Part I - The industrial sector

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

Gregorio
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
sleeping there – clandestine labour organizers. Often their visits coincided with a strike in the mine, and my grandfather would explain it to me – why they were striking and why their leaders had to come secretly, at night. Seeing how they were hounded taught me what workers were up against in their struggle for justice. I never forgot this, in spite of my later going on to get a technical education and with it certain privileges.

All of us kids in the nitrate zone learnt such things one way or another. Most parents made a point of taking us to political meetings. Their being forbidden only added to the excitement. They were out in the desert after dark. Though the days in the north are burning hot, the night is usually bitterly cold. We’d be wrapped up in our ponchos, people would bring food to share. They wasted no time – the meetings began as soon as everyone was there as there was always a fair chance that the police would break them up. Sometimes the bosses knew, and ignored them, but when someone well known was due to speak they’d usually send the police along. Often there’d be a ding-dong battle. Quite a few times I had to leg it along the gullies, tripping over and getting home all out of breath. I didn’t think much of it at the time.

The nitrate mines are open cast and working conditions in them were terrible – the heat and the dust. Although the workers were starting to talk of an eight-hour day, this was only a hope for the future. The shift was still from dawn to dusk. The company fixed the hours and the workers had no choice. Wages were hardly enough to live on and partly paid in tallies which could be spent only at the company store, the pulperia. The company controlled everything, housing, water, electricity. The lights came on at eight o’clock, and at eleven they turned them off – after that we weren’t even allowed to keep a lamp burning in the workers’ compound without permission. The water came on for a few hours daily, you had to queue up at the tap for it and keep it in tins. The store was like a fortress. You couldn’t go in without the company’s identity card, and both the doors were guarded by dogs, big German boxers. The officials would watch your every move. They were mostly young Englishmen and Germans. You handed over your tally and they’d give you your ration – a kilo of sugar, flour, two kilos of potatoes. Then as you went out through the turnstile they’d check through everything you had. If they held you up, the dogs would try and get at you.

There were different schools and housing areas. One school for the managers’ kids, where they taught mostly in English and German – even the teachers were foreign. Then there was another for the technicians’ children, and a state school for the mob, like myself. In ours we had only the vaguest idea of what went on in the other two, of the games they played, for example. The workers’ houses belonged to the company, and the rent was deducted from wages. They all had two rooms and corrugated iron roofs, like ovens in the day and freezers at night. The technicians lived in a separate compound in proper brick houses with tiled roofs. Finally there was the management compound, where the foreigners lived in big bungalows with gardens and lawns, all carefully fenced.

Workers couldn’t organize openly. Where the union existed, it was only in name. The most effective organizers were those who’d worked outside the community, gaining experience which they passed on. Political pamphlets and papers were forbidden, they had to be smuggled in. This was my first political task – I and other kids would bring them in under our jackets a few at a time and distribute them. At our age we weren’t suspected. In these ways workers gradually became more aware of their conditions, and strikes and protests began to increase. The company’s policy was to sack anyone involved and turn them out of their rented houses; if the police wouldn’t do this for them, they’d use their own security forces. Confrontations began to increase. On several occasions workers were killed, both in Maria Elena and in the neighbouring nitrate town of Pedro de Valdivia.

Although my grandfather explained everything to me, he never directly tried to persuade me to join the youth section of the Communist Party. When I said I wanted to join, he said: ‘Fine, but make sure it’s your own decision’. This meant it was a firm one. After joining I learnt a lot more from the local youth-section organizer. His way of opening our eyes was to have us read both party papers and those of the official press and judge for ourselves where the real truth lay. With the world we lived in, that wasn’t hard.
By thirteen I’d finished primary school. As I’d done well, I got a job as an office boy with the nitrate company in Pedro de Valdivia. As luck would have it my boss there was different from the others. He encouraged me to get a technical training. Eventually I managed to go to the technical school in Antofagasta, where I studied engineering.

This was the time of the Ley Maldita, the ‘infamous law’ of the late 1940s, which banned the Communist Party. Left-wing workers were rounded up in the mining areas and shipped off to labour camps. When they left on the train, their relatives gathered at the station, and they’d go off singing to keep up their spirits. The favourite song was the tango Adios Pampa Mia. Somehow my grandfather wasn’t detained, but one of my uncles was shipped out. Like many others, he escaped and went underground in Antofagasta, with the protection of the Party. As I was studying there, I was in contact with him and with the labour movement. ~he Party was especially strong among the dockers in Antofagasta – my uncle got work there in the docks, but like my father he was killed in a working accident.

Quite a few of us students at the technical college were in the Party. Of course, we had to keep this quiet, but we organized ourselves round the questions of better grants for technical students and the founding of a technical university. We were all very badly off – wealthy families looked down on technical training. I paid my way through with vacation work in Pedro de Valdivia. Later I also had a small scholarship from the nitrate workers’ union. I wrote to them once to tell them how my studies were going, and the letter was read out at a meeting. My grandfather told me how pleased they all were. This sort of thing was the beginning of growing contacts between workers, students and professionals which were later to be crucial. My fellow students were of similar background, hence our firmness on the question of grants and the technical university. Although the police broke up most of our meetings, we stuck to these issues. Eventually our pressures led to the founding of the Technical University in Santiago – and to its being a left-wing stronghold.

After my studies in Antofagasta I applied to the military academy, but with little chance of getting in. To do so you virtually had to have been to university and have the right political connections. This is why the Chilean officer corps is so very upper-class to this day, and largely from Anglo or German-Chilean families. Soon after this, though, the Technical University was founded in Santiago, and I enrolled there. But ironically I and many others couldn’t afford to complete our studies. After a year I had to give up and return to the North.

For fifteen years I worked my way up in the nitrate industry as a technician. This set me apart from the workers in terms of salary and living conditions, but as a member of the Party I did my best to support the workers whenever a dispute occurred. Many other technicians with a similar background did the same, and we were in a strong position, because the firms couldn’t do without us. They’d often replace us with technicians from the south, but they didn’t know the machinery as we did. Also the workers would support us by striking over a technician’s dismissal, if it were for political reasons. This gave us the strength to back their claims for better conditions and wages etc.

This came to a head for me in the sixties, when the company for which I was working had a productivity drive. In some sections this meant mechanization and many workers lost their jobs. In others, mine included, the firm demanded increased output. We managed this, but when the workers demanded a corresponding rise, the management said they couldn’t afford it, so they struck. I backed them – I was doubly angry because I’d been used to increase the workers’ exploitation. I was no stooge. Well, this turned the heat on me. The boss dressed me down in front of the workers. so I said that unless their demands were met, I’d quit the job. They weren’t, so I did so. Afterwards the management begged me to stay. They offered me all sorts of incentives, a salary increase and a new house, but I’d had enough. I’d been caught for too long between my own past and the privileges I’d obtained. I decided to leave the nitrate zone and look for employment further south.

This was how I came to be working in the copper industry in the late sixties, in the central province of Aconcagua. Apart from the big copper companies there were also some smaller private ones coordinated by ENAMI, the National Mining Enterprise, which provides them with credits
and technical assistance. With my qualifications I managed to get a job with ENAMI, and went as technical supervisor to a copper plant in the town of Cabildo.

A measured victory: the electoral campaign in Aconcagua

It was here that I participated in the campaign of 1970. This reinforced my conviction that the PU’s programme for the ‘Chilean way to socialism’ was fundamentally realistic. The obstacles I encountered confirmed the need to work within existing legal institutions. Aconcagua’s economy is a mixture of mining and agriculture. Its small copper concerns, with anything from twenty to two hundred workers, are isolated from one another and generally far from the nearest large town. The workers tend to visit it about once a month, sometimes less often. This meant political isolation.

The plant in which I worked refined copper from many scattered mines. Some were nearby, with their workers living in Cabildo, but others were right up in the Andes, a hundred kilometres away: their workers came there only rarely. On the other hand those in Cabildo had good conditions compared to those in the nitrate zone. Housing was cheap and reasonable, and the plant was one of the most modern in Chile. I was there when it was inaugurated by Frei. They laid on a real ceremony. ENAMI was controlled from top to bottom by Christian Democrats, and they made the most of such occasions. More importantly, all this meant that most of the workers were Christian Democrat supporters – they had to be, to get a job there. This was also true of the countryside – the campesinos were also very isolated and seduced by the promise of land reforms. In short the opposition was strong, even at a popular level. Frei’s promises were wearing thin, but not everywhere. We had to tread carefully.

Besides, even those who were disillusioned had somehow to be assured that the PU wasn’t just making promises like the governments before it. So we concentrated our campaign on the programme’s most immediate aspects. I attended countless union meetings to put across our proposals for improved housing, work security, and better education, for instance. We distributed the PU’s literature, and listened to people’s questions and doubts. When these were raised we’d consult with the leadership and try to bring back concrete answers.

Certainly the PU parties increased their vote in the area, but only on a modest scale. There wasn’t that feeling that the tide was turning, which people seemed to have had elsewhere, especially in Santiago. When we learnt the national results, there was singing and dancing in the streets, but it was muted. We were well aware that although the PU had won, it was only on a minority vote, that the way ahead was far from easy. Such considerations weighed heavily on most of us in the Communist Party when we came to implementing the programme.

Implementing the PU Programme: participation and the maintenance of production

ENAMI had a number of roles. Its basic one was to help to maintain the level of production on which the PU’s success, to our way of thinking, largely depended. This also meant an increasing number of interventions in plants with financial or labour problems. Finally, like other state agencies, it had to realize the PU’s programme for workers’ participation in management.

I became deeply involved in these issues, because soon after the elections I was appointed as ‘intervenor’ to a copper plant in difficulties, and subsequently to another. The first case was straightforward. A smallish plant in Aconcagua had failed to meet its obligations to improve both wages and working conditions. The workers finally struck, called off their negotiations with the owners, and demanded government intervention. The Minister of Labour went into this and then agreed. I was appointed for my combination of technical know-how with sympathy for the PU’s objectives.

My first job was to go to the plant and hear both sides of the argument, from the owners and workers. After that I had to make an economic and social assessment, and finally provide some recommendations. As it turned out, both sides had a case. The plant was heavily in debt and outdated and there was a backlog of unpaid wages. Nothing could be done to save it, so in the end my task was simply to wind it up and find alternative jobs for the workers. With the PU’s success in
increasing growth and hence employment, this wasn’t hard. Within a few months it was all sorted out and everyone was satisfied – the Ministry of Labour, ENAMI, the workers and even the owners.

In the following year I was called on again as intervenor for a small copper plant. This was much more complicated, and lasted right up to the military coup. It involved all the PU’s major concerns: the need to avoid class confrontations, to keep production up to the mark and to involve the workers themselves in what the PU was doing.

The first difficulty lay in people’s different expectations of an official intervention. The owners were often glad of it, imagining that the intervenor would simply arrive with a fistful of money and make no fundamental changes. On the other hand, sections of the left were for immediate nationalization and virtual control by the workers themselves. In fact intervention was not a commitment to either of these two positions. The government was a popular one, but its targets for nationalization were the big monopolies only. The ultra-left’s insistence on pushing it much further and deeper caused economic and political problems. For one thing there had to be good reason for intervening in the first place, in order to be within the law and avoid alarming the middle classes – which also meant consultation with the owners and reasonable compensation. Also the government then had to maintain such industries: it wasn’t practical to expropriate left, right and centre, as certain sectors were demanding. Our main focus was on the strategic concerns, which the government needed to control. With these controversies, an intervenor was virtually walking a tightrope.

On relationships with the owners, my party’s position was quite clear. While our concern was for workers’ interests, we weren’t seeking confrontations. Whatever the outcome of intervention, it should be on a legal basis. This reflected the PU’s strategy of sticking strictly to legal methods. Without this, we’d have lost our main strength as a legally elected government, with support from all progressive sectors. This wasn’t a ‘non-working class’ position. It was often repeated by Figueroa, the president of the CUT, for instance, so I had to try and get on with the owners – though in the end it proved impossible – in order to keep the factory working. My main contact at first was with the shopfloor’s PU committee, and although this tended to divide, I always consulted very closely with workers who belonged to the Party. But at the same time, I had to keep the owners informed of my decisions and intentions.

There’d been problems in this plant for years. It was a good way from Cabildo itself and very much a family firm. The manager was the owner’s son, the local mayor was a relative, in short the family ran the area. The plant smelted copper from several small mines, the biggest of which belonged to the firm and was right nearby. About 130 people worked in the plant and mine together. Again the intervention arose from a strike provoked by the owners’ failure to implement an agreement on wages, working conditions and so on.

My impartiality upset the owners. As soon as they realized I wasn’t there at their convenience, and that I also consulted the workers, they turned nasty. The owner’s son, the manager, was constantly creating problems. For instance he’d tell me there was some snag which I’d then have to go and deal with, only to find that he’d invented it. The main trouble was that there was also a ‘yellow’ (boss’s) section of the union which he controlled, consisting of the technicians and a few of the manual workers. They were always making trouble with the others – the majority, whose strike had led to the intervention. One day this provoked a fight between them. I found it had been instigated by one of the yellow union workers and asked the manager to dismiss him. He refused, so I sent him an order in writing, but he still refused, so I demoted him. Then he threatened to resign, and the yellow union supported the charge that I’d victimized him – they were thirty men in all, less than a quarter of the total. Well, I let him go, and most of his supporters went with him. Some came back, but it caused problems. For one thing this family got the local press to denounce us. They also brought a lawsuit against me. More importantly, we were left almost without technicians.

This was serious, given the importance of maintaining production. Our only way out was for all of us to discuss it together. This meant in effect that we introduced workers’ participation before we otherwise would have done. The nature of this participation was much debated within the left, but in our case the reason for it was clear – as I said, it was the only
way to maintain production in the circumstances. I was responsible for implementing it, and this was the way I put it across: to keep the plant running, all of us had to participate in our different ways at every level in making the necessary decisions and taking responsibility for them. We followed the government’s blueprint for this. There was a General Administrative Council (Consejo General de Administración), consisting of myself as intervenor and two union representatives, one manual, the other a white-collar worker. There was also a Technical Administrative Council (Consejo Técnico de Administración) with a delegate from each section – one from maintenance, one from transport, one from processing, etc. Each delegate was elected by a secret ballot in union meetings. Finally there was the General Assembly (Asamblea) of all the workers in the plant. All my decisions were referred to it, on accounts, production schedules and so forth. There were also Production Committees (Comités de Producción) in each section, to ensure that they were keeping to schedule.

The workers’ response soon compensated for the loss of the technicians. Many of the more experienced men were capable of replacing them. But I still stressed that responsibility should depend on experience and qualifications. The workers’ views should be respected, but important decisions still had to be taken by those qualified to take them. While the workers should participate, this participation had its limits: they weren’t equipped to take managerial decisions. In our case this wasn’t much disputed, but I know that elsewhere the official scheme for participation was criticized by other left parties as technocratic. But how else could we maintain production, as the PU required of us? This was a technical problem and we treated it as such. And we succeeded in maintaining production. Governing was the government’s job. Ours was to support it as it required.

Besides, when workers were allowed to take all the decisions, this encouraged self-interestedness. They often demanded wage increases instead of further productive investments, and the Christian Democrats used this to divide the workers and cause stoppages. I remembered their strength in the first copper plant I worked in – this too was good reason for limiting participation to the PU’s formula for it. And it worked. There was little dissension, and the assembly dealt mainly with the workers’ immediate concerns: wages, housing, sanitary conditions in the plant, etc. As a result, we paid our way without any need for government subsidies. This was my main goal, and we achieved it.

Unequal odds: the approach of the coup

Of course when the boycott of the economy by the private sector began, it was hard to keep production up. The first lorry-owners’ strike in October 1972 didn’t affect us as much as elsewhere, as we had a reserve of raw materials. This was true of the zone as a whole. Food supplies weren’t a serious problem, with its being an agricultural area.

The only real one was transport. The union helped to solve this by using our trucks to market the campesinos products. The workers drove them on a voluntary basis. The far-right wasn’t well organized yet, so we met with little opposition.

In the following year’s tank revolt (tancazo) in June, the workers showed their determination by immediately reporting to the factory, ready to defend it at any cost. But it was over on the same day, and things were rapidly back to normal. At the time some of the workers did ask why the PU didn’t get tough with the military, instead of negotiating with them. I had to talk to them, to explain the government’s position, that it was trying to avoid a confrontation; that we should have faith in our leaders’ attempts to find a just and effective solution, and that they needed our support. The workers did feel in the end that this was where the answer lay. They never lost their confidence that if there was a way out of the crisis, the PU leaders would find it. They listened to Allende’s speech immediately after the tancazo and followed his request to go back to normal work and redouble their efforts for the PU.

We had no local industrial cordon, as there was little industry, so the union dealt with these issues. But in the tank coup, as in the first bosses’ strike, the workers combined with the campesinos. Together they set up road blocks and took other defensive measures. This showed their determination to defend the government, and was a warning to the right. As a result its second strike was much more organized and violent. The lorry-
owners now intervened against our trucks which were maintaining food distribution. Although they sometimes came off worse, they usually had the upper hand, as they were often armed and we weren’t. Some of the workers wanted to commandeer the owners’ trucks but we hadn’t the means to take them over, as they were all parked together and defended by the police.

They never gave up the struggle, though. By this time we were having problems with parts, as we couldn’t get them from Santiago, but the workers often found solutions. The older ones had been in the industry so long that they could improvise most parts. They also had relatives and friends who were old hands at this sort of thing. We discussed these problems in the assembly, and one of them would say: ‘I know just the man for the job, up north’. A few days later he’d be there, with the parts or some means of fixing them. In a way, they were our best times, with everyone pooling all their talents and determined not to be defeated. If anything, their confidence in the PU was higher than ever.

The fact was, though, that we were up against fascism. We had no means to defend ourselves against the right’s methods. Just before the coup, I had orders which must have originated with the military, to give full details on all the workers – which of them had done military service, where and when, and so on. Another order demanded full details of all the dynamite used in the mine, when we were due to get new supplies, where they were coming from etc. Eventually they were severely restricted. By the time of the coup we were down to eight sticks of dynamite.

On 11 September I was in Santiago – I’d gone there to consult with ENAMI over some administrative problems. Early in the morning I heard the planes passing over the city, and then the thuds as they bombed the Presidential Palace. I listened to the commentary on the truck radio and realized what was happening. When I tried to get into ENAMI it was already full of soldiers. They wouldn’t admit me. I tried to make contact with the Party, but that was also impossible, so I headed back to Cabildo.

When I got there, other party members were still waiting for instructions. We never received them, and later realized that the regional committee had been cut off. The plant was occupied by the military. There was nothing I could do. As my name had been broadcast as one of those required to report to the new authorities, I did so. They let me go free, but the next morning they came to arrest me. The former owner of the plant had charged me with being a subversive. I was gaolé, beaten about a bit and tried in a military court, but as there was no evidence against me, the case was finally dismissed. But of course I was sacked and blacklisted. I tried getting odd jobs here and there, but with a family to support I couldn’t manage, so I had to leave Chile.

Looking back, I feel that the PU did all it could to save the day. I still think that the odds were too heavily against us, that we weren’t ready to take them on if it came to a final confrontation. It wasn’t just a defeat, because a fifty-yearlong struggle can’t be wiped out by a military coup. Today the popular forces have even wider support than they did, from people who’ve learnt what fascism is. I know we’ll come back into our own and stronger than before. If there were mistakes it wasn’t these, but fascism, that overthrew the PU. What matters is the people’s awareness. And this is measured not by mistakes, but by their will and experiences.