

Chileans protest as Pinochet becomes “senator for life”

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Thousands of demonstrators clashed with riot police in the Chilean capital of Santiago and in the Pacific port city of Valparaiso for two days running as Gen. Augusto Pinochet, leader of the bloody 1973 military coup, traded his position as commander of the armed forces for a lifetime post in Chile’s senate.

Pinochet was sworn in together with other new legislators in Valparaiso on Wednesday, March 11. The ceremony was delayed both by violent clashes outside the Senate and by a protest mounted by some of the other legislators who booed and held up enlarged photographs of people who were executed or “disappeared” under Pinochet’s reign.

While compelled to surrender his military command after 25 years in the post, Pinochet was guaranteed his lifetime senate seat by the Constitution which he himself imposed on the country as dictator in 1980.

A day before the swearing-in ceremony, the military organized its own farewell for Pinochet at the Military School of Santiago, one of the many institutions which were transformed into concentration camps and torture centers in the coup of 1973.

Speaking before thousands of Chilean officers and troops as well as Chilean government officials, including President Eduardo Frei, the 82-year-old general declared: “We in the armed forces can now declare: Mission accomplished!” Referring to his own rise to power 25 years ago, the former dictator declared that the armed forces had been compelled to take over because of an “ever more extensive, sharp and uncontrollable public conflict” gripping the country. He claimed that military rule had resulted in the “social, political and economic reconstruction of the country.”

The September 11, 1973 military coup had as its aim the crushing of the movement of the Chilean working class which had increasingly taken a revolutionary

direction. The military murdered an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 militant workers, students and supporters of left-wing political parties. Direct military rule and police state repression continued for more than a decade and a half, while Pinochet’s secret police, the DINA, carried out the assassinations of exiled political opponents in neighboring Latin American states and even in Washington, DC.

The coup overthrew the elected president, Salvador Allende, a leader of the Chilean Socialist Party. His government, which included the Stalinist Communist Party, had come to power amidst a massive strike movement and a militant struggle of peasants for land. From the outset the Allende government, with the Stalinists playing the leading role, worked to strangle this movement. It defended the property of the Chilean bourgeoisie and opposed every attempt by the workers to organize themselves independently and to defend themselves against the increasingly obvious preparations of the military and the extreme right-wing parties for civil war.

In the months before the coup, Allende formed a “National Security Cabinet,” bringing the chiefs of the armed forces, including Pinochet, directly into the government and giving them the authority to organize nationwide raids against occupied factories and workers’ organizations and homes on the pretext of searching for arms.

The Stalinists, meanwhile, told the workers that Pinochet and his fellow officers were “patriotic”, while declaring that “liberation and development are inseparable from national security.” Having helped the military disarm the working class, both politically and literally, neither the Allende government nor the Stalinists did anything to organize resistance to the coup. Workers were rounded up in makeshift prisons

set up in barracks and soccer stadiums, where they were tortured and executed.

As for Pinochet's claim of social and economic "reconstruction," his sentiment is widely shared by big business and finance capital, both in Chile and internationally. Chile is regularly described as an economic miracle and a model for development. Few who make such statements, however, care to examine how the country's growth rates were prepared through mass murder and the destruction of the living standards and basic rights of the Chilean workers.

The military dictatorship carried out the most sweeping program of privatization and deregulation seen in any country in the world. Health care, social security and education were all placed on the auction block by the regime, while corporate income tax was abolished altogether. In the first decade of military rule, the unemployment rate rose to 20 percent while more than 40 percent of the population fell below the official poverty line.

Today Chilean workers are among the most exploited in the world. Part-time and temporary jobs and contract labor are the norm, with most workers putting in 48-hour weeks. Children are also compelled to seek employment as early as possible. As a result, by 1992 only 2.5 percent of the population had more than seven years of formal education, a third as many as in Argentina and half the number in Brazil or Mexico.

Meanwhile, the dictatorship's destruction of the social conditions and organizations of the working class created unparalleled opportunity for enrichment both for foreign capital and the Chilean bourgeoisie. The effect has been to create one of the most socially-polarized economies in all of Latin America.

While there is widespread feeling in Chile that Pinochet should be going to jail rather than taking a seat in the Senate, he and his cohorts are protected by legislation which they themselves imposed under the dictatorship. A blanket amnesty protects the military assassins and torturers from any attempt by either victims or their families to bring them to court.

Under the 1980 constitution imposed by Pinochet, the 38 elected senators are joined by nine others "designated" by the Supreme Court. In addition a lifetime senate seat is reserved for former presidents with at least six years in office. Pinochet is the only figure who falls in this category, having proclaimed

himself president in 1974 and surrendering the office only in 1989.

These unelected senators wield an effective veto against any attempt by the rest of the legislature to either amend the constitution imposed by the dictatorship or repeal the military's amnesty.

On the surface, Chile is unique among the Latin American countries which have seen the military give way to civilian rule since the 1980s. In Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and other countries once ruled by US-backed dictatorships, former military strongmen have either died off or faded into the background. In a more fundamental sense, however, Pinochet's continued power symbolizes the social and political relations existing throughout the continent.

In no country have the old military establishments been disbanded, and none of the Latin American armies have repudiated the "dirty wars" which they carried out against the working class. All of them enjoy amnesties similar to the one passed in Chile. Military commanders have frankly asserted that, faced with another revolutionary offensive of the working class like that of the late 1960s and early 1970s, they would do the same thing again.

As for the parties which have dominated the working class, they pursue the same treacherous policies which paved the way for the bloodbath in Chile and similar catastrophes elsewhere. Thus, the president of Chile's Socialist Party, Camilo Escalona, proclaimed that the end of Pinochet's military command "closes the cycle of struggle to build a Chilean society in democracy." Recalling "the dream of president Allende," he declared that Pinochet's successor, Gen. Izurieta, "has the historic opportunity of restoring national unity through the path of reconciliation between civilians and the military."

The Socialist Party leader's statement echoed the words of praise which Allende lavished on Pinochet himself in the months preceding the 1973 coup.



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