

Protest against poverty

Couple set themselves on fire at Chile's presidential palace

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27 June 2005

An unemployed man and his wife set themselves on fire in front of Chile's La Moneda presidential palace Thursday to protest their impoverished condition and the government's failure to provide them with adequate assistance.

Vladimir Poblete, 39, and Ana Perez, 56, driven to desperation, took a bus to Plaza Constitucion in front of the palace in the morning. Wrapping themselves in a tattered Chilean flag, they doused themselves with gasoline and set themselves on fire in front of startled onlookers and scores of police.

Engulfed in flames, they managed to reach the base of a statue of Chile's former President Salvador Allende, who was murdered in the US-backed military coup of September 11, 1973.

Poblete was reported in grave condition Friday, having suffered severe damage to his lungs from breathing in fire and heat. He was being kept alive on a ventilation machine. His wife suffered burns to her face, neck and hands, but was expected to recover.

A friend of the couple, Carmen Negrete, said that they had decided to stage their grim protest out of despair over their living conditions and inability to get help. She said that she had discussed the plan for self-immolation with them, but didn't think they would go through with it. She accompanied them to La Moneda, where she begged them not to do it.

"They had nothing to eat and had already sold all of their furniture and were sleeping on the ground," said Negrete.

Their already impoverished existence began a dramatic downward spiral in March 2004, after they were evicted from a stadium where they had found shelter in Pudahuel, a municipality located in greater

Santiago. Vladimir Poblete had worked at the stadium as a caretaker, and claimed that the municipality owed him severance pay. The local authorities, however, maintained that he had no labor contract and was owed nothing.

After evicting the couple, the municipality relocated them to a tiny plot of rural land and a dwelling that was described by one Chilean newspaper as "made of wood and covered with the mud from the recent rains." The structure had no heat, electricity or water.

The couple made what little money they had as *cartoneros*, picking trash for recyclables—a miserable occupation that has become ubiquitous among the unemployed in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America. They also watched cars at a nightclub in Santiago.

The fiery protest at La Moneda was largely ignored in the international press. It deserves considerably more attention.

Chile has for years been touted as a model for capitalist development. Indeed, ex-US President Bill Clinton arrived in Santiago Thursday morning, just as Vladimir Poblete and Ana Perez were setting themselves on fire. He came for a conference on "world leadership." Speaking before an audience of businessmen paying \$300-a-head, he praised the "Chilean model" and declared, "You shouldn't hide success."

The success of his well-heeled audience is the product of Chile's so-called "economic miracle" of the 1980s and early 1990s, which produced the fastest growth in gross domestic product in all of Latin America.

This "miracle" was prepared through the merciless repression unleashed by the right-wing military

dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. With Washington's direct assistance, his regime carried out a reign of terror that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of workers, students and intellectuals, and saw tens of thousands more imprisoned without charges, subjected to hideous forms of torture and driven into exile.

The political decapitation of Chile's powerful workers' movement set the stage for wholesale privatizations, in which social wealth was handed over to the regime's wealthy backers, while vast amounts of income were transferred from the bottom of the social ladder to the top.

Thus, as the GDP rose in decade following the US-backed coup, Chile's unemployment rate soared from 4.3 percent to 22 percent, while real wages plummeted by 40 percent. During the same period, the share of the population living below the poverty line more than doubled, reaching 44.4 percent.

Chilean society remains dominated by the stark contrast between the immense wealth of the financial elite that benefited from the dictatorship and the grinding poverty faced by the majority. Among Latin American countries, only Brazil has more unequal income distribution. Of all the countries in the world, Chile is the 12th worst in distribution of wealth.

Today, 60 percent of Chile's households live a precarious existence based on the equivalent of US\$600 or less in monthly income.

It is no accident that the Bush administration has invoked Chile as a model for its own plans to privatize the Social Security system. The Chilean experience left retirees with considerably less in benefits than they enjoyed under the old Social Security-style system, while money managers and large investors made a killing.

As with most similar tragedies, the misery afflicting the couple who set themselves ablaze last week involved not only the general social and political conditions facing masses of people, but also immense personal problems. Vladimir Poblete was said to have symptoms of schizophrenia, while his wife was diagnosed with depression and epilepsy.

No doubt Chile's ruling elite, which has reaped such immense profits off the immiseration of millions, as well as the Socialist Party politicians, who have continued to implement the socially regressive policies

inherited from the dictatorship, drew comfort from such details.

Indeed, Claudia Sabal, the mayor of the municipality that evicted the couple, commented to the press: "There are a lot of people in extreme situations, but they don't go as far as doing this." She added that "the social net has done everything within its power, but these are people with behavioral problems."

The acknowledgement that millions of people live in the same kind of "extreme situation" that drove Vladimir Poblete and Ana Perez to attempt public suicide in Santiago is a damning indictment of the "behavioral problems" of capitalism both in Chile and internationally.



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