The British working class and the Pinochet affair: what accounts for labour's silence?

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The British House of Lords ruling on whether the former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet enjoys sovereign immunity from arrest is to be delivered at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, March 24. This will determine whether he can be extradited to Spain where he faces charges of involvement in the torture and deaths of over 3,000 people while he was in power.

The wait for the verdict by a panel of seven Law Lords began as long ago as February 4. The case has dragged through the courts since Pinochet's arrest five months ago in mid-October.

There is much speculation about the law Lords ruling, but the *Observer* reports that lawyers close to the case are mooting the possibility of a fudged verdict. The Law Lords could rule that the general's status as former head of state does not give him blanket immunity from prosecution, but that he cannot be tried for any offence committed in Chile before September 1988. This is the date on which torture became an "extraterritorial" crime under British law.

One lawyer said this "would seriously disable the case" against Pinochet, primarily because the majority of Pinochet's victims were tortured or killed in Chile in the first few months after he seized power in 1973. The Courts could challenge the evidence against him as insubstantial, and the case could drag on for months. After this, Home Secretary Jack Straw could still decide to allow his return to Chile on compassionate grounds. Britain's Attorney-General John Morris already refused leave for a private prosecution to be brought against him in Britain for the murder of British businessman William Beausire in 1974.

The twists and turns surrounding Pinochet's extradition almost defy belief. A High Court ruling in his favour was rejected by the Law Lords--supposedly Britain's highest court--only to be overturned and an unprecedented second hearing allowed. The new panel of Law Lords then hesitated for weeks over when they would issue a verdict. That they may now finally feel able to sabotage any chance of an effective prosecution is due in no small measure to the absence of a broad-based popular campaign against such a decision.

The most significant feature of the past months has been the virtual absence of the voice of Britain's workers in the Pinochet affair. Repeated opinion polls have shown overwhelming support for extradition, but anti-Pinochet protests have been largely made up of Chilean exile organisations and civil rights groups like Amnesty International. With a few exceptions, the official labour movement has maintained a deathly silence.

The contrast with the vociferous stance taken by Pinochet's right-wing defenders could not be sharper. An international alliance of political leaders urging his release has found its most determined advocates within the highest echelons of the British Conservative Party, and its ideological leader in former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

They have collected £2 million to fund a campaign characterised by its bald and vocal defence of fascist repression. News last month that the Pope had added his name to those demanding Pinochet go free was enthusiastically greeted by former Conservative Chancellor Norman Lamont. He proclaimed this as recognition of "the General's great contribution to protecting freedom in the Cold War". In the pamphlet "A Tale of two Chileans", drawn up by former Thatcher advisor Robert Harris, the pro-Pinochet forces declared: "Within Latin America the Cold War was won, above all, and most completely, through the action of General Pinochet.... Order was necessary if the right to private property was to be upheld".

This statement has far-reaching political implications. In September 1973, the major imperialist powers, led by the United States, and the Chilean capitalist class united to overthrow a democratically elected government and replace it with a military dictatorship. At a time of escalating social struggles throughout Europe, Latin America and internationally, the ruling class was determined to suppress the challenge to its power they saw in Chile and set an example for workers all over the world.

The Allende government and its Stalinist allies insisted that Chile's long traditions of democracy meant that socialism could be achieved within the framework of parliament. Though Allende carried out certain reforms and limited nationalisations, his government refused to expropriate imperialist interests or to challenge the power of the native capitalists, landowners and the military which was the root cause of the poverty and exploitation faced by the masses. The Popular Unity government opposed the attempts of the workers and peasants

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to mobilise against the obvious preparations by the military and fascist groups for a coup. It not only refused to arm the workers, but actively suppressed struggles by copper miners and others protesting against the hardship they faced. And so the way was paved for a tragic and bloody defeat.

Pinochet's regime set out to physically exterminate the socialist movement and destroy the organisations of the working class. He was responsible for the execution of tens of thousands of men, women and children, the raping of women with dogs and other forms of brutal and systematic torture--crimes which differ only in scale from those of Hitler. The military junta went on to mount an assault on living standards that produced some of the most horrific levels of poverty in the world.

The proclamation of solidarity with Pinochet by the Thatcherites is a threat directed against British workers that, should they ever dare to challenge the fundamental interests of the ruling class, they should expect nothing less than their Chilean counterparts. Britain's *Pinochistas* are unabashed in defending recourse to a military/fascist coup, mass murder and the suppression of democratic rights whenever they believe the threat of social revolution is posed. Their comments underscore the fact that, ultimately, the democratic rights of working people are incompatible with the maintenance of the profit system.

Thatcher and her cohorts view Pinochet's victory over the Chilean working class as a critical chapter in a largely successful and ongoing offensive against the working class all over the world. She feels confident in throwing down a political challenge to the democratic rights of working people because she knows that no one within the official labour movement will mobilise opposition to it.

She is well aware of the character of Britain's trade union and Labour leaders from her 11 years in office, during which they capitulated to her every attack while they sought to ingratiate themselves with the employers. When questioned by the *World Socialist Web Site* about its role in the current extradition battle, the Trades Union Congress could only point to a press statement issued on November 26 and the fact that TUC President John Monks "wrote privately to the Home Secretary"!

Thatcher has also made clear that she considers Blair a kindred political spirit--sentiments that he has reciprocated. Since it came to power, the Blair government has conducted an ideological offensive to proclaim the superiority of the market, and the struggle between capital and labour an historic misunderstanding. Whereas in 1973 the Labour Party and the unions organised demonstrations of tens of thousands in solidarity with the Chilean working class, today the Blair government has refused to take a position on extradition while making clear its tacit support for Pinochet. Blair previously treated the General as an honoured guest and was only forced to do otherwise by the arrival of the Spanish extradition warrant.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to why no substantial section of workers has rejected the labour leaders' stance in order to meet the challenge thrown down by the Thatcherites. The answer must be sought in the crisis of political perspective within the working class.

The Chilean events of 1973 serve to refute the central tenet advocated historically by the Stalinist and social democratic parties of a gradual parliamentary road to socialism. Throughout most of this century, the Labour Party and the trade unions maintained that an accommodation between the social and political aspirations of the working class and the preservation of the profit system was possible.

To the extent that workers accepted this perspective because they were able to secure improved living standards, this left them ill-prepared for the developments of the past two decades and more. The globalisation of every aspect of production and the domination of economic life by huge transnational corporations rendered the old reformist strategy of the Labour Party and the trade unions impotent. This led to a succession of bitter defeats. Without an understanding of why this happened--which requires above all an appreciation of the role of the socialist opposition to Stalinism that was led by Leon Trotsky--the confidence of workers in socialism and their own ability to change the world was badly shaken.

Today there is not a single area of social or political policy in which the voice of working people is heard. They have been effectively disenfranchised by the degeneration of their old organisations, which no longer, even in a limited sense, represent their interests. To a degree unprecedented this century, this has left politics as the exclusive province of the wealthy and their parties.

There are indications that this is beginning to change. With poverty and unemployment soaring side by side with the grotesque accumulation of wealth by the social elite, hostility to the status-quo is growing. This has already led to the fall of right-wing governments of the Thatcher type throughout Europe. Equally it is creating profound discontent amongst workers, intellectuals and young people over the attempt by Blair and other social democratic administrations to continue a pro-business agenda.

What is necessary in order to decisively shift the present balance of class forces is the elaboration of an alternative political strategy, through which the working class can intervene in its own social interests. In laying the foundations for such a reorientation of the workers movement on genuinely socialist foundations, an examination of the historic experience of the working class with reformism and Stalinism and the lessons of the Chilean events must play a key role.

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