



Photo by Jim Block.

Deputy Giorgio Jackson speaks at Berkeley, October 2018.

CHILE

From Student Movements to Congress

By James Gerardo Lamb

Former student movement leader Giorgio Jackson is 31 years old, and he has already been elected deputy to the Chilean Congress, twice. Speaking at an October 2018 event organized by the Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) at UC Berkeley, Jackson got straight to the bottom line: “The main thesis is to aggregate the demand for change within the system.” As a founder of the *Revolución Democrática* (RD, Democratic Revolution) party and the *Frente Amplio* (FA, Broad Front) coalition, Jackson has defined his politics by bringing together diverse forces for change, fueling this effort with a bold progressive vision and a strong pragmatic desire to make things happen.

Chile has seen dramatic political changes in this past decade, as generational turnover and social movements have transformed political institutions, parties, and coalitions. This period of rapid transformation has been

particularly surprising given the prior 20 years of stability and continuity under center-left *Concertación* coalition governments (1990-2010), which followed the military regime led by General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). And Giorgio Jackson has been at the center of the most notable and consequential events and processes in these last years.

Jackson first burst onto the national political scene during massive student-led protests, the so-called “Chilean Winter” that convulsed Chile in 2011. At the prestigious *Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile* (UC), Jackson was a leader in the center-left, reform-oriented student group *Nueva Acción Universitaria* (NAU), founded by Miguel Crispi, Jackson’s long-time political ally and current fellow RD deputy in Congress. In November 2010, Jackson was elected president of the university’s student union, the *Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad Católica de Chile* (FEUC). Jackson’s victory was the third consecutive

year in which the NAU candidate won the FEUC presidency. The first, unseating *Concertación*-aligned student groups, had been Crispi.

When the student movement exploded in 2011, Jackson was a key leader in the *Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile* (CONFECH, Confederation of Chilean Students), which congregates university student unions across Chile. CONFECH organized and led iconic protests, among the largest ever seen in Chile, demanding a “free and high-quality public education.”

Public opinion strongly backed the student movement. Parents, workers, labor leaders, and environmentalists, among many others, took to the streets with the students, and support collapsed for the first government of conservative President Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014).

Public leaders of the movement garnered popular support and legitimacy that challenged and exceeded the traditional parties of the incumbent coalitions, the center-right government, and the center-left opposition, alike. Along with other student leaders who became members of Congress in the next elections — the so-called *bancada estudiantil* (student block) that included Camila Vallejo, Karol Cariola, Vlado Mirosevic, and Gabriel Boric — Giorgio Jackson transitioned quickly from the social movement to the arena of electoral politics.

In January 2012, Jackson, Crispi, and other NAU leaders and student movement allies founded *Revolución Democrática* as a political movement that later became a party. Key themes that animated the student group continued to mark this important new political tendency. One focus was participatory democracy and transparency of institutions. While the NAU pushed to democratize the university (and education more generally), the RD aims to democratize Chile’s political institutions. Another touchstone for young progressive reformers positioning themselves as challengers to the status quo was autonomy from the long-established center and left parties that re-emerged in opposition to the military regime during the 1980s.

According to Crispi, the RD’s founding objective was to “channel the energy of the young people interested in strengthening democracy who took to the streets in 2011.” In its *Carta de Presentación*, a public introduction calling on adherents to join the new movement, the RD stated, “Our generation does not understand democracy only as a moment when every four years we visit the polls to express our preference for one or another candidate pre-designated by a coalition of parties.” Since 2012, the party’s Declaration of Principles has defined the RD’s fundamental bases. The first two principles are “the democratic principle” and “the principle of transparency.”

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Giorgio Jackson as one of the leaders of Chile’s student movement in 2011.



Photo by simenon.

Jackson was the movement's most prominent leader, and in just its first week, thousands of new members joined. The group's first foray into electoral politics was in 2012. As part of a large coalition, the RD helped to defeat the incumbent conservative mayor of Providencia, a central, economically prosperous district in the capital city, Santiago.

In 2013, Jackson ran for Congress in the national elections. Throughout that election year, the RD had a complicated relationship with the established coalition of center-left and left parties headed by former President Michelle Bachelet, who was running for another term. Rebranded as the Nueva Mayoría (New Majority), the historic Concertación had expanded to the left to include the Communist Party and other groups. Initially, the RD nominated candidates to compete within the Nueva Mayoría primaries for three congressional districts. When no primaries were held, Javiera Parada, an RD member on Bachelet's presidential campaign team, withdrew, and the RD decided to back only Jackson for Congress. He ran as an independent in a downtown Santiago district.

Under the Chilean law in operation since the transition from military rule, two candidates for Congress were elected per district. One coalition list could only win both seats if their total votes were double that of the next list. Until a reform of the country's voting system in 2015, this "binomial majoritarian" electoral system forced electoral competition into a two-coalition system, where smaller parties were greatly disadvantaged. Jackson had strong name recognition and support in a student-heavy district; the Nueva Mayoría decided at the last minute not to run a competing candidate, but to back him instead.

Photo by Luis Hidalgo/AP Photo.



Differences over educational policy led students to Chile's streets again in 2013.

On November 17, 2013, Jackson won the first majority in his district with more than 48 percent of the vote. A conservative candidate won the second seat with just 19.5 percent. For the period 2014-2018, Jackson was the only RD member of Congress. However, other progressive candidates the RD had endorsed ran and won seats as deputies, including Vallejo, Cariola, and Boric.

The RD did not officially back any candidate for president in the first

round of the 2013 elections, but after an online vote, the movement decided to support Bachelet in the run-off round of the election in December. Bachelet and the Nueva Mayoría won a resounding victory, obtaining supermajorities in Congress as well as the presidency. It was as a part of this progressive wave that Jackson and the other "student block" representatives arrived in Congress.

The new administration had committed to progressive educational

reforms inspired by the student movement during the campaign and offered RD leaders high-level appointments in the Ministry of Education after winning the election. For the administration, the young movement offered demonstrated technical proficiency in mobilization and campaigning, strong links with social movement organizations, and a powerful symbolic association with the student struggle. The RD decided on

a posture of "critical collaboration" with the Nueva Mayoría government on its program of structural reforms, with education policy a special focus. Miguel Crispi became an advisor to the Minister of Education, and Gonzalo Muñoz was appointed head of the ministry's General Education Division, among other RD member appointments.

The Bachelet administration began its term with high public support. In the Ministry of Education

and with Jackson in Congress, the RD was influential in the drafting of education reform proposals. Although the decision to work in an administration run by the traditional parties was controversial among some within the movement, Jackson was a strong advocate for collaborating with the administration and supporting whatever reforms substantively advanced the movement's goals.

Another key Bachelet reform that Jackson and the RD strongly backed was a replacement of the binomial majoritarian electoral system with an "inclusive proportional" system to "strengthen the representativeness of the National Congress." This bill — proposed in April 2014, and signed into law one year later — finally put an end to the stranglehold on Congress by the two coalitions that emerged from the transition. The new rules took effect for the 2017 elections.

Education reforms, which were more complicated and divided into numerous bills, progressed more slowly. The obstacles stemmed, in part, from conservative sectors of the Nueva Mayoría coalition, particularly Christian Democrats accustomed to more influential roles in education policy and the Ministry of Education during Concertación administrations. They disagreed with many student movement proposals backed by the RD and progressive political forces in the Nueva Mayoría.

Tensions between the government and the social movements were expressed in various ways and included the NAU's loss of UC student leadership after six years in power, just one year into the Bachelet administration. In February 2015, the Caso Caval, an influence-trafficking case against President Bachelet's son, became a major public scandal. The administration's poll numbers began

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Image from Wikimedia.

The logo of Frente Amplio.

to fall and never recovered. As an economic slowdown took hold in 2015, Bachelet made an adjustment to the center with a cabinet re-shuffle and a new political strategy dubbed “realism without renunciation.” For education reform, this compromise included a concession on the crucial issue of *gratuidad*, the “free” aspect of the movement’s demands. State financing would have to come more gradually and to some classes of students sooner than others.

In January 2016, Jackson and fellow deputy Gabriel Boric of the Izquierda Autónoma (Autonomous Left) initiated the first discussions about forming the Frente Amplio, a broad alliance of left forces outside of the ruling block, inspired by Uruguay’s own Frente Amplio and Spain’s Podemos (We Can) coalitions.

On May 23, 2016, the RD made the big move of withdrawing from the Ministry of Education and the Bachelet administration. Gonzalo Muñoz explained that “decisions in the Ministry of Education were moving away from the initial promises,” and thus, the party “began to push the creation of the Frente Amplio.” This decision came just one week after the RD formally constituted itself as a political party and one week before Jackson and other RD leaders announced the initiation of a process to found a new political coalition.

Jackson was a main proponent of using the new strategic environment defined by the reformed electoral system to compete with the two incumbent coalitions. This approach meant not only a full slate of congressional candidates, but also an alternative progressive candidate for president.

In January 2017, the Frente Amplio was formally launched, the culmination of a complex process of convergence among 14 political movements and parties. Jackson and Boric remained the most prominent public figures, and their political movements remained the most popular. The FA presented itself as a proponent of pluralism and participatory democracy and an opponent of neoliberalism, emphasizing independence from the business lobby, financially and politically.

Jackson and Boric also played crucial roles in supporting the candidacy of Beatriz Sánchez, an independent radio journalist in her early forties who had not run for public office before. They recruited her to compete first in the FA primary and then in the general election for president. Sánchez announced her candidacy in late March 2017, running on a robust social democratic platform: free universal public education at all levels, universal health care and social security, more progressive taxation of the wealthy, and sector-wide collective bargaining rights. In addition, her campaign emphasized themes of transparency, democratic participation of the citizenry, and women’s rights. On July 6, 2017, Sánchez triumphed in the FA primary with almost 70 percent of the vote.

Jackson and Sánchez, along with the RD and FA overall, scored historic results in the national elections on November 19, 2017.

Jackson won the most votes of any candidate for Congress: more than 100,000. Competing in the newly created, high-profile District 10 in Santiago — transformed by the electoral reform from a district centered on affluent areas that included important institutions of higher learning to a sprawling swath of the capital that is one of the most economically diverse districts in the country — Jackson was one of 46 candidates running for eight seats under the new voting system. His strong performance brought along two additional FA deputies to Congress, each of whom received between 4,000 and 5,000 votes. The RD itself sent 10 members to Congress, nine deputies, and the party’s first senator, Juan Ignacio Latorre.

The FA achieved electoral success beyond many expectations and unprecedented for any political force outside of the two major coalitions since the dictatorship. The Frente Amplio won nearly a million votes and seated

20 deputies out of 155, all newly elected, along with Latorre in the Senate. In an election that saw 10 lists, 51 parties, and 960 candidates competing for the Chamber of Deputies, the restricted electoral competition that had characterized post-transition Chilean democracy was superseded by a Congress significantly more diverse in partisan affiliation and demographics.

In the presidential race, Sánchez far surpassed previous candidacies positioned left of the incumbent coalitions. With more than 1.3 million votes and 20 percent in the first round of the election, she nearly beat Senator Alejandro Guillier, the candidate of the traditional center-left coalition, and she almost entered the run-off. This groundbreaking campaign galvanized a new political dynamic: party and coalition dynamism and fragmentation have overtaken stability and stasis. Even the historic Concertación–Nueva Mayoría political alliance — the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC, Christian Democratic Party), on the one hand, and the Socialist Party, the Partido por la Democracia (PPD, Party for Democracy), and the Partido Radical (PR, Radical Party), on the other — broke apart after 28 years, as Christian Democrats withdrew and ran their own candidate.

This trend even spread to the right. The conservative coalition of Chile Vamos (Chile Let’s Go) incorporated more than just the traditional Renovación Nacional (RN, National Renewal) and Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI, Independent Democratic Union), the incumbent center-right parties that have dominated since the Pinochet era. Just as Sánchez and the FA surprised many, so did the results for the new right-wing political party: Evópoli — short for Evolución Política (Political Evolution) — elected two senators and four deputies. The presidential candidacy of Evópoli founder José Antonio Kast gained more than 500,000 votes (7 percent of the total), outpolling PDC candidate Carolina Goic. Kast now presents the first major challenge from the right to the RN and UDI.

Former President Sebastián Piñera made a weaker showing than expected in the first round, less than 37 percent of the vote, followed by Senator Guillier at 23 percent. Within the Frente Amplio, political positioning in the second round emerged as a serious and controversial debate. After convoking a series of internal consultations and votes, the coalition decided on December 1, 2017, to call for supporters to vote in the second round without explicitly

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From left: Giorgio Jackson, Gabriel Boric, Beatriz Sánchez, and Jorge Sharp, the current mayor of Valparaíso.



Photo by Fernando Ramírez.



Photo by Ministerio Secretaría General de Gobierno

Sebastian Piñera takes office as President of Chile, January 2018.

endorsing Guillier, though rejecting Piñera as “a step backwards.”

Jackson backed the position that won in the internal RD plebiscite. The resolution expressed the ongoing ambiguity with which this sector views traditional parties, stating, “Although we consider it the responsibility of the Nueva Mayoría to win over those who put their confidence in the project of the Frente Amplio, we call on Alejandro Guillier to take up the demands of the social movements, such as ‘no more AFPs’ [a movement against privatized pensions], lowering congressional salaries, among others, to defeat the right.” As the left faced difficulty in uniting, Piñera won the second round on December 17, 2017, with 54.5 percent of the vote, gaining nearly 1.4 million additional votes between the two rounds.

In this new political reality, Jackson, the RD, and the FA have positioned themselves as often-fierce critics of the second Piñera administration. Still, Jackson advo-

cates remaining open to working with the administration on an issue-by-issue basis where possible, arguing the FA should be “a firm opposition, but not obtuse.”

The FA has also maintained a political and institutional distance from the parties of the traditional center-left. Jackson defines the legacy of the second Bachelet administration very positively in terms of representative institutional and electoral reform, but he has offered a mixed evaluation of educational reform, calling it a source of frustration. Jackson has said, “We are far from talking about a programmatic or political alliance with the ex-NM [Nueva Mayoría].”

In the opposition during 2018, the FA has seen processes of internal convergence and reorganization. What was once seven legal political parties and seven movements will be consolidated to seven parties and two movements by 2019. This process of consolidation, in part, represents the better organization and relative

empowerment of the left wing of the FA, as it has gradually become a more influential counterweight to the RD’s preeminence.

Jackson has announced that he will retire from Congress after his term ends in 2022, maintaining a long-held commitment to serve no more than two terms, although the move may prove to be more a sabbatical than retirement from politics.

In his talk for CLAS, Jackson addressed the situation faced by progressives in Latin America and beyond in broad and structural terms. “Latin America is... one of the most rich and beautiful lands, but at the same time, one of the most unequal societies,” he reminded us.

During a time of profound change and many powerful contradictions, he urged us “to rethink our ideologies to be as complex as the contradictions that [shape] people’s lives.”

He insisted that if reforms to address the growing inequalities and exploitation of neoliberalism were made incredibly difficult by socioeconomic inequality within the United States because of its effect on the political system, it is that much harder across the political-economic divides that separate rich developed countries and the Global South. “Even intangible assets,” suggested Jackson, “are distributed very unequally between countries” in the contemporary, globalized era.

One of Jackson’s central intellectual and political themes has been the difficult lessons from the failure of the left’s historic and contemporary political projects. Since his days as a student activist, a critical distance from the traditional left has been a hallmark. “It’s hard to find hope when you read about the failure of the Soviet experience in the past, the autocratic shift to capitalism by China, and the current political, economic, and social crises in many

of the progressive governments in Latin America,” Jackson explained. And he asked, “Why should someone trust in the left when corruption, homophobia, patriarchy, extractivism, and dictatorships have been present in both right- and left-wing governments?” This painful historical experience is the basis of the centrality of democracy and democratization in Jackson’s ideas around progressive social transformation. He not only has a deep commitment to democracy, but also a commitment to deepen democracy.

Regardless, the legitimacy of democratic institutions has been declining in many countries around the world, he noted. In Latin America, Jackson said, “many of the democratic institutions are perceived as corrupt and useless by an increasing number of citizens.” A resulting individualism in the search for solutions to social problems combines with democratic delegitimization to form “the breeding ground for a right-wing populism,” as in Brazil and the United States.

Jackson argued that it is critical to neither dismiss, nor “laugh or scream at” this rising right-wing, nationalist populism. Insisting that the power of capitalist hegemony comes from emotion rather than rationality, Jackson pointed to the feelings of fear

Giorgio Jackson with a poster advertising his talk at Berkeley, October 2018.



Photo by Jim Block

and insecurity behind the success of anti-immigrant politics. These insecurities, along with justified doubts about the left, need to be addressed to drain support for these movements, he concluded.

Finally, Jackson emphasized the need for solidarity throughout the Global South. On issues as crucial as international economic inequality and climate change, the Global South is most directly affected and must be unified and central to any substantive solutions. The stakes with climate change are existential — the future of the planet is at stake — and “if we don’t have global mechanisms [to address climate change] the result could end in a humanitarian disaster,” he warned. “We need to start thinking about global well-being, not national well-being,” Jackson argued, “and I think the South must lead these discussions because we are facing the worst part of this globalization process.”

Giorgio Jackson is currently serving his second term as a deputy in the Chilean Congress. He spoke at an event organized by CLAS on October 11, 2018.

James Gerardo Lamb is an instructor in the Department of Sociology at UC Berkeley.