

Chile's student struggle and the legacy of 1973

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On September 11, workers and youth demonstrated in Santiago, Chile, to commemorate the 38th anniversary of the CIA-backed coup that overthrew the government of Salvador Allende and ushered in 17 years of a brutal military dictatorship headed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

The large march through the Chilean capital was marked by repeated clashes between demonstrators and Carabinero paramilitary riot police, resulting in 21 arrests and many injuries. To intimidate the crowd, the police deployed mounted units, water cannon and tear gas.

The protest followed three months of demonstrations by high school and university students demanding an end to for-profit education and free higher education for all Chileans. The movement has steadily escalated into a confrontation with the right-wing government of President Sebastian Piñera and has raised the demand for the rewriting of the constitution approved under the Pinochet dictatorship.

This constitution arose out of Chile's 1973 military coup, one of the bloodiest and most tragic defeats suffered by the international working class. It instituted a series of capitalist counter-reforms to reverse reformist measures implemented under Allende's Popular Unity government and pointed in the direction of a new order, with education and health subordinated to profit, pensions privatized, etc.

The Chilean Students Confederation (Confech) held demonstrations in Santiago, Valparaíso and Concepción on September 13 and 14 in solidarity with a 48-hour strike by some 25,000 workers in the municipal health sector. The health workers walked out in demand for improvements in wages, working conditions and infrastructure and over the failure of the Ministry of Health to comply with an agreement negotiated last November. As in the students' struggle, at the root of the conflict in the public health sector is privatization and inadequate government funding.

Previously, university and secondary students joined in a two-day strike called on August 24 and 25 by Chile's main union federation, the CUT (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores). Less than 13 percent of the Chilean workforce is unionized.

Sections of the media have drawn parallels between the mass demonstrations and strikes in Chile and the popular movements that swept the Middle East early this year, referring to the "Chilean Winter" (winter is just ending in the southern hemisphere) in the same breath as the "Arab spring." There is a strong parallel between these distant struggles in the absence of a clearly defined program and a conscious revolutionary leadership.

The mass student struggles have taken the form of a confrontation not only with the right-wing Piñera administration, but also the "center-left" Concertación coalition, led by the Socialist and Christian

Democratic parties, which is responsible for continuing the Pinochet-era educational policies.

However, the existing trade union and student leaderships, dominated by the Stalinist Communist Party of Chile (PCCh), are determined to maintain the explosive mass movement within Chile's existing bourgeois political framework and limit it to reforms acceptable to the country's ruling elite.

This is the policy pursued by both the CUT leadership, which is in the hands of the Socialist Party and the PCCh, and the Confederation of Students of the University of Chile (Fech), whose best-known student representative, Camila Vallejo, is a member of the Communist Youth movement. The path upon which they are trying to lead the student movement is that of negotiations with the Piñera government, which would leave the Pinochet constitution intact.

The resurgence of student and workers' struggles in Chile has been accompanied by the promotion of illusions in the period of Allende and the *Unidad Popular* (Popular Unity) government that he headed. A whole range of new organizations has emerged with names like *Partido del Socialismo Allendista*, *Movimiento Amplio Allendista* *el Frente Estudiantil Allendista*, and *Socialistas como Allende*.

The most politically consistent in promoting these illusions is the Chilean Communist Party. With the assistance of various Pabloite revisionist groups, it is doing its best to confuse a new generation coming into struggle about the political betrayal in Chile that led to a strategic defeat for the working class.

Chilean workers paid a terrible price for this betrayal, with thousands murdered and tortured by the military dictatorship and a million Chileans forced to flee the country. The dictatorship carried out the wholesale destruction of workers' living standards and democratic and social rights, laying the foundations for the radical privatization and deregulation drive that became known within international capitalist circles as the "Chilean miracle."

The thrust of the PCCh's line can be gleaned from a document posted on its web site: *Breve Historia del Partido Comunista Chileno* (Brief History of the Chilean Communist Party [http://www.pcchile.cl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=945&Itemid=53]).

The heart of the document is a glorification of the policy of the Popular Front, introduced by the Stalinist Comintern in the wake of Hitler's conquest of power in Germany, which sought to ally the Communist Parties with purely bourgeois parties in the name of the fight against fascism. The price of these alliances was the Stalinists' direct suppression of revolutionary struggles of the working class, as seen most tragically in Spain.

It is remarkable that nearly two decades after the dissolution of the

Soviet Union and the liquidation of former Communist Parties all over the world, the Chilean Stalinists invoke this discredited legacy. It is because with or without the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy, it corresponds to the role played by the PCCh today, which is that of subordinating the working class to bourgeois parties.

Today, as the Chilean Stalinists spell out, this perspective translates into support for the “national, popular and revolutionary process” that has brought to power bourgeois regimes ranging from Chavez in Venezuela to the Workers Party government in Brazil

The PCCh history presents the Popular Unity government as “the greatest conquest of the Chilean workers movement until now,” citing improved economic conditions for the working class as well as the nationalization, or “Chileanization” as it was called, of mining and other sectors—measures that had actually begun under Allende’s predecessor, Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei.

Allende was swept into power on a wave of working class militancy in 1970. The decisive question is how that powerful movement of the working class was defeated, producing the horrific repression of the Pinochet dictatorship just three years later.

As is well known, the CIA, working in intimate collaboration with the Chilean right and the military, implemented a program to destabilize and overthrow the Allende government. As Henry Kissinger famously commented, “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 why was the working class not prepared to defeat this counter-revolutionary plot? The PCCh seeks to answer this question with reactionary double-talk. It claims it lacked “theoretical development” and the “vision” to “push with the same force as it did in the economic and social spheres the changes that needed to be made in the superstructure of society: the state, the armed forces, the judicial system, etc.”

This is a lie. The “theoretical development” and “vision” of the Chilean Communist Party was founded on the Stalinist perspective of the Popular Front and the “parliamentary road to socialism,” which made the PCCh the most determined defender of the bourgeois state and the most vicious enemy of the revolutionary struggle of the working class. It stood on the right wing of the Popular Unity government, using the three years between the election and the military coup to disorient, demoralize and disarm—both literally and politically—the Chilean working class.

Attempts by workers to defeat the reactionary employers’ strikes by establishing industrial committees and to prepare to defend themselves against the threat of a fascist coup by establishing the beginnings of independent defense organizations were ruthlessly suppressed by the Allende government and the Stalinists. An arms control law was invoked to carry out searches for and confiscation of weapons in the factories and working class districts, while the most militant working class areas were placed under martial law.

The Stalinists demanded that the working class place its faith in the military, while Allende invited the generals into his cabinet. Just months before the fascist-military coup, the then-secretary general of the PCCh, Luis Corvalán, vouched for the “absolutely professional character of the armed institutions.”

This betrayal was facilitated by the prior liquidation of the Trotskyist movement in Chile. With the full support of the Pabloite international organization led by Ernest Mandel, this movement dissolved itself into the centrist MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left), which propagated illusions in Castroism and guerrillaism, while

taking an opportunist position of “critical support” for the Allende government. With the sharp intensification of the class struggle in the months preceding the coup, the MIR withdrew even its electoral opposition to the Unidad Popular government, failing to provide any revolutionary alternative to the betrayal being prepared by the Stalinist and social democratic leaderships.

The modern-day successors of Pabloism in Chile are today playing a similar role. Two organizations, the Party of Revolutionary Workers (PTR) and the Revolutionary Party of the Workers (PRT), both successors of the Argentine movement led by the late Nahuel Moreno, have worked each in its own way to subordinate the uprising of Chilean youth to Stalinism.

Oscillating between skepticism in the revolutionary capacity of the working class and worshipping its spontaneity, the PTR issued a document on August 25 calling on students and workers to put pressure on the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, and the trade unions for them to abandon reformism and instead lead the student struggle in a revolutionary direction.

In the same manner, cheering the masses on and calling for the rebuilding of the CUT, the PRT (which has also acted as a cheerleader for the imperialist assault on Libya), in a statement published August 7, called on workers and students to force the CUT and other [unnamed] working class organizations to break with the bourgeoisie and take the revolutionary road.

Whatever differences they may have with each other, both the PRT and the PTR are promoting fatal illusions among students and workers that these historically discredited parties, which were responsible for subordinating the working class to the capitalist state under Allende, and thereby paving the way for Pinochet, will under the renewed pressure of the masses become revolutionary organizations.

The role of the fake-lefts is even more nakedly presented by the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the US, which has responded to the events in Chile by joining with the bourgeois media in lionizing the Stalinist student leader Camila Vallejo. Effectively endorsing the decision late last month by the student federation leadership headed by Vallejo to enter into negotiations with the right-wing Piñera government, the ISO comments: “But the millionaire president and communist student leader will have little in common.”

On the contrary, the Stalinist policy of subordinating the movement of the working class to the capitalist state provides Piñera with an indispensable political instrument for quelling the mass protests.

By passively accepting the right of the Stalinists to lead this movement and promoting illusions that this counter-revolutionary party can be pushed to the left, the fake-lefts, from the Chilean Pabloites to the ISO, are only paving the way to new defeats.

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