

“The worst of the worst”: ICE detains Chilean death squad killer

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“Worst of the worst” is a phrase that has been repeated ad nauseam by Donald Trump and his minions in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to justify the ICE rampage against immigrant workers and US citizens alike. It conveys the unmistakable message that all immigrants are criminals and that many are guilty of the most heinous acts imaginable, even as the population witnesses a heavily armed American Gestapo seizing children, brutalizing families and indiscriminately chasing workers through agricultural fields, construction sites, factories and parking lots.

While DHS’s own statistics show that barely one in 20 of those detained in the nationwide crackdown has any record of violent crime and three-quarters have no criminal record whatsoever, the agency has created a website titled “Arrested: The worst of the worst.” It features mugshots and brief information on the identity and alleged crimes of those recently rounded up. The content is decidedly underwhelming, with the most frequent “crime” cited being unlawful reentry into the US, i.e., the attempts by deported mothers, fathers and children to reunite with their families. Others list offenses such as possession of marijuana, now legal across much of the country, and decades-old traffic violations.

On January 27, however, the site highlighted 42 Chileans who had been recently detained. Ninth on this list was one Armando Fernández Larios, someone to whom the “worst of the worst” epithet can justifiably be applied.

Fernández Larios’ listed crime is that of homicide. The DHS site states that the 76-year-old was detained in Fort Myers, Florida. ICE records indicate that he is currently being held at the Krome immigrant detention center in Miami pending deportation.

The murders for which he was convicted took place in 1976. The two victims were Orlando Letelier, a prominent Chilean exile targeted by the Pinochet dictatorship, and his assistant, Ronni Moffitt, a US citizen. They were killed by a remote-controlled bomb placed under their car that was detonated as they drove through Sheridan Circle on Washington, DC’s Embassy Row, just a mile from the White House.

Letelier was living in exile after the 1973 US-backed military coup which overthrew the Popular Unity government of President Salvador Allende. He had held several top positions under Allende, including foreign minister and defense minister, as well as ambassador to the United States.

For this, a brazen act of state-sponsored terrorism on US soil, Fernández Larios was sentenced to just eight years in prison and,

out of that, served just five months. His principal collaborator in the assassinations, Michael Townley, a US-born fascist and asset of both the CIA and the Chilean secret police, DINA, received a similar plea deal. Both entered into the witness protection program and have lived undisturbed under the protection of successive US governments, Democratic and Republican alike, for four decades.

Similarly, three CIA-trained Cuban exile terrorists recruited for the assassinations had their convictions overturned on a technicality and returned to Miami where they continued operations against Cuba.

Letelier, who was imprisoned and tortured following the 1973 coup, before being exiled and stripped of his citizenship, was targeted by Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet as a leading opponent who was campaigning for an international boycott of the regime.

While the assassination of Letelier and Moffitt was undoubtedly the most well-known of the crimes committed by Fernández Larios, it was only one of many.

As a young officer, trained in the methods of torture and counterrevolutionary repression at the Pentagon’s School of the Americas in Panama, he was a direct participant in the siege of the La Moneda Palace in Santiago on September 11, 1973. The assault ended in the death of President Allende and the rounding up of dozens of his aides who were subsequently imprisoned, tortured and executed, their bodies blown to pieces with dynamite.

The Caravan of Death

A year after the US-backed coup, Fernández Larios joined what became known as the Caravan of Death, a task force that went from city to city by helicopter, torturing and murdering mining workers, students, teachers, union militants, engineers and other professionals, along with politicians deemed sympathetic to the Allende government.

Fernández Larios distinguished himself for his cruelty. The family of Winston Cabello, an economist who was among 13 prisoners murdered in the northern Chilean town of Copiapó, brought evidence in a civil suit against the ex-Army officer. They showed that he had tortured and murdered him and other prisoners with a *corvo*, a curved knife that is an emblematic weapon of the

Chilean military, which is used to hack victims to death.

Fernández Larios was also wanted in connection with the brutal torture and murder of Carmelo Soria, a Spanish citizen and representative of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) who had used his diplomatic status to attempt to save those being hunted down by the Pinochet dictatorship. He was also implicated in the abduction, torture, murder and disappearance of the engineer David Silverman, the former general manager of the state-controlled Cobre-Chuquicamata mine.

Fernández Larios was subsequently assigned to an international division of the DINA secret police engaged in hunting down and killing opponents of the dictatorship. In addition to the Letelier-Moffitt assassinations, he was also implicated in the 1974 assassination of Gen. Carlos Prats, a former Army commander who opposed the Pinochet coup, and his wife, in Buenos Aires. Attempts by an Argentine court to have Fernández Larios extradited to face charges in the killings were ignored by the US government, just as it refused to respond to at least five such requests from post-Pinochet Chilean authorities.

If Fernández Larios was protected by successive US governments, Democratic and Republican alike, over the course of 40 years, it was not merely out of fealty to a plea deal with the Justice Department.

In the first place, Fernández Larios' horrific crimes were carried out on behalf of a fascist-military regime that had been brought to power thanks in large measure to the intervention of the US government and the CIA which sabotaged the country's economy, laid the groundwork for the 1973 coup and fully supported the reign of terror unleashed in its aftermath.

The Letelier-Moffitt assassinations were carried out as part of the newly created Operation Condor that united seven US-backed Latin American dictatorships in cross-border abductions, torture and killings, all carried out with financial, intelligence and logistical support from the Pentagon and the CIA.

A key figure in organizing the assassinations, on the direct orders of Pinochet, was the head of DINA, Col. Manuel Contreras, who was tried and convicted of the killings in 1993 after the fall of the dictatorship. Classified documents that emerged subsequently showed that Contreras was on the CIA's payroll as a key "asset" in Chile.

Just three months before the assassinations in Washington, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, one of the main architects of the Chilean coup, traveled to Santiago to meet with General Pinochet and assure him of US support, despite hollow rhetoric about human rights. In a conversation in which Pinochet directly raised his anger over Letelier's work against the dictatorship, Kissinger told him, "In the United States, as you know, we are sympathetic with what you are trying to do here. I think that the previous government was headed toward Communism. We wish your government well."

Finally, on September 16, 1976, less than a week before the assassinations, Kissinger, with no explanation, intervened to stop the State Department from issuing an agreed-upon warning to the dictatorship that the murder of prominent politicians and opponents abroad could create political problems.

In other words, the crimes carried out by Fernández Larios were in direct service of US imperialism and enjoyed its support. Why, given this history, he has now been detained by ICE after four decades of US government protection remains an open question. Is it a matter of one hand not knowing what the other hand is doing, with ICE driven to meet quotas picking up anyone and everyone in its reach? Or has the ex-DINA officer suffered a falling out with his US protectors? Whatever the case, it is hardly likely that his removal proceedings will follow the usual path.

Within Chile, the detention of Fernández Larios has generated keen interest among the families of his victims and human rights advocates still seeking justice for the horrific crimes he committed half a century ago. There is also skepticism that his impunity will finally come to an end.

After all, given his blood-drenched record, the ex-DINA officer would be a prime candidate for a pardon from Donald Trump—if not a job as a consultant for the Department of Homeland Security. Trump's fascistic supporters openly venerate Pinochet and celebrate the cruelest crimes of his regime as methods they hope to replicate on US soil.

In Chile itself, José Antonio Kast, a far-right politician and son of a former Nazi SS officer, is set to assume the presidency next month. An open admirer of Pinochet, he has visited in prison those convicted of the regime's crimes and named two of the late dictator's personal lawyers as his Defense and Justice ministers. The incoming government is certain to place every possible obstacle in the way of prosecuting Fernández Larios.

Whatever the individual fate of the DINA torturer and assassin now in the Florida ICE lockup, the horrific crimes that he committed 50 years ago have a burning contemporary resonance. They are a grisly manifestation of the terrible price paid by the Chilean, and indeed international, working class for the betrayal of the revolutionary upsurge that swept the country in the early 1970s, at the hands of Stalinism, Social Democracy and the various Pabloite revisionist organizations that together worked to subordinate the working class to the capitalist state apparatus and profit interests.

As the Trump administration and capitalist governments worldwide turn towards the methods of fascism and police-state dictatorship, the lessons of this period must be assimilated and a revolutionary socialist and internationalist leadership must be built in the working class in time.



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