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By Taroa Zúñiga Silva
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Even the workers in the Constitutional Convention process are themselves organizing a union.

On March 13, 2022, two days after Gabriel Boric was [sworn in](#) as the president of Chile, Minister General Secretariat of Government Camila Vallejo [told](#) 24 Horas during an interview that her duty is “to accompany and support the constitutional process,” when asked about the government’s priorities during 2022. These two processes—the formation of Boric’s government and the writing of a new constitution—run parallel to one another and are important to the shaping of a “new Chile.”

Both these processes have emerged out of a long period of mobilization by the Chilean people, who first put an end to the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, which lasted from 1973 to 1990, through the [1989 plebiscite](#) and then fought in a cycle of protests—particularly during the student mobilization movements of [2006](#), [2011](#) and [2015](#) and the “[social outburst](#)” of 2019—to throw out the 1980 [constitution](#) introduced by Pinochet and end the status quo supported by the [right-wing governments](#) that followed the end of Pinochet’s dictatorship.

Chile has paid a [high price](#) during the Pinochet dictatorship and in the [decades since then](#) as the Chilean people fought for democracy in their country. In recent years, the repression against the demonstrators has been [brutal](#). Vallejo acknowledged this during the [interview](#) with 24 Horas, saying, “there are many people who were left behind” in the process of ensuring democracy and a new constitution for Chile. “There are many people

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who lost their eyes, who were mutilated, who were victims of aggressions of different kinds, who died for this constitutional process... [and] then obviously we put our strength and our energy into winning the approval in the exit plebiscite [of [2020](#), and] we can say that from now on, we will have a constitution, [the writing of] which we will all participate in [equally].”

Building the Constitution

Chile [voted](#) on May 15 and 16, 2021, to [elect](#) the 155 members of the Constitutional Convention [tasked](#) with drafting the new constitution for the country. The convention [began](#) its work on July 4, 2021. Many of the members created volunteer networks to assist them in holding meetings and gathering input and feedback from citizens in their constituencies. Only [around 50](#) of the Constitutional Convention members belong to political parties; the rest are independent members, a clear sign of the impact the popular movements have had on the constitutional process. Currently, following the [resignation](#) of one of its members, the convention has 154 members, 77 men and 77 women.

Úrsula Eggers is the president of the [Plurinational Union of Workers of the Constitutional Convention](#), which was formed on November 4, 2021, and of the [Providencia Human Rights Coordinating Committee](#). She knows about the violence against the demonstrators who fought for democratic reform in Chile because she participated in the 2019 demonstrations as a human rights observer. As part of her work, Eggers documented the human rights violations and then participated in the defense of the [victims of police violence](#). “We know the cost that this [constitutional] process has had [for the people of Chile],” she tells me. She is not alone. There are 370 people who have been employed as advisers to the Constitutional Convention delegates. Many of those who work in the convention have formed or are part of various social movements, which for decades have been fighting for several causes in Chile, such as the [water defense](#), housing and education, as well as unrestricted respect for human rights. These convention workers are sensitive to the violence inflicted by the state over the years against what they see as just demands.

Bringing their experience of social movements, the various workers in the Constitutional Convention who work for the delegates decided to form a union—the Plurinational Union

of Workers of the Constitutional Convention. They accept Vallejo's statement that the constitution must be written "with the participation of all." The members of this plurinational union include the 370 advisers who are employed by a government ministry known as the General Secretariat of the Presidency (SEGPRES), and other members of the workforce employed by the convention, such as cleaners, security personnel, secretaries and volunteer workers, especially from the universities. The advisers, Eggers says, do work beyond what one might assume. "We do all the necessary administrative work, but also [do] research, writing, photocopying and buying food," she says. "[We do] everything necessary, on a daily basis, to move the convention forward [toward achieving its goal]. We are the human resource that makes the convention work... the convention members play a political role, and it is good that this is so, but we are the ones who write the [rules](#) that are now being voted on, and we write them at 2 a.m., 3 a.m., or 4 a.m., with meetings [taking place] from 8 in the morning to 8 at night."

The work is intense because the convention is working on a [tight deadline](#), to finish writing the constitution in [nine months](#) (with the possibility of getting a maximum extension of up to 12 months). This has resulted in an increase in the workload for the workers, who have been putting in extra hours beyond their daily work schedule to meet the huge demand put forth by this deadline.

Working Class

"What we hope for the new Chile," Eggers tells me, "is [that it is a place] where a range of people are valued, where [a person can be] valued for their capacity and their experience, without the need for a professional degree." The conservative sections wanted to "professionalize" the work of the advisers, setting requirements such as years of professional experience and university degrees. However, the views of workers such as Eggers finally prevailed. "We do not belong to the social sector that has large additional resources or a lot of savings or a large network to borrow from," Eggers says. "Nor do we belong to the political sector that has large foundations behind it," adds Eggers.

Of the 50 members of the Constitutional Convention who belong to political parties, 37 [belong](#) to right-wing parties that have their own think tanks, such as the Jaime Guzmán Foundation or the Cuide Chile Foundation, which are institutions that have defended the

Pinochet dictatorship and have recently complained about being “[censored](#)” during the constitutional process. The progressive convention members, meanwhile, have staff who come from social movements and do not have access to outside money. “We do not identify ourselves as advisers but as workers, because we are working class,” Eggers tells me. The larger class struggle in Chile is mirrored in the struggle for better working conditions for the workers within the Constitutional Convention.

A Plurinational Union

The plurinational union was [formed](#) on November 4, 2021, because of “the multiple violations of labor rights such as the non-existence of contracts, unpaid salaries... the lack of spaces to work and eat, working hours from Monday to Sunday [for] 12 hours [a day] or more,” [according to their press release](#). It is telling that the union members all come from the left and from popular movements. “Not because we have excluded the right,” says Eggers, the union president, “but because they usually solve their problems on their own.”

While “dignity” seems to be a word used frequently in the Constitutional Convention debates, some of the rights of its workers seem to have been overlooked during the constitutional process. “As we write the future social agreement for the country,” Eggers tells me, “we cannot do it by violating the rights of the workers.” For the first four months of their work, the advisers and other staff were not being paid. “We had to raise our voices,” Eggers says, “because we were not being valued.”

The union has managed to regularize the salaries of 93 percent of the workers, which was its first objective. Other issues, so central to the convention debates about safeguarding the interests of the wider society, seem to have been neglected when it comes to affording the same protection to their own workers. These include the provision of day care facilities for the workers and finding a place for the advisers to do their work. SEGPRES, the state agency [responsible](#) for “providing technical, administrative and financial support for the convention,” is now headed by Giorgio Jackson, a former student leader. This could mean a change.

When I spoke with Eggers about how it seemed unlikely that the workers will be

successful in shortening the long working hours considering how tight the 12-month deadline to complete the new constitution is, I expressed doubt that there was any way out of the problem at this point. “With collective organization, there is always a way out,” she tells me. “At least we are not going to keep quiet.”

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