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# The coup in Chile

- Features -

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**The coup in Chile on 11th September 1973 was a chilling example of counter revolution, backed by Western powers. This statement from the Fourth International condemns the military take over. Below is a motion and [an article](#) from revolutionary socialists in Chile about the situation.**

## An Inevitable Confrontation

After the defeat of the Bolivian working class in August 1971, Chile became the epicentre of the class struggle in Latin America. The international revolutionary movement followed events in Chile with the knowledge that a trial of strength was inevitable. This trial of strength -prepared for by a series of partial confrontations in the course of the two preceding years and foreshadowed by the attempted coup of 20 June 1973 – took place in dramatic fashion on 11 September. The armed forces carried out a criminal attack on the working class, its organisations, its conquests – whether of long standing or of recent date – and on the most elementary democratic rights. Thousands, and probably tens of thousands, of dead in Santiago and the rest of the country have demonstrated once again the barbarity of the so-called ‘national’ ruling classes and of imperialism. The latter have once more given eloquent and bloody proof that they subordinate every political, juridical or human consideration to the savage and intransigent defence of their threatened interests.

One more tragic confirmation of the danger which a capitalism historically in its death throes still represents for humanity! One more confirmation that the ‘principles’ and ‘values of a society based on exploitation and repression are a shameful mystification! One more confirmation of the catastrophic consequences for the working class of the illusory and irresponsible perspective of a ‘peaceful’, ‘democratic’ transition to socialism – in a world which for over fifty years has seen, on every continent, a succession of local and general wars, revolutionary upheavals, bloody repressions, and fascist or military dictatorships.

## The Programme of the Unidad Popular’ and the Dynamic of the Mass Mobilisation

The Unidad Popular’s programme was presented by its supporters as the prelude to a stage in which the transition to socialism would be on the agenda; it aimed to carry out certain reforms within the framework of the capitalist system. This is why the coalition included political formations of petty-bourgeois origin. Worse still, the coalition sought a collaboration with sectors of the bourgeoisie itself and with the party that represented them, and it reaffirmed its total loyalty to the existing constitutional order. This is why the key sectors of the bourgeoisie – who had already supported a moderate reformist path under Frei’s presidency -had decided to give the go-ahead to the Allende experiment, under the conditions worked out in the negotiations which followed the 4 September 1970 elections, conditions which included unchanged maintenance of the existing military apparatus. To symbolise the relative continuity of the reformist perspective, the Unidad Popular did not propose a new agrarian reform, but confined itself to applying more systematically and more rapidly the reform adopted by Frei.

Nevertheless, the victory of 4 September and Allende’s accession to the presidency were seen by the broad masses as a defeat of historic dimensions inflicted on the class enemy. In fact, a new relation of forces had been created, one more favourable than ever in the past to the working class, the peasantry and the radicalised petty bourgeoisie.

The realisation of the reforms announced in the UP programme and the blow inflicted on imperialist property in the mining sector further stimulated the mass movement. The latter soon showed a tendency to come into conflict with the limits fixed by the reformism which Allende and his coalition advocated. The workers wanted to expropriate the factories which were to remain in the private sector. The peasants had their own interpretation of the agrarian reform. The logic of the fundamental interests at stake determined a rapid development of the dynamic of the class struggle, shattering the pre-established formulae.

The very sectors of the bourgeoisie which had at first been favourable to the UP began to grow alarmed, as they became aware of the dangers which menaced not the 'freedom' of the Chilean people or elementary democratic rights, but their own interests as exploiters. After numerous crises, they moved irrevocably into the opposition camp. The right wing of the UP left the government and broke from the coalition. The Christian Democrats adopted an increasingly aggressive attitude, carried to the point of obstruction and sabotage. As the conflicts grew progressively sharper, the activity of fascist shock brigades and the incitement of petty-bourgeois strata to a reactionary revolt were more and more widely employed as political weapons. Imperialism, and above all US imperialism, made its own contribution of blackmail, threats, pressures and every kind of economic and financial manoeuvre.

The situation thus led to an absolutely clear-cut opposition and drawing of the battle lines between the antagonistic forces, while the petty-bourgeois layers oscillated and divided. Terrified by the dynamic of the mass movement, the bourgeoisie now rejected the reformist road. The proletariat struggled to enlarge the breaches already made in the system and to assert its power. The UP, while it wanted an agreement and desperately sought some compromise, nevertheless could not accept the capitulation demanded by the bourgeoisie, which would have meant cutting itself off from the masses and hence its own demise.

## The bourgeoisie chooses the path of a military coup

The failure in all essentials of the Christian Democrat plan of forcing Allende to capitulate in a series of partial confrontations and thus progressively eroding key sectors of his mass base, was made clear by the outcome of the struggles of October 1972, by the results of the March elections, and by the impossibility of mobilising more than a derisory percentage of the El Teniente miners in June through a demagogic campaign of sabotage. This failure posed anew, for the Christian Democrats and for the bourgeois front as a whole, the problem of their fundamental strategy. Could they afford to continue playing the game of respect for constitutional norms and utilisation of the mechanisms of the state apparatus to counter and indeed paralyse Allende's actions? Or should they opt for a coup d'état?

The failure of the 29 June attempted coup – over and above any technical errors and setbacks there may have been – reflected the continuing indecision of the bourgeoisie, its internal divisions, and the hesitations of the armed forces themselves. But Colonel Souper's attempted coup provoked a tremendous mobilisation of the masses, who attained an unprecedented level of radicalisation. More than one thousand factories were occupied by the workers, who exploited to the full the potentialities of the cordones industriales – instruments of proletarian democracy thrown up by the struggles of October 1972 – in organising their political control and their defence, and who proclaimed their intention of not handing back to the owners even those factories which in principle were included in the private sector. At the same time, the consciousness of the masses made a qualitative leap, grasping the need to arm themselves in order to resist new reactionary attacks.

The Chilean bourgeoisie at once realised that the situation had reached a crucial turning-point. It had suffered a very serious blow to its economic power; it saw that a dual power situation was beginning to emerge, and that embryonic worker militias were being formed. In consultation with the American imperialist leaders, it decided to give up partial

confrontations and go for a major trial of strength; to give up using 'legal tricks and obstructive manoeuvres of every kind, in favour of using arms. The July/August negotiations probably served the purpose either of gaining time or of checking once again, at the eleventh hour, whether it was not possible to force Allende to capitulate without a struggle.

Since Allende was neither able nor willing to capitulate without a struggle, and since the mass movement was not subsiding, the coup was launched with a determination and savagery which, from the viewpoint of defending the interests of the exploiters, were made necessary by a highly explosive situation and an exceptional level of mobilisation.

The Chilean working class opposed the coup d'état with a courage and spirit of sacrifice which will go down in the history of the international workers' movement. The factories were defended gun in hand against the army's attacks; centres of resistance arose both in the very centre of Santiago and in the suburbs; groups of soldiers and sailors of worker and peasant origin, who were not prepared to obey the criminal order of their officers, mutinied with heroism. Despite the massive use of military firepower and of outright massacres, the resistance has not been completely broken. The working class of all continents and democratic public opinion in general have expressed their indignation and condemnation swiftly and on a massive and unprecedented scale.

The working-class movement in Latin America, after receiving a blow in July in Uruguay, has now suffered a defeat of major proportions. If the new military regime manages to consolidate its position, this defeat will weigh heavily in the balance of forces on the continent as a whole.

## The lessons of a tragic defeat

For three years the communist and socialist parties of the whole world held up the Chilean example as a proof that their theories concerning the road to socialism were valid. The tragic conclusion of the UP experiment provides a number of key lessons. It was already possible to draw these lessons from innumerable past experiences, especially in Latin America – from the overthrow of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala in 1954 by a mercenary army to the coup, fostered by the imperialists and by the Brazilian gorillas, which installed Banzer in power in Bolivia in August 1971. The fact that these lessons had only been drawn by vanguards which are not yet capable of determining the course of events has been paid for by the Chilean proletariat at an extremely high cost. It is the duty of revolutionaries to fight to ensure that the heroic sacrifice of thousands of Chilean workers and militants is not a vain one, and that the reformist and opportunist mystifications imposed on the masses by the traditional bureaucratic apparatuses are destroyed forever.

Events in Chile over the last three years show just how illusory is the perspective of a democratic, antioligarchic and anti-imperialist 'stage' of the revolution, in which the 'national' bourgeoisie can participate -illusory both in terms of its objective basis and in terms of political possibilities. No bourgeoisie can go beyond reforms of a strictly limited kind, which do not harm the fundamental interests of imperialism. Moreover, no bourgeoisie is prepared to venture onto this terrain at all unless it has a guarantee that it will be able to control the process strictly and stifle any autonomous dynamic of the mass movement. In this respect, the Peruvian military regime is a classic example.

The Chilean events show that working-class reformism, even in highly favourable conditions, quickly leads into a blind alley. Reforms actually carried out risk being themselves challenged and voided of all content if they are not generalised. Such generalisation inevitably leads to a threshold which cannot be passed without breaking the mechanism of the capitalist system itself. Moreover, partial measures damage multiple interests without destroying them, and provoke the inevitable reaction of forces which still have at their disposal powerful resources and allies.

Once again it has been proved that the petty bourgeoisie cannot be won over by a conciliatory attitude, without providing an anti-capitalist perspective and without combating with the utmost determination the manoeuvres of the ruling classes.

The Chilean events show the absurdity of planning for a transition to socialism unaccompanied by the destruction of the state apparatus in its entirety – an apparatus which the ruling classes have organised and structured in the most effective way for the purpose of ensuring the maintenance of their system of exploitation and oppression. This does not mean rejecting any tactical utilisation of legal possibilities, or any exploitation of exceptional circumstances such as the situation created in Chile by the elections of 4 September 1970. But it is essential to understand the absolute and urgent necessity, in a situation of revolutionary mass upsurge, of building revolutionary organs of proletarian democracy- bodies that are at once elements of dual power, weapons of struggle for the conquest of power and, in embryo, the qualitatively new political structures of the workers' State to which the revolution will give birth.

The Chilean reformists systematically denied this necessity, contenting themselves with promoting bodies with absolutely limited functions and without any real autonomy from the 'constitutional' organs of the State. The workers, however, under the impact of dramatic experiences, especially during the past year, rediscovered these fundamental needs and created bodies rich in revolutionary potential like the cordones industrielas. But their initiatives developed late and were not generalised. Worse still, they were often partially emptied of their content by the manoeuvres of the bureaucracy, determined to strip the cordones of their potential of becoming Chilean soviets and, having drained them of all life, to integrate them into its own reformist, constitutionalist strategy.

The Chilean events, finally, have shown once again that the thesis that it is possible to overthrow capitalist power without revolutionary violence, without armed struggle, is the most shameful of mystifications, the most suicidal of illusions. It is of primordial necessity to understand that when the crucial moment of the confrontation for power is reached, armed conflict, independently of the specific forces involved, is inevitable in all cases, and that in Lenin's phrase 'the military question is the central political question'.

The working class must prepare itself systematically for such a perspective, rejecting all spontaneist illusions and understanding the necessity, even on this terrain, for centralised action. It must understand that a purely defensive attitude is doomed to failure once the crucial day of reckoning draws near, and must seize the initiative from the enemy.

'Experience in other countries, especially in Latin America, said the December 1971 Statement by the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, 'from the invasion of Guatemala in 1964 to Banzer's coup d'état in Bolivia last August, has shown that the working class must see as a primordial task its own armed defence. This lesson is written in letters of blood - the blood of workers, peasants and students. Any belief in the enemy's 'good will' is suicidal and must be rejected. In view of the nature of the government and the relationship between the UP coalition and the masses in their overwhelming majority, the task to be accomplished is the arming of the workers and peasants, the creation of instruments of political and military self-defence, the formation of genuine people's militias, and the dissemination of revolutionary propaganda among the soldiers. Not to take any initiative in this direction would mean in practice to gamble on the "democratic loyalty" of the army and the specialised forces of repression, it would mean to be incapable of responding to a need that is felt by broader and broader sectors of the masses, made aware of the danger by the Bolivian events. Allende's declarations that the UP will respond to any reactionary violence are nothing but demagogic chatter, inasmuch as they have no practical implication. Rather than relying on spontaneism and on improvisation, it is necessary to create immediately the requisite means to prevent the class enemy from enjoying material conditions of overwhelming superiority in the confrontations that inevitably lie ahead. So that there can be no misunderstanding, the revolutionary Marxists stress that it is not against Allende but against the threats of the right and to riposte against any attack by the bourgeois repressive apparatus that the workers and peasants must place on the agenda the crucial problem of arming themselves.'

The Chilean reformists contested these elementary truths. The fact that many of them have added their names to the long list of martyrs of the workers' movement neither annuls nor attenuates their massive historic responsibility.

The absence of a revolutionary party capable of playing a hegemonic rôle at the level of the masses has once again shown itself to be the decisive factor as far as the proletariat is concerned. 'Chile will be no historical exception', said the United Secretariat's December 1971 Statement. 'The overthrow of the capitalist order cannot be accomplished without the decisive intervention of a revolutionary party, the conscious vanguard of the masses. The tasks which belong to such a party cannot be delegated to the Communist Party. The latter, deeply marked by a long Stalinist tradition, is the expression of an indigenous working-class bureaucracy and of relatively conservative strata of the proletariat which are not mobilising in the present crisis with the same dynamism as the new generation. It retains all its traditional conceptions, not having in any way broken the umbilical cord which links it to the Soviet bureaucracy. Neither can the tasks of the revolutionary party be delegated to the Socialist Party. The latter has extended its mass audience, particularly among the younger workers, and has in its own constituent bodies adopted positions which place it to the left of the Communist Party (which is the real spear-head of reformism). But it does not have the structure of a combat party, does not have solid or continuous links with the masses which it influences, and appears more as a conglomeration of tendencies and groups than as a homogenous formation; in short, it has the characteristic features of a centrist organisation. It is essential, at all events, to reject any conception based -whether explicitly or implicitly - on the hypothesis that thanks to the dynamism of the revolutionary process and the power of the mass movement, thanks to the weakening of the bourgeoisie and its probable progressive decomposition, and thanks to conditions in which imperialism is forced to relinquish the idea of military intervention, the proletariat will be able to win power even in the absence of a true Leninist revolutionary party. It is essential likewise to reject the variant which effectively holds that a substitute for the revolutionary party will be sufficient- in the present case, in the form of a front grouping all revolutionaries or a cartel of the various organisations of the revolutionary left.

# Struggle against the Military Dictatorship! Organise militant international solidarity!

A military coup in a situation like that of Chile in the last few months could not have been imposed unresisted or by means of a limited repressive action. Everything pointed to the likelihood of a courageous and tenacious resistance by the proletariat; it was also not impossible that sectors of the army - whose rank-and-file was made up of sons of workers and peasants carrying out their military service - might rebel against the orders of reactionary officers unleashing a dynamic of civil war. In the event, resistance did indeed develop heroically, and has not been completely crushed; but the second possibility was not realised, or at least not to a sufficient extent to create the preconditions for an immediate civil war.

The problem of the struggle against the military dictatorship is on the agenda. The revolutionary vanguards have the duty to carry out the necessary turn with the maximum speed. The problem of armed struggle is no longer posed in the same terms in which it was posed from September 1970 on. The previous orientation would remain fundamentally valid in the event of a civil war involving the occupation by worker and peasant forces of certain regions of the country. In such circumstances, revolutionaries would put forward the slogan, on a world scale, of creating international brigades.

It is necessary to create, throughout the world, a campaign of active solidarity evoking the best traditions of mobilisation for Vietnam. Working-class Chile must be defended against the barbarity of the golpistas and their 'national-bourgeois' and imperialist patrons.

For immediate, massive, militant solidarity with the Chilean proletariat! Halt the criminal hand of the murderers! Demand the re-establishment of the elementary democratic rights of the Chilean people! Demand the immediate

freeing of all political prisoners! Defend the right of asylum for political refugees from the other Latin American countries and their right to go to another country of their own choosing! Give political and material assistance to the heroic resistance of the Chilean workers!

Imperialism and the so-called national bourgeoisie are congratulating themselves cynically on the blow they have inflicted on the Chilean workers and peasants – indeed on the entire worker and peasant movement in Latin America and throughout the world. But the enormity of the crime and the heroism of the resistance will have incalculable repercussions. The Chilean events will accelerate the ripening of revolutionary consciousness, just as did imperialism's criminal war and the heroic struggle of the people in Vietnam. Capitalism will pay for its present and historically ephemeral victory in Chile by a dramatic deepening of its own contradictions.

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