

No.3: WHAT IS HAPPENING IN CHILEA. Background

On September 11 1973 the democratic government of President Salvador Allende was overthrown in a violent coup d'etat by the Chilean armed forces. Since then, two years of systematic and brutal repression have failed to annihilate the trade unions in Chile. CUT, the Chilean TUC, is working underground (the military banned it within hours of the coup), and has full-time organisers in almost every province of the country. Strikes have occurred in every major industry in Chile this year. Wage increases have been won, redundancies prevented, and prisoners released from concentration camps because of industrial action by Chilean workers, despite the fact that all forms of industrial action are illegal.

As CUT President Luis Figueroa said in April, when he visited Britain, "the period of fear and terror has ended: people can be intimidated only so far". Workers no longer accept their lot in silence. Petitions, mass delegations, go-slows and constructive sabotage (in a food factory the packets are deliberately made up over-weight) have taken the place of normal collective bargaining. Since meetings are banned, sports events, concerts, religious festivals and even chess tournaments have been transformed into expressions of mass opposition to the Junta. This year, May Day saw the first clandestine radio broadcasts from inside Chile.

The Junta is in serious trouble. It cannot pay its foreign debts. Its former friends, both inside and outside Chile, are deserting it. Even the World Bank has delayed new loans. The Junta's constant fear is massive rebellion. In desperation it turns to ever greater repression.

In mid-July, 12 leaders of the copper miners' union at El Salvador were arrested for holding an unauthorised meeting (trade union meetings may only be held with the permission of the military authorities, and a copy of the agenda and list of all who will attend must be filed 48 hours in advance). Protests throughout Chile led to the arrest of 14 more trade unionists, among them Hector Cuevas, President of the Construction Workers' Federation.

Torture is now the normal procedure applied to all detainees. In the second week in June a young trade unionist was taken to the torture centre at Villa Grimaldi in Santiago. His head was encased in a metal helmet, which was then compressed to squeeze his skull and cause indescribable pain. A young woman was tortured by the insertion of a live rat into her vagina.

Those that the Junta cannot beat, it starves. Unemployment is now stated officially to be 15%, although diplomats already estimated by March 1975 that the true figure was over 20%. A Catholic organisation, which made a survey in February of one area of northern Santiago, found that 61% of the workers living there were unemployed. The price of bread is 139 times its level on the day of the coup, two years ago. The Chilean equivalent of the CBI reported that sales of food had decreased by 25% since 1973, and in May a kindergarten teacher reported that in a single month four of the children in her class had died of diseases produced by malnutrition.

Elementary trade union rights are denied. Strikers face the death penalty. Collective bargaining has been abolished. Trade union elections are forbidden by military decree. CUT estimates that two-thirds of all trade union

officers have been arrested and detained for varying periods of time since the coup. Of the 40,000 killed in the coup and its aftermath, the majority were trade unionists. The ILO delegation which visited Chile in November 1974 found that "a large number of trade union leaders have been eliminated through their death, execution, detention, dismissal, resignation ..., prohibition from holding office, or they have gone into exile or disappeared".

This is the situation as it confronts the oldest and strongest trade union movement in Latin America. Chile was one of the very few countries to have in the CUT a single, united trade union organisation comparable to the TUC.

But the Chilean trade unions are at the centre of the opposition to the military Junta. They have shown enormous courage and resilience. They have been immensely heartened by what we have already been able to do on their behalf. In a speech of thanks to trade unionists in Glasgow in April, Luis Figueroa stated: "Despite the reign of terror, the determination to be free and the basic democratic instincts of our people are more powerful still. In the coming days and months we will confront important battles. In these circumstances international solidarity, concrete solidarity, will play a vital role in defining the course of Chilean history".

B. LEGAL AND FORMAL REPRESSION OF TRADE UNIONS IN CHILE

**Central Unica de Trabajadores de Chile (CUT -the Chilean TUC) banned.

On September 29 1973 a Junta Decree Law cancelled the legal status of the CUT. It is now illegal to suggest in Chile by word or deed that the CUT exists. CUT buildings, funds and properties were confiscated. At least one CUT property, a workers' holiday camp called Ritoque, has been converted by the military junta into a concentration camp.

**Individual unions lose recognition or are dissolved.

Many trade union federations, such as the Textile Workers, Metalworkers and Bakery Workers, have been dissolved, and their funds and property confiscated. Others, such as the peasant confederations Unidad Obrera Campesina and Ranquil, are not officially banned. But their funds have been frozen or confiscated, their income cut off, and they are effectively prevented from functioning.

**Military decree to "restructure" some unions.

A few unions, like the Copper Workers Federation, have been decreed to be "in reconstruction". Effectively they are unable to take any action whatever without the blessing of the military authorities, their leaders are suspended, and their funds frozen.

**Election of officers.

By military order, elections are forbidden at any level in the trade union movement. Vacancies are filled by appointing the oldest or most senior worker in the factory or work-place. In practice the appointment to a trade union post is often made by the employer, or in public enterprises, by the military administrator. The person chosen is obliged to accept. Existing leaders can be replaced at any time. The entire leadership of the Telephone and Telecommunication Workers Union was sacked and replaced.

**Meetings

Trade union meetings must be held outside working hours. A copy of the agenda of the meeting, time and venue, and a list of those who will attend, must be handed to the local military police 48 hours in advance of the meeting, for approval. If permission is granted, an armed policeman will normally attend.

**Collective bargaining

All forms of collective bargaining are suspended indefinitely. ILO representatives were informed that normal bargaining would be resumed when inflation in Chile is halted. As it is at present running at 400%, this seems to offer little hope of a return to 'normality'. It is actually illegal for workers to present a wage claim, whether verbally or in writing. While it has proved impossible in practice for the Junta to enforce this edict, it is regularly used by employers as a pretext for sackings, and by the military as an excuse for making arrests.

**Strikes

Strikes are illegal. Decree Law No.5 introduced "work discipline" to Chile. Under the terms of this junta decree, and those of the State of Siege, strikers are subject to court martial. The death sentence may be passed on any striker convicted of attempting to "paralyse an activity vital to the national interest".

**Arbitration

All the former arbitration and negotiating committees have been abolished. New ones have been set up on which the employers and representatives of the local military command are in the majority.

**Dismissal

Anyone suspected of being an "extremist, saboteur, or a recognised activist" can be dismissed on the spot and without compensation. According to the Junta's own laws, mass dismissals are illegal, but they often take place in practice.

**Working hours

Working hours were extended by 4 hours per week soon after the coup, as a contribution to what the Junta terms "National Reconstruction". No extra pay was given for the hours worked. There have been reports of substantially longer hours being worked, with as much as two extra hours per day being added in some places, again without any wage increase.

**Education

Contracts for worker education classes between the trade unions and educational establishments, especially the State Technical University, have been torn up or quietly dropped. All the universities are under the control of military rectors.

**New Labour Code

After interminable delays, the Junta finally published a draft of a new labour code. It is essentially the same draft as the one shown to the ILO, and which the ILO opposed because it violates a number of fundamental trade union freedoms. Among the more startling provisions are:

-the Ministry of Defense shall determine which activities are considered to

be "strategic" for the national security or economic stability of the country, and all industrial action by trade unionists in these activities will be forbidden.

- employers need no longer pay wages in cash. Payments in goods or kind may be made (this is a regression to the situation in Chile prior to 1931).
- a minimum of 300 members are required to form a trade union branch in any one enterprise
- amalgamation of unions grouping workers from different sectors of the economy is forbidden
- stipulations on living and working conditions are eliminated for enterprises having less than 25 permanent employees (there are 30,000 such enterprises in Chile).

This code caused a major outcry in Chile, despite the ever-present repression. Even those trade union leaders who had been appointed by the Junta publicly expressed their opposition, and the Code has been shelved for the time being.

C. REPRESSION OF TRADE UNION LEADERS AND MEMBERS

Many leaders of the CUT are dead, in prison or in exile. Hundreds of trade unionists were killed during and after the coup.

- ** In October 1973, 17 peasant leaders were shot dead in Paine, near Santiago
- ** In the Port of San Antonio 10 dockers were shot on the quay-side.
- ** July 21 1975, Fernando Dionisio Gonzalez Fredes, a plasterer from Santiago, was arrested and shot. He was a member of the Construction Workers' Union, whose President, Hector Cuevas, was arrested on July 26 1975, and has disappeared
- ** H.Moya, a Christian Democrat leader of the Santiago Province CUT Committee, was arrested with 7 other Christian Democrat trade unionists while they were attending a works training course.
- ** Out of 246 Christian Democrats who once worked for their party and held jobs at the Chuquicamata Copper Mine, only 11 have retained their jobs (the Christian Democrats were in the opposition to Popular Unity. The situation for Popular Unity supporters is far worse).

These are only a tiny sample of literally thousands of cases.