers in 2001 and 2003 (Santibáñez and Gaudichaud, 2017), and copper workers in 2003 and 2004 but, again, with limited results. These workers moved their targets up a crucial notch by establishing informal higher-level organisations (*coordinadoras*) to mobilise effectively against actual employers. Indeed, the *coordinadora* of subcontracted copper workers (later CTC) decided, as early as 2004, to disrupt the 2005-06 presidential elections to force CODELCO’s owner, the Chilean state, to engage in negotiations (Durán-Palma, 2011). Far from ‘unprecedented’ therefore, the crucial mass mobilisations of subcontracted copper workers of late December 2005 to early February 2006, not only resulted from long-term strategic planning, but also were preceded by decades of recurrent conflict in the mines and elsewhere (Calderón, 2008; Núñez, 2009; Ponce, 2017). The political establishment proved woefully ill prepared to neutralise such challenge and, for the first time during the neoliberal era, social mobilisation led to legal reform (2006 Subcontracting Act), the contested substance and implementation of which was followed shortly after by further mobilisations by copper workers in 2007 and 2008. Workers in the forestry and timber, and salmon farming sectors mobilised in a similar manner in 2007, but while the former were able to force large private-sector conglomerates to negotiate at sector level (Durán-Palma and López, 2009; Ruminot, 2009; Aravena, 2017), the latter’s ‘long strike’ failed to twist the arm of employers (Álvarez, 2009).

The 2000s also saw the expansion of ‘rupturist’ forms of unionism onto non-strategic sectors. SINTRAC split from SINAMI in 2003 - when the legendary militant union abandoned mobilisation in favour of ‘non-conflictual’ direct negotiations with employers – and not only brought rupturism to town, organising all manner of urban subcontracted and temporary workers in construction (particularly, concessions for metro stations and urban highways), call centres, and privatised public transport among others; but also innovated with participatory forms of union democracy (Durán-Palma, 2011). Rival SINTEC split from FETRACOMA in 2007 to fill the vacuum left by SINAMI in industrial engineering (Salazar and Salinas, 2021). Emblematic ‘weak’ and ‘unorganisable’ service sector workers managed to organise flagship anti-union multinationals such as Walmart (Bank Muñoz, 2017; Ratto, 2021) and, more than a decade before their North American counterparts, Starbucks in 2009 (*El País*, 2021; Giordano, 2022).

During the 2010s, mass mobilisations in strategic sectors returned notably in copper mining, the docks (Santibáñez and Gaudichaud, 2017) and, with less intensity, in the southern forests (Canals, 2014). ‘Rupturist’ organisations played an important part in the long lead up to the 2019-20 revolt, by triggering, catalysing and/or aiding broader manifestations of labour unrest, and have continued to expand their influence e.g., Starbucks union and the founding of the inter-firm union of McDonald’s and Burger King workers in 2019 (Páez, 2019).

A comparative analysis of these and other experiences shows that their forms of action and organisation are sufficiently definable and distinct to set them apart from Chile’s mainstream *traditional* and *enterprise* union models and constitute a type of unionism in its own right. *Rupturist* *unionism* can be defined as an autonomist type of radical/oppositional unionism that purposely ‘breaks with’ the legal framework and institutionalised forms of unionism in terms of its choice of *constituency* typically, but not exclusively, periphery workers in triangular employment regimes; *objectives* including traditional bread-and-butter agendas but going beyond to articulate workers’ discontent against the re-commodification of life under neoliberalism; and *methods* of representation, involving, but not limited to, ‘extra-legal’ modes of action oriented to disrupt the labour process to force actual employers to engage in multi-employer negotiations; unified inter-firm organisational forms along vertical and/or horizontal lines of inclusion; and ideologically motivated yet politically-autonomous leaderships who are able to ensure coordination and encourage rank-and-file participation (after Hyman, 1997; Durán-Palma and Urrutia, 2020; Durán-Palma *et al*., *in preparation*).

***Polanyian struggles with an important proletarian component***

Labour’s contribution to what can be collectively described as countermovement for the protection of society also includes a variety of ‘Polanyian struggles with an important proletarian component’, the origin of which can be dated back to the 1983-86 National Days of Protest. By this we mean to refer to broader expressions of working-class resistance against recommodification where workers organise themselves under banners other than labour to resist their proletarian condition (see Silver, 2003: 181-188). For reasons of space, we cannot review these experiences at any great length here so we will limit our account to highlighting some key struggles that have taken place during the latest cycle of protest (2006-2019).

As the 2006 mobilisations of subcontracted workers and secondary students extended well into 2008, a group of union leaders led by former CUT vice-president, Luis Mesina, started No+AFP a popular campaign against Chile’s signature privatised pension system which would evolve into a more general denunciation of the lack of basic social citizenship rights to economic welfare and security. Only a year after Sebastián Piñera took office as the first democratically elected conservative president since 1958, a second wave of student protests began in early 2011 and extended well into 2013. On this occasion, students mobilised to demand more participation of the state in secondary education and against the pursuit of profit in higher education, particularly among institutions subsided by the state, which has pushed working-class families to turn to debt for low quality university education. The protests became known as the ‘Chilean winter’ because of the massive protests that took place in August 2011, including a two-day general strike called by CUT in support of students.

But 2011 had started early with a social rebellion in Chile’s southernmost city, Punta Arenas, against a proposed 17% rise in the price of natural gas. The so-called 2011 Magallanes protests saw working classes mobilise against what was seen as an insensitive assault by central government on an essential necessity of life in a cold climate. In 2012, protests continued in another remote region of the Chilean south. Cash-strapped working classes in Aysén demanded increases in wages and subsidies, as well as the ‘unconstitutional’ return to public and regional ownership of water, fisheries, and mineral resources. The protests were organised by the *Movimiento Social por Aysén*, an umbrella organisation that included worker organisations, unions and CUT. After Michelle Bachelet returned to power in 2014, regional unrest continued in 2016 on the island of Chiloé, where the ‘red tide’ phenomenon threatened the livelihoods of fishing communities and central government’s indifference provoked the uprising of all major cities and towns. What is important about these territorial expressions of working-class discontent is not only that for weeks and months working classes took over these towns and regions, displacing the state and forcing the government to respond, but also that labour issues were present, not just as grievances but as threats of unemployment from employers and the state.

In 2017, No+AFP led protests that were even more massive than those of students in 2011-13, but it was women who initiated a qualitatively new wave of social mobilisation with a major march against violence against women. Coinciding with Sebastián Piñera’s return to power for the period 2018-2022, women called a second, much larger, march in March 2018, expanding their grievances to issues of gender equality at work and traditional feminist themes like wages for housework. After women took to the streets again in March 2019, numerous other mobilisations by subordinate groups took place during the year but with little political effect (e.g., secondary school students in some key state schools). Unusually, the government seemed in control. However, in August 2019, more than 50 unions and civil organisations (including many rupturist unions, No+AFP, and university and secondary students) formed *Unidad Social* and called a National Day of Protest for 5 September under the slogan ‘*nos cansamos, nos unimos*’ (‘we’ve had enough, we’ve united’) (Unidad Social, 2019). Although in and by itself the protest achieved little, indirectly it was crucial. The government’s victory-turned-over-confidence led to the catastrophic political error of hiking metro fares that sparked the anti-neoliberal revolt on 18 October.

The events that followed are, of course, well known. After the National Strike called by *Unidad Social* for 23-24 October led to millions marching across the country on 25 October, *Unidad Social*’s ‘*bloque sindical’* (its trade union arm) called another National Strike on 12 November 2019, which forced the government to open negotiations and led to the historical 15 November ‘Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution’. What we would like to emphasise however is that, to appreciate the political significance of these events, they should not be understood as pure and simple ‘general strikes’ but as much broader ‘popular revolts’ that not only involved the great majority of the working class (Pérez and Osorio, 2021), but also, for which the broader working class did most of the legwork: from actions of popular political violence to spontaneous statements that posed that such actions were indispensable for advancing the welfare of the majority.

In sum, alternative accounts offer analytically the best means to make sense of labour responses during the neoliberal era and, as such, provide a necessary corrective to ‘workerless’ mainstream narratives. Alternative accounts’ attention to unions *and* the broader working class, and emphasis on contained *and* transgressive contention, allows them to go beyond contained ‘traditional’ and ‘enterprise’ types of unionism, to include ‘rupturist’ types of unionism and broader Polanyian struggles with an important proletarian component. Taken together, these experiences can be conceived of as the key elements of a broad, prolonged, and complex countermovement for the protection of society, the origins of which can be traced back to the early 1980s, and the highwater mark of which can be readily identified with the 2019-20 anti-neoliberal revolt.

To be sure, it is not that mainstream narratives deny the existence of these experiences but that they downplay the prevalence and significance of the former and the proletarian element of the latter, misjudge their apparent originality, and fail to explain their emergence and development. Alternative accounts, in contrast, view rupturist experiences as pervasive and highly significant largely because of their contribution to transgressive contention which, as is well known, leads more often to substantial political and social change than contained contention. Second, they conceive of struggles by allegedly non-class-based movements as expressions of working-class resistance which, although under banners other than labour, demonstrate the continuing emancipatory possibilities of worker collective action. Third, alternative accounts do not view these struggles as ‘new’ or ‘unprecedented’, but instead as ‘innovative’ and ‘historical’, that is to say, as involving forms of contention forbidden within a particular regime that show important continuities with historical logics of action and organisation (see, for example, Ponce, 2017). Last, alternative accounts can explain their emergence and form with reference to neoliberal transformations but in a non-deterministic manner. Drawing on Silver (2003), for example, it is possible to argue that ‘rupturist’ forms of unionism correspond to ‘Marx-type’ struggles by newly emerging working classes, made and (counter-intuitively) strengthened as an unintended outcome of the development of historical capitalism (e.g. precarious workers in tightly integrated subcontracting chains), whereas broader expressions of working-class action – from the 1980s National Days of Protest through ‘third-generation’ anti-neoliberal struggles to the 2019-20 revolt – can be seen as ‘Polanyi-type’ struggles against the spread of the self-regulating market by working classes weakened by historical capitalism.

**5. Conclusions**

What characterised the Chilean oasis was not its sweet water or its lush palm trees, but the apparently unscalable fence that ringed it, made of a curious alloy of the basest metals: neoliberal economic policy, absence of civil rights, and repression. Chileans were on the right side of this fence (Luis Sepúlveda, 2020: 16)

The 2019-20 anti-neoliberal revolt and its aftermath not only put a dramatic end to the ‘Chile-the-oasis’ delusion, but also showed the inadequacy of mainstream interpretations of the recent evolution of Chilean capitalism and the nature, evolution, and impact of labour responses during the neoliberal era. In this chapter, we have tried to put work and workers back in their rightful place by, first, demonstrating the centrality of a recommodified world of work and a thoroughly dominated working class for the production and reproduction of the neoliberal project. Second, we have shown that working-class struggles against the structural class violence embedded in neoliberal institutions and their resulting ‘everyday inequalities and everyday indignities’ have been more prevalent and significant than mainstream narratives care to admit, and that class conflict, rather than social stability, has characterised the last four decades. Indeed, if the neoliberal era is a testament to anything is not only to the perennial struggle for domination between class actors, but also to the ever-changing nature form, intensification, and extension of labour resistance.

When exit polls on 25 October 2020 showed that more than 78 per cent of voters in a national referendum had chosen to ditch Pinochet’s 1980 constitution, Santiago’s ‘Dignity Square’ filled with thousands celebrating under the slogan ‘Chile reborn!’ (*Renace Chile!*). Whether the 2019-20 anti-neoliberal revolt and its aftermath will prove to be a turning point in the history of Chile’s political economy, even from a ‘soft’ Polanyian perspective (Goodwin, 2018), remains an open question. What is certain is that, as ever, the ‘end of history’ has been postponed indefinitely.

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4. This is the title of the first chapter of McAdam *et al*.’s (2003) *Dynamics of Contention*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Our emphasis on the law as backbone of the model should not be taken to mean that neoliberal industrial relations institutions are limited to individual and collective labour law, or that neoliberal institutions of labour domination are limited to industrial relations institutions. In other words, not only the ‘institutional order’ of industrial relations is much broader and deeply intertwined with other social spheres, but also ‘most, if not all, neoliberal institutions reinforce the thorough domination of capital over labour’ (Kotz, 2015: 43). In the Chilean case, this is evident across the board, e.g., from the disciplining effects of privatised social welfare – healthcare, pensions, education – through constitutional barriers to the exercise of popular sovereignty by the democratic majority, and beyond. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)