Socialist Workers Party (US) denounces Pinochet arrest

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The lead editorial in the November 2 edition of the *Militant*, the weekly newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party of the US, begins: "The October 17 arrest of Augusto Pinochet by British police, acting on a warrant issued by two judges in Spain, has nothing to do with defending human rights and is an attack on the sovereignty of Chile. It should be condemned by working people, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States."

A casual observer might be forgiven for reacting with astonishment to a supposedly socialist organization springing to the defense of a CIA-backed dictator who presided over the murder of tens of thousands of left-wing opponents, trade union activists and peasant leaders. To those familiar with the evolution of the SWP, however, this bizarre declaration will come as less of a surprise.

The *Militant* editorial, reproducing a statement originally issued by its cothinkers in Britain, attacks the arrest of Pinochet in pseudo-orthodox "Marxist" language. It suggests that US and British imperialism conspired to detain Pinochet in order to set a precedent for the arrest and war crimes prosecution of Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic. The editorial states: "In the name of opposing genocide and war crimes, the imperialist wolves in sheep's clothing seek to deepen their own intervention in the Balkans with the ultimate aim of overturning the workers states." It continues: "Now that Pinochet has already done his dirty work for imperialism, he is expendable to his masters, and his arrest can even be used to further their war goals elsewhere in the world."

The claim that the US and Britain are behind the arrest of Pinochet is delusional. For the Blair government in Britain, which welcomed the ex-dictator as a VIP, the arrest has been a major embarrassment. Blair has adopted an official stance of neutrality on the Spanish magistrate's request to extradite Pinochet, while maneuvering behind the scenes for the ex-dictator's release. Washington has refused to comment, while working furiously for the liberation of its longtime ally in Latin America.

The Pinochet affair has led to a revisiting of the bloody events of September 1973, when he led the military overthrow of the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende. Outside of the US, there has been considerable discussion in the media about the part played by Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger and then-CIA Director Richard Helms in the overthrow of Allende and the reign of torture and murder that followed. Even the US press has been forced to take note of the US role in the 1973 coup.

Does the *Militant* expect the reader to believe that the US political, military and intelligence establishment is cheering on the effort to extradite Pinochet, with the enormous political dangers this entails? It is an argument that falls under the weight of its own absurdity.

The other side of the coin is the *Militant*'s defense of Milosevic. He is characterized as the head of a "workers state," which presumably should be defended by working people. Such an argument, insofar as it is taken seriously, can only produce political confusion and bring discredit on the name of socialism. The characterization of the authoritarian bourgeois regime in Belgrade as a workers state, simply because it is run by ex-Stalinist apparatchiks, is another demonstration of how far the SWP is removed from reality.

The "left" verbiage of the SWP will delude no one familiar with its day-to-day practice. While the *Militant* resounds with phrases about the "anti-imperialist" struggle and the tasks facing "communists," it devotes

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its pages to a defense of Stalinism, social democratic reformism, the AFL-CIO and various bourgeois nationalist regimes, in particular those of Cuba and South Africa. The lack of enthusiasm for Pinochet's extradition expressed by Fidel Castro finds an echo in the SWP position.

The very rationale advanced by the SWP to defend Pinochet, based as it is on support for Milosevic and the Yugoslav state, is an example of the group's gross opportunism. The SWP, since its abandonment of Trotskyism in the early 1960s, has been characterized by an orientation to Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism. Now this has reached truly grotesque proportions.

It is no small matter that a new generation of socialist-minded workers and intellectuals should begin to familiarize itself with the events of 1973 in Chile and their political significance, above all the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism, reformism and Castroism. The SWP has no interest in such a discussion.

In addition to the twisted and reactionary politics of the SWP's defense of Pinochet, there is a related question: the social and moral physiognomy of the organization. The Chilean dictator, after all, has the blood of tens of thousands of workers and others on his hands. The SWP's cavalier attitude toward such a man, its lack of concern for the sensibilities of workers in Chile and elsewhere, says a great deal about the group and the social milieu in which it is based. Deeply alienated from the working class, the SWP has more in common with a cult than a political party.

This is not the first time that the SWP has justified sinister political positions with "left" rhetoric. In 1987, for example, it came to the defense of Nazi war criminal Karl Linnas, extradited from the US to the Soviet Union, where he faced the death penalty. The SWP argued that Linnas, Klaus Barbie ("the Butcher of Lyons") and Treblinka death camp guard John (Ivan the Terrible) Demjanjuk were being made "scapegoats."

In November 1996 the *Militant* carried a defense of the CIA against the charges, since proven, that the agency had been involved in the drug trafficking carried on by the Nicaraguan Contras. The SWP's candidate for Congress in Los Angeles claimed that efforts to expose CIA crimes "point workers away from developing a materialist understanding of how the social and economic crises they face are rooted in class-divided society," and that such efforts encouraged a "conspiracy theory" of history.

The attitude of the SWP when it was a Trotskyist movement, many decades ago, was entirely different. During the Nuremberg Trials of 1945 it exposed the complicity of all the powers in the crimes of German fascism, but it certainly did not oppose the death sentence for the Nazi mass murderers, much less campaign for their release.

If one puts aside the rationale of the SWP for its political line on Pinochet, what is left? The demand for the release of the Chilean dictator, a line that intersects with the aims and desires of the White House, the State Department and the CIA.

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