

# Correspondence on WSWS coverage of Pinochet's arrest

18 November 1998

To the *World Socialist Web Site*

Dear Editor:

I am a student at Leeds University, studying Spanish and economics. As part of my course I spent the past year in Chile and worked at a transnational company.

I think that your coverage of the crisis over Pinochet's arrest in London is very good. It is important that the lessons of this whole affair and of the Chilean coup itself should be known as widely as possible. The press all over the world has praised the Chilean "free market miracle" to the skies. I want to make people aware of the disastrous effects the policies of this so-called "miracle economy" had on the lives of ordinary Chileans.

Immediately following the coup in 1973, the Chicago boys went back to Chile. They were Chilean economists who had been trained in Chicago under Milton Friedman. Their training in the US was part of the preparation for the coup. They were all ready to take over the economy, to dismantle the nationalised industries and implement free market policies.

Wherever the state was involved it was ousted and market forces were unleashed. The only people to benefit were the US transnational corporations and the top 10 percent of Chilean society. Industries were sold off at a discount to the big banking families, like the owners of Banco Santiago. They created monopolistic markets. The mines went into hands of the Luksic family and Codelco bought up the national copper industry.

Between 1978 and 1988 the income of the top 10 percent increased by 83 percent. Ordinary Chileans, including the middle class, suffered terribly. Wages were cut and millions of people are living on the poverty line or below. From 1977 to 1988, average unemployment was 20 percent. The social services were decimated.

The theory was that the people would benefit from the "trickle down system". It is a lie. It does not work. Spending per capita on health care was reduced from 28.8 US dollars in 1973 to 10.9 US dollars in 1988—a cut of almost two-thirds. The multinationals came in to take over the privatised health service. Poor people had to depend on the few public hospitals.

I saw the main hospital in Santiago. It is a very small building, which is short of funds and short of doctors. The hospital was filled to overflowing with crowds of people who couldn't possibly be provided with the treatment they needed.

This has resulted in a huge deterioration in health care. In 1977 and again in 1984 there were typhoid epidemics.

It was the same for housing. Santiago is built in a bowl shaped area. The smog is one of the worst in the world. It is worse than Mexico City. The pollution is so bad that in the winter many children are not allowed out to go to school. Up to 1978 poor people lived on the eastern side of Santiago, on the edge of the mountains, where the air was good. Then the government announced a re-housing scheme. The poor were driven out of their homes and pushed into regions like La Pinta, where the conditions were horrific. They were sent to the industrial areas where air pollution was terrible and the accommodation was totally inadequate. They were squeezed into tiny places—three or four families to a flat.

I could go on. Very little has changed since 1990. From what I have gathered the government has made a few minimal changes, but nothing significant. People complain that Frei is a puppet. He was democratically elected but the Pinochistas are still in control. They control the army and they have the majority in the senate. The government can do nothing about the transnational corporations. They haven't kicked out the

Chicago boys. There has to be a transformation on a global scale.

Regarding the coup itself, the British media keep repeating the figure of 4,000 people murdered by the regime. I can't accept this. The figures just don't add up. My experience in the country is that there is not a single ordinary Chilean family that was not affected by the crimes of Pinochet—the arrests, the torture, the disappearances. The DINA maintained a rule of terror. And apart from those who were killed outright, families were destroyed through exile to Venezuela, Uruguay, or here in Europe.

While I was in Santiago U2 played a concert. They invited the “mothers of the disappeared” to come up on the stage. And once again for the millionth time the mothers asked where are their children? Their question remains unanswered.

Today people are not afraid to speak. But there are problems in the discussion. They are so emotionally involved; it is very difficult to discuss objectively. I found that people were completely polarised about what had happened. I had to be careful whom I spoke to. But they did not want to talk about the coup. They blocked it out. I didn't question them about the details, because I knew how they would react. They tried to put the past behind them and just get on with their lives. They seemed to suppress their dissatisfaction because they couldn't just go on worrying about the past.

Now the arrest of Pinochet is reopening old wounds. People are saying what they did believe and what they still believe—because it is the truth, it is what is right. They may have suppressed their beliefs but they are always there. They can't hide away from them forever. They can't ignore the past, because the legacy of the past is still there, imprinted on the politics, on culture, on society, on everything. I feel very strongly that the lessons of this whole period must be learnt by people all over the world.

Yours sincerely,  
M. M.-T.



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