

On the 50th anniversary of the Chilean coup: Lessons of a revolution betrayed

Tomas Castanheira
10 September 2023

Read also: "From the archives of Marxism: Lessons of the 1973 coup in Chile," Statement of the ICFI, published on September 18, 1973.

Today marks the 50th anniversary of the infamous CIA-backed military coup in Chile led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet, which established one of the most brutal regimes of the second half of the 20th century.

In the early morning hours of September 11, 1973, the three branches of the Chilean armed forces and the military police issued a radio announcement that they had taken control of the country and demanded the resignation of elected President Salvador Allende of the Unidad Popular (Popular Unity--UP) coalition government.

The Army and Air Force laid siege to the La Moneda presidential palace, bombarding it with fighter jets and tanks. Cornered and refusing the coup leaders' demand that he resign, Allende died at La Moneda, according to investigations from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

On the same day, the military rounded up tens of thousands of workers and youth, herding them into concentration camps where they were interrogated, tortured and in many cases murdered. The famous musician Victor Jara described the terror he experienced with thousands of others during his last days in the Estadio Chile, where he was sadistically tortured and murdered on September 16:

How much humanity exposed to hunger, cold, panic, pain, moral pressure, terror, insanity?

Six of us were lost as if into starry space.

One dead, another beaten as I never could have believed a human being could be beaten.

The other four wanted to end their terror: one jumped into nothingness,

another beating his head against a wall, but all with the fixed look of death.

What horror the face of Fascism creates!

A vast operation orchestrated by the CIA and US military intelligence was launched to smash all workers and peasants organizations, and to hunt down, detain, torture and kill their leaders and militant rank-and-file workers, who were abandoned by the Allende government, without weapons, training or political leadership to resist.

The Pinochet regime, in the following months and years, sold off nearly two-thirds of Chile's key copper industry, nationalized under Allende and his predecessor; privatized sections of banking, the telephone company, metalworks and other companies placed under state control by Allende; returned factories and land taken by workers to private owners; privatized water, pensions, healthcare, education, transportation, utilities and other sectors. Taxes and regulations were cut to the bone to turn the country into a playground for the emerging transnational corporations and the local oligarchy. The regime followed the instructions of the "free market"

economist Milton Friedman and the so-called "Chicago boys," Friedman-trained acolytes from the University of Chicago who were sent to Chile to oversee the wave of privatizations and brutal attacks on the conditions of the working class.

The fascist terror in Chile lasted for two long decades. Thousands of political opponents were killed or "disappeared" by the Pinochet regime, and around 30,000 tortured, according to official figures. The coup in Chile also had profound consequences for the whole Latin America.

The Chilean military's rise to power followed a series of coups sponsored by US imperialism, including in Brazil in 1964, Bolivia in 1971 and Uruguay earlier in 1973. The Brazilian military regime, recognized by the Nixon administration as an instrument for US operations, worked systematically to prepare the Chilean military to overthrow Allende.

After the coup in Chile, this counter-revolutionary network coordinated by the CIA in South America was consolidated under what was dubbed Operation Condor. It systematically spread repression, torture and political assassinations across the region and facilitated new coups, most notably the rise of the fascist military regime in Argentina in 1976.

Fifty years after Chile's horrific September 11, its political relevance is becoming ever more urgent. The specter of dictatorship and military intervention in the politics of Latin America, after a brief cycle of civilian regimes over the last 30 years, haunts the entire region once again.

Prompted by the explosive accumulation of social antagonisms, expressed by the working class in the growing number of struggles, the friends of Pinochet, who were never displaced from power in any of these countries, are once again showing their faces. In Brazil, the Armed Forces endorsed the challenge to the country's electoral system by the former president Jair Bolsonaro, which culminated in the fascist coup attempt of last January 8 in Brasilia, which called for a military dictatorship.

In Chile itself, where millions of workers and youth mobilized against social inequality in repeated national strikes in 2019 and 2020, the ruling class is now systematically promoting the most rabid defenders of the Pinochet dictatorship. These elements are currently led by José Antonio Kast, whose fascistic Republican Party won the most votes in last May's election of a council to draft a new constitution.

US imperialism served as the principal patron of the Latin American dictatorships. It remains a central player in the region. Under conditions in which the US ruling class is hurtling toward a new world war, it is openly fighting to secure its geo-strategic hegemony in "its own backyard," cultivating relations with the region's military commands, independently of its elected governments.

In their tributes to the anniversary of the 1973 coup in Chile, the bourgeois nationalist representatives of the "Pink Tide," such as Chilean President Gabriel Boric, as well as the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left, are issuing appeals for new "national pacts" and for the restoration of a popular facade for the region's bankrupt capitalist regimes. This political path can lead only to a repetition of Pinochet-style coups on an even more horrific scale.

The new generation of workers and youth who are entering the path of revolutionary struggle against capitalism must urgently assimilate the lessons of the Chilean coup that the pseudo-left is working to conceal.

The violence utilized by the Chilean fascist junta demonstrated the ruthlessness which the ruling class is prepared to employ to defend its power.

But what took place in 1973 in Chile was *not only* a bloody US-backed military coup that overthrew an elected government.

There was a powerful proletarian revolutionary upsurge under way in Chile, whose defeat under the jackboot of the military was by no means inevitable. The coming to power of a fascist-military junta was the product of the failure of the working class to seize political power when it could have, as a result of the criminal betrayals of its Stalinist and Social Democratic leaderships, with the indispensable aid of the Pabloite renegades from Trotskyism.

Allende's UP coalition, formed by the Socialists and Stalinists together with "left" Christian Democrats and Radicals, was elected in 1970 amid a massive upsurge of working class and peasant struggles. Responding to the historical conditions of misery and oppression by imperialism and a protracted inflationary crisis, those struggles took radicalized forms such as factory occupations and land expropriations.

As it took office, the UP sought at all costs to discipline the insurrectionary movement of the workers and peasants and subordinate it to the bourgeois state. Calling it the "Chilean road to socialism," Allende insisted that, based upon its century of parliamentary democracy, Chile was an exception to the laws of history established by Marx and Engels and given flesh and blood in the course of the 1917 Revolution in Russia. In Chile, he claimed, the revolutionary process would follow a unique course, growing within the structures of the old state. He insisted that the Armed Forces and the military police in Chile were the "people in uniform" and a "granite foundation of the revolutionary process," "just as much" as the "workers and their unions."

While the UP worked to appease the working class by carrying out limited nationalizations and social reforms, the Chilean bourgeoisie and the imperialists gained time to prepare the overthrow of the government and the crushing of the working class. The road to September 11, 1973 was paved with ceaseless attacks on the working class and several military incursions and direct coup attempts.

In October 1972, the ruling class, working in direct collaboration with the Nixon administration and the CIA, attempted to strangle the country economically by promoting a massive employers' lockout. Workers responded by establishing numerous *coordinadores*, *cordones industriales* and other local networks of rank-and-file industrial, neighborhood and self-defense organs to maintain production and distribution of essential goods and oppose fascist provocateurs. Demands to place the whole of the economy and political power directly in the workers' hands became widespread.

In face of the independent development of the workers' movement, the UP government acted to disarm the working class and secure bourgeois rule in Chile. Allende brought the military into his cabinet, which was also joined by the trade union leaders of the CUT, dominated by the Stalinists and Socialists. The government enforced an Arms Control Act to take arms away from workers and peasants, freed fascist agitators, and returned numerous occupied factories to their previous owners.

In June 1973, a rebel wing of the Army made a failed coup attempt by sending a column of tanks against the presidential palace, an episode that became known as the *Tanquetazo*. The UP's response was to deepen its concessions, naming Pinochet commander-in-chief of the Army and bringing him into Allende's cabinet.

Only the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) fought consistently to expose the role played by Allende's government and his apologists in disarming the working class in the face of the clear

danger of a military coup organized by US imperialism.

Drawing the lessons in the days immediately after the coup, the ICFI declared in a statement issued on September 18, 1973:

Defend your democratic rights not through Popular Fronts and parliament, but through the overthrow of the capitalist state and the establishment of workers' power. Place no confidence in Stalinism, social democracy, centrism, revisionism or the liberal bourgeoisie, but build a revolutionary party of the Fourth International whose program will be the revolution in permanence.

While it was the Stalinists and Social Democrats who directly led the Chilean workers to defeat, the Pabloite revisionists played a crucial role in enabling these crisis-ridden bureaucratic leaderships to maintain their domination over the working masses.

The Chilean Partido Obrero Revolucionario (Workers Revolutionary Party - POR) was among the organizations that betrayed Trotskyism, joining the American Socialist Workers Party in breaking with the ICFI and reuniting with the Pabloites. Praising the middle-class forces "liberated by the Cuban Revolution" as "the ones who will unleash the revolution in each country" of Latin America, the POR immediately dissolved itself and joined the Castroites and Maoists to form the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement-MIR) in 1965.

The MIR played a fundamental role in the disruption of the Chilean revolution, standing in the way of the building of a genuine revolutionary party in the working class. As the conflict between the Chilean working class and the UP's popular front government developed, many workers breaking from Social Democracy and Stalinism came to the MIR, only to be reoriented to "putting pressure" on the government to realize their demands.

The fundamental lesson of the Chilean defeat was that the working class was willing and able to take political power, but it lacked the decisive element of a revolutionary leadership, a party based upon Trotskyism and the assimilation of the bitter lessons of the 20th century.

In the initial years of the second decade of the 21st century, which have witnessed the outbreak of the greatest crisis in the history of world capitalism, there is no question that the working class is once again entering upon the path of revolutionary struggles. The globalization of production, the massive growth of the working class worldwide and the powerful developments in technology and communications have created highly favorable conditions for the construction of international socialism.

But to wage successful struggles for power, workers in every country must assimilate the lessons that were written in blood by the heroic Chilean proletariat half a century ago. Above all, this means building in every country sections of the world party of socialist revolution, the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact