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Laboring for Unity

Abstract

[Excerpt] Fourteen years after the military coup the Chilean people are still seeking the road back to democracy. Yet finding that road requires a strong, democratic, united labor movement voicing the aspirations of working people. To achieve that goal Chilean labor leaders have to resolve important tensions in the unions' relationship to political parties, the role of union officials who are also committed political partisans and the balance between political and economic demands.

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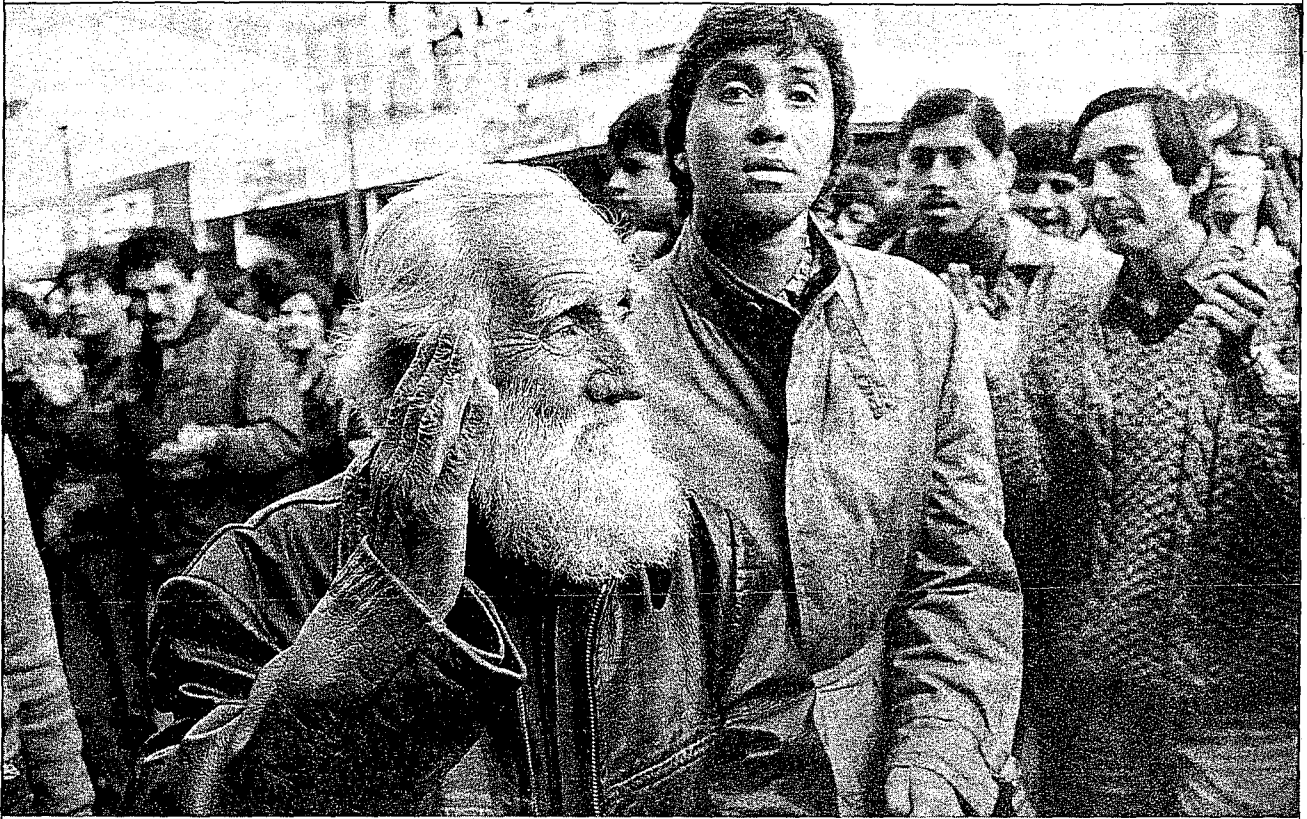
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LABORING FOR UNITY

By LANCE COMPA



Steve Rubin

Legendary voice of unity: Clotario Brest of the CUT

THE HEADQUARTERS OF CHILE'S NATIONAL workers command is a leaky-roofed, one-story converted warehouse on a side street in an aging section of Santiago. Exposed plumbing and wiring conduits scar the walls and ceiling. Partitions separate makeshift offices. Nineteen CNT leaders pack a small conference room for an executive council meeting.

Colorful posters cover the walls. Most recall events demanding *libertad*, or *paz* or *justicia* under the ruling military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who overthrew the constitutionally elected government of Salvador Allende in 1973. One large work commemorates the one hundredth anniversary of Chicago's Haymarket rally and its hanged martyrs that gave rise to the May 1 workers' holiday.

It is July 1987, winter in Santiago, and the leaders of Chile's largest labor grouping are planning two important steps in months to come: an October 7 national protest strike and a 1988 founding convention for a new central labor body. "We have to be strong in the pro-

vinces," insists CNT president Manuel Bustos on the strike call. "This can't just be a Santiago action."

Bustos is a 40-year-old textile worker and a battle-hardened veteran of the struggle against Pinochet. He has spent nearly three years in prison for trade union and political organizing since the military coup of 1973. Before then, Bustos was a rank and file leader in the giant Sumar textile mill, one of the biggest work sites in Chile. A Christian Democrat, he opposed the Communist and Socialist Party leaders of the textile union and many policies of Allende's Popular Unity coalition. Today, however, Bustos stands for unity with the Left, reflecting a CNT goal of rebuilding a broad, representative labor movement.

FOURTEEN YEARS AFTER THE MILITARY coup the Chilean people are still seeking the road back to democracy. Yet finding that road requires a strong, democratic, united labor movement voicing the aspirations of working people. To achieve that goal

Chilean labor leaders have to resolve important tensions in the unions' relationship to political parties, the role of union officials who are also committed political partisans and the balance between political and economic demands. Ironically, these are the issues that most troubled the labor movement under the Popular Unity (UP).

Through decades of trade union struggles Chilean workers had succeeded in shaping a dynamic labor movement that played a decisive role in electing Salvador Allende in 1970. Unions prospered during the three years of UP rule. Membership rose dramatically. Unions were consulted as never before on important government policy and on key management moves in newly nationalized companies. Union leaders were brought into state posts to administer labor-related programs. But the infusion of new members, new challenges and new responsibilities also created fresh problems that the unions were struggling to address when the military took over.

THE FRAYED STATE OF THE CNT NERVE center reflects the Chilean labor movement today, torn by military rule and its brutal repression. Before the coup, over a million workers in some ten thousand workplaces—more than 40% of Chile's workforce—belonged to the United Workers Central (CUT). Joining trade unionists of differing ideologies and philosophies in a single body, the CUT was perhaps unique in Latin America in its commitment to labor unity.

The smashing of Chilean democracy by the military in 1973 carried with it—not as a byproduct of the coup but as a strategic objective—the destruction of organized labor and the imprisonment, torture, exile and murder of thousands of union activists. Today about 400,000 workers, barely 10% of the employed workforce—another million are effectively unemployed—belong to unions in fewer than 3,000 enterprises. They are divided among different federations and independent labor groupings. The CNT is the largest and most representative, but important sections of the labor movement are estranged from the CNT because its leadership includes Communist and Socialist Party activists.

But the militant posters and upbeat banter among CNT leaders also reflect the spirit and hope that characterize the movement. In this modest setting union leaders plan strategies and make decisions that will go far to determine the fate of their country. Chile's social and political history—and its future—cannot be understood apart from the story of trade unionism and working class consciousness.

EXTENSIVE ORGANIZING AND MOBILIZING among Chilean laborers, especially in northern nitrate mines largely controlled by British capital, had been going on for decades when unionists created the

Workers Federation of Chile (FOCH), the country's first national labor organization, in 1907. In its beginning years the FOCH identified itself with the reformist, middle-class dominated Democratic Party. But in 1912 the FOCH pulled out to create the Socialist Workers Party "because the Democratic Party has never occupied itself with organizing the workers for the defense of their economic interest" and "because the party in its many conventions has refused to establish a program of workers' economic demands."¹

After the Soviet Revolution, the Socialist Workers Party, like socialist groupings in many countries, became the Communist Party. Union leaders were elected to parliament from working class areas where the Chilean Workers Federation was active. Both the federation and the party grew steadily through the early 1920s.

In 1933 various independent Marxist groupings formed the Socialist Party of Chile. Some were influenced by Trotsky or anarcho-syndicalists. Some were breakaway Communists and others on the left who were uncomfortable with the role of the Third International in party affairs. Many were intellectuals and middle-class youth radicalized by the experience of the Depression and unhappy with the Radical Party, which was by then the anti-clerical standard bearer of liberalism in Chilean political life.

THE SOCIALIST PARTY FIRST ORGANIZED a rival trade union federation to compete for worker support, splitting the movement at a time when, in the Depression, organizing and bargaining gains were few. But with the growth of Popular Front sentiment the split was repaired. Communists and Socialists formed the Confederation of Chilean Workers (CTCH) in 1936, though each maintained a separate faction in the new body.

Economically weakened by the Depression, workers were forced to seek protection in the political arena. A Popular Front government led by the Radical Party with Communist and Socialist participation prevailed in the national elections of 1938. Important economic reforms were enacted, expanding social programs and extending state intervention in the economy. The Communists and Socialists formally left the government in 1941 but continued to vote with the majority for reform legislation.

From 1938 to 1946, the tendency of organized labor and the two Left parties to focus their work in the legislative and administrative process was reinforced. A national health service was created; a young Socialist deputy, Dr. Salvador Allende, was named minister of health. Wage and price regulations were extended. The *sueldo vital*, a minimum wage for white collar workers, was instituted. Consistent with the broad range of forces allied against fascist Germany and Japan, a climate of widely heralded "social peace" replaced open

class struggle as the hallmark of Chilean political culture.

JUST AS THE ANTI-FASCIST ALLIANCE BEGAN falling apart after the war, Chile's political consensus and truce between the Communist and Socialist parties were violated in 1946. A labor gathering was broken up by police, with five demonstrators killed. A general strike was called, but disagreements over whether to prolong it led to a new, open split between the Socialists and the Communists in the labor movement and the collapse of the CTCH.

The 1952 presidential elections saw a substantial victory for Carlos Ibañez, a retired Army general who had been key in the upheaval of the late 1920s. He won on a populist-tinged platform with some Socialist support. In a poor fourth, with 5.5% of the vote, came Salvador Allende, candidate of a Left coalition barred by law from including Communists.

In 1953 Chilean unions healed their rupture to create the United Workers Central (CUT). This new national union federation grouped Communists, Socialists, Radicals, Christian Democrats and other political tendencies in a unitary body that held together for the next twenty years. While they had sharp conflicts and often bitter policy fights, union leaders subordinated their political differences to common trade union interests, uniting a fragmented labor movement into a central organization with a single program.

At its founding, the CUT represented about one-fourth of the nation's workers, virtually all Chile's union members. The first CUT elections resulted in Communist and Socialist Party dominance, but with constitutionally mandated proportional representation, all parties were represented in the federation's leadership councils.

The CUT and the left-wing parties organized the Popular Action Front (FRAP) for the 1958 elections, and almost elected Salvador Allende president. The candidate of the Right, Jorge Alessandri, won with 31.6 % of the vote. Allende followed with 29.9%. Eduardo Frei, on the ticket of the rapidly growing Christian Democratic Party, drew 20.7%, and the Radical Party candidate received 15.6%. Most Chileans agree that Allende would have won were it not for the doomed fifth candidacy of a populist priest who garnered 5% of the vote.

THE ALESSANDRI YEARS WERE CHARACTERIZED by anti-inflationary campaigns aimed at cutting workers' real wages. The CUT and the FRAP parties, especially the Socialists and Communists (legal again since the last days of the Ibañez regime) fought bitterly against this program, demanding legislative guarantees of wage increases equal to the rise in the cost of living. Though there were exceptional cases where workers made bargaining gains, most workers

and their unions again found themselves dependent on the political parties rather than their own organizing and bargaining resources for economic protection.

In the 1964 elections Allende clearly would have won another three-way contest. Fearing this result, the Right threw its support to Eduardo Frei in a two-man race. Frei won with 56% of the vote, to Allende's 39%.

The Frei regime began with broad support and high hopes, even among workers who had supported Allende and the FRAP coalition of Left parties. Frei campaigned on a reformist platform stressing justice and land redistribution. But early in his rule eight copper miners were killed and forty injured in what labor saw as a strike-breaking massacre.

The Army's move against striking miners took on added significance because of copper's historical importance. Nearly all of Chile's foreign trade, and much of its domestic economy, depended on the copper industry. And miners were viewed as the "shock troops" of Chilean labor, much like U.S. coal miners in the early 20th century. Geographically isolated, they took on some attitudes of a labor elite, yet knew that Chilean workers looked to them and their union for leadership. In dispatching troops against the miners, Frei sent the labor movement a sharp, hostile message.

Later Frei measures, including forced savings and anti-inflationary steps like those of Alessandri, further embittered the unions. Within the Christian Democratic party itself, young leadership became increasingly disillusioned with the president's performance. In 1968 much of the party's progressive youth split off to form the United People's Action Movement (MAPU).

During the Frei regime the Communist Party and the Socialists who followed Allende argued for a shift in the Left's political strategy. Rather than an exclusively Left, working class coalition like the FRAP, they called for a broader grouping that would include progressives among the middle class and disaffected small business people. Their reasoning found converts: in late 1969 the two big Left parties, the MAPU, some independent socialists and a majority within the Radical Party formed the Popular Unity coalition (UP) to confront the 1970 elections.

THE UP FORMULATED A PROGRAM THAT aimed to create conditions for a transition to socialism while respecting Chile's constitution. The program called for "the transfer of power from the old dominant groups to the workers, the peasants and the progressive sectors of the middle classes of the city and the countryside."²

The core of the UP economic program was creation of an *Area Social* or state sector including natural resources, banks and major manufacturing enterprises, especially the enormously important copper industry. The UP issued a list of 91 companies targeted for full or partial nationalization. Together, *Las 91*, out of

more than 35,000 business establishments in Chile, produced 60% of the country's gross national product.

Radomiro Tomic, the Christian Democrats' choice in the 1970 elections, presented a platform similar in many respects to that of the UP, including extensive nationalization. Memories of Frei's broken promises, however, eroded his credibility. Judging they could now win a three-way race, the Right again offered Jorge Alessandri, the ex-president who ran on an openly authoritarian program.

Allende and the Popular Unity won the election with 36.2% of the vote, narrowly ahead of Alessandri's 34.9%. Tomic was third with 27.8%. Conservative forces had won in 1958; the middle-of-the-roaders had their chance in 1964. Now it was the socialists' turn.

LIKE THE TWO THAT PRECEDED IT, the UP was a minority government, but hardly impotent. The constitution provided for a strong executive. The Christian Democrats and the Right held a majority in Congress, but not the two-thirds needed to override a presidential veto. Earlier presidents had been granted powers of "intervention" and "requisition" of mismanaged or strategically important enterprises. Now, Allende's veto power could block any legislative move to deny him the same power to take control of the 91 companies targeted for nationalization.

But the government had to develop strategies for 1973 mid-term congressional elections. A loss of just over 3% of its 1970 vote meant the UP would lose its protection against a veto override, while a two-thirds majority for the opposition would allow it to roll back reforms. To carry out its program, the UP had to hold on to its sources of voting strength.

The Popular Unity owed much to the CUT for its 1970 victory. While the Left coalition obtained just over one-third of the overall vote, some two-thirds of the CUT's rank and file members voted for Allende.³ Looking ahead to 1973, CUT mobilization would be decisive in holding the UP's margin over the congressional opposition.

LIKE ANY COALITION OF PARTIES WITH strongly held views, the UP was troubled by internal differences. The Communist Party urged a slow, step-by-step reform process rather than precipitous socialization, and attacked "ultra Left" groups outside the UP—mainly the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR)—that pushed for immediate action. In contrast to the disciplined Communists, Socialist Party activists were divided. Its right wing, identified with President Allende, was closest to the Communist position. Other Socialist factions, however, developed close ties to the MIR and other groupings that criticized the UP from the left. The Radical Party and MAPU developed a mix of policies that put them to the left of the Communists

on questions of nationalization, but stressed worker participation in management and other themes that resonated in their own middle-class bases.

Communists and Socialists held most CUT leadership posts. In 1968 the Communist slate won 46% of the vote in CUT national balloting. Socialist unionists won 22%, Christian Democrats 10% and Radicals 8%. Luis Figueroa, a longtime Communist Party and union leader, was CUT president when the UP came to power.

CUT union leaders reflected their party differences despite the federation's unitary program. The relatively restrained positions of the Communists and the Allende socialists in the CUT opened them to attacks from the MIR and the left Socialists for betraying their promises of revolutionary change. Meanwhile, the Christian Democrats were the third largest force in the CUT, and also the majority opposition party. Holding the union movement together under these circumstances would test the maturity of Chile's workers and the commitment to unity of their leaders. How would the labor movement now balance its trade union activities and its political role under the "workers government" it had put into office?

TENSIONS IN THE RULING COALITION AND among its union supporters resulted in mixed, sometimes contradictory policies in government and the labor federation. On one hand, enforcement of labor laws boosted unions' institutional interest in organizing the unorganized, building industry-wide bargaining structures and pushing hard for gains at the negotiating table and on the picket line. On the other hand, the government, often supported by CUT leaders, called for restraint and sacrifice by workers in formulating and bargaining for their economic demands, especially in the nationalized *Area Social*.

The total number of workplace unions and union members practically doubled between 1970 and 1973, a burst of organizing reminiscent of 1930s CIO union organizing in the United States under the New Deal. There were 4,000 local unions in 1970 and 10,000 by 1973. 600,000 workers belonged to unions in 1970; three years later 1.1 million were unionized. The number of strikes doubled, too, from 1,800 in 1970 to some 4,000 in 1973.⁴

WHERE EARLIER ADMINISTRATIONS made workers run an obstacle course of paper-filing and formalities to form a union, Allende's Ministry of Labor rapidly approved organizing requests. "Even the Frei people sided with employers who resisted union organization," said a ministry staffer who reviewed union organizing petitions under the UP. "My job is to call up the boss to tell him 'You've got a union now.'"⁵

In place of a system of plant-by-plant bargaining that

retarded industrial unionism and weakened workers' bargaining power, the UP promoted industry-wide bargaining "commissions" to negotiate standard wages and benefits for entire sectors of industry. Sectoral bargaining raised wages for lower paid workers. Since it carried with it automatic union representation in formerly unrepresented workplaces, union membership jumped in sectors with industry-wide bargaining.

In the *Area Social* the UP was the employer, often through an "intervention" prompted by a strike demanding a government takeover and expulsion of the company owners. In theory, as a UP representative on the management team of a nationalized textile firm argued:

We cannot analyze the functioning of these firms in traditional capitalist terms. We are not worried about the individual case of each firm, but rather

the global context of the textile area. Some firms suffer losses but are compensated by the enormous gains of others. We are not interested in profiting, but in serving the entire community.⁶

But what if the workers in profitable firms—and unprofitable ones, too, for that matter—demanded more for themselves than for the community? In a speech to a CUT rally in July 1972, President Allende insisted "It is imperative to put a stop to the unreasonable demands for wage increases . . . We must rise above the criteria of the past . . . It is indispensable to link wage increases to production and productivity . . . We cannot have new demands after a settlement is reached. . . ."⁷

SIMILAR CALLS FOR "DISCIPLINE" AND "restraint" marked public declarations of other UP government leaders and CUT officials. But inside the unions, sharp debates took place. Left-wing Socialists and *MAPUCistas*—UP party members—joined critics from the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) and the Christian Democratic Party in attacking the Communists and Allende Socialists for betraying the workers they were supposed to defend. In turn, the two dominant parties agonized over which course of action to take: attacking the Left groupings and the Christian Democrats as "wreckers," or disarming them by taking the lead in making new economic demands. "I wish I were still a union negotiator in the private sector," said one Communist textile union official in the *Area Social*. "There the boss was the class enemy. Here the boss is a party comrade."⁸

Communist Party unionists were especially troubled by the conflicting demands of labor partisanship and government policies of restraint. The party's theoretical journal contained articles asserting, on one hand, that "a policy of senseless expropriations, of indifference to the lack of labor discipline and considerations of productivity, and of pushing opportunistic wage demands, is to give ammunition to the enemy," and on the other hand arguing that "Workers should not be prevented from trying to get wage increases from a state that appears to them as the successor of the old boss. . . . Without falling into opportunism, Communists should support the workers' wage demands."⁹

CUT leaders ended up trying to take both positions, never reconciling their dilemma. There was accord on generalities: unions should be "the orienting motor and conductor of the working class" and "the nerve of agitation on political problems."¹⁰ But on the ground, events like a joint Left-Right occupation of the Economy Ministry in October 1972 by *Miristas* and Christian Democrats demanding wage increases above what their Communist and Socialist union leaders were seeking starkly exposed the divisions in the labor movement.

The decades-old dependence of the trade unions on the Left political parties for defense of workers'

A generation that has known only dictatorship



Miguel Sayago

economic interests could not be quickly ended. Union leaders had always told their members to vote Communist and Socialist to defend and advance their standard of living through legislative means. Now that workers' parties were in government, union members understandably expected delivery on old promises of a better life. Many were disillusioned by the calls for sacrifice from CUT and UP leaders.

THE 1972 CUT NATIONAL ELECTIONS DEMONSTRATED the problems faced by established union leadership. From their 1968 total of 46% of the vote, the Communist slate fell to 31%. Allende Socialists gained ground, reflecting the president's popularity, from 22% in 1968 to 26% in 1972. But Christian Democrats nearly tripled their representation, going from 10% in 1968 to more than 26% in the 1972 balloting.

The rise in Christian Democratic strength in the labor movement increased opposition confidence that it could win two-thirds of the congressional seats needed to overturn the UP program in the 1973 mid-term parliamentary elections. But Chilean workers exhibited their class loyalties and support for a widened program of social services in poor working class and *campesino* communities. A massive registration and get-out-the-vote drive helped Allende's coalition win an astonishing 44% of the vote.

It was the first time a sitting government actually gained seats in mid-term congressional elections. Indeed, the 1973 contest was really a greater electoral triumph for the coalition than winning the presidency in 1970, considering the forces arrayed against the government and the fierce opposition campaign. But the UP advance in March 1973 also forced the hand of coup planners, since it blocked their "constitutional" road to reverse the UP program. In appearance, the constitutional road to socialism had won three more years. In fact, Allende and the Popular Unity had six months to live.

CHILEAN WORKERS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN pulled toward opposite poles. One is a national trade unionism in which working class conditions are a question requiring country-wide solutions. But at the same time, workers often identify with their employer and workplace as the locus of struggle.

Through most of this century, national, class-based unionism has prevailed. One reason is cultural: Chileans' self-image is strongly homogenous. The near-destruction of Indian culture left hegemony to the Spanish heritage. In addition, the waves of immigrants who rolled ashore on the east coast of the continent rarely crossed the Andes. Stretched between the mountains and the sea, Chile is like an island whose people see themselves as one.

At the same time Chileans are highly attuned to the notion of struggle between classes. The country's

economic history is key: development was based mainly on the exploitation of mineral resources—coal and nitrate in the last century; coal, copper and oil in this century. Mines are spread the entire length of Chile; to take a U.S. analogy it is as if the Appalachian coal range were one country, with its history of militant unionism and "us-versus-them" attitudes toward mineowners. In Chile, this brand of working class sentiment radiated outward over the decades through the railroads and ports that shipped mineral products, and into the factories where miners and their children found work after pits were exhausted. It even found its way into teaching, public employment and professions where the gifted children of working class families found careers.

Under these forces a "national," class struggle-oriented unionism has held sway in the Chilean labor movement throughout this century. But it has always had to contend with a rival tradition of paternalism on the part of many employers and corresponding worker subservience, and an identification with the individual workplace or firm as the place where workers' immediate problems of wages, hours and working conditions are resolved.

THE MILITARY COUP OF 1973 DESTROYED the structure of Chile's national, class-based unionism. Pinochet quickly dissolved the CUT and liquidated its assets on the grounds that it was a subversive Marxist-Leninist political body, not a labor organization. Hundreds of union leaders were jailed, killed or exiled in the months following the coup.

But the military left in place many workplace-level unions and local leaders, not seen as militants or UP party activists. In line with its proclaimed break with socialism and move to a liberalized economy, the military aimed to create a new, atomized movement based on enterprise-conscious "company" unionism. The new movement would be apolitical, confining activities to collective bargaining. It would also be a market unionism, where workers in each enterprise would tailor their demands and contract settlements to the profitability of the individual employer rather than seek industry-wide standards.

On September 18, 1973 the new military junta issued a proclamation calling for the firing of workers considered "activists," "saboteurs" or "criminals." Collective bargaining was banned and agreements still in effect were voided. The right to strike was abolished. Union meetings after working hours were forbidden.

For nearly six years after the coup, unions were prohibited from any form of political activity. A meeting's place, time and agenda had to be delivered in writing to the police two days in advance. Military governors could remove union officers deemed "unsuitable." Office vacancies had to be filled by the next senior member, not by election."

DESPITE SUCH RESTRICTIONS, LABOR ACTIVISTS fought their way back toward their traditional national-level unionism—not, however, without new tensions and divisions. Only months after the coup, labor cadres from the UP parties began meeting as a “clandestine CUT” in a Catholic Church-sponsored education program. At the same time longshore union head Eduardo Rios led labor leaders who had opposed the Allende coalition in dealing with the military authorities and supporting Pinochet’s economic policies. These unionists, mostly Christian Democrats, expected a rapid return to normalcy under their party’s rule once “the Left” was wiped out. When it became clear Pinochet was not going to hand over power to the Christian Democrats, however, this “Group of Ten” union federation leaders joined the opposition to the junta.

“The Ten” became the public face of Chilean organized labor in the years immediately after the coup. But behind the scenes, former CUT and UP activists were coordinating new organizing moves. Progressives among The Ten began working with them, leading to their expulsion on charges of collaborating with Communists. In 1976 a new union grouping took shape: the National Union Coordinating Body (CNS) expressed the work of former CUT activists and the expelled leaders of the Group of Ten.

By the end of 1976 two distinct union bodies with divergent political perspectives were operating, often competitively. The Group of Ten, led by formerly anti-UP Christian Democrats, was based in the maritime unions, public employee unions and agricultural workers’ organizations. Influenced and financed by the United States’ AFL-CIO, the Group of Ten rejected any cooperation with Marxist unionists from the CUT or the UP parties. While it maintained a “national” line opposing government efforts to promote enterprise unionism, the Group of Ten rejected class struggle and a strategy of mass mobilization, calling instead for an orderly return to democracy in which a relatively apolitical labor movement could conduct its trade union business without government or party influence.

ALTERNATIVELY, CNS LEADERS WERE left Christian Democrats and former CUT and Popular Unity activists who agreed on the need to work together. The CNS had a broader base in industry than the Group of Ten, especially in blue-collar private employment including textile, metal and construction workers and miners from small and medium-sized copper and coal mines. It also had a strong, though minority, base among *campesino* organizations.

The CNS did not include copper miners in *La Gran Minería*, the half-dozen giant copper mines that accounted for most of the country’s output of that key mineral. Those workers belonged to the independent Copper Workers Federation (CTC), where the Pinochet

dictatorship had installed pro-government leaders in months following the coup. The main copper mines are far from other sectors of industry and trade unionism. The government-chosen leadership promoted an isolationist line, arguing that copper workers were better paid than others and should not mix with the rest of the labor movement.

The attempt to co-opt the copper workers and their union failed. Rank and file activists who opposed the government out-organized their puppet leadership and began winning elections to successively higher union posts. In November 1977 workers pulled off a nearly total strike in the giant El Teniente mine. Seventy workers were fired and four union leaders were sent into exile, but the strike galvanized the rest of the labor movement.

The Group of Ten and the CNS held a joint May 1 rally in 1978 calling for increased union freedoms and economic justice. Strikes broke out in other industries. Though most did not win immediate gains, they reflected increasing impatience and boldness by rank and file.

IN MID-1978 COPPER MINERS AT THE CHUQUICAMATA pit launched a new tactic. Barred from striking by government decree, they initiated “eat-ins.” These lunch-time protests called for wage increases—and delayed a return to work after lunch. Alarmed by growing labor militancy, the dictatorship struck back in October. Seven key federations of the CNS and a number of local public sector unions were dissolved by decrees and new union organizing in state enterprises was barred. Police seized dozens of leaders in all sectors—CNS and Group of Ten officials and heads of unions in independent groupings like the FUT, a small federation linked to the Latin American Christian Democratic labor organization, CLAT, and the CEPCH, Chile’s major union of white-collar employees in private employment.¹²

The unions responded with an urgent, united call for international support. The AFL-CIO and European union federations threatened to boycott Chilean commerce. Faced with such action, the government relented, releasing most detainees and revoking most of the October decrees. Instead, the junta decided to formulate a new labor policy that would, in its view, create “the bases of a democratic labor union movement.”¹³

THE PINOCHET DICTATORSHIP TOUTED ITS 1979 *Plan Laboral* as a modernization of labor relations that would win wide union support. But the plan’s policing of internal union affairs, prohibitions on collective bargaining above the single-plant level, sixty-day strike limit and ban on strikes in government-selected strategic enterprises united all unions against the new labor regime. The Group of Ten, the CNS, the

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FUT, CEPCH—even breakaway elements of the government-sponsored union body—formed a new Command for Defense of Trade Union Rights to fight the Labor Plan.

Union opposition notwithstanding, the Pinochet government imposed the Labor Plan with minimal changes. Four years of what was in effect labor “guerrilla warfare” ensued, with selective work stoppages, protest rallies and new organizing efforts. Continued progress by anti-government forces in the copper mines led to an April 1983 one-day national strike against government labor policies. The call by Chile’s labor “shock troops” seized the country’s imagination. Instead of just a show of strength by workers, plans were laid for successive “days of national protest” involving all sections of the political opposition.

To coordinate the new, widened actions, the unions in the Command for Defense created a new National Workers Command (CNT) that included, at the outset, the Copper Workers, the CNS, the Group of Ten (now called the Democratic Workers Union, UDT), FUT, CEPCH and several independent unions. For a brief time the National Command was as broad a labor grouping as the CUT had been in earlier times. But old tensions soon resurfaced. Within a year of the CNT’s creation, the UDT left it to form its own Democratic Workers Confederation (CDT). It was not a clean break, however: the important oil workers union and key independent unions in the banking sector and the shoe and leather industry quit the CDT to remain with the CNT, now seen as the principal advocate of labor unity and continued social mobilization against the dictatorship.

By now a young Christian Democrat named Rodolfo Seguel had rocketed to the top leadership post of the Copper Workers Union and the CNT. Seguel led massive strikes and protests throughout 1984, 1985 and 1986. When the more experienced and at first more recognized Manuel Bustos returned from another period of exile in 1984, he conceded that “Today Seguel is in charge and I’m part of his team. He stood up when it was needed, and that gives him the authority to lead the labor movement.”¹⁴

FOR A TIME DURING THE 1983-1985 PROtests the future of the Pinochet government was called into question. But hopes for a rapid evolution to democracy evaporated by the end of 1986. A sharp sense of discouragement took hold among rank and file workers and the population at large, exhausted by what seemed a permanent state of mobilization with nothing to show for it. Pinochet appeared unwilling to budge. The discovery of a large guerrilla arms cache in a remote northern site in August 1986 frightened the moderate opposition and strengthened Pinochet’s “It’s me or chaos” card. Then, a failed assassination attempt in September brought a new sense of despair: first by the

botched results, second by the widespread belief that greater repression than 1973 would have followed the death of Pinochet, sure to be replaced by another general. Perhaps worst of all, many Chileans felt that the opposition was unprepared to govern a restored democracy.

Immediate prospects for the Chilean opposition, including the labor movement, are not promising. Three years of social mobilization shook the regime but failed to break it. The October 7, 1987 national strike was a limited success, effective mainly in Santiago. The government said bombings on the eve of the strike had kept people from reporting for work. CNT leaders countered that the explosions could have been designed to discredit the strike and divert attention from its demands.

IF THERE IS HOPE FOR A REUNIFIED LABOR movement in Chile, it rests on what is now a consensus in the CNT that trade unionists should not be too dependent on political parties, too controlled by party labor commissions or too unwilling to work with the entire political spectrum within the labor movement. Two years after the coup d’etat, CUT president Luis Figueroa, at a meeting of union leaders in exile in London, conceded that “We made a mistake getting too close to the government . . . The Christian Democrats supported the coup because we didn’t know how to work with them in the unions . . . We cannot avoid responsibility. We didn’t know how to maintain our independence . . . Loyalty to your party is one thing, an instrument of class unity is something else.”¹⁵

The CNT is planning a founding convention of a new labor central in late 1988. Most analysts agree it will consist largely of current CNT unions without the participation of the CDT. Current plans are to call the new body the Unified Workers Central (CUT), evoking the historic significance of the “CUT” and implying a labor movement still based on principles of class struggle. “The name is not important,” says Manuel Bustos. “It’s the principles and program that count.”¹⁶

Unfortunately the CDT rejects the principles and program implied in recreating the CUT. The two groups might collaborate on events like May 1 protests and calls for a return to democracy or respect for labor rights. But these unifying themes are countered by continuing divisions. Should the Christian Democrats cooperate with Marxists? What is the proper mix of bread and butter union demands and wider political demands? Can the CDT port workers’ interest in expanded imports, which means jobs for themselves, be reconciled with CNT industrial workers’ calls for protection of the internal market to save their members’ jobs? Until Chilean trade unionists again put common interests ahead of such differences, the labor movement will be unable to lead the Chilean resistance in a return to democracy. ■

Report on the Americas

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have infected both sides of the aisle. Liberal and conservative members of Congress alike are proud of the last two years of dictator-toppling. First Marcos; then Baby Doc; now Gen. Noriega's days are numbered. But the bipartisan attack on Panama in the last few months has brought the art of rhetoric, destabilization and meddling to new heights, as even progressive and liberal political leaders join the chorus. Sen. John Kerry's groundbreaking hearings on drug running rightfully traced the traffic through Panama, only to be transformed into a pep rally for Noriega's ouster.

That Panama, especially, should stick in Washington's craw is perhaps understandable. It was, after all, the Panama of Omar Torrijos which successfully forged a solid regional consensus behind Panamanian dominion over the canal. It is that consensus—growing Latin American unity expressed in multilateral diplomatic initiatives such as the Cartagena debtors, Contadora and Esquipulas—that threatens U.S. dominance more than any drug-dealing dictator or progres-

sive polity. The Esquipulas peace process—Central Americans solving Central American problems—fundamentally challenges the Monroe Doctrine at a time when even longtime friends such as Gen. Pinochet are accusing Washington of imperialistic meddling. It seems the terms of Congress' bipartisan consensus are an acceptance of intervention. The debate turns on whether Washington is using its considerable leverage for good or evil, not on whether it should unilaterally seek to determine the course of events in other nations.

Martin Andersen, who recently joined the National Democratic Institute, says that "As in the watershed year 1973, Chile's prospects for democracy are, once again, in many respects ours to lose."⁷ Does that imply a replay of 1973? "Chileans have got to solve it themselves," concluded one longtime observer. "Even though we mucked it up in 1973, that doesn't mean we should go down and muck it up again, even if some Chilean leaders are coming up here and asking for help." ■

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