

# That other 9-11: The coup that ended Chile's Popular Unity government

Monday 11 September 2023, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 10 September 2023).

**This year, on September 11, we mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup in Chile. The violent military overthrow of the Popular Unity government put an end to a turbulent experiment in the parliamentary road to socialism initiated with the presidential election of Salvador Allende just three years earlier. The coup government headed by General Augusto Pinochet launched massive and deadly repression and inaugurated the capitalist world's first major wave of neoliberal economic "reforms," many of which remain in force today.**



It seems appropriate to look back at the Chilean experience - the first breakthrough for the Left in Latin America after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 - and to think about the lessons to be learned for today's Left and progressive movements. Allende's electoral base, the Unidad Popular (UP), or Popular Unity, was a coalition of his Socialist party with the Communist party and several much smaller parties around a [programmatic agreement](#) that promised "revolutionary changes" to "liberate Chile from imperialism, exploitation and poverty." And it pledged to do this in full respect for and compliance with the country's parliamentary, legal and other institutions.

For an initial balance sheet, I recommend an [important article by Ralph Miliband](#) first published in the 1973 edition of *Socialist Register*. Miliband was a prominent sociologist and author of numerous books on socialism and politics, including *Parliamentary Socialism* and *The State in Capitalist Society*. His essay, too lengthy to be reproduced here, merits reading in its entirety. But here is a brief excerpt, from its concluding section, on "the question of the state and the exercise of power."

It was noted earlier that a major change in the state's personnel is an urgent and essential task for a government bent on really serious change; and that this needs to be allied to a variety of institutional reforms and innovations, designed to push forward the process of the state's democratization. But in this latter respect, much more needs to be done, not only to realize a set of long-term socialist objectives concerning the socialist exercise of power, but as a means either of avoiding armed confrontation, or of meeting it on the most advantageous and least costly terms if it turns out to be inevitable.

What this means is not simply 'mobilizing the masses' or 'arming the workers'. These are slogans - important slogans - which need to be given effective institutional content. In

other words, a new regime bent on fundamental changes in the economic, social and political structures must from the start begin to build and encourage the building of a network of organs of power, parallel to and complementing the state power, and constituting a solid infrastructure for the timely 'mobilization of the masses' and the effective direction of its actions. The forms which this assumes - workers' committees at their place of work, civic committees in districts and sub-districts, etc. - and the manner in which these organs 'mesh' with the state may not be susceptible to blueprinting. But the need is there, and it is imperative that it should be met, in whatever forms are most appropriate.

This is not, to all appearances, how the Allende regime moved. Some of the things that needed doing were done; but such 'mobilization' as occurred, and such preparations as were made, very late in the day, for a possible confrontation, lacked direction, coherence, in many cases even encouragement. Had the regime really encouraged the creation of a parallel infra-structure, it might have lived; and, incidentally, it might have had less trouble with its opponents and critics on the left, for instance in the MIR, since its members might not then have found the need so great to engage in actions of their own, which greatly embarrassed the government: they might have been more ready to cooperate with a government in whose revolutionary will they could have had greater confidence. In part at least, 'ultra-leftism' is the product of 'citra-leftism'.

Salvador Allende was a noble figure and he died a heroic death. But hard though it is to say it, that is not the point. What matters, in the end, is not how he died, but whether he could have survived by pursuing different policies; and it is wrong to claim that there was no alternative to the policies that were pursued. In this as in many other realms, and here more than in most, facts only become compelling as one allows them to be so. Allende was not a revolutionary who was also a parliamentary politician. He was a parliamentary politician who, remarkably enough, had genuine revolutionary tendencies. But these tendencies could not overcome a political style which was not suitable to the purposes he wanted to achieve.

Miliband focused his analysis on the trials and tribulations encountered by the UP government as it sought to pursue, and then retreat from, its reform program in the face of strenuous and mounting opposition by Chile's capitalists backed by Washington. Writing from afar, he was unable to assess the reactions among the popular forces that constituted the government's social base. That, however, is the subject matter of a remarkable study of "constituent popular power and the politics of conflict" in Chile from 1970 to 1973 that - in the words of its author Franck Gaudichaud - are "keys to understanding a thousand days that shook the world." [1] Gaudichaud's text, adapted from his doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Michael Löwy, is a detailed analysis of the forms of "popular power(s)" created in their struggles by the workers, peasants and "pobladores" of the shanty-towns during the UP regime.

This research shows that at the heart of this period of social confrontations and political upheavals, various attempts at what we have proposed to call popular constituent power arose. A notion defined as 'the creation of social and political experiments of organized counter-power and counter-hegemonies' leading to 'new forms of popular collective appropriations' and 'a calling into question - total or relative - of relations of production, forms of work organization, social and spatial hierarchies and material or symbolic mechanisms of domination'. It is precisely in the specific (and historically determined) configuration taken by these forms of popular power that the true originality of the

Chilean process, its transformative capacity and its historical force are located. This, beyond the unprecedented nature of Allende's project of transition to socialism or a supposed intangible stability of the democratic institutions of the 'compromise State'. And it seems to us that there is here a path worth taking, to explore, in the study of other great political crises or Latin American revolutionary processes.

If we examine the various facets of this collective turmoil which mobilized several tens of thousands of employees, *pobladores* and left-wing activists, we see the emergence of a 'grammar of protest' little known to Popular Unity. This *idée-force* is that of popular power, but in this turbulent sky, one star shone more brightly than others: that of the industrial *cordones*.<sup>[2]</sup> Certainly, 'the theme of the industrial *cordones* refers to one of the most important and successful experiences of Popular Unity, perhaps approaching one of the most realized utopias of Chilean socialism: that in which the workers built themselves as an historical actor with strong collective economic and political responsibility within the ongoing process. Appearing most of the time on the outskirts of the major cities, these are territorial bodies of class coordination, bringing together the unions of several companies in a specific urban area, with the immediate aim of realizing demands such as the extension of the nationalized sector, workers' control of production, the self-defense of factories, the increase in wages or even, in the medium term, the establishment of a new institutional architecture, based on municipal and provincial popular councils. The *cordones* thus draw a new topography of struggles in urban areas, alongside other actors in the social movement. They gradually anchor themselves in a city in struggle and territories appropriated by and for massively mobilized popular classes.

A militant in the Chilean process in the early 1970s was the Peruvian peasant leader and ecosocialist [Hugo Blanco, who died this year at the age of 89](#). Released from prison in 1970 by Peru's revolutionary military junta, Blanco made his way to Chile. He authored many articles on the grassroots mobilizations and political conflicts under the UP government. Some were translated and published in English in *Intercontinental Press*, a socialist newsweekly published in New York City.<sup>[3]</sup> They provide insightful analyses into the class dynamics of the events, and can be accessed on line. Here is a representative sample:

Chilean Workers Organize Distribution, April 23, 1973

[https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental\\_Press/1973/IP1115.pdf#page=16&view=FitV.35](https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental_Press/1973/IP1115.pdf#page=16&view=FitV.35)

Right Wing in Popular Unity Consolidates, April 30, 1973

[https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental\\_Press/1973/IP1116.pdf#page=12&view=FitV.35](https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental_Press/1973/IP1116.pdf#page=12&view=FitV.35)

Fascist Threat Mounting in Chile, May 7, 1973

[https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental\\_Press/1973/IP1117.pdf#page=8&view=FitV.35](https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental_Press/1973/IP1117.pdf#page=8&view=FitV.35)

The Sharpening Struggle in Chile, May 28, 1973

[https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental\\_Press/1973/IP1120.pdf#page=12&view=FitV.35](https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental_Press/1973/IP1120.pdf#page=12&view=FitV.35)

Fascist Provocations, Labor Unrest in Chile, June 4, 1973

[https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental\\_Press/1973/IP1121.pdf#page=11&view=FitV.35](https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental_Press/1973/IP1121.pdf#page=11&view=FitV.35)

Chilean Workers Organize to Meet the Rightist Threat, June 11, 1973

[https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental\\_Press/1973/IP1122.pdf#page=18&view=FitV.35](https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental_Press/1973/IP1122.pdf#page=18&view=FitV.35)

The Workers' Cordones Challenge the Reformists, June 18, 1973

[https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental\\_Press/1973/IP1123.pdf#page=12&view=FitV,35](https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental_Press/1973/IP1123.pdf#page=12&view=FitV,35)

The Role of the Cordones Industriales, November 26, 1973

[https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental\\_Press/1973/IP1142.pdf#page=19&view=FitV,35](https://www.themilitant.com/Intercontinental_Press/1973/IP1142.pdf#page=19&view=FitV,35)

**Also worth reading:**

[Allende's dream, Pinochet's coup and Chile's present](#) By Carmen Aguirre.

People in Chile never stopped resisting the dictatorship that began 50 years ago, or seeking to revive the social reforms of the 1970s. A childhood in exile has made it impossible for me to forget that.

This article, published in the *Toronto Globe & Mail* September 8, is remarkable not least because it is almost unique, amongst the coverage of Chile's coup in the business media, to remind us of the complicity of Pierre Trudeau's government in related events before, during and after the Pinochet coup.

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[1] Franck Gaudichaud, [Chile 1970-1973, Mille jours qui ébranlèrent le monde](#) (Presses universitaires de Rennes 2013, free on-line since 2017). In French only, at present.

[2] The Spanish word *cordones* could be roughly translated in English as "lanyards," that is, interlaced bodies of workers in different workplaces or geographic units.

[3] As a staff writer for *Intercontinental Press* in the early 1970s, I met Hugo Blanco for the first time in 1974, in Italy, at the Tenth World Congress of the Fourth International.

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• Life on the Left. Sunday, September 10, 2023:

<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2023/09/that-other-9-11-coup-that-ended-chiles.html>