

Natalia Corrales Cordero, feminist social worker and Union Leader¹

By Rodrigo Cortés Mancilla



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In this issue dedicated to addressing discussions from feminist and intersectional perspectives to think about critical proposals in social work, we could not ignore the voice of a social worker who has been intensely involved in the movement of the Coordinadora Feminista 8M and in the constituent process, running as a candidate in the constituent elections held in May this year. It is an honor to have this powerful interview with Natalia Corrales Cordero, social worker, Master in Social Psychology and union leader, who currently works in the Department of Works of the Municipality of Valparaíso.

We thank Rodrigo Cortés Mancilla² who kindly talked with Natalia, giving us this interesting look at social work, feminism and political action on the front line.

Rodrigo: Thank you very much Natalia for accepting our invitation to this conversation. First of all, we would like to know more about you, about your professional trajectory, in order to understand how feminism has appeared in your career.

Natalia: Well, first of all I thank you for the confidence, it is always very nice for me to talk and connect with my colleagues, and well, obviously, one of the reasons why we

¹ Conversation held via online platform on May 07, 2021.

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are here has to do with the decision to have studied social work. So, starting with the first question: I am Natalia Corrales Cordero, I was born in Iquique, I studied in Iquique and then I came to Valparaíso to continue studying and I have been here for almost 13 years. I also came here because my mother was from here, she was from the Fifth Region and we had plans to come and live here... then she got sick and passed away. That project was left unfinished, and I feel that must have been one of the unconscious motivations that drove me to come here. While I was at school I was part of the Student Center for a while, and then at the university I was also a leader of the Social Work career. Before social work I studied law. I felt that I was very emasculated, I felt that I could not give my opinion, I could not develop the capacity for reflection. I was born to a communist woman, a union leader, who organized everything that came her way, very used to discussing. I remember those lunches with her, having long after-dinner conversations. So, entering a world where I was not allowed to speak was terrible for me. Besides, I saw how teachers mistreated my classmates and it seemed horrible to me. I was not comfortable there.

When my mother died in 2001, I was 21 years old. I decided to change careers, because when your fundamental pillar dies, the person you love the most, it changes your whole life. It changes your place. The loss of my mother made me rethink many things that have to do with how I wanted to live, how I projected myself in life, what I really felt, what I was passionate about. And what I was always passionate about was connecting with the community, connecting with people. When I studied law I felt that it was an individualistic career and that made me very sad, because deep down - I realized later, when I entered social work - I really liked the collective.

I decided to change to social work and I felt that I could not be anywhere else. I got a scholarship for academic excellence and because my mother had passed away, I took care of my younger sister. My sister was 11 years old at the time, and we were left alone. I worked, studied and took care of my sister. After graduating I started working on different projects.

I am a union leader and I am part of social movements, and that permeates my work as a social worker: I always try to link people, neighbors and neighbors with other organizations, collectives, groups. This is something typical of my professional training, that is, you don't stay only with the work you develop in an institution, but always expand beyond, because social dynamics are so complex and so diverse, that expanding the community is fundamental.

I worked at the Housing and Urban Development Service, but at the end of my work cycle, suddenly, I was fired. I was in shock because I said “what do I do with my sister”, “how do I solve this problem immediately? My colleagues could not believe it, they started to organize, but there was no case and I had to leave.

And then something woke up in me. I had the experience of my mother’s precarious work. She worked on contract for the National Service for Children. She was fired and a month later she was diagnosed with leukemia. Some time after my mother’s death, they called me from the institution to give me my mother’s contract. I don’t think it was with bad intentions, maybe they thought that giving me her contract was a kind of legacy, but I remember that I threw it in their face with a lot of anger. Then, by the twists and turns of life, it was my turn to work as a worker Without a Stable Contract (WSC) and suddenly, I was fired.

I wrote my thesis on WSC workers, thinking “hopefully one day WSC workers will have the possibility, or feel the need, to organize themselves and that in the future there will be an organization that will allow them to advance in dignity and rights”.

And now I am here: I formed the first union of WSC workers of the Municipality of Valparaíso.

Rodrigo: How did you come to work in the Municipality of Valparaíso?

Natalia: Once I was fired from Housing and Urban Development Service, I continued studying, graduated and worked in an NGO developing reconstruction projects after the 2005 earthquake. Then I came to Valparaíso and worked on large-scale social housing projects. When those projects were finished, I joined the municipality of Valparaíso, thinking it was a project we had with my mother. I worked on different projects, all as a WSC worker, and generally in housing, territory and community work. Then I joined the Department of Works, accompanying the execution of projects, which is the work I do now.

Rodrigo: And how was this articulation with the union? How was it built up and how did you also become involved in other spaces?

Natalia: That happened because when I started working the payment of my salary was very late. This is a type of mistreatment of workers that occurs in the public sector. One

³ Entidades de Gestión Inmobiliaria Social:

day they were doing a survey on drug use among public employees. It bothered me and I answered to the person who was handing out the forms: “before asking if I take drugs or not, ask me under what conditions I am working, that is, what is the reason why someone ends up taking drugs or alcohol in a job like this”. He was a union leader in the municipality. Through him I met other women colleagues who thought in this way, we began to know each other and to set up the union.

When the President Michelle Bachelet came to Valparaíso, we gave her a letter telling her about our status as WSC workers. We got in touch with the workers of the Housing and Urbanism Service that I knew, so we began to put together a group of WSC workers, we allied ourselves with unions that had already been in existence for a couple of years and with people who wanted to organize from all over Chile.

We organized meetings in secret at first, because we were always told that we would be fired if we were caught. Most of us were women. That must be emphasized. We women are always the spearhead of revolutions, and that has to do with feminism.

We held meetings at lunchtime. I think it is very important to highlight this because when a worker gives up his or her eating time to organize, it is because it is a vital and important need.

I was worried about the fact that we didn't have the right to work, it was true that we could be fired. My uncle, who had been a union leader, recommended me to present the union in society. Another fellow leader recommended the same thing to me: “you have to present the union to society, you have to go straight ahead, tell the mayor, let's set up this union! But before telling him, everyone has to know that you are already organized, that there are many of you, ideally make a press release or something like that”. We did it that way in 2014. The mayor did not want to receive us, but a close person invited us to a meeting with him. It was like a trap. We were just women and a fellow sexual dissident. We told him: “We are WSC workers. Many of us have been working in that way for 6 or 8 years. We are going to form our union. The idea is that we have a permanent connection, that we work together because the idea is to improve the working conditions of the people who make it possible for you to be mayor”. We had a letter, a petition, and we sent it to them.

The formation of the union was very exciting. We elected a provisional directive that later became permanent, we raised our first petition, we signed a protocol of agreement with the mayor of that time, Castro. We included almost all the basic labor rights, and



then we began to advance in the recognition of rights, we carried out mobilizations, protests, we took over the cash registers, different actions. In the course of a year, the union was very well known, very well supported, because the strategy is that it was not only our union, we were part of the National Union of State Workers, and this unity also has to do with the social movements in which we participate. Most of us are social workers, many of us are also social workers in the federation's leadership and we understand that union work does not develop alone, that it has to be connected with the community. That is how we linked up with No + AFP , with the Coordinadora Feminista, with the Mesa Social de Valparaíso, with the Mesa Social de Valparaíso and the Mesa Sindical de la National Workers Union (NWU).

Solidarity began, and I began to learn a lot from the most experienced leaders, from the most hardened leaders. I think I have had a wonderful school here in Valparaíso with comrades who were from the NWU, who were from the National Association of Public Employees, who were from movements of different trade union organizations, of different militancy, and with whom I may have many differences, but I also learned to work in the difference, with respect for the opinion, for the different opinions. There are things, of course, that I do not compromise on, of course. I am anti-neoliberal. In any case, almost all of us are anti-neoliberal in the trade union world, so that's where we are aligned.

This is how I came to unionism, a lot of it because my mother was a union leader. I never thought I was going to be a union leader, and I am super honest, I never imagined I was going to end up in this, let alone contesting the constituent assembly to write the new constitution and burn Pinochet's constitution, which is what I want to do.

Rodrigo: Addressing that surprising history, your legacy and trajectory, how did you come to be a candidate for the constituent assembly, and surely related to that, how did you arrive at this feminist militancy?

Natalia: I think you realize that you have always been a feminist. At some point you realize why feminism is so special. It is not a movement like No+AFP, which has a very concrete demand and that I can say: I have been a member of No+AFP since 2014, for example, which is when we started building our union. Feminism, I believe, is not entered into at a certain date. One day I realized that I had been a feminist for many years, so when did I realize it? During the union work, that's when I realized it.

As I was telling you, we were all women who began to raise the unions, not only in Valparaíso, but also at a national level. Cannon fodder right away, first line. Among women we began to organize this political life, this new union political life. When the Coordinadora Feminista 8M was formed, which happened in the framework of the First Feminist Strike of 2018, I had already dabbled in feminism. Feminism has its good things and its bad things. One of the things we urgently need to solve is language: how feminism reaches working class neighbourhoods. It is not that feminism is not present in working class neighbourhoods. Feminism exists there, because our *compañeras* are the ones who are raising the common pots, they are the ones who take care of their neighbor's children because they have to go out to work. Feminism, in fact, is born in the working class neighbourhoods, in the territories, in the organizations. It is not the patrimony of the intelligentsia, but the intellectual discourse is sometimes presented as a barrier to make feminism flesh, so that it penetrates people.

I also felt insecure, until today, because I am not a scholar of feminism and I respect my friends very much. One of my best friends is one of the important intellectuals of feminism here in Chile, but I feel that there is a debt in this sense. In feminism there is an adhesion from the youth, and the youth have had the possibility of having more information than our grandmothers, than our mothers. For example, with young women one can talk about patriarchy, because they have already internalized this concept. But our mothers, our grandmothers, have not internalized it. We have to do this exercise. And it is not a question of going to teach the women, but simply of accessing this capacity to reconcile the everyday with the concepts, nothing more than that. This is a pending task.

So remembering, I think that is how I realized that I was a feminist, I realized that my mother was a feminist woman, who fought against the dictatorship, who risked her life for democracy, who was later mistreated by the system, because she was not one of those who was later *apitutada* in the governments of the Concertación. She never even wanted to be registered in the Program for Reparation and Integral Health Care. My grandmother participated in the Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women. They had a feminist life, perhaps without knowing it or wanting to say it. During the dictatorship there were feminist comrades and they were very criticized. The lesbian feminists were victims of discrimination within their own political parties for being lesbians; this invisibilization that we women have historically had, is made flesh there too. During the dictatorship women fought, risked their lives, took care of their families, took charge of the political parties, because their comrades were imprisoned and this



is absolutely invisible. When “democracy” was reestablished, the government cabinet was made up only of men and feminist demands were transformed into gender agendas, institutionalized, framed in the policy of “as far as possible”.

I understand feminism as a transversal struggle, as a mass movement that allows uniting different causes, something that no other movement achieves, in my opinion. Here we are the students, the paid workers, the unpaid workers, the caregivers, the sportswomen, the ecofeminists. When we decided to run for the constituent assembly, it was also a very critical discussion. I did not agree with the way in which the November 15 agreement was reached. It is not the merit of the political parties, as some say, - that if the parties had not come together within four walls there would not be a new constitution -, because I believe that we would be thinking of a new constitution without Piñera, without a criminal president who has attacked his own people. However, we decided to assume this responsibility and my candidacy was raised from the 8M Feminist Coordinating Committee, from the Federation of Workers WSC and from the Association of Social Workers of the province of Valparaíso. This is how my participation in the constitutional convention was conceived. That is to say, it is not a personal decision, it is collective.

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Rodrigo: What are the key proposals that have to be in the constituent process, from your perspective?

Natalia: Today all rights are really a class privilege: health, education, housing, dignified old age. Rights are being profited from, because the current state is a subsidiary state and because the constitution is a neoliberal constitution. What we are disputing, then, is above all an ideological discussion, why does the current constitution prioritize private property before life and biodiversity? Why does it guarantee the freedom to choose where to treat an illness, in the hospital or in a private clinic, but does not guarantee my right to timely, dignified, plurinational health, which respects my ancestral traditions? What we are dealing with here is an ideological dispute at the neoliberal root.

In this sense, I believe that the most important political project has to do with putting the articulation with social movements at the center. I have just come from a press point among our sister lists of social movements throughout Chile. We have been invited to participate in the First Plurinational Meeting, organized by the constituent social movements. It is a kind of national meeting, where we are going to address various issues and we hope it will be the first of many. What we are doing is to begin to articulate the struggles at the national level, from the peoples, with a plurinational perspective. I be-



lieve that this is the most important political project that we have as future constituents, as social movements. It is a matter of forming networks, of transforming our culture of silence into a culture of speaking out, of raising our voices, of critical reflection and of losing our fears.

The priority is also to make this constituent process participatory and popular. We do not have the constituent assembly, which is what we are asking for in the streets, but we are going to make it concrete through these links between social movements, which we have already begun to promote.

This constituent process has to be transparent, it has to be public. The sessions have to be transmitted on television, we all have the right to know what is being discussed. The territories must have the right to speak and vote in situations that affect them. For example, here we have sacrifice zones, and the communities have not been heard. There must be mechanisms of direct democracy that allow the territories to decide on issues that affect them at the national and local levels. This redistribution of power must take place.

If we are talking about the redistribution of power, its objective is greater political participation of communities and territories, of intermediate groups. This implies thinking about how we, as leaders but also as social workers, achieve, make and build a participatory society; how we make children, from early childhood, aware of the importance of political participation, and make it their own, as a necessity. If we do not educate people for political participation, it will be useless to have this number of plebiscites and citizen consultations, because there will be no need or political awareness in our people of the importance of participation. Participation is also key in our intervention from Social Work. We are well aware that there are many policies that are implemented in the neighborhoods, where no one reaches because no one feels it makes sense, because no one was asked, because people do not feel part of it

We need to build a caring, supportive State, which is regulated by a constitution framed by respect for human rights and the dignity of people. Feminism seeks equality and if we talk about unrestricted respect for human rights we are talking about equality. I am not taking weight away from feminism, but I am saying that the constitution does not necessarily have to be called “feminist constitution” to be so. What we have to do is to put at the center of the discussion the patriarchal violence that affects women, children and gender dissidence. Put at the center the recognition of the rights of nature, the right



to water, which is vital; social rights, which must be substantive rights and not class privileges. To put at the center the historical memory, a feminist historical memory, in the sense of making visible the struggles that we women have fought; the sexual political violence that we suffer from the State until today, women and sex/gender dissidence. On March 8th we had several reports of women comrades who were abused by the police in brutal ways. We have to take charge, as social workers, because we do Social Work from a human rights perspective.

Learn more about Natalia's work:

Corrales, N. (2021). No tenemos derechos laborales básicos. El Desconcierto Newspaper.

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Cofré, G. y Corrales, N. (2020). Covid-19: Pandemia de la precariedad. CIPER: <https://www.ciperchile.cl/2020/04/02/covid-19-pandemia-de-la-precariedad/>

Corrales, N. y Rivera, I. (2020). Presupuesto Base Cero Ajustado, ¿hacia más precarización estatal? Columna de opinión publicada en La Voz de Los Que Sobran <https://lavodelosquesobran.cl/presupuesto-base-cero-ajustado-hacia-mas-precarizacion-estatal/>

Corporación de Investigación, Estudio y Desarrollo de la Seguridad Social (CIEDESS). Ejecutivo se reúne con trabajadores a honorarios del Estado por cotización de independientes. Nota de prensa. <https://www.ciedess.cl/601/w3-article-2893.html>

Federación Honorarios del Estado <https://www.facebook.com/HonorariosdelEstadoUNTTHEmcn>

Coordinadora Feminista 8M
<http://cf8m.cl/>

⁴ Agentes policiales del Estado.



*Poster of Natalia in her candidacy as Constituent for District 7.
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