

"There is no process of peace and reconciliation in Chile"

Chilean exiles in Britain speak to the WSWS

Mike Ingram
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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the Chilean Sports and Cultural Centre in Sheffield and spoke to Chilean exiles living in the city. Around 300 political refugees came to Sheffield following the coup 25 years ago. The local council and trade unions ran an 'adopt a political prisoner' program in which workers in the South Yorkshire town acted as sponsors for refugees settling in the city.

Several Chilean exiles were gathered around a television screen watching a video recording of news coverage following the Law Lords decision last Wednesday to reject former dictator General Augusto Pinochet's claim to sovereign immunity and allow his extradition to Spain. They saw scenes of Pinochet supporters giving the Nazi salute while demonstrating for Pinochet's return to Chile. 'It is good for them to show this,' said one of those watching, 'It shows who Pinochet's supporters really are.'

The WSWS spoke to Pedro from the Sheffield committee of 'Chile--Political Prisoners and Victims of Torture', one of the many human rights pressure groups that have been involved in compiling cases against Pinochet.

Pedro explained that since the Law Lords' decision the emphasis of the committee's work had shifted. Various groups pursuing the cases of individuals have come together to exert maximum pressure to ensure that the extradition to Spain is carried through. The committee plans to organise visits to local MPs, lobbies of the Labour Party and further demonstrations in London.

Pedro then took up some of the points made in the media coverage. 'To me the question of compassion is a valid issue in relation to Pinochet's extradition, but it has to be looked at from a proper angle. It has to be considered by Home Secretary Jack Straw what people have suffered and are still suffering in Chile, the tragic events that Pinochet provoked and his actions against the victims and the relatives of those victims.'

'Straw has to feel compassion towards the victims and relatives of the victims themselves; not only compassion towards the victims of torture, but towards what the economic model in Chile has produced in terms of extreme poverty. There is an issue of compassion.'

The Chileans watched with disgust as former Tory Chancellor Norman Lamont made the claim that there was no difference between what took place under Pinochet and the Allende government itself.

'I think he is ignorant. It is nothing like that. They cannot be compared. Throughout the Allende government there were no politically motivated killings whatsoever. Lamont does not know what actually happened in this period. So he is trying to attract media attention and shift public opinion to justify Pinochet's atrocities,' Pedro said.

He went on to speak about his conversations with people in Chile since the extradition case began: 'People say that Chile is living through a very important time in its history. People are celebrating and telephones keep

on ringing. People are sharing views and there is an atmosphere of joy and happiness.

'People are looking to the future and say that if the worst comes to the worst and Pinochet is allowed to go back to Chile now, things have still fundamentally changed. World opinion is now the same as that of Chileans before Pinochet's arrest. Pinochet is recognised as a murderer and the main culprit. This has been recognised by neutral countries and by the Law Lords and, from that, Pinochet is finished as a political 'leader'. He has to face the damage he has done to the Chilean community and to Chilean society today.'

Pedro opposed the demand put forward by some British politicians for Pinochet to be returned to Chile for trial:

'Ideally that should be the case. In the ideal world it would happen, but that is not the situation that exists in Chile. The conditions don't exist in Chile to do that. The constitution in Chile has been imposed upon the Chilean people. It hasn't been negotiated amongst parties.'

'It is claimed there is an important process of reconciliation and peace which is about to be broken. This is nonsense. There has been no such process. There has been a lot of consultation, but all the consultation was stopped. Cases have been documented, but we have to remember that Pinochet declared an amnesty and that amnesty was aimed at protecting people who were involved in the murders and torture.'

'We also have to take into consideration that Chilean society is regulated through Pinochet's constitution. This constitution doesn't allow them to answer for their crimes. Not only Pinochet, but also the other people involved. Pinochet has managed to build a wall of immunity to defend himself against any official procedure, and it is working nicely.'

'In an attempt to back up this position, they report the argument from the Chilean government that they have quite a few legal cases going through the Chilean High Court. But they forget to mention that last Friday, the Chilean courts rejected 12 cases. Those cases have already been rejected, so there is no ground whatsoever for Pinochet to go to a fair trial and answer for his crimes. He is sitting nicely in the Senate as a Senator for Life. He is immune under the Chilean constitution.'

The 'transition to democracy'

'On paper it looks like democracy in Chile, but you have to understand that the transition is going through Pinochet's framework. Again, the constitution is a straitjacket for everybody. Political parties are regulated. Unions are regulated and it has nothing to do with democracy as the people would relate to it. The claim of democracy is designed for Pinochet and by him and his supporters to protect him and those who are favoured by the economic model to carry on without opposition.'

Asked about the present situation in Chile, Pedro said:

'In terms of macroeconomic indicators, Chile is doing very well indeed, but that is just figures. Chile has a level of extreme poverty that is far worse than other countries in Latin America. Even the official press of the right wing in Chile say that these conditions exist, and the levels of extreme poverty are of great concern to everybody.

'The average income is quite high, but that does not mean Chilean workers are doing well in terms of wages and quality of life. The 'miracle' and economic success are only for a minority, as is always the case.

'So if you look at economic indicators, it is amazing what Chile has done, but they never refer to the social cost. They never refer to what Pinochet did. It is very easy to wipe out the population and start building up again. Like Franco's Spain, they spoke of the success of the Franco economy, or Brazil after the military coup. Everybody talked about the economic miracle of the Brazilian government. Where is it now?

'There is an influx of money, support and investment because they have to create conditions for international capital, but at a severe cost for the Chilean population. So there is no such miracle.'

On the ruling by the British Law Lords, Pedro said, 'The ruling is very important, not only for the Chilean people but for humanity itself. First of all, the Law Lords have recognised evidence relating to his crimes against the Chilean people and other nationals in Chile and abroad and his crimes against humanity. That is the main thing. It is a huge victory for the human rights movement. Also it provides a strong signal to people like Pinochet throughout the world.

'The second issue is that Pinochet's acts occurred throughout the 17 years he stayed in power. That belongs to a generation, my generation, and does not belong to my children's generation. They know it through what they have seen on television now, through personal experiences and what they can gather from books.

'Before this case broke out people were not interested in anything about Pinochet, the atrocities, his crimes, etc. Now it is on the agenda. So this is very important in that we have a sort of memory and experience of the atrocities that have been committed in terms of human rights, but also politically.

'Now a collective memory has been passed on to a younger generation. They identify the man. It was said that Chileans living abroad in exile were inventing stories about the dictatorship and Pinochet himself. But our stories have now been proven.

'So there are two elements. One is that this has been recognised now and highlighted internationally and has attracted attention from all over the world. The second is that this generation now know exactly what crimes have been committed in Chile.'

Pedro took issue with the claim that Pinochet must be returned to Chile in order to prevent a further coup by the military:

'There is always the danger of an attempted coup and I would not be surprised if somebody from the armed forces tried to do something like that, but if they attempted it there would be little support. Power can be imposed upon the people of Chile, but that is not enough. The relation of forces world-wide is different now and it is not enough for a dictator to seize power and try running the country. They have to get the support of other political forces, not only Chileans but from abroad. I don't see where this can happen now.

'The line of argument of pro-Pinochet people is precisely this: 'We are going back to square one. All the progress that has been made to the new democracy in Chile--the economic gains, the Chilean position internationally--is going to be torn apart if extradition goes ahead.' That's another fallacy. They are trying to show a picture of a divided Chile and people fighting each other and anarchy and that kind of thing, but this is not the case.

'The situation is that you have a bunch of Pinochet supporters in Chile attempting to demonstrate and show their anger, and then a couple of English and Spanish flags burned and a strong reaction against British and

Spanish journalists in Chile, but that is all.

'The claim that Pinochet's support is broad-based goes nicely with their aims. They are trying to do that in Chile, to support the argument that has been put forward here in defence of Pinochet; the Tory position that wants to support Pinochet and highlight the claim that Pinochet has done great things for humanity in overthrowing a so-called Marxist government.'

Response of the Labour government

Pedro gave his opinion on how Labour would now deal with the case:

'Jack Straw has tried to give the impression that he will make his final judgement based on the legal definition and the legal arguments from both parties. I am sure that Jack Straw will not be acting just like that. He will be making his final judgement on political grounds.

'It would not be advisable for him to reverse the Law Lords final verdict on the case. I think that Pinochet will be going to Spain some time from now and Pinochet will be enjoying the English weather for some time to come, because this will be a long process. But you never know, because politics is like that. There are a lot of economic interests for Britain, and Jack Straw and the Blair government must be weighing up the pros and cons of their decision.'

Asked if he was surprised by the silence of the official labour movement in relation to Pinochet, given that several MPs and trade union leaders had close ties with the Chilean exiles in the 1970s, Pedro said:

'There initially was a response from Labour. Everybody remembers the comments of Peter Mandelson. He got done straight away and everyone followed suit. The Labour Party wants to disassociate itself from any opposition because it is not good for them. It does not do the Labour Party and the Labour government any favours.

'Social democracy has historically always acted like this. I am not surprised by the attitude of the Labour Party to the Pinochet case, and I am not surprised that local MPs, who in the past have been involved in the Chilean Solidarity Campaign and led campaigns against Pinochet, have kept their mouths shut. It is social democracy in action, basically. They are not bound to say anything but are looking forward to capitalise after everything has been done.'

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