

Chile 1970-73: The Brutal Repression of Workers Power

Mike Gonzalez

32 On September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet, flanked by the leaders of the armed forces of Chile and backed by the Cardinal, appeared on television to announce that they had seized power in a military coup. Hawker Hunter planes had already bombarded La Moneda, the presidential palace in the capital, Santiago, where Salvador Allende, the president elected in 1970, was trapped with his closest supporters. He died later that morning. Part of the political mythology of Latin America is that military coups are frequent. It is true of some countries, but Chile had a reputation as a stable bourgeois democracy, with regular elections and a professionalised army. Since 1973, Chile has become synonymous with repressive military regimes that torture and murder trade unionists, peasant farmers and students, like those of Uruguay and Argentina in the 1970s. Chile, it seemed, was a model to be followed.

Until the coup, Chile was not especially present in the consciousness of the rest of the world. Trapped in a narrow coastal belt between the Andes and the Pacific and limited to the south by the Antarctic and to the north by the Atacama Desert, it was the last frontier in the Spanish Conquest of the Americas. The Spanish conquistadors, led by Pedro de Valdivia, crossed the Atacama in 1541 and were faced with the determined resistance of the Mapuche people of the south. They proved ferocious enemies, until their lands were finally occupied in 1558. Under their colonial rulers Chile produced wheat and silver to finance Spanish imperial expansion. The wars of independence at the beginning of the 19th century against the collapsing Spanish empire created the Latin

American republics, Chile among them. The colonial class fought to defend the old regime until independence was won in 1818. A glance at the Chilean telephone directory tells a story of the new European emigration that followed independence; the names (such as Edwards and Subercaseaux) – reflect the migration of a new middle class with a dream of growing rich on Chile's natural resources. The first boom was the trade in guano, the droppings of seabirds on the unpopulated islands off the coast which was both an effective fertiliser and a component of gunpowder.

In the 1850s, copper, silver and coal mining developed, attracting European speculators and investors, particularly British banks. And it was the same bankers who supported Chile's war against its northern neighbours, Peru, and Bolivia (the so-called War of the Pacific (1879-83) for the nitrates mined in the desert and for control of the saltpetre (called *salitre* in Spanish) essential to the production of explosives. Peru lost the mineral rich Atacama and Bolivia the port of Tacna, its only outlet to the sea. The broken Peruvian economy then began to rebuild with loans from the same British banks. Capitalism has no scruples when profit is involved!

By 1881, 78 percent of Chile's export earnings came from mining (nitrates and copper) and the industry boomed until the discovery of artificial nitrates at the beginning of the First World War undermined an industry which the new middle class, mostly of European origin, were the beneficiaries. The older landowners had suffered badly in the economic recession of 1883 and had entered alliances with the newer capitalists to maintain political control. It was this ruling class alliance that persisted, in different forms, well into the 20th century.

The 53,000 nitrate workers and the coal miners provided the base for Chile's emerging trade unions. The leading figure in the workers movement of the early 20th century, Luis Emilio Recabarren, was a revolutionary socialist who formed a socialist party in 1912. He was also the sole Chilean delegate to the first Comintern Congress in 1919 and later founded the Communist Party in 1922. He was immensely effective and popular, but like many leading revolutionaries, he fell foul of the Stalinist leadership of the Comintern and committed suicide in 1924. His importance remains unacknowledged.

The collapse of the nitrate industry virtually destroyed the working class movement and radicalised a middle class which saw its privileged position disappear almost overnight. That early history had direct political consequences for the next generation too when another economic crisis led to political turmoil and heightened struggle. The immediate consequence of the crisis was the creation in 1931 of a military regime under Carlos Ibáñez, but in June 1932 a socialist junta took power that included Colonel Marmaduke Grove as defence minister: he would later become president for twelve days. The short lived government of which he formed part passed some radical measures in its 100 days of existence. All foreign capital held in Chilean banks, for example, would be forfeited to the state, half a million free meals were to be distributed daily to the poor, and an agrarian reform bill was proposed. However, the socialist republic was itself quickly overthrown, and Grove was arrested and imprisoned.

A year later, Grove was a founder member, together with Salvador Allende, of the Socialist Party of Chile, which declared itself Marxist-Leninist. In 1938, as part of a coalition known as the FRAP, Allende stood for the presidency – as he would several times before his election in

1970. The FRAP was a popular front, following the policies of the Comintern, based on collaboration with bourgeois parties - the Chilean Communist Party adopted the same position, as did its Spanish equivalent in 1936. Allende always described himself as a Marxist, but in practice his interpretation of Marx was social democratic: he was on the right of his party which always contained a range of revolutionary currents too. Allende was a doctor and popular figure. He stood again as the candidate of coalitions of the left in presidential elections in 1952, 1958 and 1964, unsuccessfully. The election of 1964, however, was significantly different. His main opponent then was Eduardo Frei, a Christian Democrat.

The 'Revolution in Liberty'

Future U.S. vice-president Nelson Rockefeller's Latin American tour in 1958 was met by demonstrations and protesters wherever he went, while the Cuban Revolution the following year was celebrated in a wave of anti-imperialist enthusiasm. Washington knew that their allies were deeply unpopular, including the eternal candidate of the Chilean right, Alessandri, the scion of one of the country's most powerful families. When Guatemala elected a progressive government in 1951, promising agrarian

reform and internal democracy, a military coup supported by the U.S. and the United Fruit Company that owned half of its land bombed the capital and threw out its popular president, Jacobo Arbenz.¹ Faced with widespread support for Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution, Washington looked for other ways to exercise their power over Latin America.

In 1961, John. F. Kennedy founded the Alliance for Progress, with the promise of supporting economic and social development in Latin America. At the same time, a number of European academics were recruited to devise strategic alternatives to the spectre of revolution. The ‘Revolution in Liberty’, (to be set in motion by a Christian Democracy), proposed a series of reformist measures to counter the influence of the Cuban revolution - and Chile was chosen as the first location for the experiment.

It had a stable parliamentary system based historically on political alliances, armed forces which appeared to stand outside politics, a potential social base in a rural population still deprived of land by the continuing power of the landowners, and a middle class which was demanding educational reform and

economic development. The Chilean economy was by then almost wholly dependent on copper mining which was controlled by two U.S.-based multinationals, Kennecott, and Anaconda. Transferring ownership of the industry to Chile would satisfy the demand for its nationalisation that united the working class and most of the middle class, while bringing new revenue into the coffers of the State.

But instead of nationalisation, Frei offered “Chileanisation” - passing the industry into the hands of Chilean private capital. After the multinationals failed in their attempts to block the distribution of Chilean copper in the global market, they were paid wildly overpriced compensation which undermined any hopes of redistribution. But the promise embodied in the ‘Revolution in Liberty’, however false, awoke hopes and expectations among ordinary Chileans – and anger and protest when the promises were not kept.

By the end of the sixties there were confrontations and strikes across Chile and a deepening social crisis. An agrarian reform programme also stalled, in part through the organised resistance of landowners who used the courts to stop the process. Landless workers and

peasant farmers responded by occupying land by direct action. The promise to deliver economic and industrial growth accelerated the process of migration from the country to the cities by poor rural populations seeking work. One result of this was a housing crisis which provoked large scale land occupations in the cities where the self-built *poblaciones* gave precarious shelter to the poor.

In 1969 the situation led to a confrontation between the military and squatters in the southern city of Puerto Montt which resulted in several deaths. The Chilean higher education system was notoriously elitist, and in that same year a nationwide student protest marched the length of the country demanding the democratisation of the education system. Far from calming the demand for change, the “revolution in liberty” reinforced it, intensifying the mobilisations as the campaign for the presidential elections of 1970 approached.

A different Chile

The highest number of strikes were recorded in 1969 as workers demanded the improvements in wages and living standards that Frei had promised but not delivered. The failure to enact agrarian reform and redistribute land to small

farmers also produced a rising tide of land occupations which the landowning class failed to repress. The student movement was demanding a transformation of Chile’s conservative, Catholic dominated education system and the rural migrations to the cities in the search for work created new confrontations around the lack of housing. At the same time, Allende’s election campaign was marked by a cultural revolution of its own. A generation of musicians and song writers, many of whom learned their craft from the singer-songwriter Violeta Parra, produced a new music built on folk and popular traditions from Latin America and performed by new groups like Quilapayun and Inti-Illimani, who set Allende’s election manifesto to music in the “Canto al Programa”. And on the walls of the cities an anonymous movement of young artists – the Brigada Ramona Parra- painted huge and beautiful murals, symbolic of a new public art. One of Inti-Illimani’s songs echoed the atmosphere in the streets.

Esta vez no se trata de cambiar un presidente, Sino de crear un Chile bien diferente.

This time it’s not about electing another president, but of building a very different Chile.

Allende's political career had developed through a series of electoral coalitions with other parties in pursuit of "an alliance with the progressive bourgeoisie", the popular front he had advocated in the thirties. Though he described himself as a Marxist, and his strategy as "The Chilean Road to Socialism", he was committed to achieving his goals within the framework of Chile's bourgeois democracy. The presidential elections of September 1970 gave his Popular Unity (UP) coalition the largest number of votes, just over 36 percent, but not the absolute majority that would ensure his confirmation in post by Congress. Jorge Alessandri for the right wing National Party won 34.9 percent and Radimiro Tomic, a left Christian Democrat 27.8 percent. The bourgeoisie were clearly divided, but this did not explain Allende's victory. He had won the support of a mobilised population at a time of deepening social crisis. To assume the Presidency in November, however, Allende needed the support of others in Congress. And the price of that support was an agreement he signed with the Christian Democrats called the *Statute of Guarantees*, a series of concessions which were to prove of

critical importance, though the Statute was never publicly acknowledged.

It was clear from the outset that bourgeois parties would not support any radical measures, so the framework of UP's reforms was the existing legislation. Allende's political programme operated within the constraints imposed by a coalition of reformist parties and a perspective announced as 'designed to win over the middle sectors'.² In many ways, the programme went little further than Frei's; it promised economic growth, based on raising the level of consumption, and a general wage rise, thus taking up the slack in the economy. On the question of agrarian reform, it undertook to carry through the provisions of Frei's 1967 Agrarian Reform Law, redistributing land to small farmers by dividing up the great estates. Most importantly, its first act in government was to legislate for the nationalisation without compensation of copper, the source of the bulk of Chile's export income, although as we have seen, private companies had already withdrawn most of their investments from Chile during the Frei period and had been paid compensation, which left very little for the Chilean state. The programme sought to take on the Chilean oligarchy – that 2 percent of the population whose wealth

stemmed from the land, but whose interests now extended into industry, finance, and the press. Nonetheless, compensation to expropriated landlords was to be generous. And while the oligarchy was attacked, it was made clear that 'enterprises where private ownership of the means of production will remain in force will in terms of numbers remain the majority'. Overall, the plan was to nationalise 150 out of 3500 firms (and that figure was further reduced at a later stage), leaving 60 percent of industry outside the public sector.

38 The Statute of Guarantees clearly established the limits of UP policy. Signed in October 1970, it was an undertaking by Allende to respect the autonomy of the police, and the armed forces, and to refrain from interference with the press and mass media, education, and the Church. The Christian Democrats still had a majority in parliament, which they used to try to block and undermine every UP initiative. In effect, the price of Christian Democrat support for Allende's assumption of the Presidency was the assurance that UP would not attempt to extend its control into any other institution of the state, nor use it to mount any ideological challenge to the existing regime.

The mass movement that had brought Allende to power, however, knew nothing of the Statute, and the level of class struggle increased throughout 1971, given an extra impulse by Allende's victory. For Allende, this represented a serious problem, a threat to the politics of compromise and to the capture of the middle sectors. His early speeches, therefore, returned persistently to two themes: one, the need to raise production and productivity as an urgent priority, and two, the need to restrict workers' and peasants' demands and actions within the limits of bourgeois legality.

It is a challenge to us to accomplish everything in legal terms ... History has broken with past patterns; our revolutionary path is the pluralist path ... It is neither an easy nor a short-term task to build socialism. It is a long and difficult task in which the working class must participate with discipline, organisation, and political responsibility, avoiding, above all, anarchistic decisions, and irresponsible, impulsive acts.³

This was to be a recurrent theme in government statements, growing more insistent as the class struggle developed. The first year (1971) brought a general wage rise of 38 percent for

manual workers and 120 percent for white collar workers, unemployment fell to below 10 percent, 90 factories were nationalised, and 1400 estates (30 percent of Chile's cultivable land) were taken into state ownership. Inflation fell and GDP rose by 8 percent. These early economic advances were not the result of socialist measures, however, but of orthodox Keynesian techniques whereby the state intervened to raise the general level of economic activity. Their initial impact was to raise the living standards of workers, while prices remained for the first time below the level of wage rises. But as was to become clear by the end of the first year, none of these initial actions affected the structure of Chilean capitalism nor represented any serious inroads into the economic power of the Chilean bourgeoisie. The confidence expressed in municipal elections of April 1971, which increased the UP vote, was rapidly to come into question. In May, Allende called in the MIR, a far left organisation which was outside the coalition and was deeply involved in the squatter's movement, for discussions concerning the growing number of occupations of urban and farm land. In June, he moved to restrain 'illegal' occupations, which the Communist Party simultaneously denounced as 'ultra left' provocations. In July, the bill for the

nationalisation of copper received unanimous support in Congress.⁴

It was already clear that the honeymoon period would be brief. The US acted quickly to block economic aid, channelling it instead to right wing parties and the military. And while private capital was enjoying the fruits of the short-term boom, there was significant disinvestment and hoarding of goods, particularly food, to create an economic crisis. During the first year of the Allende government, strikes, land occupations and mobilisations continued. In the face of food shortages, the state created organs of food distribution (the JAPs) to be run by local communities themselves. The shortages were the result of the hoarding of goods by the bourgeoisie, but they waited to take to the streets until the visit of Fidel Castro in November 1971.

He was met by demonstrations of the middle classes waving and banging empty saucepans and complaining of the food shortages for which they were responsible. The fact that many demonstrators brought along their maids and cooks to carry the pots undermined their claims of hardship. At the beginning of 1972 it was not government legislation that shaped the course of events but the

intensification of the class struggle. The previous year had seen 1278 land occupations and 1758 strikes, the highest numbers yet. Radimiro Tomic, the ‘left’ Christian Democrat, complained of

illegal occupations of farms, smallholdings, shanty towns, rented land, commercial offices, factories, mines, schools, colleges, public buildings, roads, and bridges. Illegal occupations are not only the work of the ultra-left; they are also the spontaneous actions of groups of peasants, workers, and miners.⁵

40 In January, the right used their control of Congress to impeach Jose Toha, the Interior Minister. In February they put forward a bill restricting Allende’s right to order nationalisations. In the light of this offensive two alternative strategies emerged within UP – to encourage and strengthen the workers’ own struggles to create extra-parliamentary support for the government (as the left socialists were arguing), or to appeal to the Constitutional Court (as the socialist right, Allende himself and the CP were advocating). At Popular Unity conferences at El Arrayan and Lo Curro, the right wing strategy won hands down. The results were immediate – the pace of nationalisation slowed, talks designed to

agree upon a joint economic strategy with the Christian Democrats began, and Socialist and Communist ministers began to advocate punitive action against workers in struggle. On May 12, for instance, a street demonstration in Concepcion produced clashes. The Communist mayor called in the infamous riot police, *the Grupo Movil*, which Allende had promised to dismantle but could not touch because of the Statute of Guarantees. The Communist Party then denounced the MIR, the Revolutionary Movement of the Left, as ‘ultra left’ for jeopardising further talks with the Christian Democrats.

In keeping with this turn to the right, Pedro Vuskovic, economics minister, a left independent who was closely identified with calls for further nationalisations and thus a particular target for right wing attack was dismissed from the Cabinet. The domination of the press and mass media by the right was guaranteed by the Statute of Guarantees, which ensured that it had the largest audience. The Catholic University channel, *Channel 9*, became the province of a neo fascist priest called Hasbun, whose constant hysterical attacks provoked a series of workers’ occupations. Here, too, the Allende government used the police to ensure the

return of the station to its 'rightful owners'. And a series of minor electoral victories for UP served only to encourage and harden the right within the coalition. The implications of the political line adopted at the UP congresses at El Arrayan and Lo Curro were most clearly illustrated in the government's relationship with the army. While the assault of the right continued in the ideological arena, and in parliament itself, Allende time and again reaffirmed his commitment to the Constitution. At the conference of UNCTAD held in April in Santiago, for example, he protested that.

Little weight has been carried ... by the fact that the nationalisation process, with all its implications and consequences, has been the clearest and most categorical expression of the will of its people, and has been conducted in full accordance with the exact dictates of provisions established in the nation's Constitution.⁶

And in their public declarations, Allende and other UP leaders insisted on the neutrality of the armed forces. As Luis Corvalan, Secretary of the Communist Party, put it, 'the army is not a body alien

to the nation, in the service of anti-national interests', while Allende himself pointed to the 'patriotism of our armed forces, their traditional professionalism, and their submission to the civil authority'.⁷ These declarations were presumably meant to legitimate the increasingly central role the army was coming to play throughout 1972. In March, the visit of General John Ryan of the US Army was followed by an announcement of increased military aid to Chile – the UP government had nothing to say. Instead, it called in the army to control events – first, in December 1971, during the March of the Empty Pots; then, in May 1972, to enforce a ban against a left wing counter demonstration in the city of Concepcion.

Several months earlier, the army had been called to the Chuquicamata copper mine to control a miners' strike. Then, on August 18, 400 armed police invaded the poor working class shanty town of Lo Hermida in Santiago, leaving one person dead, another dying, and an unspecified number injured. Several days later, Allende offered his apologies to the inhabitants – yet at the same time he condemned the activities of the 'ultra left', suggesting an equivalence of the resistance of the poor and the repression by the armed forces. It was a slogan that

42 appeared repeatedly in CP and government publications in the final year of Allende's Presidency. In September, in response to right wing attacks on a radio station in Bio Bio province, Allende declared a state of emergency, thus handing effective control to the police and the army once again. If Lo Hermida had taught Allende nothing, it served to reinforce the fears of the rank and file of the workers' movement. The People's Assembly of Concepcion, held in July and August 1972 with 2,000 delegates attending, called for the formation of a national Popular Assembly (which was actually part of the UP programme), and argued that the struggle for workers' control must be stepped up at all levels. The final item in its closing statement called for the construction of a workers' state. It was clear that the class struggle was intensifying, as October was to prove.

October

Early in October 1972, Allende embarked on a new set of discussions, this time with the judiciary, aimed at 'curbing the violence of left and right'. Then, towards the end of the month, the lorry owners' organisation announced a national strike, ostensibly in protest at the plan to form a national transport system. In a country so

dependent on long haul road transport the implications were very serious. The owners gathered the lorries in car parks on city outskirts, removed key engine parts, and set up armed guards at the gates. The strike was joined by large numbers of shopkeepers, and several professional organisations – of lawyers and doctors – announced their support for the strike. The Christian Democrats refused to discuss the situation with Allende, who was clearly unable to decide what to do. In the event, it was the working class which determined the outcome of events, forming Communal Commands and '*Cordones*', elected committees to run factories together with local communities, and to organise food distribution, and security. The working class took on the lorry owners and the capitalists directly and kept transport functioning. The result was defeat for the ruling class and the right, and a renewed confidence and strength among the workers. Against the lorry owners, led by an extreme right group called Fatherland and Liberty, they had forged new organs of control and had demonstrated where the power in society really lay.

For Allende, however, the central issue was to reimpose state control. Once again, he called in the army to 'restore order' – three generals now joined the

Cabinet.⁸ The key task as he saw it was the return of the factories occupied during the bosses' strike. And this, in turn, demanded the demobilisation of the workers. As far as UP was concerned, the immediate task was to pull back the workers' organisations under the umbrella of the UP parties and the CUT, the trade union confederation dominated by the CP. In the aftermath, the organisations set up by the working class to coordinate their resistance to the right, were attacked as organisations parallel to the CUT. *El Siglo*, the Communist Party newspaper, as well as the Socialist Party, denounced them as anarchist forms of organisation.

The whole Chilean process was documented by the brilliant filmmaker Patricio Guzman in the three chapters of his film 'The *Battle of Chile*'. There is a scene dating from the October period, filmed within the Vicuña Mackenna *Cordon* in an industrial area of Santiago. The workers are being addressed by a trade union official from the CUT; their anger is as palpable as the discomfort of the man from the CUT who is trying, and failing, to reimpose the authority of the official unions. For UP, the coming congressional elections of March 1973 would provide an ideal opportunity to channel the energies of the workers into

electoral activity and away from their independent mobilisations. By January 1973, the *Cordones* had been effectively demobilised, though to cover himself Allende responded with some new measures. Simultaneously, the Minister of Economy, Orlando Millas, a CP member who had replaced Vuskovic, proposed the return of 123 occupied factories to their owners, and repeated the accusation that the takeover by the workers during the bosses' strike of the previous October was anarchic and ultra left.

In April the copper miners at the El Teniente mine struck in support of the annual review of their wages and conditions, which the government refused to implement. In reality, Allende was asking them to sacrifice the gains they had won in struggle in order to appease the right and encourage the bourgeoisie to reinvest. When the strike persisted, Allende denounced the miners as 'traitors' and when the miners marched to Santiago, they were greeted by ranks of police who attacked them with tear gas and water cannon. The bitterness and anger of the miners was carefully exploited by the right – fuelling even more the confusions of the left, who also attacked the miners. The MIR, for example, criticised the use of force, but

attacked the miners for “economism”, even though they were fighting to maintain their living standards in an economy that remained capitalist. Yet the miners had not only been the backbone of the working class movement throughout its history; they had also given their support to the UP time and again in the period since 1970.

44 As the March elections approached, the rhetoric of UP appeared to move to the left, proposing a more central role for the CUT and a general wage rise for lower paid workers, though Allende appealed to striking miners to return to work and moderate their wage demand just three weeks later. In the event, UP won the elections with an increased vote (43.4 percent). Yet when a document from MAPU (a constituent organisation of Popular Unity) criticising the government for its concessions to the right emerged a few days later, fifteen members were expelled and the organisation split.

The increased working class vote was an expression of a new confidence and strength gained during the struggles of October. Yet within a month, Allende responded to the increasingly open attacks from the right, and the Christian Democrats in particular, by again attacking the ‘ultra left’ on television.

Street violence increased, yet throughout May and June, Allende focussed on seeking a dialogue with the right, even as the signs of their open mobilisation against him increased.

Counter revolution

The core of the right wing attack was that UP had reduced the country to economic chaos. The shops were empty, the black market was rampant, and inflation was running above 400 percent. Real wages fell in 1973 by around 50 percent.⁹ Clearly, the direct responsibility for the crisis could not be laid at UP’s door. The economic chaos was consciously created by the bourgeoisie, through economic sabotage, the export of capital, and the systematic hoarding of goods. The United States, too, was exercising constant economic pressure by insisting on the repayment of debts while blocking aid to the government. And while welfare payments, and the wages of the poorest had risen during the first two years, inflation ensured that the gains were lost: and the area of the economy under state control was shrinking.

The non-revolutionary left did not contradict the allegation that the independent organisation of workers in these circumstances was anarchic -

instead they echoed these arguments and remained silent when Allende insisted that the UP was a government of the workers that had “conquered a part of power”. A Socialist militant, Pio García, responded to “the simplistic formulation that ‘part of power’ has been won. The bourgeois state (he said) still exists in Chile...The formula ‘dual power’ corresponds to a situation, as in Russia in 1917, when the Soviets and the provisional government confronted one another, when there coexisted two powers which by definition cannot exist within a single state apparatus”.¹⁰ One critical mark of the difference was the attitude of the UP government towards the armed forces, the central column of the bourgeois state.

On June 29, 1973, the tank regiment rolled on to the streets of Santiago and their commander Roberto Souper declared a coup. It was clearly a test of the readiness of the working class to respond, and a rehearsal for what was to come. It served once again to demonstrate the readiness of the working class to take on the bourgeoisie and conduct its own struggle directly. But it also exposed the lack of preparation of the parties of the UP to confront a coup. The response from UP was once again to affirm their confidence in the

constitutionalism of the armed forces. The working-class organisations that had appeared briefly in October 1972 emerged again, though their documents (and above all the newspaper of the joint committee of the *Cordones*, Tarea Urgente) showed a greater political understanding and an even more combative spirit. Once again, the factories were occupied, and distribution controlled directly. And this time the workers’ organisation also began to organise the defence of the factories. This was too much for Allende, who turned again to the army, inviting them to join the Cabinet. They refused. He offered posts to two leading Christian Democrats. They also declined. Yet, despite this refusal, the major government supporters called on the armed forces to take responsibility for the ‘restoration of order’.¹¹ Their message to the workers was work harder, accept more sacrifice, ‘production is also revolution’ and ‘collect signatures against civil war’. As far as Allende saw it, the key task at this point was to remove the historical initiative from the working class and restore it, *by force, if necessary*, to the state. One month later, in August, the military entered the Cabinet of UP for the last time. What changed their mind? Two events; the first was the government’s agreement to implement

the Arms Control Law. Ostensibly passed to deal with the right, the Arms Control Law was administered directly by the armed forces – and was, in the reality of the situation, an invitation to the armed forces to disarm the working class. When the lorry owners embarked on a second national strike on July 26, it was in the knowledge that their chief enemy, the organised working class, was under systematic attack. On August 9, the Financial Times reported:

Availing themselves of powers given them under the arms control law, the armed services set about searching factories and leftist enclaves. These raids, carried out with little delicacy, incurred the wrath of the left. Few arms have apparently been turned up by the searches, and while nests of weapons have been uncovered by the police in the redoubts of wealthy rightists, and the present wave of violence certainly comes from the right, the military's attention has been focussed exclusively on the left.¹²

During these 'arms searches', militants, union activists and members of left parties were tortured and murdered. Allende knew – the left press contained

literally hundreds of stories of what was happening; the Socialist Party Journal, *Chile Hoy*, carried dramatic photographs and eyewitness reports. But Allende and his government did nothing. They could not hear the message coming from one worker at the Vicuna McKenna Cordon:

... what we want is a revolution, we don't want reformism, we want people's power once and for all in Chile. We don't want generals in the new Cabinet because we think they want to stop the revolution.¹³

The signs of what was to come were impossible to ignore. In July, *Chile Hoy* published a debate between members of the right on whether a 'soft' (economic) or a 'hard' (military) coup was preferable. A group of sailors wrote to Allende warning that military preparations were already under way in the Navy. Allende called on the naval command to deal with it! Pinochet, who had been given the public order responsibility in the Cabinet, was already ordering attacks on trade unions and political parties. Allende had insisted that Carlos Prats, the commander in chief and a socialist, was a constitutionalist. Prats resigned and recommended Pinochet for his post and then left the country. His

loyalty, it appeared, was to the army and not the constitution. On August 9 General Ruiz, the transport minister, called openly for a coup. On September 4, a huge demonstration marched through the streets of Santiago on the anniversary of Allende's election. One observer described the muted and demoralised atmosphere, so different from the September day in 1970 when Allende was elected.¹⁴ Seven days later the coup was announced; but the persecution of trade unionists and militants, the occupation of union and party headquarters, the arrests and the torture had started weeks before. The most striking thing was that despite declarations to the contrary, the organisations of Popular Unity were completely unprepared.

The aftermath

In the days that followed, the sinister Caravan of Death passed through the country taking socialists, activists and trade unionists to the torture centres and concentration camps around the country. We now know that at least 6300 people were murdered during and after the coup. Thousands were imprisoned and tortured. The reaction internationally was immediate as solidarity campaigns began to make known that this experiment in democracy in a bourgeois democracy had

been drowned in blood. The debates on the left were intense. Inevitably the whole thing was explained as a CIA operation or the work of psychopaths in uniform. Both were almost certainly true, but the explanation had already been given in a ludicrous speech in May 1971 by Carlos Altamirano, the general secretary of Allende's Socialist Party

Armed confrontation between classes is inevitable ... Reaction will again knock at the barracks door. Lenin's words are pertinent to our situation: 'It seems impossible to fight against a modern army; the army has to become revolutionary ...' In reality, the indecision of the troops, inevitable in any truly popular movement, leads to a real struggle for the army as the revolutionary struggle intensifies.¹⁵

Altamirano seems to be arguing that the workers in uniform should take on the officers. It is an absurd position. Workers will fight when the class is organised and ready to respond. Some soldiers did respond in Chile – and they were immediately shot. Without political leadership, rank and file soldiers cannot take on the struggle themselves.¹⁶ In the days after the coup, there was a persistent

rumour that Prats had prepared for a military response and would defend the constitution. As we have seen, when he had the opportunity, he resigned and passed his post to Pinochet. It was bourgeois democracy that both men were prepared to defend, not the interests of the working class. Many comrades were persuaded that the factories had stocks of arms in preparation. But at one of the better organised factories one militant complained that.

When we got there (the Indumetal factory) the workers had already occupied the factory with the most rudimentary weapons. We gave out AMK guns and showed them how to use them. We had some bazookas and some machine guns. The most disturbing factor, though, was the lack of any specific plan, any direction and especially the lack of contact and coordination with other places where there was resistance. We'd no idea what was going on outside the factory".¹⁷

In fact, they were among the very few whose small stocks of arms had not been confiscated in previous weeks by the military. The general picture was one of confusion, impotence, and isolation; the

working class was left to take the brunt of a coup that, by 1974, had murdered 6300 of their number. The Chilean Road to socialism, it appeared, only followed the parliamentary route: there was no strategy for the intensification of the class struggle across society.

Allende's election was celebrated by reformism as evidence that socialism could come through parliamentary change, that class confrontation could be avoided. The actions of UP were directed at winning the right to compromise. Chile tells it very differently. Reformism absorbs the left into the delusion that the ruling class in a capitalist society will concede power. Chile is the evidence that when its power is challenged by a working class prepared to act in its own interests to emancipate itself through its own actions, as Marx put it, then the ruling class will act with the maximum savagery in defence of its interests. The rules will cease to apply.

When the coup took place, no appeal to law, constitution or human rights was worth a candle when the interests of the powerful were at risk. And in Chile they were genuinely at risk. The working class had begun to act collectively in its class interests and to discover its own potential. For the Chilean bourgeoisie

that was their worst nightmare, and they acted with maximum savagery in response. The reality is that global capitalism had a different plan. Neo-liberalism was its vision of the future, but its implementation required the demobilisation of the workers movement, the destruction of its capacity to fight back. And the terrible irony of Chile is that it was a government claiming to be socialist that deployed those weapons against its base in the working class. In the months after the coup, the communist and social democratic parties around the world met to draw their conclusions from Chile. Enrico Berlinguer, general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, put it this way.

We must work to constantly increase the weight and ensure the eventual predominance of those tendencies that, with a sense of historical and political realism, recognise the necessity and maturity of a constructive dialogue and agreement among all the popular forces ... we are the first to realise that the march towards this prospect is not easy and cannot be hurried. But neither must we think that the time at our disposal is infinite ... the necessity to open at long last a sure road of economic development, social renewal, and

democratic progress ... make it increasingly urgent and pressing to arrive at what we call the great new 'historical compromise'.¹⁸

Berlinguer's historic compromise is the abandonment of socialism itself. For revolutionary socialists, however, the lesson of Chile is to remember that socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class, and that Chile is evidence of their capacity to create in their struggles the instruments of their liberation. Allende's last speech before his death at the hands of those who organised the military coup was moving. Allende argued, "The people must defend themselves, but they must not sacrifice themselves. The people must not let themselves be destroyed or riddled with bullets, but they cannot be humiliated either".¹⁹ Yet he headed a state which had denounced its self-defence as anarchic and compromised with its class enemies. In the end it was an admission of defeat. Yet the Chilean October, despite its terrible human cost, was the legacy it left for the international revolutionary movement.

Endnotes

¹ It was no coincidence that the head of the FBI and the Secretary of State at the time were respectively the brothers Allen and John Foster Dulles, both directors of United Fruit.

² The full UP programme is in Ann Zammit (ed) 1973. *The Chilean Road to Socialism*, Brighton; and Salvadore Allende 1973. *Chile's road to socialism*, London, pp. 23–51.

³ Salvador Allende. 1973. *Chile's road to socialism*. London. p.139.

⁴ Why should the National Party and the Christian Democrats support the nationalisation of copper? Most importantly, because it was the *quid pro quo* for the *Statute of Guarantees*; because their forces were still in slight disarray, and they were anxious not to discredit themselves; and the Christian Democrats could hardly oppose a measure they themselves had set in motion.

⁵ *Morning Star*, 7 August 1972.

⁶ Allende: op. cit., pp. 192,3.

⁷ Allende in op. cit., p. 141.

⁸ The only public repudiation of the move came from the Christian Left, who resigned from the Cabinet.

⁹For a detailed account of the economic situation see Phil O'Brien et al. 1977. *Chile, State and Revolution*. London chapter 6, pp. 123–160.

¹⁰ Gabriel Smirnow. 1974. *The Revolution Disarmed: Chile 1970–73*, London, p. 103.

¹¹ See the speech by Luis Corvalan, in *Marxism Today*, September 1973.

¹² Mike Gonzalez. 1984. The Left and the coup in Chile. *International Socialism* 2:22 pp,45-86.

¹³ *Chile Hoy*, August 1973, quoted in Phil O'Brien *et al.*, 1977, pp. 180–181.

¹⁴ See Helios Prieto. *The gorillas are amongst us*. London 1974. The march was filmed by Patricio Guzman and included in “The battle of Chile part 1”. The atmosphere on the march is muted, the faces of the marchers demoralised.

¹⁵ Gabriel Smirnow, op. cit., pp. 14–15.

¹⁶ This issue is discussed in Mike Gonzalez and Houman Barekat (eds) *Arms and the people* London, 2013.

¹⁷ Quoted in, Chile trade unions and the resistance, *Chile Fights* 11, p. 3.

¹⁸ Enrico Berlinguer. 1974. Reflections on the events in Chile, *Marxism Today*, February, p. 50.

¹⁹ Salvadore Allende, Last Words to the Nation, @ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/allende/1973/september/11.htm>