

# Footsteps That Bring Us Closer

November 1987

## REPORT ON THE THIRD

**Oxfam** CANADA

## TOUR TO CHILE



*The Canadian delegation met striking members of the "Diario El Sur" newspaper union in Concepcion, Chile.*

Our tour began on Nov. 2nd, with a welcoming round of Chile's traditional drink, *pisco sours*, at a reception given by Chilean unions involved in previous tours. It ended two weeks later, on November 16th, after an exhaustive series of meetings in three cities with our Chilean counterparts: steel workers, nurses, health care workers, postal workers and many other groups.

Chile had had one of Latin America's oldest democracies, until the US backed military seized power from the socialist government of Dr. Salvador Allende in 1973. Following

the coup, thousands of people were rounded up, tortured and killed. Unions and all independent, democratically run organizations were wiped out or forced underground.

We wanted to see firsthand the conditions in which our Chilean brothers and sisters live and struggle for labour and human rights, 14 years after the coup.

We wanted to develop ongoing links of solidarity between unionists of both countries, including financial assistance to worthwhile projects.

Our delegation included:

*Ken Signoretti* of the United Steelworkers of America (Mississauga Area),

*Gail Rogers* of the Newfoundland and Labrador Nurses' Union,

*Wayne Mundle*, Atlantic Region Director and National Director of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers,

*Linda Ross* (educator and health worker for OXFAM-Canada, from Newfoundland and CUPE Local 2722 Vice-President).

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## TWO WORLDS WITH THEIR BACKS TO EACH OTHER

The houses in the Estacion Central neighborhood of Central Santiago are neatly painted and look well kept. Inside however, we saw doorless interior rooms housing entire families, with no light, no electricity, no plumbing, no heat. In one room, we visited an elderly woman doubled up with pain on an old cot. Her sciatica required proper medical treatment, but to get it she would have to reach the local polyclinic early in the morning, line up for hours to get a number and return later in the day for attention: all impossible in her condition.

This dual reality was perhaps the most striking thing about our visit to Chile. Some of us expected the sort of across the board poverty and economic underdevelopment typical of other Latin American countries we had visited. But what we saw in Chile was far more chilling: the luxurious furnishings and state of the art technology in the private Las Condes Hospital serving a small elite vs. the cracked walls and filthy floors of the public, government funded Barros Luco-Trudeau hospital; the shiny new highrises that pack Santiago's downtown, served by a subway any Canadian city would envy vs. the desperate poverty of people who live off the garbage in the Lo Errazuriz dump; the pride of steelworker union members in their work vs. the appalling conditions they must work in.

**We soon realized that fear is as pervasive as the smog in Santiago: everywhere we went we saw how hard it was for people to speak freely with us.**

Government appointed directors of the hospitals and postal buildings



*Patients wait for hours to get health care at the underfunded Barros Luco-Trudeau state hospital in Santiago.*

we visited made it clear they didn't want us there and made it difficult to take photographs. Many of the union people we spoke with had experienced arrests and torture.

While we were in Chile, 78 actors and actresses received death threats, as did a large group of journalists, lawyers and human rights activists. We realized that while on the surface there is an apparent move toward normalization, the current implementation of the dictatorship's 1980 constitution has actually meant a worsening of the human rights situation.

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## CHILEAN LABOUR ORGANIZES FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Just days after we met with the National Union of Telephone Workers (SINATE), their offices were entered by "unidentified civilians" and turned upside down. Ironically, National Workers' Command leader Manuel Bustos, who was visited in jail by the 2nd OXFAM Labour tour (in 1985)

was once again in prison; this time, however, prison authorities refused to let us see him.

At the AZA plant (considered one of the most modern in Chile) in the north end of Santiago, old tin and scrap metal is melted down into steel ingots which are reheated until they are red hot. Workers thread these through a series of machines to stretch the steel to its proper length and breadth. Dressed only in ordinary street clothes, the workers hop skillfully between the 200 metre long redhot snakes which twist dangerously close to their bodies.

Two hundred and fifty steelworkers affiliated with the Chilean Metalworkers Confederation (CONSTRAMET) work at this plant. Two of them were killed on this line in the past fifteen years: one of them when red hot metal spilled over his entire body, another when his throat was pierced by one of these red hot rods.

Nevertheless, the AZA workers, like those of the silverware, Odis

Lock and other plants we visited were extraordinarily proud of their skill and the fact that they have jobs at all. Workers here were slightly better off than those at other plants we visited. Their basic wage was 16,000 pesos (C\$106) a month; with incentive bonuses, take home pay amounts to an average 35,000 pesos (C\$226). They receive a transportation bonus of about 700 pesos (C\$4.52) a month; most spend at least 100 pesos per day on busfare. They get 15 days vacation per year, in the summer.

CONSTRAMET leaders told us that Pinochet's labour laws require that members negotiate on a plant by plant basis. The law encourages the formation of more than one union in a plant. As few as 25 people may form a union and workers in any sector can strike for only up to 59 days, after which the company can fire them and hire others, from the vast reserves of Chile's unemployed.

In hospitals, factories and postal sorting rooms we saw the same disregard for occupational health and safety. We met with one church related group which has recently begun research, educational and technical assistance in this field. But the struggle for survival, by individuals and as organizations, has meant even otherwise active unions have done little in health and safety.

Trade unionism in general has declined from 30% before the coup, to 10% now. In the forestry industry for example, it went from 100% to 5%. The situation in the southern coal mining region around Concepcion, particularly appalled us. The overall unemployment rate there is about 25 to 30%, as production in the state owned mines has dropped. This has meant that hundreds of families try to survive by digging their own mine shafts and scraping coal out of the earth.

We saw these workers and their families living in improvised shacks and ruins, and they told us that 26 people had died in 1987 from fumes or cave-ins: dramatic witness to how little they earn and how much they risk. One 17 year old boy was overcome by fumes and died, when he ran back into the mine for his tools, because he had to sell them for food.

Standing in one of the "better" mines, constructed by a new miners' cooperative, we looked at the roughly shored up walls. One of our delegation referred to the earthquakes Chile regularly experiences. "Yeah, but these walls are strong," our guide told us. "You have more faith in God than I do," she said. The man replied, simply, "That's all we have left in Chile."

We also talked to fisheries workers who complained that 350 large factory freezer trawlers were taking 5 million tons of fish (up from 150,000 tons in 1970) in offshore fisheries, leaving little for small scale fishermen working from the coast. 8000 to 10,000 people working in inshore fisheries can catch no fish and Chilean fish consumption has dropped from six kilograms per person to four kilograms per person in recent years.

One union representative said that to earn enough to buy a kilo of bread, a fisherman on the trawlers

had to catch the equivalent of 21/2 tons of fish; for busfare, one ton. If these were some of the results of Chile's version of 'free trade', we were seeing more clearly the reasons for opposing it in Canada.

We spoke to ordinary people in the streets of these towns and discovered their views were very similar to those of union and community leaders. They agreed Pinochet was making some improvements, apparently in an



*A metalworker working without protection to his eyes. Health and safety is a low priority when job stability and the survival of union organizations are threatened.*



*Ken Signoretti and Wayne Mundle discussing the impact of privatization with workers in Penco. Poster of Chilean postal workers against privatization of the post office.*

attempt to win votes in the plebiscite next year (a 'yes' or 'no' vote on the military junta's candidate for president of Chile until 1997.)

**But most people plainly expected the plebiscite to be fraudulent. As one man put it, "Anybody can take part in this raffle, but only one guy has all the numbers."**

The extraordinary beauty of the Chilean countryside impressed us; it made it especially difficult to understand the extreme misery it contains.

A sympathetic security guard and member of Chile's postal union warned us to leave the central post office in the middle of our visit. A pro-regime spy had reported our presence to the management and they were about to come after us. This presence of spies in the workforce is one of the main causes of insecurity and fear among the workers.

Chile's postal workers face a problem that we in Canada know all too well: privatization. Already the telex and telegram section of the post office has been sold off to the private sector, meaning a loss of union rights, the reduction of services in more remote areas, and many layoffs.

Phone workers also face privatization. The leaders of SINATE told us how the regime uses electronic surveillance, bugging devices and wire taps to control its critics through the phone system. The government has split the telephone workers into 20 different unions with membership of 25 to 2000 people. The leader of one union has been appointed to the board of directors and members of SINATE are pressured to leave the union because it's too "political".

**ROB FROM THE POOR  
GIVE TO THE RICH  
PRIVATIZATION IN CHILE**

LAN Chile (the formerly state-run national airline) and a host of other public corporations are all being offered to the private sector, at bargain prices. We met with the Command for Defense of State

Enterprises, a co-ordinating body for the struggle against privatization. So far the only corporation that has been saved is the national copper company, CODELCO. Members of Chile's national congress voted unanimously to nationalize CODELCO in 1972. Important sectors of the military also oppose its sale to private companies, because of its strategic importance.

While the government hasn't been able to privatize CODELCO itself, new mining ventures involving multi-million dollar investments from foreign corporations are being pushed by the military government.

We realized that the problem with privatization in Chile and Canada is almost identical. The big difference is that we can still speak out freely against privatization without facing the same level of repression as the Chilean workers.

**Looking at the huge selloffs of public corporations and services built up over decades by generations of Chileans was like catching a glimpse of what could be our future in Canada, if we don't fight to save what we have now.**

Privatization has destroyed or at least weakened existing trade unions, reducing the rights, benefits and protection of workers. Private corporations cut back on public services, saving only the most lucrative aspects of business. Better paid positions for trained workers are eliminated in favour of poorly paid jobs for less skilled workers. As well, work is contracted out to private companies whose workers receive few or none of the benefits and guarantees of unionized workers in the sector.

One scheme for privatization involved workers buying shares in



*Patricia Talloni, President of the College of Nurses of Chile, and Gail Rogers of the Newfoundland and Labrador Nurses Union compare notes on the privatization of health care in our two countries.*

the companies where they work. Since they never hold enough to control management decisions, they gain no real power, but, as shareholders, many become reluctant to take strike or other actions against the company in defense of their own rights. This program was inspired in British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's so-called "popular capitalism", for the same purposes of concentrating wealth and control in a few hands, at unions expense.

Pension plans and social services (health, education and so on) are also being privatized, for everyone except the armed forces. Instead of being used to provide low-cost housing to more than 800,000 homeless families, or for other socially productive ends, millions of dollars of workers' pension funds have been handed over to private companies, many of them large transnational corporations, to use for their own profit.

Privatization of the public education system meant the layoff of 8000 teachers in February of 1987, and there are now about 50 students for each teacher. What privatization has meant for workers' quality of life was graphically illustrated to us by the healthcare system.

#### THE CLOCK TICKS BACKWARD CHILEAN HEALTH CARE

Perhaps the most surprising thing for our delegation was to realize how good the Chilean health care system used to be, better in many ways than Canada's. After hearing testimony from nurses, university trained midwives, auxiliaries, doctors and patients, we all ended up with the feeling that they once had what we are struggling to get in Canada: cheap, accessible, good quality health care.

We visited private and public hospitals, community clinics, and alternative health care centres. We were particularly "impressed" by the private Las Condes hospital, serving a small number of wealthy Chileans, but with the latest medical technology and the carpeted floors and polite service of a luxury hotel.

In contrast, the Barros Luco Trudeau hospital serves some of Santiago's poorest *poblaciones* (shantytowns and low-income workers' communities). There we saw long lineups of people waiting for appointments (months in the future) where they could receive the examination or the operation they sometimes urgently needed. We also saw nurses removing needles from hypodermics by hand (a serious health hazard, making people vulnerable to diseases such as hepatitis, AIDS etc.) and a midwife washing surgical gloves, so they could be re-used.

We discovered that patients at public hospitals must provide their own bandages, syringes and medication. Aides often give medication, something that only a registered nurse or physician can do in Canada.

The Chilean government has ensured that health care is wholly curative and there is no emphasis on prevention, as we are beginning to develop in Canada.

One of the most pathetic things we saw were husbands and children, gathered outside the barbed-wire encircled maternity building at the Barros Luco, calling out women's names. No one but the patient is allowed in the hospital, so the only way families can find out how women are doing, is by calling them to second and third storey windows. We later read a report that indicated that due to overcrowded facilities, women in labour are put two in a bed.

We learned that a child that is 85% malnourished according to the Iowa scale, is only 15% malnourished according to the Chilean scale. There are infant malnutrition centres and milk programs for the under two's, keeping infant mortality levels low and Chile's standing in relation to international statistics looking good. Once children reach the age of two, however, child health and nutrition measures are virtually non-existent, because there are no internationally examined statistics.

Working conditions for nurses, most of whom are not unionized, were exhausting. A typical nurse is responsible for 100 beds or five wards, as compared to 1 nurse for every 8 beds in Canada. Chilean nurses usually work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily and every six days they work a 24 to 28 hour shift.

We also met with Dr. Antonio Cavalla and Midwife Association President Veronica Baez, of the CIASPO alternative health project, which serves the same area as the Barros Luco Hospital. We were impressed by the emphasis they placed on their role in the community: to provide some immediate health care, but more importantly to organize people to demand their rights from the state system. Over and over we heard similar positions, from the College of Nurses, health care professionals and members of the Federation of Private Sector Healthworkers Unions (FENASAP).

Chile has traditionally provided excellent health services, and people are organizing to defend what little is left, and improve it beyond the levels in the past.

We realized that sending bandages and medicines is not what is needed, but rather support for those demanding their right to health care.

The CIASPO women's program, assisted by OXFAM-Canada, particularly impressed us, with its concentration on women's rights in extremely *machista* Chilean society. The program focuses on early detection of breast and cervical cancer; family planning; counselling for couples; and workshops for training health monitors. We realized just how important this work is, when we heard that while many women do have pap smear examinations (for cervical cancer), they **never get the results**, and when positive, **never get the appropriate follow-up treatment**.

We were especially surprised by the midwives of Chile, university-trained professionals since 1834! (Midwives still can not practice legally in Canada.) Their role at births however, is currently being downgraded, due to the high unemployment rate among doctors. Their shifts are as long as 12 and even 28 hours, but they still provide the best care they can under appalling conditions.

We realized that low salaries, when supported by a network of free, high-quality social services (health, education, pensions) are one thing. But when this network has been virtually destroyed, the living conditions for workers and their families are much worse than even their wages suggest.

## WOMEN AND YOUTH CHILE'S HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

One of the most exciting events that we attended was a rally in the Cariola theatre, for psychiatrist and political leader Dr. Fanny Pollarolo. She is a leader of the Women for Life organization, a broad coalition of women from all walks of life and all political parties including independents. She was imprisoned along with union leader Manuel Bustos and others on October 7, 1987. The rally, an impressive multi-media event brought together women of all ages to participate in song, dance, poetry and solidarity.



*The unity of women was evident in this shanty town near Vina del Mar. These women were part of a Health Monitors training programme.*

We were impressed by the level of organization and unity among the women. While we heard a lot about unity in the speeches and reports from union and political leaders, we saw little of it in practice, except in the women's organizations and to some extent among youth and students.

Everywhere we went, we found a range of women's organizations from groups as simple as the neighborhood Common Pots, organized to feed the hungry, to Women for Life, with representation from almost every woman's organization in Chile.

We left with the feeling that if anyone was really going to bring about change in Chile, it was the women and young people, with fewer prejudices from pre-coup days and more creative approaches to organizing and mobilizing people for change.

We met with different national organizations, including the Assembly of Civil Society, the National Workers' Command, the Democratic Workers' Central, etc; and in general we found divisions among the opposition leadership which don't reflect the level of unified work at the grassroots.

However, there was a general consensus that the 1980 constitution, which Pinochet and the Junta claim is steering Chile gently back to democracy, only institutionalizes the military's power over civilian society.

When the "Congress" is created in 1989, one third of its members will be appointed. More seriously, all civilian powers are subject to control by the National Security Council, that is, the commanders-in-chief of Chile's armed forces.

We were particularly concerned about Article 8 in the Constitution,



*Can anyone believe the intentions of the regime for the plebiscite if it will not provide answers to these families of the disappeared as to the whereabouts of their loved ones?*

and the recently adopted law to enforce it. Under this article, unionists, party leaders and members, activists and those critical of the regime, can be charged, imprisoned and stripped of all civil rights, including the right to vote, teach and hold elected office, including positions in unions, simply for defending ideas at odds with the military's 1980 constitution.

### **FREE ELECTIONS VS. THE JUNTA'S PLEBISCITE**

According to Pinochet and his supporters, next year Chileans will "vote" for their new president (to serve until 1997), but this election consists of a 'yes' or 'no' vote, on the candidate proposed by the military junta. Pinochet has already begun his campaign and we saw a few pro-Pinochet slogans painted on the walls before we left Chile.

Most of the opposition, led by the Christian Democratic party, is working together on a campaign

for free elections. They initially hoped to convince the military to hold multi-candidate elections, instead of the plebiscite. Now that hope is wearing thin, and they're increasingly talking of a campaign to vote 'no'.

In the meantime, most of their efforts are to get people to register to vote. Of a potential 8.2 million voters, only 2.882 million had registered by October 1987. Their goal is to register 6 million people: enough, they hope, to have a resounding "no" vote in the plebiscite. (Even if the "no" vote were to win, Pinochet would carry on for another year, at which time there would be multi-candidate elections, but still under the military's control. Not all parties would be allowed to participate).

Already, most observers are talking of a fraudulent plebiscite. General Pinochet's critics have little access to the press, particularly television, and security services have launched an intensive campaign to intimidate the general's critics.

We mentioned the threats and harassment in the first section of

this report. Even more alarming are the new cases of people who have disappeared after arrest, a practice which had virtually ended in 1978. Five young men, associated with the Chilean Communist Party, disappeared in September and there is evidence that they were kidnapped by the government's security forces. (A sixth case, that of Karin Beovic Pizarro, a 24 year old student, came to light just as we were leaving.)

**We left Chile firmly convinced that there can be no genuine democratic change there as long as General Pinochet, and the armed forces, are in control. We have no doubt that the necessary pre-condition for any real change is the unity of the entire opposition, without exceptions, behind one strategy for mobilization and political change.**

Ultimately, it is the Chilean people who must decide, through a free and democratic vote, which party or coalition they want to lead the reconstruction of their country. Until such a vote can be taken, we deeply believe that all anti-dictatorial forces must participate together in the struggle for democracy, the drafting of a new, democratic constitution and the signing of an agreement which guarantees justice for the victims of human rights violations.

We are convinced that the 1980 constitution and plebiscite, far from bringing democracy closer, will only institutionalize the regime even further.

### **WHAT ARE CANADIANS DOING IN CHILE?**

Toward the end of our visit, we met with Canadian Ambassador Michel de Goumois and Senior



*The vast majority of the Chilean people oppose the dictatorship and want a return to democracy.*

Counsellor Frank Chandler. They informed us that the Embassy's prime role in Chile is maintaining relations with the government and within that role they are concerned about the human rights situation, although they conduct no investigations themselves.

We asked them what impact the new immigration law, Bill C55, will have on Chileans' chances for finding refuge in Canada, but they indicated the Embassy has done no research nor made any particular recommendations on the subject.

Generally, Canada accepts about 120 to 150 Chilean refugees a year, but more can be accepted, if necessary, we were told.

They mentioned the Red Cross' agreement with the military authorities, which allow a Red Cross representative, accompanied by a doctor, to enter Chilean prisons and interview prisoners, then file a confidential report to the government. On occasion, the Embassy has seen copies of these reports but cannot make them public.

We asked if they would take a more energetic role, monitoring the impact of the 1980 constitution on the human rights situation, but they indicated they still hadn't decided. Some initiatives are underway, they told us, but could not reveal what those initiatives consist of.

They indicated the Embassy does not actively encourage Canadian trade or investment in Chile, but they do provide support and information on the business climate to interested Canadian companies.

It was generally felt by the delegation that the Embassy should be playing a much more active role in defending human rights, modelling its efforts after the Dutch or Italian embassies which have made valuable declarations in the past.

## CONCLUSIONS AND COMMITMENTS

We saw Chile as a country full of contradictions. Santiago's downtown, of steel and glass office buildings and shops packed with the latest consumer products, could equal that of any North American city. Just blocks away, behind white-washed facades, 18 to 20 families lived 6 to 8 people to a room in rundown buildings lacking water, sewage and the basic necessities of life.

**The military, ordinary and political police have created an atmosphere of terror and violence, aimed at quelling any sign of opposition from the labour movement and popular organizations that exist.**

Despite this pervasive repression and fear, we witnessed the strength and determination of the vast majority of Chilean people who

oppose the dictatorship. We were moved by their continued efforts to organize and work for democracy through unions and popular groups.

**Having seen their courage, we are deeply convinced that we as Canadian trade unionists must concretely express our support and solidarity with the people of Chile and we have made the following personal commitments:**

1. To send a letter to General Pinochet protesting the violations of human and trade union rights and supporting free elections. We did this before leaving Chile and sent copies, with a news release, to Chilean media.
2. To publicize through our own labour media as well as the commercial media in Canada what we have seen in Chile, and what we feel Canadians should do about

the situation there.

3. To incorporate information on Chile in general and its labour movement in particular, into our own union activities particularly educationals, seminars and conventions, in order to better inform Canadian workers.
4. To form an Atlantic Working Group of unionists in solidarity with Chile, similar to that formed in Ontario by participants in the 2nd labour tour; our Ontario member will join the Ontario Working Group.
5. To recommend that our unions sponsor projects like a union education program we saw in Concepcion (SER) and a similar program in Valparaiso (CESLA), along with the organizing drive of healthworkers and the College of Nurses.

For more information on the Labour Tours to Chile and other development activities of OXFAM-Canada, contact the OXFAM office nearest you or the National Office; 251 Laurier Ave. West, Ottawa K1P 5J6 phone 613 - 237-5236.

**Credits:**  
Written by Lake Sagaris  
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# RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE OXFAM-CANADA LABOUR TOUR - 1987

Based on our experience and discussions with Chilean trade unionist at all levels, we strongly recommend that your union get involved in supporting our Chilean brothers and sisters in these ways:

1. Provide financial aid for educational, training and information and organization programs in Chilean trade unions, as a way of strengthening the movement against the dictatorship. Contact us, or Oxfam-Canada.

2. Send financial aid and telegram support on an emergency basis to strikers and their families, and to families of victims of repression. These appeals will come to your union through a number of channels.

3. Press the Canadian government with letters, cables and face-to-face meetings on the following important issues;

- \* to intensify its monitoring of the human rights situation in Chile, through the United Nations and directly through the Canadian Embassy in Santiago.

- \* to discourage Canadian trade and investment in Chile as long as these violations continue (similar to sanctions against the South African government)

- \* to express Canadians' concern about human rights violations more publically, both to Chilean authorities and within the Canadian public.

- \* to press the Chilean government to hold free and democratic elections in Chile with full participation of all political and interest groups.

- \* to participate in monitoring this election to assure its fairness.

- \* to scrap Bill C-55 (on immigration), and facilitate the immigration of Chilean political refugees to Canada; and provide services to assist the return of Chilean-Canadians who decide to go back to Chile.

- \* to intervene to secure the release of jailed trade union and political prisoners now being held without due process in Chilean jails.

- \* to vigorously express to the Chilean government its opposition to the imposition of the death penalty, particularly for political prisoners.

4. Keep your membership and the Canadian public informed about the situation in Chile through newsletters, speakers, audio-visuals and educationals. They should know about;

- \* the effects of privatization and 'free trade' on Chilean workers.

- \* the legislative restrictions on trade union rights, combined with jailings, torture, exile and murder, which have been used to silence the critics of these 'free trade' economic policies.

- \* the implications of Article Eight of the 1980 Constitution which creates a form of political apartheid in Chile.

5. Participate in a trade union delegation to Chile and support the visits of Chilean trade unionists to Canada, thereby developing strong ties with organizations struggling for democracy within Chile.