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Chile

9-11 of the people: Chile 30 years on

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When I returned to Chile for the first time in 32 years to attend a weeklong seminar called “30 Years - Allende Lives! Popular Alternatives and the Socialist Perspective in Latin America”, I found myself entering the chilling atmosphere of the world's first laboratory for militarily imposed economic neoliberalism. This model had been introduced after the September 11, 1973 US-assisted military coup d'état against President Salvador Allende, a democratically elected parliamentary socialist.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/21_91103.jpg]

Cuban singer Silvio Rodriguez, Plaza de la Constitucion, September 11, 2003

Engineered by the free-market “Chicago Boys” (economists from the University of Chicago), the Chilean neo-liberal model has been enforced ever since by state-imposed and institutionalized terror. Transnational corporations, their Chilean allies staffing monopolistic “conglomerates” and major political parties, and a radically neo-liberal value system continue to hold sway over Chile's communications media, “popular” culture, electoral campaigns, and all levels of government and the military.

Despite Chile's opening to the world economy through free trade, its people live in a relatively closed society, one largely shut off from the social and political turbulence of the rest of Latin America. The atmosphere in present-day Santiago is one of noisy traffic, minimal human interaction, public fear, and imminent repression, with well-armed Carabineros (the hated national police) visible everywhere.

The replacement in 1990 of the 17-year military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte by the civilian governments of the Christian Democrat/Socialist Party coalition “Concertación” has not altered the mass media campaign against “communism,” “crime in the streets,” and “terrorism.” Chile's military still declares itself at war with “internal enemies.” These Concertación governments have jailed some 250 political dissidents, 89 of whom are still being held in Santiago's Maximum Security Prison, where they have been tortured. This does not include the Mapuche and other Indians killed or jailed.

Chile's mass media trumpet the big lies of Pinochet-ism and civilian administered neo-liberalism. Concerning the country's world-renowned mass murders, disappearances, mass graves, torture, and institutionalized state terrorism, the media drumbeats the government line that “we must put the past behind us,” insisting that “we were all responsible” for the crimes of the Pinochet dictatorship “and therefore no one is responsible!

After the 1973 coup September 11th became an official national holiday, established to “celebrate the victory of democracy and civilization over godless Marxism.” But sporadic social movements and scattered leftists have been reclaiming September 11 as their moment to honour Allende and renew the struggle for human rights and economic change. Therefore, in 2000 the government officially converted the national holiday into a normal working day, apparently hoping to reduce the number of demonstrators. Instead, protests escalated. As always, the media blacked out the nationwide popular demonstrations of September 11, 2003. There was almost no news about the more than 10,000 mostly young people (reported as “5,000 without incident”) overflowing Santiago's Plaza de la Constitución facing the presidential palace La Moneda to honour not only Allende but also the thousands of other “fallen ones,” the 400,000 people tortured during the Pinochet dictatorship, and the hundreds of thousands forced into political refuge abroad. This marked the first time in over 30 years that Chileans were allowed to occupy their traditional meeting place, and they did so with militant songs and chants, calling their day “The September 11 of the Peoples.”

Earlier that morning, for the first time in over 30 years a Chilean president entered La Moneda through the side door

preferred by Allende (and through which Allende's bullet-ridden corpse was snuck out in 1973). Television cameras followed a solitary President Ricardo Lagos down the roped-off side street as he hypocritically sought to cloak himself in the mantle of the deceased "compañero Presidente," whom he described as "perhaps the best of the Chilean Left."

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/22_cpvm.jpg]

Chilean Communist Party president Gladys Marin at international seminar "30 years - Allende Lives!"

Allende was more truly "presente" (alive and present) than Lagos this September 11th. Despite the smear job done by Chile's media and privatized educational system on his period of governance, he has become the cultural hero of many Chileans, young and old. In Chile and throughout the world there is a huge resurgence of the image of "compañero Presidente Salvador Allende," albeit not as commercialized on as many t-shirts as that of Che Guevara. New books with Allende's speeches and interviews, once difficult to publish or circulate, now sell like hotcakes. Allende's rising stature parallels that of another martyred president who sought to nationalize Chile's mineral resources: José Manuel Balmaceda (1886-1891). Even the government has had to accept monuments to Allende, as well as the renaming of the Estadio Chile as the Estadio Víctor Jara, after the world-renowned folksinger tortured and killed in the stadium during the 1973 coup d'état. Why?

Because millions of Chileans have joined the "battle of memory" [batalla de la memoria] and are unwilling to forget the positive examples of Allende's dying in defence of democracy and reform and of all those relatives and friends who, like Jara, dreamed of another possible Chile. Feminist writer Pia Barros has observed that "The memory of the vanquished is dangerous for the conquerors," while a young Chilean born in the 1980s has noted "If 30 years of fear are being commemorated, well it's necessary to commemorate the accumulated courage of 30 years."

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/22_hb.jpg]

Hebe Bonafini, Madres de Plaza de Mayo, interview at Santiago's Radio Nuevo Mundo

Most Chilean TV coverage on this September 11th focused on a chuckling, ageing, feisty mass murderer, Gen Pinochet, as he walked with a cane to a podium to deliver his presidential sash to a group of wildly cheering right-wing admirers said to number 2,000. All channels emphasized isolated incidents of "violence" by "delinquents." Cameras panned armoured personnel carriers spraying entire city blocks with teargas or water hoses and Carabineros clubbing fleeing youth.

Each September 11th youth in the big urban poblaciones (outlying slums often created from seized lands) set up street barricades and fight back against the police, a tradition dating back to 1982. TV channels now zeroed in on one Santiago slum intersection barricaded with burning tires that presumably caused a blackout affecting 30 percent of the city's population.

Much TV "news coverage" was given over to the nation's "economic progress" in the last 30 years, informing people that they live in Latin America's "best-off economy." In light of the horrifying collapse of the region's other "best-off economy" (Argentina's in 2001), that may not be such a desirable prize. In fact, many economists opine that Chile's super-neo-liberal economic model is approaching its limits of economic sustainability, just as Argentina's did.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/22_rod.jpg]

Relatives of the disappeared at their headquarters, Santiago

In a heavily indebted privatized economy dependent on mineral, forestry, and fruit exports, with a reduced or stagnant manufacturing sector, Chileans work more hours per year than any other people. While some still participate in the plastic credit card world of frenzied consumerism, most are spending their dwindling hourly incomes on the basic necessities of life. Unemployment has more than doubled in recent years. Employment lists favour job candidates according to political party affiliation, echoing the old torture and assassination lists based on party affiliation used by Pinochet during his reign of terror. By World Bank estimates, 45% of Chile's 6-million-strong

workforce live below the poverty line.

The “informal economy” incorporates nearly half the working population. Less than 10% of the workforce belong to Chile's remaining unions. Many workers are reduced to poverty by the fragmentation of modern production methods that leaves them atomized in precarious “flexible labour markets” as “pseudo-independent” or “self-employed” workers in subcontracted or “micro” enterprises. Others are either unemployed, semi-employed, or part of the great mass of proletarianized “professionals” and “technical workers” (eg, super-exploited women data-entry personnel working with computers).

Chile's relatively large “salaried middle classes” are experiencing classic downward mobility. They could find themselves in the same bankrupt position of their Argentine neighbours if there is a run on Chilean banks the way there was in Argentina. Chile's debt-ridden economy, like Argentina's, is mortgaged to US, Canadian, and European bankers and investors.

The vast majority of Chile's salaried and waged workers are poor, especially among the young and among women, who are rotated in and out of the labour market at sub-minimum wages. Many youth, as historian Luis Vitale discovered through recent student-conducted surveys in Santiago's slums, “do nothing, do not work and can't even study.” Those youth who do study have unstable, uncertain futures. Women constitute nearly 40 percent of the workforce and are generally, as in the rest of the world, super-exploited. A typical Chilean works more than one job in any given year. A common saying is “vivimos al dia” - “we take it a day at a time.”

These underlying economic realities, combined with burgeoning social protest movements, have helped make the Concertación government both divided and afraid. For the week of September 11th, it announced it was stationing on Santiago's streets 10,000 Carabineros, billeting another 27,000, and calling out 30,000 army soldiers. It ordered traffic lights and lampposts removed so that pro-Allende “terrorists and vandals” would not destroy them. The Chilean Communist Party assured the government there would be no violence; it then marshalled special personnel to detect agents provocateurs (of the government or ultra-right) and remove them from demonstrations before they could “create an incident.”

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/23_eftomb.jpg]

Tomb of ex-President Eduardo Frei, who backed 1973 coup - screened because people often trash it

Ever since the late 1990s, episodes of public protest have escalated. By the time of the 1997 parliamentary elections, 40% of a disillusioned electorate failed to register, abstained, annulled their ballots or left them blank. In subsequent years, Mapuche Indians and the National Association of Rural Women and Indians, university and high school students, doctors, dock workers, miners, and members of the national labour confederation CUT launched protests that caused presidential candidates to distance themselves from the neo-liberal economic model. Direct action protests and mutual aid networks surfaced in the provinces. Tiny worker, unemployed, and/or student collectives swung into action, operating like affinity groups and rallying to the nascent organization Colectivos de Trabajadores. Some poblaciones like Santiago's La Victoria established their own “radio popular” (102.9 FM, which interviewed me and a Sandinista delegation from Nicaragua on September 7). Groups of young people regularly gathered outside the homes of known torturers in loud protest actions known as “funas,” demanding an end to immunity from prosecution. A movement against neo-liberal capitalist globalization began to take shape.

In 2003, an August 13th general strike by tens of thousands of CUT members became the nation's largest protest since the 1990 installation of the post-Pinochet “pacted democracy” (pacted with Pinochet and the military). Five days later three children of the disappeared launched a human rights hunger strike and were joined on September 4th by older women relatives of the disappeared. September became a month of daily events commemorating Allende and other fallen ones, including a concert with Cuban “new song” artists Silvio Rodriguez and Vicente FeliÃ° at the national soccer stadium, attended by nearly 60,000.

The month included the international seminar “30 Years “Allende Lives!” that helped “open up” Chile's closed society. The seminar brought together a thousand Chileans and foreigners, including 150 Argentines and 150 Brazilians, several Europeans, and one of the invited guests from the United States and Canada, myself (people in US, Canadian, and European cities also organized well-attended events to honour Allende). The seminar held many of its sessions at prisons, poblaciones, and human rights organizations both in Santiago and in the country's interior.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/23_es.jpg]

Emir Sader of Brazil at tomb of Allende, September 11, 2003

On the evening of September 10th, a bomb went off near Santiago's general cemetery. Apparently members of the ultra-rightist UDI (Independent Democratic Union) carried out the bombing in order to accuse those about to honour Allende the next day of “terrorism.” Nonetheless, on the morning of September 11 a large, dignified, and militant march of activists made its way through the cemetery to the flower-bedecked tomb of Salvador Allende, where others and I spoke. On September 12, police violently busted up the well-attended inauguration of the Victor Jara Stadium. Tensions remained high the following days.

I left Chile with a singular impression: this was a new, tightly controlled, and different Chile, but one wrestling with the torments of its past and beginning to show some slits in the 30-year iron curtain of fear and ideological brainwashing. A terrified Concertación government acting in complicity with institutionalized terror faces a shaky political future. On September 26, Nelson Mery, chief of Chile's Investigative Police since 1990, resigned his post, more than a month after being formally accused of torturing prisoners during the long Pinochet dictatorship. But like so many other known torturers and murderers, he still walks free.

Poet José Emilio Espoz calls the government's fear “the fear of the coward.” Others call it the fear of the guilt-ridden, of those to blame for the failure to repeal the Pinochet-imposed amnesty, or state of immunity from prosecution, on behalf of Chile's ex-dictator and his cohorts. The government recently proposed a new “reform” that would recognize the human rights violations but would guarantee impunity for any of the criminals if they hand in information on the crimes.

Chile's fractured and wounded left seems significant in only two cases: the Communist Party, whose widely respected candidate Gladys Marin won 6% in the first round of the last presidential election, and the still small social movements holding high the image of the beloved “compañero Presidente Salvador Allende” and sometimes linking up with the burgeoning Colectivos de Trabajadores. But Marin, a person who has managed to hold together the party's duelling moderate and left wings, had to fly to Sweden in late September to undergo an emergency operation for a brain tumour. And the struggling social movements face both frequent repression and infiltration by government agents, leaving them secretive, fragmented, and without major national coordination.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/24_rod.jpg]

Relatives of the disappeared, Plaza de la Constitucion, September 11, 2003

Ironically, Allende's half-litre of milk a day programme for children is still in place. Moreover, if Chile were to nationalize its copper industry as Allende did, it would have the funding for colossal economic changes, since Chile still accounts for 35% of world copper production. In 1971, no member of parliament dared vote “no” to nationalization. Today, no member dares vote “yes,” although 8 voted against the new free trade agreement with the United States and 8 others abstained after a stormy debate interrupted by shouting demonstrators in the gallery.

Marin, who calls for a new constitution, recovery of the nation's copper and workers' rights, and a radical redistribution of income, told one public gathering during my visit: “Change in Chile today cannot be achieved through the electoral road. A better consciousness of the people is necessary, just as one developed during the Allende years, just as one developed during the general strike of last August.”

In Chile I glimpsed a developing new consciousness, a true “battle of memory” and small but significant signs of hope.