

The view from outside the Pinochet hearing

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Britain's Law Lords ended their first week of hearing evidence in the extradition case against General Augusto Pinochet Thursday. Whilst dozens of journalists and TV cameras have relayed images of the composed proceedings within the House of Lords, little has been shown of events outside. Here the mood is of extreme tension.

Groups of people, wearing blank, white masks carry banners asking, "Where are they?"--a reference to the thousands of "disappeared" victims of Pinochet's military coup in 1973 and his subsequent dictatorship. Chilean exiles, victims and their relatives chant, "Justice, justice, we want justice" and "The only decision, extradition". Cries of "No to injustice, no to impunity, the blood of the dead cannot be negotiated" have been interspersed with the song "Que viva la Espana". Some of those leading the chants were themselves subjected to the most brutal torture by the junta and forced to leave their country and loved ones for fear of arrest. At intervals the protesters covered their eyes with pieces of cloth while they answered "presente" after the name of each disappeared "companero" was read out.

Also present in the capital are right-wing supporters of the former dictator who have been brought over from Chile especially for the hearing. Enormous anger and frustration have swept the picket each time Pinochet's supporters entered or left the House. "Fascistas, fascistas, vosotros soy los terroristas" (Fascists, fascists, you are the terrorists) the pickets shout, whilst the right-wingers taunt the protesters from the other side of the street.

A new element in the slogans of the anti-Pinochet pickets is the references to the treachery of the Frei government in Chile. The administration is demanding the return of the dictator and is due to make official representation on his behalf. "Gobierno Chileno, verguena nacional, etas comprometido con el

criminal" (Chilean government, national shame, you are implicated with the criminal.) Nobody believes that Pinochet will stand trial if he were returned to Chile. There is no judge, no court and no laws that could realise this, the pickets insist. Besides, Pinochet is not the only one responsible for the murder, torture, execution and disappearance of thousands of people, they point out. One of the provisos of transition from dictatorship to civilian government was a blanket amnesty for Pinochet and his cronies. Even if some kind of mock trial were to be staged, to satisfy international opinion, it would not be the Chilean people to whom Pinochet would have to answer.

The sense of outrage and hatred at the butchery that took place in Chile a quarter of a century ago, and over the following years, is even evident amongst the younger pickets. Some of these were born in Britain; some came as small children. But they are the most vociferous in the demand for justice.

Alejandra's father was held in the Santiago Stadium, but was "one of the lucky ones" who escaped to exile. She told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the military wanted to kill him because "he wanted something better for humanity". But she was there for their family friend, who was 22 years old at the time of the coup. He was captured and submitted to the most horrendous torture. "They pulled out his eyes, his teeth, tore one arm out of his body and dropped him in hot oil. His mother had to identify his corpse."

Even today, Alejandra went on, people don't talk about this in Chile. "I was there last year and you have to be very careful. There are lots of people who will grass on you to the authorities. It is rubbish that there is democracy and that Pinochet will be tried if he is returned. The right wing say that they have only 14 cases against him, but why haven't they been heard? Why did he have to come to Britain to be arrested? Frei was bought by Pinochet--he gained his presidency on

the basis that the government would give Pinochet and his entourage immunity."

A group of about 200 people, specially shipped and paid for by Chile's right wing, were allowed to set up a picket for a couple of hours at the end of the proceedings, around a hundred yards away from the exiles. Encircled by railings and heavily guarded by police, they displayed their banners calling for Pinochet to come home so as to facilitate "peace and national reconciliation". They held up Chilean flags, balloons and pictures of the dictator. From time to time passers-by would shout "fascist bastards", upsetting the sensitivities of the police who threatened more than one with arrest.

In sharp contrast, inside the House of Lords, the air was charged with pomp and ceremony, but above all--authority. People queued for hours for the very limited seats allowed to the public. The queue was also heavily guarded by police, who were told how many people to allow in--only between 20 and 30. People were given numbers and then escorted through the doors to the security x-ray cameras to be frisked and have their bags searched, before being directed on to chamber no. 102.

Outside the room, ushers in full-length tail-suits and gloves collect each number and allot the seats. Everyone stands up at both the entry and exit of the Law Lords. The seven geriatrics hearing the Pinochet case are the specially selected representatives of the British ruling class--the same bourgeoisie that has supported every dictatorship from Franco to Suharto, and with centuries of their own bloody repression around the world behind them. The Law Lords sit in judgement at the front of the chamber, facing rows of gowns and wigs worn by lawyers representing the different parties.

The few ordinary people who manage to get in sit amongst the well-groomed, high-heeled, bejewelled supporters of Pinochet. These arrogant men and women sit, surreptitiously sneering and smiling at one another every time murder, torture or another of Pinochet's crimes is mentioned.

During last week's hearing--which was limited to presentation of the prosecution's case--one got the overwhelming feeling that a major fraud was being perpetrated. Behind the veil of impartiality within the court, it was apparent that the Lords were seeking some

means of letting Pinochet go. In several remarks, the Law Lords indicated that the issue was not whether the general was responsible for the crimes enumerated, but whether he was head of state at the time and thereby, under English law, exempt from prosecution.



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