

53 years after the coup: US imperialism and the coming confrontation in Chile

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Fifty-three years ago, on September 11, 1973, the Chilean armed forces, acting at the behest of Washington, bombarded the La Moneda presidential palace and drowned the Popular Unity government in blood. The anniversary this year falls under conditions that make the historical continuity, and the rupture, unmistakable.

In September 1970, as the Nixon administration set about strangling the Allende government, the president gave his instructions to the CIA station chief in Santiago to “make the economy scream,” a formulation that has since become notorious. The destabilization of Chile was a covert operation, the financing of the truckers’ lockout, the sabotage of the economy, the cultivation of the military high command, the millions of dollars channeled to the parties and press of the right. The whole apparatus of subversion was deployed in the shadows precisely because the American ruling class understood that it was doing something that had to be concealed from its own population and from the world: strangling a democratically elected government and preparing the mass murder of the working class.

That concealment is over. What was covert in 1973 is now proclaimed from the stage of a fascist summit in Santiago. The Trump administration does not hide its operations in Latin America but on the contrary advertises them. The difference is not one of morality but of historical position. The US bourgeoisie that could afford the discretion of the CIA in 1973 is today a ruling class in crisis, and its imperialist policy has shed its liberal-democratic trappings.

The overt face of imperialism

The personification of this transformation is the current US ambassador to Chile, Brandon Judd. He is not a diplomat in any meaningful sense of the word. He is a former border-patrol union official, a political appointee of Donald Trump, sent to Santiago as a signal of what the relationship now is. His tenure has been a running catalogue of threats and ultimatums, warning Chilean ministers against criticizing US tariffs, demanding they “read the free trade agreement,” publishing a secret security declaration signed by Chile’s defense minister to expose the government’s subordination, boasting that the Chinese submarine-cable project “is already over” while threatening sanctions against Chilean officials.

At the Madrid Forum, the gathering of the international far right held in Santiago last week, on the eve of the coup anniversary, Judd dispensed with all pretenses. The “Donroe Doctrine” (Trump’s corollary to the Monroe Doctrine), he explained, “is going to be different for each country and each ambassador we’re empowered to implement that policy as we see fit in each individual country. Now the great thing about that is when we have administrations like President Kast’s Administration it becomes very easy.”

“Now I’ve heard a lot of people say that the Donroe Doctrine is bad and it makes me laugh because Chile is exercising the Donroe Doctrine as we speak,” the ambassador added.

The same forum was the stage for Javier Milei, the Argentine president who functions as the most effusive client of Washington in the hemisphere. There he celebrated the overthrow of “the communist Allende” and denounced as “radical left” an evil “whose only objective is to wipe clean our way of life through violence and propaganda.” That a sitting head of state should stand on Chilean soil, days before the anniversary of a coup that murdered thousands, and praise the dictatorship, is not an aberration. It is the logical expression of a period in which the imperialist bourgeoisie and its regional clients no longer feel any need to drape their intentions in democratic rhetoric.

There is a direct line from Nixon’s covert instruction to make the economy scream, to the public boasts of Judd and Milei. What has changed is not the aims of American imperialism of subordinating Latin America to the interests of Wall Street and the Pentagon, but its confidence in the institutions that once mediated that subordination. Trotsky, in the founding document of the Fourth International, “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International” (1938), characterized the epoch as one in which the productive forces have long since outgrown the framework of the nation-state and private property. The United States, as the most powerful concentration of those forces, at the same time exhibits the most explosive concentration of their contradictions. What we are witnessing in Latin America is the death agony of American hegemony expressing itself in increasingly naked, increasingly desperate forms. Judd is not a throwback to the imperial proconsuls of the past; he is their degeneration, stripped of every screen.

The client state

The Kast government has embraced this relationship with an enthusiasm that is itself historically significant. The president’s first full day in office was reportedly to be marked by the signing of “broad agreements” with Washington on critical minerals and security. The government has moved to align Chile with the “Shield of the Americas,” the Trump administration’s hemispheric military-policing framework; its defense minister signed a secret declaration of military and police cooperation with the US Department of War within 24 hours of taking office, a document whose existence was revealed only when the American ambassador chose to publish it. Chile has been drawn into the “Americas Counter-Cartel Coalition,” has joined US-led declarations backing the Bolivian government against popular blockades, and has withdrawn from the Non-Aligned Movement after 55 years.

This is the relationship of a client to a patron—or, as the pseudo-left

opposition itself has been forced to acknowledge, of a subordinate to a master. The Kast government's subservience is not a matter of diplomatic style. It expresses the objective position of a national bourgeoisie that has lost the capacity to defend any independent interest of its own and has thrown in its lot with the declining hegemon.

The contradictions of this position are already tearing at the ruling class itself. The Trump administration's 12.5 percent tariff on Chilean exports, imposed under the pretext of "forced labor," a pretext whose real target is China, has struck the salmon, fruit, wine and timber industries, and provoked open clashes between Washington and Chilean ministers. The government's own defense minister was reduced to insisting that "we are not the backyard of any country," only to have the ambassador publish the document proving otherwise. The interpellation of the foreign minister now pending in the Chamber of Deputies is a symptom of a bourgeoisie in disarray, caught between its subordination to Washington and the collapse of its own economic position.

Explosive conditions

That collapse is deepening. The Central Bank has slashed its 2026 growth projection to a range of 0.25-0.75 percent, a cut of up to a full percentage point in three months. The Imacec index of economic activity fell 1.5 percent year-on-year in July, the worst figure since March 2023.

The country is in technical recession. Inflation has accelerated to 4.1 percent annually, double the market's expectation, driven by the government's own increase in fuel prices. Unemployment has risen to 9.5 percent, with the central bank warning of the destruction of jobs, particularly in formal employment. Copper production, the lifeblood of the Chilean economy, has fallen to its lowest level in 23 years, with mining output down 9.3 percent in July, with major producers, including BHP, Antofagasta Minerals and Lundin, all cutting their projections.

These are precisely the conditions that, 53 years ago, the Nixon administration set out to engineer by covert means in order to justify the destruction of the workers movement. Today they are being generated spontaneously by the crisis of world capitalism itself, and the Kast government is responding to them with the same program the Pinochet regime applied by force: austerity, the transfer of wealth to the already wealthy, and the criminalization of the resistance that the crisis is generating.

The resistance is already appearing. Students by the thousands marched against the Madrid Forum and were met with gas and mass arrests. Teachers and education workers are marching to Congress against the privatization offensive. The class struggle is resurgent internationally, in the United States, in Europe, across Asia, and it is opening up in Chile as well. The question posed by the anniversary is not whether the working class will move, but under whose leadership and with what program.

The chloroform of nationalism

Here the role of the pseudo-left, the Communist Party, the Broad Front, the Socialist Party and the Party for Democracy, acquires its full, poisonous significance in the workers movement, subordinating it to the "Chilean road to socialism" and disarming it in the face of the coup. Their historical function has not changed.

Their response to the naked aggression of Judd, Kast and Milei has been a campaign of nationalist chauvinism. They have denounced the

ambassador's interference, demanded that he be silent, filed criminal complaints under the intelligence law, appealed to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and above all wrapped themselves in the flag. The dispute with Argentina over the Strait of Magellan has become the centerpiece of their "opposition," an interpellation of the foreign minister framed as a defense of "the superior interests of our country." "Chile needs partners and allies, not bosses," declared the Frente Amplio's Gonzalo Winter.

This is a deliberate operation to conceal from the working class the true character of the situation. The pseudo-left presents the confrontation with Washington as an offense against "sovereignty" and "dignity" that can be repaired through parliamentary procedure and patriotic indignation. But the sovereignty whose violation they lament is the sovereignty of the Chilean bourgeoisie. Judd is not an aberration from the normal functioning of American imperialism; he is its true face. The subordination of Chile to Washington is not a diplomatic error to be corrected by a firmer foreign minister; it is the expression of the class relationship between American imperialism and the Chilean ruling class, a relationship in which the pseudo-left itself is fully implicated. Every one of these parties administered austerity, police-state legislation, and subordination to Washington when they were in government under Boric. Their nationalism is the mask of their complicity.

The working class has no interest in the "sovereignty" of the Chilean bourgeoisie against the American bourgeoisie. The task is not to restore a more dignified client relationship, but to break with both foreign and domestic capital and with the imperialist system as a whole. The pseudo-left's patriotic campaign is designed to channel the genuine anger of workers and youth against the far right into the dead end of bourgeois parliamentarism and national chauvinism, and thereby to prevent the one development that could actually threaten the ruling class—the independent mobilization of the working class against capitalism itself.

What the ruling class is preparing

The Kast government is not a normal bourgeois government. It is a government whose program includes Pinochet-era "reforms" of the economy, the constitutional reform granting the president the power to declare states of emergency for up to 240 days without congressional approval, the criminalization of protest, integration in the "Shield of the Americas," all of which represents a systematic preparation for the forcible suppression of the working class. The forces around Kast are not encumbered by any commitment to institutionalism, legality, or democratic process. They demonstrated their colors on September 11, 1973. The elements who today call for pardons for the torturers of the DINA, who celebrate Milei's praise of the coup, who gather at the Madrid Forum, these forces are the heirs of the junta, and they are telling the working class plainly what they intend.

The lesson of 1973 is not that the working class was weak or that imperialism was too powerful. The working class was more than capable of taking power, but it was betrayed, disarmed and demobilized by the very organizations that claimed to represent it, the Communist and Socialist Parties who insisted that the revolution could be made within the framework of the bourgeois state. The ICFI, in its statement of September 18, 1973, drew the conclusion that remains the only valid one: "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."

Fifty-three years later, under conditions in which the world capitalist system is entering its most profound crisis since the 1930s, the working class and youth of Chile must take stock of the situation and prepare accordingly. The anniversary is not an occasion for nostalgic tributes to a betrayed past, of the kind being organized around the mausoleum of Salvador Allende. It is an occasion for drawing the political conclusions that were written in blood in 1973. The ruling class is preparing a new assault. The Chilean “left” is preparing to chloroform the resistance. The task of the working class is to build its own independent organizations, rank-and-file committees against the trade-union bureaucracy, a party of its own against the “left,” and to unite internationally against the imperialist system that, in its death agony, is once again turning its most naked face toward Latin America.



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