Part I - The industrial sector

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Background

Industrial workers in the mines and factories were the PU’s key supporters, numerically and politically. Their particular history underlay the PUs formation and much of its political thinking. Their struggle began in the nitrate mines of northern Chile towards the end of the nineteenth century, when protests against starvation wages and working conditions produced the first working-class organizations. Most of these mines were foreign owned. This meant that for the working class the enemy was imperialism and its contradictions with national interests – a persistent distinction, central to PU strategy.

Out of these early organizations grew the first labour confederation and the Communist Party in the twenties, then in the thirties the Socialist Party. As described by Gregorio (ch. 1), the atmosphere of the mining towns was one of systematic repression, a fertile ground for the emergent left-wing parties. Also constant fluctuations in the world demand for nitrate led to mass redundancies. These scattered the miners and spread their awareness throughout the length and breadth of Chile.

It was this labour movement’s resurgence, after a period of repression, which forged the parties of the left into the Popular Front of the thirties. While dominated by the centrist Radical Party, this led to considerable state support for Chilean industrialization. Organizations like CORFO, the National Development Corporation, and interventionist legislation resulting from this period provided much of the legal basis for the PU’s programme.

By the forties and fifties, this state support was going increasingly to the private rather than the public sector. Meanwhile foreign capital was concentrated in copper production. In the sixties, however, it dominated industrial growth. This entailed monopolistic, capital intensive enterprises which neither produced cheap popular goods nor increased industrial employment. Even in this ‘modern’ sector labour conditions remained repressive, as a means of attracting capital, as described by Roberto in chapter 2. In these circumstances the reformist image of the Christian Democrat Government waned. Protest increased from the labour movement, headed by the Communist-led CUT, the Central Workers Confederation. Attempts by the Christian Democrats to obstruct the trades-unions’ growing power had little success. If anything they helped to motivate the labour movement’s major part in reunifying the parties of the left in the PU coalition.

The PU’s main proposal was to nationalize all basic resources and industrial monopolies, both foreign and nationally owned. Also legislation from the 1930s allowed for government take-overs (‘interventions’) in cases of mismanagement or insoluble labour disputes. This process, described by Gregorio who served as a government intervenor, led to further nationalization. The PU also committed itself to workers’ participation in industry. As these three chapters will show, this was interpreted differently by the various PU parties. For Communist activists like Gregorio, it meant that workers should be consulted over the maintenance of production. For others, like Roberto, as a member of MAPU, and many Socialists such as Pablo (ch. 3), it meant workers actually deciding how the means of production should be utilized. There were, of course, variations within these two widely differing positions, and even within single parties, according to local circumstances.

These differences sprang from events as well as from predetermined positions. The PU’s first year brought unprecedented industrial growth. Wage increases and price controls increased buying power and hence demand: unemployment fell and popular living standards rose. For political and economic reasons this success was short-lived. Declining private investment was followed by production boycotts, lock-outs and even sabotage. The economy took a rapid downturn. The question of how to deal with this crisis divided the left, particularly after it carne to a head in the ‘bosses’ strike’ of October 1972, when private industry supported the stoppage by lorry-owners.

The PU leadership stressed the importance of maintaining production and played down the mounting class confrontation, which it considered
premature. This position was criticized by the MAPU, many Socialists and the MIR. Instead they demanded official support for workers’ factory occupations with a view to government intervention, and also for the industrial cordons. These associations of workers in neighbouring factories arose mainly in response to the boycott and especially to the bosses’ strike. Beginning in Santiago, Valparaiso and Concepción, they spread to other major cities and became increasingly organized. The PU leadership recognized these organizations, but felt that devolving power to them would antagonize the right much more than it would strengthen the left. At stake was its basic strategy of not alienating the middle sectors. Also at issue was the extent to which the cordons acknowledged or were felt to supersede the CUT’s (and hence also the Communist Party’s) traditional control of the labour movement. Especially in areas where cordons expanded into communal commands incorporating campesinos, students and nonindustrial workers, this meant a widening gap between the PU’s leadership and its base. The extent of this gap was a matter of opinion; particularly party opinion, as is evident in Gregorio’s views as compared to those of Roberto and Pablo.

Gregorio, with his deep experience of the labour movement’s history, defends the PU’s position as fundamentally realistic. Roberto argues quite differently from the viewpoint of his work as a full-time unionist in Valparaiso and Santiago: workers were ready for the advances which the situation demanded. This is also Pablo’s position, in the context of a single industrial cordon, and its development into the communal command of Maipú-Cerrillos in Santiago.

Each speaker bases his case on concrete local variations: the advanced and concentrated awareness of Santiago’s working class, as against the relative isolation of workers in smaller plants like Gregorio’s. Ultimately, though, the debate is clearly on a strategic level. Whether experience has brought it closer to agreement can perhaps be surmised from the conclusions which each of these speakers draws for the future.

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The Chilean way to socialism: from company town to a nationalized copper industry

Speaker: GREGORIO, 47, member of the Communist Party and mining technician employed by ENAMI (The National Mining Enterprise) as ‘intervenor’, or interim manager, of several small copper plants subject to Government intervention

Growing up in the mining regions: the roots of the Chilean labour movement

I never knew my mother and father. They died soon after I was born. My father worked on the railways and was killed in a railway accident when he was only twenty-four. My mother followed him a year later. I was brought up by my grandparents. My grandfather worked in a copper mine in Potrerillos, in northern Chile. A few years later we moved further north to the nitrate zone, to Maria Elena, a mining town near Antofagasta. This was in the thirties, times were hard. My grandfather worked in the nitrate mine and I helped out to make ends meet. I ran errands and polished shoes, doing what I could for a few escudos. Maria Elena was a company town, the nitrate mine was German-Chilean and most of the managers were foreign. I’d make a bit extra by ball-boying on tennis courts in the management compound. Sometimes I gardened for them too. My grandparents were careful to send me to school at an early age, but even so I carried on working.

My grandfather belonged to the Communist Party. From as early as I can remember he’d explain to me what this meant, and the workers’ hopes for a better future. In those days in the nitrate zone all left-wing politics were clandestine. The bosses forbade political meetings and visits by the workers’ leaders who travelled round organizing the struggle for better wages and working conditions and for freedom of expression.

Most nitrate workers were aware of these things, though. It was they who’d launched this struggle. One of my earliest memories is of my grandfather bringing home strangers at night. Or I’d wake up to find them