The lessons of Chile—30 years on

Mauricio Saavedra, Margaret Rees
17 September 2003

Thirty years ago on September 11 the Chilean military, with the full backing of Washington and the Pentagon, overthrew the democratically elected government of President Salvadore Allende and installed General Augusto Pinochet's fascist-military dictatorship, which lasted 17 years.

Commemorations of the anniversary in Chile and internationally have focused on the fate of Allende, who headed a Popular Unity coalition dominated by his own Socialist Party and the Stalinist Communist Party. Allende committed suicide as the military shelled the La Moneda presidential palace in Santiago. Yet it was Allende's government that betrayed the Chilean working class and delivered it into the hands of the military junta.

The Chilean workers, intellectuals, peasants and youth bore the brunt of that White House-sponsored "regime change". Of a population of barely 11 million, more than 4,000 were executed or "disappeared," hundreds of thousands were detained and tortured, and almost a million fled the country.

Thirty years on, the issues raised by the Chilean coup continue to reverberate. This can be seen in the feverish attempts by the present government, led by one of Allende's political heirs, Socialist Party President Ricardo Lagos, to manipulate and distort the experiences of 1973 for its own political purposes.

In the lead up to the official 30th anniversary commemorations, Chile's state-run media devoted nightly coverage to the formation of the Popular Unity government, the CIA-inspired destabilisation process, and the atrocities committed during the coup and its aftermath. Numerous seminars, debates, speeches, ceremonies and art exhibitions were held, together with new editions of scores of books, recitals and even revivals of musical hits from the 1970s. Lagos renamed one of the meeting rooms of La Moneda palace in Allende's honour to officially endorse him as a martyr and national hero.

The mythmaking and resuscitation of Allende's image as an opponent of the US flows from the political needs of Lagos' increasingly discredited administration. In the first place, he is seeking to distance his government from its craven support for the neo-colonialist policies of the Bush administration, particularly since Chile currently sits on the UN Security Council and voted in favour of the US-controlled "Authority" in Iraq.

Secondly, Lagos' party, together with its Spanish and British counterparts, helped block the extradition of Pinochet to Spain in 1998 and, once in government in 2000, brought him safely back to Chile. Lagos then held dozens of secret meetings with the military high command to guarantee Pinochet's escape from prosecution in Chile and to put a brake on the hundreds of lawsuits against the military. This was an enormous relief to Washington, which did not want any exposure of its role in Chile in the 1970s, especially in the 1973 coup.

Thirdly, like Allende before him, Lagos is increasingly resting on the military, sending officer corps to train in the US, modernising its equipment and dispatching troops to international missions to prepare for use against the working class.

In August, Lagos, interviewed by the Buenos Aires daily *El Clarin*, sought to explain the significance of the Allende revival. "I believe the repercussions have been very positive. It is not something that was forgotten 20 or 25 years later. The TV has been showing hitherto unseen, very shocking footage. What impact will all this have on the 50 percent of all Chileans who had not been born or were much too young at the time?"

Despite the countless crimes committed against his political associates and friends, Lagos has reconciled with the perpetrators in the military. This has had a "positive" effect.

Allende's political heirs not only continue to cover up the military's crimes, but pursue the "free market" economic program carried out under the military dictatorship. Lagos boasts that during his third year in office both the European Union and United States signed free-trade agreements with Chile, specifically because of his so-called "flexible" labour laws, commitment to fiscal surpluses and economic "liberalisation".

Thirteen years after the military handed power back to the civilian politicians—in return for protection from prosecution—a quarter of Chile's people continue to live in poverty, official unemployment hovers around 10 percent and the working class remains among the most exploited in the world.

New confrontations with the working class are looming. Only a month ago, on August 16, tens of thousands of miners and industrial workers, public sector employees, drivers and students held the first general strike since the return to civilian rule. Their main demand was that Lagos end his commitment to free market policies.

And when, on September 11, protest barricades went up in the poorest suburbs of Santiago, Interior Minister Jose Miguel Insulza declared that the full strength of the law would be used against the demonstrators, leading to 300 arrests.

While the Lagos administration is doing its best to confuse a new generation of workers and youth, the 1973 coup was a decisive strategic experience for the working class in Chile, throughout Latin America and internationally. The bloodbath exposed the perfidy of all those who subordinate the working people to the so-called democratic state of the capitalist class.

There is no doubt that the coup was only possible because of years of financial and military aid given by Washington to Chile's ruling elite. During the 1960s, both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations poured millions of dollars into the right-wing Christian Democratic government of Eduardo Frei.

When these vast sums of money failed to prevent the 1970 election of Allende's Popular Unity coalition, the Nixon administration initiated the destabilisation and overthrow of the elected government. Nixon's top foreign policy advisor Henry Kissinger infamously remarked: "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist because of the irresponsibility of its own people."

But the political responsibility for the coup rested squarely on the shoulders of the Popular Unity government. Fearing the response of the working class, Nixon and Kissinger pulled back from a 1970 coup plan. It required three years of systematic political disarming and disorientation of the Chilean masses by Allende's government before the conditions were created for Pinochet's coup.

Allende was brought to power by an increasingly militant working class

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amid a worldwide upsurge in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Even before the September 1970 elections, Chilean workers had occupied factories and established workers committees, while peasants had taken over large estates. The Popular Unity's supporters were under the illusion that once in power it would fulfil the promise of profound political and socio-economic change.

As the government's chief ideologists, the Stalinists of the Communist Party played a pivotal role in purveying these illusions. They propagated the theory of a "peaceful, parliamentary road to socialism" in which the state—the parliament, the judiciary, the executive and the armed forces and police—could be harnessed in the interests of the masses.

According to this doctrine, it mattered little that Chile's wealthiest families and the landed bourgeoisie dominated the state, that the US military, a bastion of anti-communism, had trained the Chilean generals, and that American multinational corporations and European finance had a virtual stranglehold over the economy.

Moreover, the political crisis in Chile was not an isolated occurrence. The same period saw the French general strike of May-June 1968, strike waves in 1969 in Italy and Germany, as well as mass antiwar protests, urban riots and militant industrial struggles in the United States that ultimately led to the Nixon administration's downfall in 1974. During that same year, the fascist-military regimes in Portugal and Greece collapsed, while in Britain the miners' strike brought down the Heath government.

But the warning signs of the willingness of ruling circles to resort to bloody counter-revolution had already been witnessed in Indonesia in 1965-66, when more than half a million workers and peasants died in the United States-backed coup led by General Suharto. There too, the key role was played by the Stalinist Indonesian Communist Party, which helped suppress the convulsive struggles of the Indonesian masses in the name of pursuing the "peaceful road to socialism".

Allende's government took office in the throes of a world economic and financial crisis that sent the Chilean economy spiralling downwards. The Central Bank's reserves plummeted, the foreign debt skyrocketed, and the nation's access to foreign credit came to a standstill.

Instead of repudiating the massive debt, Allende swore to meet the impossible demands of the international money markets, knowing full well that the impoverished sectors of the middle class and the working class would suffer the brunt of this policy. The servicing of foreign debt alone amounted to $300 million in one year.

Facing deliberate economic sabotage by big business and international finance, Allende moved violently against the working class and turned to the military for support. Workers established industrial committees to defeat the 1972 bosses' strike that sought to cripple the economy, created Supply and Price Committees to break the hoarding of goods by merchants, and formed embryonic workers' defence organs in response to an abortive right-wing coup in June 1973.

The Popular Unity government sabotaged every one of these workers' initiatives. In early 1973, it attacked the striking copper miners and later placed the most militant working class zones under martial law. Allende legalised military searches of factories and workplaces and disbanded workers' self-defence militias. He brought three top generals into his cabinet, and, following their resignation, proposed their entry into the cabinet again.

Allende sought to appease the rightwing, which was by then openly clamouring for a military takeover. In this he was backed to the hilt by the Stalinists, who were deeply committed to the defence of the nation state. Following the abortive coup in June 1973, the Stalinist leader Luis Corvalan made begging overtures to the fascists and extreme nationalist parties: "The revolt was quickly contained, thanks to the prompt and determined action by the Commander-in-Chief of the army, the loyalty of the armed forces and the police ... We continue to support the absolutely professional character of the armed institutions. Their enemies are not among the ranks of the people, but in the reactionary camp."

The military, however, pressed on with preparations for a violent takeover and bloody repression. It could only succeed because the working class had been politically disarmed by the policies of the Stalinists and the Socialist Party. By suppressing working class militancy and strengthening the military's hand, they objectively paved the way for the coup five months later.

The betrayals of the Popular Unity government were, in turn, only possible because no Trotskyist party existed to fight to break workers from illusions in Allende and the Stalinists, develop an alternative revolutionary leadership and pose the necessity for a struggle for power.

No such party existed because a liquidationist tendency had emerged inside the Fourth International. Led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, it had jettisoned the Marxist program of proletarian socialist revolution, to propound the guerrillaist theories of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Internationally, the Pabloites adapted to every national form of political opportunism, insisting that the parties of the Fourth International should join prevailing reformist or centrist formations.

On the basis of this political orientation the Chilean section of the Fourth International was disbanded and merged into the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), a Castroite group formed in 1964 by ex-Communist and Socialist members to establish a guerrilla movement in Chile. Once the Popular Unity coalition took office, the true face of this abandonment of a revolutionary socialist perspective became apparent.

While making limited criticisms of Allende, the MIR claimed that the Popular Unity coalition was a step toward socialism and that workers had to support the government's "positive measures". The MIR had a considerable following among the landless peasantry in Chile's south. But, like the centrist POUM in the Spanish Civil War, the MIR capitulated to a Popular Front regime. In March 1973, it withdrew its electoral opposition to Allende, precisely at the juncture when a bold challenge to Popular Unity and a demand for a workers and farmers government could have provided an alternative for workers and poor peasants.

This was entirely in line with a statement issued by the Pabloite United Secretariat, which provided the platform for the subordination of the working class to Allende. It claimed that Marxists were obliged to "support progressive measures undertaken by the Allende regime and maintain a united front against the attacks of the reactionaries".

In liquidating Chilean Trotskyism, the only force that could have resolved the crisis of leadership of the working class, into the MIR, Pabloism provided the catalyst for the horrific betrayal of 1973, which had profound consequences throughout South America and worldwide.

Under Pinochet, Chile became a social laboratory for the right-wing monetarist and free-market policies that were to be unleashed globally by the end of the 1970s with the advent of the Reagan and Thatcher governments.

Pinochet's mass murders, the destruction of living standards and democratic rights and the atomisation of the working class, created unparalleled opportunities for foreign capital and the Chilean bourgeoisie to enrich themselves. A functionary in the military regime, Sergio de Castro, boasted that Pinochet's repressive apparatus provided the "authorities a degree of efficiency that was not possible to obtain in a democratic regime; and it made possible the application of a model developed by experts and did not depend upon the social reactions produced by its implementation."

This "shock therapy," backed by Washington and spearheaded by Milton Friedman's "Chicago Boys" economists, consisted of the most radical program of privatisation and deregulation seen anywhere in the world. The economic experiment plunged almost half the population into poverty and deliberately kept unemployment in the double digits.

Following the coup, having supported Allende's regime to the end, the Chilean and European Stalinists rewrote history to present the coup as

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tragic, but historically inevitable. Nothing could be further from the truth. A revolutionary struggle by the militant Chilean working class would have impacted on the class struggle internationally.

The survival of capitalism internationally during this period depended—internationally as well as in Chile—upon the betrayals carried out by the Stalinist, social democratic and trade union bureaucracies, which worked to divert the working class from the path of socialist revolution. It is critical that workers and young people in every country draw the lessons of Chile in preparation for a new period of economic, social and political convulsions.

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