CHILEAN VOICES
Activists Describe their Experiences of the Popular Unity Period

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INTRODUCTION

Chile and the Popular Unity

Few foreigners knew much about Chile when, in September 1970, a Marxist president was elected. Yet the next three years were to make it a stage on which the world watched the re-enactment of almost all the classic problems of achieving socialism. In the last, bloody act, the name of Chile would be scored, like Spain’s, across the minds of a generation.

The Popular Unity coalition supporting Salvador Allende with his programme for initiating a ‘peaceful way toward socialism’, won 36 per cent of the votes, against 34 per cent for the candidate of the right-wing National Party. Much propaganda was to be made of this lack of an overall majority. However, the Christian Democrats, who were previously in power under Eduardo Frei (1964-70) and won 28 per cent of the vote, had a programme almost as radical as the PU’s, in the short term.

Following Allende’s victory, capital was rushed out of the country. Congress, which was dominated by the opposition parties, still had to confirm the election result. It did so only after Allende had undertaken to respect the integrity of the Church, the judiciary and the armed forces. Soon afterwards, the army’s commander-in-chief, General Schneider, was assassinated. This turned out to have been an attempt by a small neo-fascist party, Fatherland and Freedom, to provoke military intervention. (It later emerged that the CIA was also involved.) The left, meanwhile, debated what all this meant for the future. It was in this climate that Allende took power on 3 November 1970.

The PU was a broad left coalition. Its largest components were the Communist and Socialist parties, which had combined in previous elections. The former, dating from the twenties, was traditionally committed to an electoral strategy. With its roots in the nitrate mines of the north, it was strongest among industrial workers. The Socialist Party was founded in 1933, by Allende among others. Though mostly Marxist, its followers ranged from Social Democrats to Trotskyists.