

Recent letters to the WSWS

22 December 2000

Dear Editor,

Many thanks for the recent report on the systematic abuse of asylum-seekers in Australia's refugee camps. Depressingly, this seems to be a global phenomenon which parallels the rise of racist and xenophobic sentiments in many different countries. As a South African citizen, I have also become aware of the vicious treatment meted out to so-called illegal immigrants, both by the official organs of government and by members of the public in general. To date, no member of the government has spoken out against the rising tide of xenophobia. Similarly to Australia, the cultivation and implicit encouragement of chauvinism serves a definite political function, namely the obfuscation of the real causes of economic hardship and human misery.

Yours,

EG

South Africa

20 December 2000

Impunity rules in Chile

My mouth fills with purple butterflies ready to paint the sky with their fragile wings and a century-old rage when I hear the term impunity. That's exactly what is happening in Chile at the moment, because general Pinochet remains untouchable. Every time somebody or something approaches, however timidly, his military, political and judicial fortress, obscure forces go into action to protect the dictator's golden retirement. Well, not that obscure anymore. To its disgrace, the civilian government protects Pinochet and the military. In an unprecedented and baffling move, President Ricardo Lagos recently invited, of his own volition, army general Hernán Ramírez to the presidential palace. Baffling because the general is being tried as an accomplice to the murder of trade union leader Tucapel Jiménez in 1982. Sickening too, for the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared have been asking for over a month to meet with the president to no avail.

What kind of country are we living in when murderers, torturers and rapists are more important and treated with more respect than the victims of the dictatorship's repression? What kind of democracy are we living under when the government bows down to military pressure every time the latter show their discontent for judicial resolutions? This is what happened when the government gave in to the armed forces' demand to convoke a special meeting of the National Security Council. The military's anger had been provoked by a judge's decision to prosecute Pinochet on charges of kidnapping and murdering 76 Chileans in October 1973. The Council was created by the dictatorship so that the armed forces would have a formal voice in the country's internal affairs in times of crisis. However, Pinochet's indictment does not constitute a crisis, it's just a legal proceeding in a criminal case. To call for a meeting of the Council is simply unconstitutional. But who cares?

Chile is a strange country with a peculiar type of democracy where everyone rules except the people. A strange country where the

military lost their power but none of the cowardly politicians had the courage to tell them. So, they just keep ruling the country as in the good old times. Not that they need it, because the Appeal Court also protects Pinochet. The magistrates had no problem in overruling a brave judge's decision to indict the general. So, it's back to square one again: Pinochet is still a free man, the military is happy and the government is relieved, because they fear the military.

The Catholic Church also protects the military, for in a recent liturgical ceremony the bishops asked for forgiveness for all sins committed in the last three decades. As if we are all guilty of what happened in Chile before and after the military coup in 1973. They also valued a letter sent to them by Pinochet, because the dictator thinks "with grief in the suffering that so many Chileans have experienced or still experience." How dare the bishops believe a murderer, how dare Pinochet talk about sorrow when it was he and his men who inflicted untold pain on our people? The dictator is unable to feel remorse, his words are not only hollow, but outright offensive.

Whenever I see the dictator's smile, whenever I see his bodyguards act in the same arrogant way as they did for nearly two decades, I think of Mauricio's beautiful dreamy eyes, for he took part in the ambush to kill the dictator back in 1986. They failed and Pinochet escaped. Mauricio did not give up the struggle for democracy and freedom, he went underground and was finally arrested after a shootout with hundreds of secret police agents. He was shot seven times, his legs were nearly destroyed by machinegun fire and a bullet went right through his forehead. "When I was dying," he told me, "I could only think of my little boy and how I would never see him again." But Mauricio did not die; amazingly he survived. We spent about three months in a prison hospital together before being moved to the prison itself. We shared a room in hospital, learned to walk again and never gave up our dignified attitude. I was eventually released and Mauricio escaped from prison alongside 40 other political prisoners. Sadly he died of cancer shortly afterwards. He was only 32 years old; courageous, firm, but sweet. His only regret in life was that the ambush against Pinochet did not succeed. He remembered with sadness how the dictator got away in his armoured vehicle: "We just ran after him firing our guns, his bodyguards presented no resistance, they ran away like rats," he used to say proudly.

Today, when impunity rules in Chile, the Chile you fought for, Mauricio, there are many that refuse to erase from their memory your memory. The dictatorship invented an amnesty law to protect human rights violators; the civilian government is now talking about "justice with clemency" to protect murderers and torturers. What the hell is that? You either have justice or you don't, anything else is just a euphemism for immunity and impunity. The government and the military want to find a way out of the human rights issue; they want to put an end to this problem. But this is not a problem for the thousands of victims of the repression, it is simply the desire for justice to be

done, it is not a problem but a moral obligation.

Can justice be accomplished in today's Chile? Well, nearly six months ago the military agreed—after 27 years—to provide some information about some of the people they kidnapped, killed and made disappear. One of those responsible for gathering such information is police officer and lawyer Luis Acevedo; he has just been indicted as an accomplice to the massacre of 12 young Chileans in June 1987. The deadline to come up with this information is January of next year, but no one expects any real results, except for the military to say that they are dead, and perhaps, that their unidentified bones can be found somewhere in Chile. The government will thank the military's diligence and the Church will ask us to heal the wounds of the past and move forward in the name of national reconciliation.

What they cannot understand, Mauricio, is that we will never forget your simple smile, sweet as a pink cloud. We will never cease to repair broken dreams, no matter how long it takes. Only when our right to justice is respected can we laugh at the purple butterflies painting the sky with their sparrow's jump.

TT

Chile

19 December 2000

Dear Editors,

I found Joanne Laurier's critique of the film *Billy Elliot*, very interesting. Having not seen the film, I'm not in a position to comment on her description of the scenes, contained in the first half of the article, but it was enlightening to read about the particular motivation of the film's creators. Her comment that the film depicted the mine workers as "monotypes with no intrinsic dynamism" is in my view entirely believable.

I can recall reading one of Charles Dickens' novels (about 40 years ago) and can remember how I was mesmerized by his characters as he brought them to life, with their language and behavior. But more importantly, she points out the failure of the filmmakers to make any reference to the role of the union bureaucracy in the defeat of the strike.

However the last half of the article beginning with, "Hall and Daldry are groping towards important matters," was, I felt, the most incisive part of her critique. Her assessment of the collapse of "a certain kind of working class existence" and its effect on the spirit, was spot on, in many cases it was worse than this. She is also correct in pointing out that Billy Elliot's sensitivity to music and dancing could be a way out for him personally in avoiding the cultural "backwardness" of the industrial working class. But it is hardly a solution for the rest of the village or the class in general.

It is an interesting description, "working class backwardness", but as the author correctly points out it is "not entirely incorrect"—provided it is understood to be rooted in socioeconomic causes and not a genetic outcome as some would have us believe. The description always reminds me of a quotation from *Gods Englishmen* (Christopher Hill, Ch. VIII ... "men who have been rendered brutal and stupid and ferocious by ages of slavery"). The social relations of feudalism have come to an end, but a lifetime spent in the pits, or in the foundry, or on the workshop floor, in yesterday's or today's capitalism is not an environment conducive to the study of the arts, for the majority who experience it.

But as David North pointed out in his article about the Columbine High School massacre, brutality, stupidity and ferociousness can arise not only as a result of feudal or capitalist exploitation, but can be found alive and well in the ranks of "the highly paid and celebrated

columnists at the *New York Times*" ["The Columbine High School massacre: American Pastoral ... American Berserk," <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/apr1999/colo-a27.shtml>] Another important point that Ms. Laurier makes is one that David Walsh never tires of making in his numerous articles, and that is, these filmmakers "share in common with so many other artists at present a lack of political and historical imagination". Lee Hall and Stephen Daldry could just as easily have shown how the sensitive child of a coal miner was capable of understanding and acting on the far-reaching causes of the defeat of his father's generation of working class union militants.

Joanne Laurier's article is of course, after all, about the role of the art of filmmaking and the quality of films being produced, but I am sure that if I was to see this film about Billy Elliot and his coal mining village I would find myself agreeing with her favourable assessment of it.

Yours sincerely,

AC

Australia

19 December 2000

In response to David Walsh's article regarding the media and financial reality, his last paragraph was almost prophetic, as I at one point several years ago (I am still in college) thought about pursuing a career in journalism, in order that I might inform people of the reality of their surroundings, to help them by informing them of what is going on in this world. However, in class, the professor blatantly stated journalism is all about money—pleasing advertisers, and reporting what will net them the biggest gain. I was disgusted; I did not follow through with my plans of switching my major to journalism. I worked for a while at my community college newspaper, where my editors, also, were less than interested in truth. They seemed to think only what went on within the walls or grounds of the college was worth reporting; anything else, any broader topic than, say, a faculty award, was dismissed, unless it could be diminished down to a story of "relevance." Once again, I was left with a less-than-favorable impression of print journalism. It seems to me if teachers are teaching their students that journalism is all about money, and that college students cannot possibly be interested in national or international events, that the media is doomed to become even more subject to the influence of large corporations and elite entities than it already is, as students emerging from academia will graduate to careers with practices into which they will have already been indoctrinated. So I want to thank Mr. Walsh for his reporting; at least someone's out there trying to report with some accuracy, without fear of advertiser "retribution."

Sincerely,

LF

18 December 2000



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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