



The Lessons of Chile; Popular Unity 1970-1973

This article was originally written by Stuart King for Workers Power newspaper in September 1983, on the tenth anniversary of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's coup. It has been lightly edited for this edition. Wed, 11/09/2013 - 16:10

This article was originally written by Stuart King for Workers Power newspaper in September 1983, on the tenth anniversary of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's coup. It has been lightly edited for this edition.

The Chilean coup of September 11, 1973, was the most severe defeat suffered by the international working class of the post-war epoch. The events of 1970-74 have vital lessons for us in a new period of revolutions and counterrevolutions. Whenever the working class fails to learn from the past it is condemned to re-live it.

On November 4th 1970, Salvador Allende took up the Presidency of Chile. At the head of the Popular Unity (PU), he had achieved 36.3% of the popular vote as against his Radical Democrat-National Party (RD-NP) and Christian Democrat (CD) rivals, who gained 34.9% and 27.8% of the vote respectively. The disunity of the main bourgeois parties stemmed from the failure of President Eduardo Frei's "reform" government (1964-70) and was a mark of Chile's deep crisis.

Popular Unity brought together the two main parties of Chilean working class politics, the Communist and Socialist parties, with three small bourgeois parties - the Radical Party, the Social Democrats and Independent Popular Action (API). These were based mainly on the small industrialists, businessmen and professionals. The Radical Party had once been the major "liberal reform party" of the Chilean bourgeoisie but had been ousted from this role by the Christian Democrats. Closer to the SP and the CP, a small petit bourgeois party, the Movement for Unified Popular Action (MAPU) made up the coalition.

POPULAR UNITY ? POPULAR FRONT

This was not Chile's first experience of a Popular Front. Salvador Allende, himself a doctor, had been a reforming minister of health in just such a government in 1938-41. Popular Unity's programme was, as Allende told the New York Times, "not a communist programme, nor a socialist programme", but "a convergence of opinion." Popular Unity, he made clear, was not going to attack capitalism in Chile. How could it with three parties that openly defended capitalist property within its ranks?

The CP held to a nearly 40-year old commitment to the "revolution" by stages in which the present stage had to be conducted in alliance with the national bourgeoisie. Its aims were limited to breaking the power of the landed oligarchy, the monopolists and the economic stranglehold of the US corporations.

There was, of course, one drawback to this strategy. The decisive sections of the Chilean ruling class were precisely the oligarchs and monopolists. No distinct national bourgeoisie, capable of independent action against the US, existed. The weakness of the bourgeois parties which joined Popular Unity reflected just this. With Allende's support, the CP attempted to coax the Christian Democrats into playing the progressive "national bourgeois" role. On no account were they to be frightened into hardened opposition. Thus, Popular Unity's programme talked not of socialism but of "People's Power" and a "People's Government" and of the "profound changes that the national situation requires?", based on the transfer of power from the old ruling groups to the workers, peasants and progressive middle sectors, urban and rural.

The programme outlined a series of reforms to answer the problems facing an ailing and stagnating Chilean capitalism.

These included the unresolved land problem. Chile was still dominated by inefficient latifundia (huge estates) and a land hungry peasantry. Then there was the massive exploitation of Chile's major source of wealth - copper - by US imperialism. Two US corporations, Anaconda and Kennecott, largely controlled the country's mines.

Their super profits, added to by selling Chilean copper to their US based plants at half the world market prices, ranged between 20% and 80% on their Chilean operations. Copper represented the decisive grip which US, and to a lesser extent, European, imperialism, had on the Chilean economy. Frei's feeble attempts to alleviate this had been a dismal failure. Chile's growth rate remained lower than most other Latin American countries; its national debt had risen to the highest per capita in the world by the end of his presidency. The failure of land reform was leading to rural disturbances.

In this situation, Popular Unity seemed to offer a programme of dynamic reforms; redistribution of the landed estates; nationalisation of US copper companies and the use of an expanded state and "mixed sector" to promote economic growth and industrial development. Why then was the victory of Popular Unity greeted with such trepidation by the most important sections of the Chilean ruling class?

Not because they feared the credentials of Allende, a self-proclaimed "Marxist". The defeated Christian Democrat candidate for the presidency, Radomiro Tomic, had the measure of Allende when he said, "My best wishes for success go to the next president of Chile, whose long and proven democratic convictions, reflected in attitudes of constant respect for the constitution and the laws, are well known".

The real fear of the ruling elite in Chile, and of their North American masters, too, was that a Popular Unity victory would raise expectations amongst the worker and peasant masses; not just in Chile but also throughout Latin America. A hard-line reactionary ruling class faction, backed by the CIA and Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, wanted to stop Allende from even taking office.

An abortive coup in October led to the murder of the Commander in Chief of the Army, Rene Schneider, who had refused to support it. The more farsighted sections, in particular the majority of the Christian Democratic Party, had an alternative strategy. They attempted to tie Allende's hands by getting him to sign a "Statute of Guarantees", in return for their support for his appointment as President by Congress.

Allende had not won an outright majority and though the precedent was for Congress to elect the candidate with the highest votes, this would require the Christian Democrats voting for Allende. He agreed to their terms without any complaint. These guarantees laid down that there should be no reduction in the size of the armed forces, no "interference" with the judiciary, schools, press, radio, etc, and no "private" militias. Generally, they strengthened the opposition-dominated Congress against the executive. Allende had started as he meant to go on.

CHILE'S WORKERS TAKE THE OFFENSIVE

The victory of Popular Unity was followed by a massive upsurge in working class struggle and confidence. It saw a dramatic expansion of trade union membership - the Central Unica de Trabajadores (CUT) reached 800,000 members, 25% of the economically active population, by 1972. Both the Socialist Party and the Communist Party grew dramatically. On the land, the victory of Popular Unity was accompanied by a veritable class war between the campesinos (rural workers and peasants) and the big landowners. In the last full year of Frei's term there had been 148 land seizures: in 1971 the government registered 1,278.

The government implemented a series of wage increases, averaging 35%. Social welfare measures were introduced, such as increased family allowances and free school milk. The decree for the nationalisation of the big US copper mines was passed unanimously through Congress with even the right wing National Party voting for it. The predominantly US-owned banks were treated generously with the government buying up stock to bring them into the state sector. Nevertheless, they set about trying to organise a world boycott of Chilean copper.

But already the limits of Popular Unity's programme were being exposed. The Agrarian Reform, taken over from Frei, was an extremely weak one, giving compensation to the latifundists while allowing them to keep 80 hectares of land of

their choice plus buildings, machinery, animals etc. This arrangement allowed them to continue to dominate many rural areas. The reform was further hampered because the government lacked funds to pay the generous compensation. It only accelerated when the peasants and landless labourers began to take action themselves, organised often by the MIR, a hitherto guerilla organisation which remained outside Popular Unity.

The reactions of the Socialist and Communist Party leaders to the campesinos pushing beyond their reformist programme, and thus threatening the alliance with the bourgeoisie, was to be repeated again and again with other sections of the labouring masses. On February 13, after meeting with the National Farm Owners' Organisation, Allende announced special legislation to punish those who instigated land seizures.

Luis Corvalan, General Secretary of the Chilean CP, declared: "We do not approve of land occupations because we have an obligation to the country, and because we are going to carry out agricultural development within the limits of the law."

In the urban areas, the class struggle likewise forced the government's hand. In the face of employers' sabotage, workers struck back. Throughout 1971 the government made use of Decree Law No.520, passed in 1932 and never repealed, which allowed the government to "intervene" in industries threatened with bankruptcy or social conflict. During 1971, seventy industrial enterprises were thus "intervened" in, a measure short of outright nationalisation. This took place in the textile, metallurgical, cement, fishing and domestic electrical enterprises.

These, together with the nationalised copper, nitrate, iron and coal concerns, the banks and the initial state sector, now made up the so called "Social Production Sector", which accounted by 1972 for some 20% of production. In April 1971, in the municipal elections, Popular Unity increased its percentage of the vote to 51 %.

THE BOURGEOIS COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

By the summer of 1971, alarmed at the gains being made by the workers and peasants, the bourgeoisie started serious counter moves against the Popular Unity government. US imperialism had already been "softening up" the government by a series of measures designed to damage the economy. Loans, credits and investments from international agencies were either blocked, delayed or tied to stringent conditions.

The big US copper companies attempted to put an embargo on Chilean copper shipments through the international courts. These measures, combined with internal economic sabotage by Chilean business and fall in world copper prices, seriously weakened the economy. In 1970, there was a \$91 million balance of payments surplus. By 1971, it had become a \$311 million deficit. Inflation soared and, at 8.3%, unemployment in Greater Santiago was the highest for 10 years.

In these circumstances, the bourgeoisie began to use the legal and parliamentary apparatus to frustrate the government's plans and halt the workers' advances. The Comptroller of the Republic, who had the role of reviewing the constitutionality of presidential decrees, began to declare various "interventions" illegal. Starting in June 1971, he ordered the return of one of the largest textile manufacturers to its owners.

Over the next year, the Comptroller, a life appointee, together with the reactionary judiciary, which Allende had pledged to leave untouched, used every "constitutional" avenue to obstruct the Popular Unity programme. The opposition-dominated Congress used its power to veto legislation and impeach government ministers.

In December 1971, the Christian Democrats gave their backing to a predominantly middle-class housewives' "March of the pots and pans" protesting shortages and the high cost of living, many brought their maids with them to do the banging. The march was "protected" by the now active fascist youth of Patria y Libertad (Fatherland and Freedom) resulting in widespread street clashes with Popular Unity supporters.

The SP and CP leaders faced a stark choice. They could have led the workers' and peasants' organisations against the bourgeois opposition, nationalising the land and factories with no compensation, breaking the power of the state bureaucracy and the judiciary, democratising the armed forces by promoting the election of all ranks and mobilising a

workers' and peasants' militia to enforce these measures.

The whole Popular Unity strategy dictated that they chose another road. By April 1972, the leadership was in full retreat. In that month, they opened negotiations with the Christian Democrats, despite ineffectual protests from the left of the Socialist Party.

The government attempted to broaden its alliance by bringing in more decisive sections of the bourgeoisie through greater concessions to them. The workers and peasants were exhorted to observe discipline, make sacrifices, join the "battle for production" to solve the economic crisis provoked by imperialism and the bourgeoisie. This line was pushed home at the Popular Unity meeting at Lo Curro.

A leading Stalinist Orlando Millas, was brought in as Minister of Finance to lead the "battle for production". But, despite Popular Unity's efforts, the negotiations with the Christian Democrats failed, although Millas proceeded to carry out policies designed to keep open this dialogue with Christian Democracy.

Yet the workers themselves were spontaneously groping towards an alternative course. At the end of 1971, the Linares Province Campesino Council, together with the Popular Unity and MIR regional committees, called for the "the immediate elimination of latifundia, the expropriation of entailed estates; the reduction from eighty to forty hectares of the limit of non-expropriable land, that expropriated land should not to be compensated and building campesino councils.?"

In Concepcion, in July 1972, the Socialist Party regional committee held a "People's Assembly" which denounced the strategy of government submission to the demands of the bourgeoisie. The National Popular Unity parties, in the face of outrage from the right and Congress, quickly repudiated their regional committees' decisions.

Most importantly, in June 1972, the first cordones industriales (literally industrial belts, industrial zone committees, linking factories) was born. An industrial dispute over wages at the Perlak canning plant in Cerrillos resulted in a workers' occupation and demands for the firm to be "intervened". The Communist Minister of Labour, Mireya Baltra, denounced the occupation and the courts ordered the police to restore the plant to its owners. The workers of Cerrillos responded by setting up an area committee and blocking all roads around the industrial area of Maipu, forcing the government to concede their demands. The cordones were to spread rapidly during the bosses strike in October.

THE BOSSES' STRIKE ? THE WORKERS' RESPONSE

In the summer and autumn of 1972, the bosses stepped up their offensive. August saw pitched battles in Santiago between high school students supporting the Opposition and members of Popular Unity. Hoarding and speculation by distributors and shop owners caused widespread shortages. Inflation almost hit 100% in September 1972.

In October, the Opposition, now united in the ironically named Democratic Federation, declared the government of Allende to be "illegitimate".

A bosses' strike was organised for October 9, starting with the Truck Owners' Federation. These small owners, supplied with limitless CIA funds, declared an indefinite general stoppage. Chile, whose narrow territory extends over 2,653 miles (4,270 km) north to south, is heavily dependent on road transport; over half Chile's fuel, raw materials and foodstuffs are moved in this way. Thus, an effective strike would quickly strangle the economy. On October 10, the Democratic Federation brought 100,000 onto the streets of Santiago, and three days later the retail trade association joined the strike and SOFOFA, the employers' association of medium sized and big industry, declared a lockout.

The government responded with appeals to "observe legality" and turned to the military, placing 13 provinces under military authority. In contrast, the workers took matters into their own hands, meeting the bosses' strike with a wave of occupations of closed factories, and commandeering transport.

The JAPs, committees of housewives which had sprung up in response to shortages and hoarding, expanded dramatically, requisitioning food supplies and forcing the re-opening of closed shops, and fixing the prices for the goods sold. The cordones industriales spread through all the major industrial centres, five emerging in Santiago alone,

linking industrial units with a directly elected workers' committee. They took on the tasks of mobilising the workers, organising defence, transport and materials and finished products and liaison with the neighbourhood committees, particularly in the militant poblaciones (shanty towns).

Faced with this growing mass takeover of production and distribution by the workers and the poor, carried out on their own initiative, the bourgeoisie panicked. By the end of October, all sections of it were clamouring for negotiations with the government.

In this situation, the Popular Unity government managed to snatch defeat out of the jaws of a victory the workers had won for it.

Having failed to bring wider sections of the bourgeoisie into the government, it brought in the military. The presence of the military; General Carlos Prats as Interior Minister, Rear Admiral Ismael Huerta at Public Works, and Air force Brigadier General Claudio Sepelveda as Minister of Mines, was meant to be the guarantee of the restoration of bourgeois order.

The Socialist and Communist Party leaderships had always peddled the illusion that the Chilean army, unlike those of the other Latin American states, was 'constitutional', 'professional' and pledged to support any democratically elected government. Luis Corvalan had declared before the election of Popular Unity that the CP was opposed to proposals to arm the masses as this would be 'equivalent to showing distrust in the army'.

The Socialist Party Minister of Agriculture justified their entry into government in the magazine Chile Hoy in the following terms: 'The armed forces...enter the cabinet to preserve the institutional system which the hottest heads in the opposition wish to destroy. In this way they help assure the conditions for the programme to advance.'

Indeed, the armed forces had a long and 'distinguished' record of 'preserving the institutional system' but the system was capitalism. In its defence, they had committed a whole series of massacres of workers struggling against the employing class. Like every other South American army, their officer caste was drawn from, and closely integrated into, the ruling classes of Chile. It was trained by the USA, most of its officers passing through that 'school for counter revolution', the US Army School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone.

Such was the "ally" that Popular Unity called on in November 1972. If Allende and Corvalan insisted on dragging the Chilean working class into the jaws of counter revolution, then their "left" critics failed to provide any real alternative leadership for the workers and peasants.

The left of the Socialist Party, for all its declarations of 'Marxism-Leninism' and support for 'uninterrupted revolution', was fatally ambiguous on the nature of the army. The Party Secretary and leader of the left wing, declared in the weekly Marcha on November 17 that, 'The Socialist Party has never objected to the presence of uniformed men in the cabinet. That is the prerogative of the President'.

Thus, as so often before, when push came to shove, the "left" of the parties accepted the actions of the right. The same problem of political leadership was present within the cordones, too. For all their militancy and initiative in the emergency, in the absence of an alternative strategy to that of the government, they went into decline after November. With the Socialists often the most important force in them, the cordones relegated themselves to giving 'support' to Popular Unity and defending the existing gains of the government.

The Movement of the Revolutionary Left, the MIR, offered no political alternative either. It counterposed its 'own' front organisations, the commandos comunales, to the cordones. Politically, it flipped from boycotting the 1970 elections to giving 'critical support' to the government. And it, too, vacillated on the nature and role of the army. On the one hand, it denounced 'some bad officers', on the other hand, it referred to the 'true patriotic and democratic role' it had to play alongside the people.

The far left thus failed, just as badly as the CP and SP, to tackle the crucial tasks facing the Chilean working class in 1972-3; winning the cordones to demand that the reformist leaderships, both CP and SP, break with the bourgeois

parties, kick the military out of the government, and install a workers' and peasants' government, acting to meet the urgent needs of the masses.

This should have included an urgent campaign amongst the rank and file sailors and soldiers against the coup mongers, for full democratic rights in the barracks and on the ships, and drawing their representatives into the cordones and the formation and arming of workers' militias for defence against the fascists and the coup plotters.

Urgent measures of a workers and peasants government, fought for and imposed from below, as well as from above, should have included the expropriation of the big farms and industries under workers' control, the cancellation of the foreign debt and expropriation of the imperialist interests. The struggle around such demands would not only have countered the bourgeois offensive, but offered the possibility of breaking the rank and file of the Socialist and Communist Party from the fatal popular frontism of their leaders and rallying them to a revolutionary communist alternative.

Instead, the government was able to proceed with its strategy of reassuring the bourgeoisie; which had as its price the demobilising of the working class and the handing over of those soldiers and sailors who tried to resist the plotters.

In January 1973, the notorious "Millas Plan" was put forward in which this "Communist" minister proposed to return 123 occupied enterprises to their former owners. The plan was only blocked by a massive working class resistance led by the cordones and sections of the socialist left. This convinced the bourgeoisie that, whilst it had nothing to fear from Allende, he had little control over the workers when it came to grabbing back their gains. It made them even more determined to get rid of Allende himself and by the most bloody means.

Having failed to gain a two-thirds majority within the Congress in the March 1973 elections, a figure necessary to impeach Allende himself (Popular Unity's vote, in fact, increased in these elections) the bourgeoisie turned more and more to the army to do the job for it.

THE SEPTEMBER COUP

Under the Law of Arms Control of October 1972, passed by Allende, the army could act almost autonomously in raids searching for 'arms'. Of course, these powers were increasingly used to intimidate and disarm the workers' organisations. In May, the army raided the Socialist Party headquarters in the city of Rancagua. The acting Commander in Chief, Augusto Pinochet, approved the raid. In June, there was an attempted coup by the Second Armoured Regiment, put down by troops loyal to General Prats. The army was increasingly divided between those officers favouring a coup and the dwindling number of "constitutionalists." Allende's actions systematically strengthened the former and weakened the latter.

July offered the last chance for Allende to mobilise the workers against the impending coup. The month opened with a series of arms raids, by all three branches of the armed forces, against factories, union offices and campuses, which left behind them a trail of dead and imprisoned. In early August, a group of sailors and petty officers, supporters of Popular Unity, who had opposed the coup preparations underway, were themselves arrested and tortured for informing the Popular Unity parties. The High Command accused the left of the Socialist Party, MAPU, and the MIR of incitement to mutiny.

Allende not only refused to support, or order the release of, these sailors but denounced the "attempt by ultra left sailors to organise cells in ships of the national fleet." Allende was digging his own grave but more tragically that of thousands of working class militants, by ensuring that the ranks of the armed forces saw they would receive no support if they disobeyed the coup orders from their officers.

On September 11, the coup came, organised with US assistance. Despite heroic resistance by the cordones and rank and file SP, CP and MIR militants, the lack of weapons and centralised coordination meant that it was crushed with exceptional violence. Allende himself died in still disputed circumstances in the Moneda Place.

In the capital, Santiago, the national football stadium was converted into a concentration camp holding some 5,000 inmates in appalling conditions. Even two years later it still held 3,811 according to US government sources. Similar camps were created in virtually every population centre. Amnesty International and the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations estimated that by the end of 1973, 250,000 Chileans had been arrested and detained.

Some 28,000 of them were incarcerated for extended periods and many, both male and female, were cruelly raped, tortured and murdered. Many prisoners were tossed out of helicopters over the Pacific; a technique later copied in Argentina after the 1976 Videla coup. It is estimated that 1,850 were killed in the Santiago stadium alone. Whilst later official reports settled on a figure of 3,200 deaths nationwide, 1,300 "disappeared" and 30,000 went into exile. But many believe these figures to be a gross underestimate and that the real totals are ten times higher

So ended the "experiment" with a peaceful democratic stage along the "Chilean road to Socialism", based on an alliance with a supposed patriotic bourgeoisie and army. As in Spain between 1936- 1939, the Popular Front once again delivered the working class into the hands of the deepest reaction.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/lessons-chile-popular-unity-1970-1973>