

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3140>



Chile

# Looking back at popular power 1970-1973

- IV Online magazine - 2013 - IV465 - October 2013 -

Publication date: Wednesday 2 October 2013

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**Franck Gaudichaud has just published two books, *Chili 1970-1973. Mille jours qui ébranlèrent le monde* (Presses universitaires de Rennes/IDA, Coll. Amériques, 2013), and, *¡Venceremos! Analyses et documents sur le pouvoir populaire au Chili* (Editions Syllepse, Paris, 2013). He was interviewed on 27 August 2013 by Jan Malewski**

**You have just published two books on the Chilean experience from 1970-1973. It was probably the last great experience of an attempt to reform capitalism, and we know of its terrible ending. During this experience, there was not only a governmental policy but also a popular mobilization. Can you talk about this popular experience?**

The point of reviewing this period is to see how “as in all the great sequences of revolutionary upheavals” there was a phenomenon of transcendence of the big parties, trade union federations and political leaderships. In the specific context of what the Chilean parliamentary left called “the institutional road to socialism”, there was a transcendence of the legal and political framework. The gamble by Allende and the coalition which won the elections in 1970 was precisely the possibility “in the midst of the Cold War” of a peaceful or “legal” transition to socialism, different from both the USSR and the armed struggle (as in Cuba). A transition envisaged as gradual, by stages, respecting the Constitution of 1925 and the existing state, a state which was supposedly “flexible” enough to integrate radical reforms. He also gambled on the armed forces being “constitutionalist”, that they would respect universal suffrage and the electoral result. These strategic gambles of the “Chilean road” were denounced by the revolutionary left of the time, the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) notably, as “bourgeois reformist”. And it is precisely the institutional framework (when the Popular Unity coalition remained in the minority in parliament) which would be progressively overtaken by the dynamic of the class struggle, by the workers’ movement, even if this workers’ movement remained very broadly framed by the two big governmental parties “The Chilean Communist Party (PCC) and the Socialist Party (PSC) (to which we should add the Christian Democrats who had a real trade union base). There was then a contradictory, dialectical dynamic between the government and its mobilized social base, between the big parties of the parliamentary left and their activists; the political and trade union leaderships who from 1972 onwards little by little were overtaken by the dynamic of the social struggles and by the forms of self-organization “still embryonic” in the poor neighbourhoods (*poblaciones*), in the workplaces, known as “popular power”.

**What does it take for the workers, the people in general, to mobilize and begin to act by themselves, at a given moment? How do we get to that point?**

It should be remembered that Popular Unity came to power not simply in the context of a given election, but that this electoral victory was the product of a rising tide of social mobilization since the mid-1960s. Allende’s election as president came in the context of collective mobilizations. For example, those of the Committees of Popular Unity (CUP), which were supposed to then be transformed into something more than electoral committees. Some 14,000 committees were created, mobilizing tens of thousands of activists. Allende’s election as president in 1970 was not the end of struggles, it was the extension of struggles. Workers used the election of Allende not to wait for what he would do, but to accelerate their mobilizations, especially by strikes and factory occupations. We see for example the increase in the number of “illegal” strikes, which would accelerate again in 1971-1972, to the extent that the bourgeoisie and the big right wing parties understood that it was also on the economic level, on the terrain of the class struggle, that the movement which accompanied Allende had to be fought. So the response was not to rely uniquely on the president “even if he remained of great importance to the great majority of workers until the end. The workers and trades unionists thought that it was necessary to defend the government, but above all through the process of transformation, with the tools the workers had: factory occupations, street demonstrations, self defence of

neighbourhoods, and so on.

One of the big projects of the Allende government was the constitution of the “area of social ownership” made up of nationalised companies. There was nationalisation “and expropriation without compensation” of immense copper mines, then in the hands of the big multinationals and of imperialism, nationalisation of the big industrial monopolies “91” of the banking system. But numerous employees were not included in this social area which also envisaged an original system of co-management and participation. The latter then said: “we also want to join this nationalised sector, we want the right to participate, to benefit from better wages, to no longer depend on the boss and so on” and thus, in the name of the first measures taken by the government, they set about going beyond the narrow legal framework of the reforms proposed by Popular Unity, to occupy their workplaces to force their nationalisation.

### **Did this phenomenon of “popular power” begin in the sector which had not been nationalized?**

There was a combined dynamic. The big workers’ bastions (in manufacturing for example), integrated in the nationalised sector, gradually began to criticise the limits of the system of co-management proposed by the government and the main trade union federation, the CUT: the state nominated a director and there was a system of co-management with workers’ representatives and “production committees”. In some of these enterprises, where there was a strong presence of the left wing of Popular Unity, of the PS in particular [1], or the MIR, unionists began to question and deepen the system of co-management. At the same time, in the enterprises which had not been nationalised, the request for integration became ever stronger. It was expressed through pressure on the government “demonstrations, barricades in the big peripheral main roads of Santiago” or, very often, by factory occupations denouncing employer abuses. These “tomas” also took place increasingly in reaction to the attacks of the bourgeoisie and far right. The moment of the qualitative leap was October 1972. In the superb documentary film *The Battle of Chile*, Patricio Guzmán called this moment “The insurrection of the bourgeoisie” “it’s a good image: there was then an employers’ lockout on a mass scale, a blockade of the country by the lorry drivers union (financed directly by the CIA) supported by the liberal professions. The limits and weaknesses of the legalism endorsed by Allende emerged clearly for many activists; the government seemed paralyzed “it began then to call on the military to maintain “order” and try to resolve the problem. The response of the workers was to occupy many enterprises “in some the workers initiated partial and transitional forms of workers control “and help the fuel supply of the surrounding neighbourhoods, creating forms of alternative public transport and so on. Here we see the emergence of the so-called “industrial cordons”, horizontal or territorial coordinations essentially located in the big peripheral roads of Santiago but also existing, in a lesser sense from Arica in the north (in the electronics sector) to Patagonia (Punta Arenas) via cities like Concepción or Valparaíso. Hence throughout the country, the same phenomenon of self-organisation and territorial coordination which surged from below, thanks to the work of trades unionists and activists.

### **How did these “industrial cordons” function?**

There were several dozen coordinations in Santiago. There is a historiographical discussion on the figures, but several tens of thousands of employees were involved (around 100,000 at the national level). I worked for several years in Santiago on the press, carrying out dozens of interviews, but it remains difficult to establish the exact number of these structures, for some were very active and others only exist “on paper”, in left propaganda. It was nonetheless a significant phenomenon, even if it remained a minority one, but it involved key sectors of the economy and very active fringes of the union and political field.

The most powerful of these industrial cordons was that of Cerillos-Maipu, in the most industrialized area of Santiago (with 250 enterprises and thousands of workers). Its linear territorial organization is very clear, because the enterprises were built along road and rail axes. As I explain in my book, there was thus a “cordon in itself”, existing

objectively in the geography of the town, which led to a “cordon for itself”, a mobilized organization, emerging from the self-organization of the working class. In MaipÃº, a great number of medium sized enterprises, which were not integrated in the area of social ownership, were union bastions of the MIR and the left wing of the PS (which was very dynamic). From June 1972, thus before the great crisis of October, this industrial cordon began to organize. That indicates that this form of organization was latent inside the working class and that explains how during the October crisis these organizations multiplied.

These cordons generally emerged from the initiative of left activists and trades unionists. In the most mobilized enterprises, they were the fruit of genuine workers assemblies, which elected one or two delegates to the industrial cordon assembly. My investigation on the ground indicates however that we should relativise the image of a “Chilean soviet” because these were only embryonic forms of dual power (as understood by Lenin or the Bolivian Marxist Zavaleta Mercado) — which also explains in part the rapidity of the coup d’état. The cordons often found it difficult to go beyond the defensive and transitional stage, because of the majority political orientations of the left, of inter-partisan conflicts inside the enterprises and the problems of communal and national coordination. These meetings were open to all but in general it was essentially party activists and left trades unionists who were involved.

### **Were these assemblies a form of transcendence or development of the popular unity committees, or something different?**

Something very different, because the popular unity committees were in decline from 1971, in the absence of political orientation from the Popular Unity leadership. The cordons were then genuinely anchored in the industrial working class, they demanded workers’ control, the acceleration of reforms, while defending the government against the bourgeoisie. They entered into contradiction with the CUT, which had a weak territorial organization. The cordons thus made up for this organisational deficit.

### **How did the workers’ assemblies function in a factory? Was there a general meeting of all workers or only a part of them?**

It’s a much differentiated story, factory by factory. A monograph study has been done on the big textile factory Yarur by the historian Peter Winn [2]. Yarur, a working class bastion where the level of organisation was such that these were real assemblies where all the workers came, discussed politics, the orientation of production in the factory, but also the class struggle at the national level, participation in the cordon, the limits of the governmental left or Allende’s institutional road and so on. In other factories, it was more limited and the assemblies only involved the most organised and conscious workers, often those belonging to the left wing of the PSC. According to the political geography in the factory, there was not the same dynamic. For example, a study realized at the time in more than 30 enterprises confirms that where the Christian Democrats or the PCC dominated the level of participation was much weaker, it was the union bureaucracy that gave the line and the construction of the cordons was not a priority [3]. We see the basic role played by the PCC in the period to channel, to “moderate” but also rein in these initiatives from below which went beyond the framework of the CUT and the stageist orientations of the government. The PCC first condemned firmly the industrial cordons as a division of the workers, a “leftist” or “adventurist” initiative, whereas it was however the cordons which in October 1972, then in June 1973, in the great moments of crisis, allowed Allende to remain president. Here we see clearly the role of whole sector of Popular Unity, in particular the PCC because of its union implantation, in reining in the initiatives of self-organization and what I call “constituting popular power” for this undermined the negotiations underway with the Christian Democrats in parliament. On the contrary, the left wing of the PS, the revolutionary Christians, the MIR called for “advancing without compromise” and “creating popular power” without this being however followed by concrete actions. Between propaganda and action, there were sometimes many gaps!

### **What was the rate of unionisation in 1970-1973? And the influence of the political parties?**

The rate of unionization was very different according to the sectors. In the public sector, unionization was virtually obligatory, thus the rate of unionization reached more than 85%! In the private sector, unionization was significant – around 20 % – according to the sector. The CUT was hegemonic and fundamental for the mobilizations, but it didn't represent all the union movement, since in the small and medium enterprises there were numerous unions not affiliated to the CUT, because of the labour code. The CUT had around 700,000 members in 1970 (of a population of 9 million). Inside the federation, there were three main currents: the PCC – very strong, structured and disciplined, strongly marked by Stalinism (it had more than 250,000 members) which was the main support for Allende; the PSC, much more divided, with a strong left wing capable even of calling for an insurrectional general strike, more inter-class in nature (around 180,000 members) and we should not forget the Christian Democrats, the second biggest trade union force. The far left was then above all the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), which was very new (formed in 1965), marked by the theory of “prolonged people's war” and faced with the hegemony of the big workers' parties, inserted in the most marginalized sectors of the working class, which were less controlled, indeed abandoned, by the CUT, with around 10,000 to 15,000 very active militants and a broader circle of sympathizers. There were also small organizations like the PSR (Revolutionary Socialist Party) or the Liga comunista which was then recognized by the Fourth International. The more the limits of the Allende project appeared and the possibilities of a legalist transition entered into crises, the more the influence of the MIR led by Miguel Enriquez developed, in particular inside the left of Popular Unity. The MIR policy oscillated then between a critique of Allende's “reformism and bourgeois legalism” and attempts at an alliance with the PS left. The MIR even for a time provided protection for Allende.

**In the debate you led at the NPA's summer university a Chilean comrade stressed that inside the structures of popular power, which in practice went beyond the Popular Unity project, the great majority of workers were at the same time “Allendistas”. How do you explain this situation, of advance practice combined with ideological submission?**

Until the end Allende remained for the great majority of the workers' movement “the comrade president”, a symbol much beyond the electoral level. He even had an increasingly strong influence on Christian Democratic workers, who saw that the government had taken measures favouring employees – increased wages, nationalisation of copper, participation and workers' co-management. The charismatic aura of Allende was not challenged up until the end, despite the limits of his programme or the illusions on the “constitutionalist” armed forces. The dialectical contradiction is that popular power developed in the name of the defence of the government, but on the basis of demands specific to the workers... which went beyond this same government, like all other parties. For example, the slogans of the industrial cordon Cerillos y MaipÃº of 1972, was for the extension of the nationalized sector, some demanding a constituent assembly and the closure of the “bourgeois parliament”, echoing the Concepci3n popular assembly of May 1972, fuel supplies under popular control, and a political intervention in the army to expel the reactionaries. They thus had demands going well beyond the framework that Allende had fixed, but it was always in the name of the objectives of the governmental left. Witness also the letter to “comrade president”, on September 5, 1973, from the provincial coordination of the industrial cordons of Santiago (contained in the book “Venceremos”), which said in substance “if you do not have confidence in the masses, if you continue to hesitate and seek parliamentary alliances with the Christian Democrats or to integrate the military in the government, you will be responsible for the cold massacre of the working class”. But it was still a request that Allende show stronger support for the forms of popular power. That also highlights the fact that the so called “rupturist”, revolutionary sector – the MIR, the left wing of the PS and the radicalized Christian sectors – had not succeeded in proposing an alternative project to Allendism, to the strategy of a legal, peaceful transition to socialism. Twice, Allende integrated the highest command of the armed forces into his government, including alongside the top leaders of the CUT, also made ministers. It was Allende who made Pinochet head of the army in August 1973, persuaded that he was a “legalist”. And it was the army which was given the task by Popular Unity of assuring fuel supplies or “controlling” the circulation of arms, which allowed it a year before the coup to surround the factories and evaluate the resistance.

If the MIR activists were right on a series of things – they predicted the coup more than two years in advance, they stressed the need for political work among the soldiers as well as the need to strengthen the forms of popular power

â€” this revolutionary organization was not able to present a national political alternative in the eyes of the broad masses, which could have changed the course of history.

### **Can you say more about the Concepción popular assembly?**

Divergences accumulated within the left, following the permanent attempts by Allende and the CP to find agreement with the Christian Democrats so as to continue to legislate and consolidate their model, while the left – an essential point – was in the minority in parliament. Faced with this, there was a rise in social struggles which made the local and regional sectors of the PS, and MAPU â€” radicalized Christians who had left the Christian Democrats â€” and the MIR call to accelerate things, to “advance without compromise”, to break with the state and the dominant order. Following big demonstrations in May 1972, a popular assembly took place in Concepción called by trade union and social organizations, neighbourhood committees, and all the left except for the Communists. The assembly called for the unification of the forms of popular power. Sometimes, a posteriori, we have seen here a kind of popular dual power. In reality, this was a big deliberative assembly, of alert, on the part of the left of Popular Unity and the far left, more of a questioning of the government than of dual power. At the beginning it was to be a debate between parties, but the trade unionists and social activist imposed their voices, on the contradictions of the period, criticising their political leaderships and so on. The assembly was immediately denounced: by the PCC as leftist manoeuvre, manipulated by imperialism, and by Allende himself as a dangerous division for the popular government.

### **You have talked about industrial cordons. There were also what have been called “comandos comunales”. Can you say how they differed from the cordons?**

The comandos comunales were essentially a demand of the MIR and certain sectors of the left of Popular Unity. They were supposed to group, beyond the working class, all the dominated sectors of the popular classes, the “poor of the town” as the MIR put it, the students, small traders, and the peasants. This was to be a pre-figuration of future revolutionary communes. That was the theory, defended in particular by the MIR. In practice, we see that it was difficult to go beyond the stage of an organization of the so-called “marginal” urban sectors, the *pobladores* and the problems of fuel supply in these neighbourhoods. The lack of a link between working class and these important fractions of the social movement was another difficulty for this revolutionary process: how to build the unity of this social camp which was very heterogeneous and had separate historic practices? The left of the PS on the contrary wished to give priority to the cordons. Often this debate reflected the different social insertion of the parties: the PS was very strong in the industrial cordons and the working classes, the MIR, which had a weak industrial insertion, had developed comandos comunales, based on the poor neighbourhoods, as in Nueva La Habana. A posteriori, we can analyze this as an erroneous orientation of the MIR, which always wanted the industrial cordons â€” the most advanced form of constituent popular power â€” reintegrated in the CUT, because in its conception the comando comunale was the true form of popular power. Indeed what really functioned were the industrial cordons, at least in Santiago and some medium sized towns... Of course we should also analyze what happened in the countryside, but that is another debate and that means more research. Whatever, the MIR did not grasp fully the need to centralize, coordinate these industrial cordons, which were among the “lost treasures” - to paraphrase Hannah Arendt – of the Chilean revolution ... and which, 40 years after the coup and the repression, deserve to be brought out again so as to draw the lessons for the future.

---

[1] The Chilean Socialist Party of the time was a Marxist party with a very strong left sector and had nothing in common with today's PS. It was not a member of the Second International.

[2] Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986

[3] Juan Espinosa & Andrew Zimbalist, *Economic Democracy: Workers' Participation in Chilean Industry, 1970–1973*, Academic Press, London 1978