

Public meeting in Sheffield, England

Lively discussion on the lessons of Pinochet's coup

Our correspondent
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Several representatives of the Chilean exile community attended a public meeting held December 1 in Sheffield, England on the detention of former dictator General Augusto Pinochet and the lessons of the military coup in 1973. Following a report by Socialist Equality Party national secretary Chris Marsden, there was a lively and frank discussion on the Chilean events.

One member of the audience disagreed with Marsden's criticism of the Allende government's refusal to arm the working class. He said workers had been armed in Spain during the Civil war in the 1930s and yet more people had died as a result. 'Pinochet would have still been in charge but there would have been 300,000 dead instead of 3,000. This was America's sphere of influence and the combination of Pinochet and the United States could never have been beaten.'

Marsden said the question echoed the arguments used by Stalinism to justify its betrayals in both Chile and Spain. 'Your argument divorces the question of arms from the central issue of the perspective on which the struggle was being conducted in Spain. The Stalinists pursued a limited armed struggle against Franco, but when it came to the crunch--whether Spain fell to the fascists or whether the Stalinists alienated democratic imperialist opinion, as they saw it--the Spanish working class was sacrificed.'

'Stalinism was responsible for the defeat of the Spanish revolution because it left political power in the hands of the bourgeoisie. And they did the same in Chile. The bureaucracy sought systematically to disarm the working class in Spain, both politically and practically. They refused to countenance any challenge to the power of capitalism. Moscow was concerned with maintaining its alliance with the so-called democratic imperialist powers, not pursuing a struggle for power in Spain. They carried out a genocide against their socialist opponents, the Trotskyists, and the members and leaders of the centrist POUM. The aim of this was to destroy the political leadership of the working class. A socialist revolution in the middle of Europe would have changed the entire course of world history.'

'If you believe that the working class cannot defeat imperialism then it is time to pack up your bags and go home. If you expect the imperialist powers to cede some type of democratic transformation to socialism, then you are very much mistaken. The basic tenet of socialism is that the international working class is more powerful than imperialism. If you don't accept that then you don't believe

there is a possibility for socialism.'

An electrical worker said the Labour government's actions over Pinochet showed 'how far to the right the party had shifted. I hope that this is not going to be lost on the people who voted for New Labour on the false premise that things were going to get better.'

Marsden responded, saying, 'This will have a dramatic impact on workers' attitudes to the Labour Party. For many people, reading the reports of what took place under the Pinochet dictatorship is a revelation. A whole generation has grown up that didn't know anything about 1973. They are now reading stories about people who were tied up and electrocuted, whilst their family members were in cages underneath listening to them scream. And they will ask why the Blair government does not want to see this man brought to trial.'

'I do not mean to imply that the judicial process will deal with Pinochet. Even if he flies to Spain he couldn't be put in prison. Under Spanish law, no one over the age of 75 can be jailed. This question is not going to go away. The ruling class has tried to bury it for so long but now it has come up again. Workers will say, 'The fascists are still there. The military are still there. We haven't benefited from the transition to democracy.' Now, the very party that Pinochet overthrew, the Socialist Party, is launching a campaign to get him released. This must have a profoundly disturbing impact on political relations.'

A Chilean member of the MIR, a left group active at the time of the coup, said the analysis presented was 'too black-and-white,' but he agreed that the Communist Party's position that Chile was a feudal society was wrong.

Marsden replied: 'Chile was a capitalist nation, both before, during and after Allende's term of office. Our position is that in the oppressed and semi-colonial countries, and you can define Chile in those terms, the tasks once associated with the bourgeois democratic revolution--such as the liberation of the peasantry--can only be achieved as a by-product of the working class struggle for socialism. That is the perspective we would have advanced in Chile. It's not a question of creating a viable bourgeois democracy prior to the struggle for socialism. The struggle for socialism was posed at that time both in Chile and on an international scale. It was the only road forward.'

'The Communist Parties internationally have a long and counter-revolutionary history. This can no longer be a question of serious

academic debate. At one time, Stalinism's defenders would argue, 'You Trotskyists say that Stalinism is counter-revolutionary, but look, it still defends Russia, look what it has done in China, Eastern Europe. This is real existing socialism.' Well, that same bureaucracy has for the last decade and more been participating in the restoration of capitalism in every single one of these countries. Its reactionary character is now confirmed.

'To the extent that the Stalinists maintain any political influence in the working class, it creates real problems. But one of the major differences between 1973 and today is that the influence of Stalinism has declined enormously. And that is an enormous gain.

'Nothing I have said is meant to personally decry people who were involved in different political tendencies. One can make a political mistake about the tendency one joins as a young person. And this can be rectified based upon experience. A crucial mistake made by the MIR was lending support to the Allende government. The POUM made the same mistake in Spain and they paid for it with their lives.

'If you were seeking to define an independent position for the working class, you would oppose any attempt by the right wing and the fascists to depose Allende. Our perspective would be to replace Allende with a genuine workers government. The Allende government was a bourgeois government. It didn't set out to replace capitalism with socialism, yet that was what was posed. Pinochet knew that. The CIA knew that, and they acted on this understanding on behalf of their class.'

Another member of the audience from Chile argued that making criticisms of the actions taken at the time ignored the fact the working class was unprepared for revolution. 'The only way forward was to support the government...To apply a pure political analysis without taking that into account is wrong. It's like putting the working class in Chile on trial again.'

Marsden replied: 'Where the working class was in 1970 was also determined by the line pursued by its leaders in previous years. Stalinism didn't become counter-revolutionary in 1970. It had been counter-revolutionary since the 1920s. Anyone who opposed Stalinism in the 1930s faced persecution, imprisonment or the assassin's bullet. And that had a profound and lasting impact on the development of the workers movement. That goes some way in answering what you are saying.

'You cannot assert that the working class was not ready in 1970 without answering why. The reason was that the political line the Stalinists and social democrats advanced in 1970 had been propagated for the previous several decades. The primary responsibility of a socialist organisation is to politically educate the working class in the fundamentals of socialism. What the Stalinists put forward and what social democracy stood for was a gradual parliamentary road to socialism. The CP said the army was some kind of neutral institution. This prepared the way for Pinochet. Workers were disarmed on the fundamental questions of strategy, tactics and programme.

'In Russia, the Bolsheviks worked for years to delineate a clear perspective articulating the independent interests of the working class. They worked to educate the best elements in Marxism. That is what enabled the Russian workers to take power. This remains the model by which a socialist tendency should be judged.

'Without addressing the question of leadership and programme, you end up with the fatalistic position that what happens must happen. Marxists must ask, why did it happen? What role did political tendencies play in that process? Was there an alternative? People paid for the politics of Stalinism and social democracy with their lives and those of their loved ones. That should never be allowed to happen again.'

Another Chilean in the audience said he agreed with what had been said. 'There was no genuine socialist party in Chile. The working class was disarmed not only through not having weapons, but also through not having a political education. That for me is the major lesson of the Chilean events. There was not a single party that was educating the working class.'

Marsden concurred. 'It is necessary to win workers to a socialist perspective. This requires years of political education and training. Outside of that, how are we going to make the revolution? The working class has to be conscious and aware of the tasks it confronts. This is especially true under conditions where Stalinism has wrought such a devastating blow to the rich tradition of Marxism in the working class.

'That is the fundamental question. It is very positive that the lessons of 1973 are now being discussed in the Chilean exile community. But we are long overdue in extending that discussion to other sections of workers. Chile raises fundamental issues of perspective. Is it possible to achieve socialism on the basis of the electoral process? History says no. It does not mean you don't work in parliament, or use it as a platform to expound your programme. But you have to reassert the central Marxist position that revolution is achieved through the independent political activity of the working class.

'Finally, there is the central issue we have to work through very carefully -- what type of party is needed to make socialism and on what perspective? If we begin such a discussion, then that's where the ripples from Pinochet's arrest are going to be felt.'

See Also:

The significance of Pinochet's arrest and the lessons of the 1973 coup

Speech by Chris Marsden to the Sheffield public meeting

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