40 years since the attempted assassination of Pinochet

Podemos' Pablo Iglesias romanticizes the politics of despair

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On September 7, 1986, a commando unit from the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front, a guerrilla front created by the Stalinist Communist Party of Chile, ambushed Augusto Pinochet's motorcade in Cajón del Maipo. Five of the dictator's bodyguards were killed. Pinochet suffered only a minor injury to his hand. That night, in retaliation, the dictatorship's security forces kidnapped and murdered four left-wing activists.

Forty years later, the pseudo-left commemorates the event as an act of heroism. Pablo Iglesias, former leader of Podemos and once Deputy Prime Minister of Spain, dedicated a special episode of his podcast *La Base* to the anniversary. His verdict was unequivocal:

> Those young people from the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front (FPMR) who organized the attack on Pinochet should be considered heroes and heroines of freedom in Chile. Attempting to kill a dictator, a murderer, is a moral and patriotic act.

And again:

> It shouldn't be necessary to invoke Thomas Aquinas, Juan de Mariana, or the French or American revolutionaries to recall that tyrannicide is legitimate.

The program praised the FPMR's armed struggle as "the only recourse available to peoples aspiring to free themselves from oppression," and denounced those who label the assassination attempt as terrorism as lackeys of "the right, the (center-left coalition), and many sectors of the government."

What is this really all about? It is not a defense of the struggle against the dictatorship. It is the political self-justification of a sector of the upper-middle class that has spent three decades integrating itself into the capitalist state and now seeks to renew its "revolutionary" credentials by idealizing a strategy that Marxism has always rejected and whose track record is an absolute disaster for the very people it claims to defend.

The hypocrisy of the pseudo-left

Let's start with the man making these statements. Pablo Iglesias is a former deputy prime minister of Spain who led Podemos into a coalition government with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) in January 2020.

The PSOE is the party that, under the leadership of Pedro Sánchez, has presided over the ever-increasing impoverishment of the Spanish working class, the maintenance of the repressive apparatus inherited from the Franco dictatorship, the expansion of military spending, and Spain's participation in the US-led NATO alliance. Podemos entered this government not to challenge any of this, but to administer it. As the *World Socialist Web Site* documented at the time, Podemos was the "midwife" of the PSOE government, committed to imposing EU austerity and increasing military spending. Iglesias himself became a minister in a government that aided the genocide in Gaza, sent weapons to Israel, and has been a loyal participant in NATO's escalation against Russia.

Having integrated itself into the very institutions of bourgeois domination it once claimed to oppose, this social stratum now compensates by adopting radical posturing: the idealization of guerrilla warfare, the glorification of "tyrant-killing," the celebration of armed struggles that lies at a safe distance in time and place from their own comfortable present.

No one who has spent four years in a government that is financed and armed genocide has the moral or political authority to lecture anyone, let alone on political violence. More to the point Iglesias and his inner circle directly administered the violence of the capitalist state, the violence of imperialist war, and the violence of austerity. Their sudden rediscovery of "revolutionary violence" is to conceal their own track record.

The origins of the FPMR: The politics of Stalinism

But the critique must go beyond hypocrisy of the petty bourgeois politician of Iglesias' ilk. The pseudo-left's glorification of the FPMR is based on a falsification of history, and that requires unmasking if anyone is to draw the true political lessons from the Chilean tragedy.

The FPMR did not emerge as an independent expression of the revolutionary will of the Chilean masses. It was the military apparatus of the Stalinist Communist Party, the very party whose policy of class collaboration had paved the way, more than any other single factor, for the catastrophe of September 11, 1973.

Within the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende, the PC sat in the far-right wing of the coalition. It was the PC that insisted that Allende's government operate "within the framework of the bourgeois institutions of the past," it was the PC that defended the "professional" character of the armed forces, that rejected arming the workers, and that

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actively suffocated the Cordones Industriales—the embryonic organs of workers' power that emerged in the factories—and prevented them from becoming independent instruments of dual power.

When Orlando Millas, a prominent leader and Central Committee member of the PC declared that "the working class will gradually attain full power… as we gain control of the state apparatus," he was articulating the precise formula that would deliver the unarmed and disorganized Chilean working class into the hands of the military. When the poet Pablo Neruda—a Stalinist and Allende's ambassador to Paris—declared of the army, "We love it. It is the people in uniform," he was promoting the ideological disarmament that made the coup possible.

This was no mistake. It was the political logic of Stalinism and its theory "socialism in one country," which had long since abandoned the perspective of world socialist revolution and the independent political mobilization of the working class, and which subordinated every communist party to the diplomatic and commercial interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. The Soviet bureaucracy had in the decades since conditioned its Latin American counterparts to work with and under the command of the military and taught it that the so-called "healthy forces within the armies must play an important role in the liberation movement." The bloody outcome was September 11, 1973.

The alternative to the PC's class collaboration was actively destroyed by the revisionism of the United Secretariat. The United States Socialist Workers Party, then the dominant section of the Pabloite Fourth International, played the decisive role. Its leaders glorified the Castro regime as a substitute for the building of a Trotskyist party in the working class, and they transmitted this orientation throughout Latin America. The signal was given by the United Secretariat's celebration of Ernesto Che Guevara, the Argentine radical who, like many Latin American intellectuals of his generation, explicitly rejected the Marxist conception of the revolutionary role of the working class.

The Pabloites called on socialist youth in Latin America to reject a strategy based on the working class, with the Bolivian Pabloite Moscoso spelling out the formula: in countries "where there exists a great peasant mass with an unresolved land problem, the guerrillas will draw their strength from the peasantry."

The consequences were worked out concretely in Chile. The leaders of the Workers Revolutionary Party (POR), the Chilean section of the Fourth International, liquidated their own organization in 1964. The following year they entered the Castroite Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), founded, with the stated intention of pressing it to the left. The actual result was the reverse. By 1968, the former POR leaders had been pressured out of the MIR altogether, their political capitulation to Castroism complete. The organization they had abandoned, and the politics they had helped to arm, consciously renounced the working class as the revolutionary subject, substituting for it the peasantry and guerrillas based in the countryside, in accordance with the Cuban "foco" theory that held that a small armed vanguard operating in the rural periphery could substitute for the organized power of the proletariat.

The MIR's trajectory then followed the logic of that substitution. When the class struggle erupted in Chile in the early 1970s and the workers began building their own organs of power in direct struggle against the US-sponsored destabilization—the Cordones Industriales (Industrial Cordons) in particular —the MIR, which had spent the previous period preparing for rural guerrilla war, had no strategy for the urban working class. It oscillated between ultra-left posturing and, in 1973, a centrist turn that subordinated it to the Popular Front and to Allende's bourgeois legality at the very moment the military was preparing its assault.

The MIR's cadres, radicalized youth who had been recruited to a program that denied the centrality of the working class, were then hunted down and exterminated by the dictatorship. Operation Colombo was only one of the exterminations that wiped out the MIR's ranks. It was the logical terminus of the politics of guerrilla adventurism: the sacrifice of a generation of radicalized youth to a strategy that had renounced the only class capable of defeating the dictatorship, had it been organized under revolutionary leadership. That the proletariat was left defenseless was the product of a double betrayal: the Stalinism of the PC, which chained the workers to the Popular Front, and Pabloism, which glorified Castro and guerrillaism as a substitute for the Trotskyist party in the working class whose construction was the precondition for victory.

The 1980s: crisis, radicalization, and the preparation for the "Transition"

The context in which the FPMR emerged is essential to understanding its character. The early 1980s was a period of catastrophic economic crisis in Chile. The "Chicago Boys" experiment of radical neoliberal restructuring imposed by the dictatorship under the tutelage of Milton Friedman collapsed with the 1982 debt crisis. Chile entered one of the deepest depressions in its history. Unemployment skyrocketed to over 20 percent. The social base of the dictatorship's economic program was devastated.

This economic catastrophe sparked a massive radicalization of the working class and the urban poor. Beginning in 1983, Chile was rocked by waves of nationwide protests in which workers, residents, students, and the unemployed confronted the dictatorship in the streets. This was a genuine mass movement, and it was this movement and not the armed actions of any guerrilla group, that put the regime on the defensive.

This radicalization took place in a political vacuum that the bourgeois political forces rushed to channel toward a negotiated "transition" that would preserve the power of the bourgeoisie. The dictatorship itself had laid the groundwork for its eventual withdrawal. Pinochet's 1980 Constitution established the institutional framework for a "transition" that would uphold the essential structures of capitalist rule and guarantee impunity for the military. The Christian Democrats (PDC) and the "renewed" Socialist Party (PS) prepared their return to power within this framework. Discussions between the PS, the PDC, and the right took place precisely on the basis of acceptance of the 1980 Constitution and the guardian role of the armed forces.

Within this political framework, the PC introduced the FPMR.

The FPMR: Armed struggle as a substitute for class politics

The FPMR was formed in December 1983 as the "armed wing" of the Communist Party, under the slogan of the "Politics of Mass Popular Rebellion" and "all forms of struggle," including armed struggle. Its cadres were trained in Cuba, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and East Germany. Its main leaders—Raúl Pellegrin, Cecilia Magni, and José Joaquín Valenzuela Levi—were products of Cuban military academies and the Sandinista experience in Nicaragua.

The pseudo-left presents this as the PC's belated recognition that only armed struggle could defeat the dictatorship. The reality is quite the opposite. The shift toward armed struggle was not a break with the PC's class-collaborationist policy; it was the continuation of that policy by other means.

The PC did not abandon its strategic orientation toward an alliance with the Christian Democrats and the bourgeois "democratic" forces. Its program remained that of the "Anti-Fascist Front," the "Provisional

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Government," and the two-stage theory that postponed socialism indefinitely.

What changed was not the political framework, but the incorporation of a military instrument designed to exert pressure on the political situation to raise the cost of excluding the PC from the negotiated transition and to give the party leverage in its negotiations with the bourgeoisie.

This is the decisive point, and it is the point that the pseudo-left will never confront. The FPMR was not the expression of a strategy for working-class power. It was a substitute for such a strategy. The PC, having assisted in the repression of independent political and military organization of the working class when in the Popular Unity between 1970–73, was now cynically thrusting its young cadre into futile actions. The "heroism" that Iglesias celebrates was the heroism of young people, the vast majority of whom were working-class youth and residents of shantytowns, as the FPMR's own testimonies acknowledge, who were sent, by a party that had betrayed their parents' generation, to carry out actions that could in no way achieve the political objective for which they were ostensibly undertaken.

The results were entirely predictable and proved catastrophic. The 80 metric tons of weapons supplied by Cuba in 1986 was discovered by the dictatorship's security services, which seized 90 percent of them. The assassination attempt against Pinochet failed militarily and gave the regime a pretext for a wave of repression. A state of siege was declared. The secret police launched Operation Albania in June 1987, murdering twelve members of the FPMR in cold blood and presenting their deaths as the result of "clashes." After the PC abandoned the armed struggle it had initiated to further a return to power through negotiation, a section of the guerrilla front formed the "Autonomous" faction and continued conducting individual terrorism, assassinating UDI Senator Jaime Guzmán in 1991 and kidnapping Cristián Edwards of the newspaper dynasty, before being hunted down and destroyed.

The final verdict is written in the annals of history. Pinochet remained commander of the army until 1998 and died a free man, unpunished, in 2006. The "transition to democracy" negotiated between the right and center-left parties left every structure untouched. The working class gained nothing. The bourgeoisie took it all. And thousands of radicalized young people were murdered, imprisoned, tortured, or exiled in the service of a strategy that could never have yielded any other result.

This is what Iglesias calls "heroism." In reality it was the massive sacrifice of the most militant segment of a generation on the altar of a bankrupt political strategy.

What Marxism teaches about individual terror

The pseudo-left's celebration of "tyrant-killing" runs counter to more than a century of Marxist analysis. The question of individual terrorism was theoretically resolved by the founders of scientific socialism, and their conclusions have been confirmed by all subsequent historical experiences.

Plekhanov, in *Socialism and Political Struggle* (1883), presented the first systematic Marxist critique of the People's Will faction of the populist movement that elevated individual terror to the central method of struggle. Plekhanov, while acknowledging the heroism and self-sacrifice, explained that the struggle of isolated individuals could not replace the class struggle, and that political freedom could only be won through the organized action of the working class. Terrorism, by diverting the energy of the most dedicated militants toward conspiratorial acts, actually delayed the development of the mass movement.

Lenin developed this analysis in *What Is to Be Done?* (1902). His famous formulation that the "economists" and the "terrorists" "bow to opposite extremes of the same spontaneity," the former to the spontaneity of the pure trade-union movement, the latter to the spontaneity of the "passionate indignation of the intelligentsia" went straight to the heart of the matter. Individual terrorism, like economism, was a symptom of the absence of class consciousness and revolutionary organization, not a substitute for them. The task of revolutionaries was not to assassinate individual oppressors, but to build the political organization of the working class to overthrow the system of oppression, the Tsarist autocracy.

Trotsky returned to the issue in *Why Marxists Oppose Individual Terrorism* (1911), written after the defeat of the 1905 revolution, when the Social Revolutionaries' turn toward individual terrorism was at its height. Marxists do not oppose individual terrorism for abstract moral reasons, he insisted. They oppose it because it is ineffective: because it substitutes the heroism of isolated individuals for the heroism of the masses, because it disorganizes and demoralizes the working class, because it gives the state a pretext to intensify repression, and because it is the characteristic weapon of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, which, having lost faith in the masses, seeks a shortcut to revolution through individual acts. Terror, Trotsky concluded, is not a form of class struggle. It is a substitute for it, and, historically, it flourishes precisely when the class struggle is in retreat.

The Chilean experience of the 1980s confirmed every element of this analysis. The FPMR's terrorism did not mobilize the masses; it replaced their mobilization. It did not weaken the dictatorship; it provided the dictatorship with justification to intensify repression, which fell first and most harshly upon the working class and the poor. It did not advance the struggle for socialism; it served, objectively, as an instrument through which the Communist Party sought to negotiate its own place within the bourgeois order. And it was carried out, above all, by the youth, the sector whose radicalization was genuine, whose militancy was real, and whose lives were expendable in the political calculations of a party that had long since ceased to represent anything other than its own interests.

The real lesson

The martyred leaders of the FPMR—Raúl Pellegrin, Cecilia Magni, José Valenzuela Levi and others—along with the thousands of young people who passed through its ranks were radicalized by the brutality of the dictatorship, by the catastrophe of 1973, by the poverty and repression of the 1980s, and by the example of Cuba and Nicaragua, which the Stalinist and Castroites presented as models of revolution.

Their courage was real. Their commitment was real. Their sacrifice was real. What was false, and what destroyed them, was the policy for which they were recruited. They were told that the assassination of a dictator was the path to revolution. They were told that the armed vanguard could replace the organized power of the working class. They were told that Cuba and Nicaragua, petty bourgeois nationalist regimes, dependent on the Soviet Union and hostile to the working class as they were to socialist internationalism, were the model to emulate.

The same tragedy was repeated throughout Latin America: in Argentina, with the Montoneros and the ERP; in Uruguay, with the Tupamaros; in Peru, with Shining Path; in Colombia, with the FARC and the ELN. Generations of radicalized youth were sacrificed in the name of the politics of guerrilla adventurism, while the bourgeois parties, including the "left," waited for the storm to pass and then negotiated their return to power on terms that left the class structure and the repressive apparatus intact. Today's pseudo-left, which idealizes these movements from the

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safety of its media platforms and university positions, is the direct political heir to the parties that sent those young people to their deaths.

Why, then, is Pablo Iglesias celebrating the FPMR in 2026? After integrating themselves into the capitalist state in Greece, Spain, Chile, Argentina, Brazil and elsewhere, pseudo-left parties like Podemos implemented austerity measures, backed imperialist war, and repressed the working class. Everywhere, the result has been the same: the demoralization of the workers and youth who once placed their hopes in the pseudo-left, and the rise of the far right, which feeds on the vacuum left by their betrayal.

The pseudo-left cannot defend its track record, so it flees into an idealized past. It cannot offer a program, so it offers assassination of an individual dictator as a substitute for the overthrow of an entire social system. This pernicious outlook is aimed directly at today's radicalized youth, who are facing the rise of fascism, the threat of a world war, and the deepening capitalist crisis, and who are searching for a way to fight back. To these young people, the pseudo-left offers a politics of desperation: the glorification of individual violence, the cult of guerrilla warfare, and the rejection of the organized mass struggle of the working class as "obsolete."

What, then, is the answer for young people who want to fight against the threat of dictatorship, repression, and war? It is the building of the working class's independent political power, in the struggle against capitalism itself.

The struggle against dictatorship today is inseparable from the struggle against capitalism, because dictatorship is the form that capitalist rule takes when the bourgeoisie can no longer govern through democratic means. The struggle against repression is inseparable from the struggle against the state, because the state is the instrument of class rule. And the struggle against war is inseparable from the struggle against imperialism, because war is the continuation of the imperialist struggle for markets and spheres of influence.

These struggles can only be won by the international working class, organized on the basis of a socialist program, under the leadership of a revolutionary party built in the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. This is the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

To the young people who are today becoming radicalized by the threat of fascism and war, we say: do not repeat the tragedy of your predecessors. Do not allow your militancy to be channeled into the dead end of individual terrorism by the very forces that betrayed the generations that came before you. The working class remains the revolutionary subject of history. It alone—organized, conscious and international—is capable of destroying the capitalist system and the dictatorships, repression and wars it generates. Build the leadership that the working class requires. Build sections of the ICFI in Chile and throughout Latin America.

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