Part I - The industrial sector

2. The Working Class and the Struggle for Power: from workers’ participation to the communal commands

Roberto
The Working Class and the Struggle for Power: from workers’ participation to the communal commands

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A factory worker’s experiences: the force behind the PU

I joined the union when I was fifteen – the Shoeworkers’ Federation. I was working in a factory in Santiago. Three years later I was branch secretary. Experience taught me early on that it was only by uniting that we could defend our interests as workers. For instance in our biggest strike, when we occupied the factory for weeks, it was other workers living round it who saw us through. They fought pitched battles with the police to get food and blankets to us. Workers have few resources. We have to pool them and pull together. Ever since recognizing this I’ve tried to base my actions on it. That’s why I’m in exile today on the instructions of my party.

I worked in this factory for eighteen years, and left when I was thirty-three, after one of our regular showdowns. The management bought new machinery, but not to raise output. Instead they made half the workers redundant, men with up to forty years of service. They’d never get another job, and the compensation was a pittance. I protested but to my disgust my fellow unionists wouldn’t support me. This was under Frei, when crises of this kind were common and resistance brought retaliation. Their argument was: we can only defend our working conditions – hiring and firing is the boss’s prerogative. I was so fed up that I almost came to blows with my colleagues. In the end I decided to leave the factory.

I set up shop as a cobbler in the shantytown where we were living, on the outskirts of Santiago. We had a house lot there and built our own home. The floor was bare earth and the roof was made of hardboard, but I was happy. I had no boss, and I was politically active in my neighbourhood association, which we set up to defend our own interests. But I couldn’t forget what had happened in the factory. I realized that although the union defended the workers’ immediate interests, it could never change relations between the exploiters and the exploited. The bosses had done as they pleased with the men – and once you’re out of work in Chile, there’s no unemployment benefit and ten applicants for every job. You take what they give you.

All this time I’d had no connection with any political party. Then I came into contact with some young people working in a literacy programme. They were using the methods of Paulo Freire, which include the raising of political awareness. One day I heard Freire speak, and we got into a debate – I felt he was overlooking things which were important to factory workers. Later we came to know one another, and this got me reading seriously. Marx, especially. It wasn’t easy, but what gripped me was how it explained my own experience. The reading was a real struggle though. Some nights I’d sleep only two or three hours, I’d read and read, and even so I might cover only twenty pages – I was determined to take it all in. I’d left school at twelve, you see, and although I’d learnt to read and write I was functionally illiterate. Like most Chileans I’d had nothing to read.

Meantime I enrolled in an adult education course, to complete my secondary school training. I finished this inside a year. From then on I spent all my free time organizing young people’s cultural centres in my own and other shantytowns. I kept stressing that young people’s problems could be understood and dealt with only in terms of their class situation. All our discussions came back to the point. In the end we set up a federation of four hundred cultural centres.

In 1969 the MAPU was formed. I and many other comrades from the cultural centres joined the party. Most of the others had been Christian Democrats. I was assigned to the party’s mass front, to develop educational programmes for unionists and factory workers.

From unionist to party activist: workers’ education courses

Through the party I was sent to Valparaiso to teach in an extension programme for workers run by the Catholic University. The course was vocational, but we gave it a political perspective. We included the history of
the labour movement. For instance we showed how the labour laws had developed to control the unions. We also discussed where different parties stood on these questions. This projected the PU’s programme right into the unions and factories, and aroused discussion of its proposals throughout the campaign of 1970. This was crucial. Chilean workers have a great respect for education, and now they really had the chance to focus it on their own situation.

With the PU in power, our discussions turned to the problems of implementing the programme. Our main concern was with the scope for workers’ own initiatives in pressing their proposals home, especially those for nationalization and for workers’ participation. We took our course right into the factories in the Valparaiso area. Many of these were subsequently taken over by the workers, and then transferred to public ownership. One typical case was a cement factory in a small town called -La Calera. It was almost the only local employment, which gave it an iron grip on its workers – if they were sacked, they’d have to leave home to look for a job. So they were completely cowed by their bosses – the wages and working conditions were terrible. But after we held a summer school there, in which all this company’s workers took part, its power crumbled. A union was formed, and this produced a confrontation and occupation of the factory. The government intervened and eventually nationalized it. It became a model of increasing workers’ participation and finally of workers’ control.

My own experience as a worker came in handy on these courses. I didn’t use texts to convey our message, but popular images. For better or worse, I’d even turn to the machismo common among Chilean workers. ‘Now, comrade’ – this would be in a group discussion ‘supposing your wife has another man, and you find out – what happens then?’ ‘What happens? We fix him’. ‘Right then, society includes exploiters and the exploited. You find this out – what happens then?’ ‘What happens? We fix the exploiters – no more bosses’. Later our discussions would move on to workers’ participation, its different forms, its real purpose. They’d give examples of what was happening in their own factories. We’d deal with everything in class terms, but always through the workers’ own imagery and in terms of their own experience.

Workers’ initiatives: expropriations and new forms of participation

For the next three years I continued working for the party’s mass front on union affairs in Santiago and Valparaiso. One of the most important aspects of the PU process, as we in the MAPU understood it, was workers’ participation. All sectors of the left acknowledged this, but they understood it in different ways. Some saw it only as a basic support for PU’s economic measures: but our view was that it should lead to workers’ control, as an antidote to the bureaucracy. In practice, though, it wasn’t we activists who made the decisions, it was the workers. Their new awareness and initiatives came from experience, not theories – particularly from the crisis produced by the factory-owners’ boycott, when they started cutting investments. This crisis became so acute that the workers had to find answers to it.

Their first answer was to occupy factories which were sabotaging production. This enabled them to maintain the factory and ask for government intervention. Of course it raised the most basic question – the ownership of the means of production – but as I say, this was in response to the day-to-day needs of the struggle in progress. In Santiago alone, over three hundred factories became subject to government intervention, and most of these were outside the PU’s original programme. This had provided for nationalizing only the biggest, monopolistic concerns, about 150 in all. But we saw this as a false distinction. We stressed that the prospect of socialism divides loyalties along class lines that the bourgeoisie as a whole would resist, which meant a need for popular power, working-class organizations within the shell of the bourgeois State. Only these could guarantee the PU’s advances. In taking this position, though, we were responding mainly to workers’ initiatives – steps they took because they were closest to the development of the conflict.

This shows that a revolutionary process is never something deriving from textbooks. New situations have to be dealt with and this produces new ways forward. For example, when food supplies were short, the working-class neighbourhoods set up JAPs, people’s supply control committees, which not only limited speculation – they also compelled many middle class people who couldn’t afford black-market prices to accept their basic
principle of equal shares at official prices. Sometimes they even helped to organize them, under working-class direction. In this way they were drawn into the workers’ battle – and on workers’ terms against the bourgeoisie’s manoeuvres, because only the workers could counteract them.

I could cite more examples of how these concrete developments made the workers their own vanguard, because they’re the ones who control production. It was they who gave meaning to the PU’s measures – the PU itself was too heterogeneous to respond to the changes which it set in motion. Officially, expropriation depended on a decision from above. But in practice we had to fight from below, not only for its implementation, but for its results to be effective as a product of class struggle.

We set about this in the following way. Taking a particular area, we’d find out which factories had been involved in the most disputes, which were best organized politically, and whether the owners were reducing or even sabotaging production. On this basis we’d select one for an agitational programme. Activists would distribute pamphlets and bulletins throughout the area, especially at factory gates. This made other workers aware of the issue. Meantime the party would strengthen contacts inside the factory, raising the possibility of the workers requesting intervention and eventually expropriation. These projects had to be carefully planned. Spontaneity meant the risk of serious setbacks. Party discipline at the base is crucial in these situations.

Often, though, these demands were spontaneous, in which case we mobilized support from workers in the neighbouring factories. But either way they were often at odds with PU policy. One such case was the Rayon-Said factory. With a labour force of about two thousand, and a near monopoly of rayon and cellophane production, it should have been due for nationalization, but in fact the government was against this. It had an unofficial agreement with the factory owner, the magnate Said, who also owned the Banco del Trabajo, one of the biggest private banks. In return for its nationalization – together with the whole banking system – the PU had undertaken to leave the Rayon factory alone. So the workers took the initiative and they did so consciously in answer to this compromise by their government. They demanded a rise, which wasn’t given, then occupied the factory in order to get it expropriated. They had a long struggle, but they succeeded. More than succeeded – they got the support of the workers in another Said monopoly and later this too was taken over. During the factory occupation they also got help, both food and money, from the nearby campesinos, as many of themselves were ex-campesinos, an important factor in building this alliance. After the expropriation, they had training to enable them to manage the factory independently.

We had experiences like this throughout the province of Valparaiso. The main textile factory in Viña del Mar would probably not have been taken over but for pressure from the workers. They’d been fighting a reactionary management for years. Under Frei they struck for six months to get it turned into a cooperative. This failed and half the workers were dismissed. They tried and failed again, with a further month’s strike, in Frei’s last year. More ‘temporary’ dismissals were threatened in order to modernize the factory but the workers wouldn’t have this, knowing they’d never get their jobs back. The argument was still going on when the PU was elected, but even it was non-committal. So the factory was occupied again. This time the workers refused to leave until it was expropriated, against the original decision of the Minister of Economics.

These struggles created a powerful base to build on after expropriation. This textile factory in Viña del Mar wasn’t only transferred to the public sector, but came to be fully controlled by its workers. They decided to reorganize its production and distribution patterns. They designed cheaper, more popular materials, and started distributing them through the JAPs and other popular organizations with their rationing and price controls. In this way the whole process was socialized, right from production to consumption. These experiments dealt crippling blows to the capitalist system, built as they were on the workers’ growing recognition that they couldn’t change their part of it without transforming it as a whole.

Officially workers’ participation was much more limited and formal. Production committees were appointed for each section of the factory, from among the trade-union officials – one for the administrative section, another for the mechanics and so on, depending on the number of sections. The heads of these production committees and other union officials then elected...
five members of the General Administrative Council. This was the main managing body, to which the government appointed five more representatives, plus a director – six in all. So even at plant level the bureaucrats were in the majority, as well as controlling the higher levels of economic decision making.

In practice then, workers still had no power to amend production schedules etc., let alone initiate them. This provoked a lot of discussion, especially among workers in the big metallurgical and textile concerns in the public sector. They argued that government nominees on the administrative councils should also be workers from the factory, since this was a workers’ government. It was pointed out that under the official system the technocrats were the majority, whereas the workers were concerned with the social aspects of production. In one large factory called Solimar, producing boilers and railway engines, the workers actually struck on this issue. Eventually they won their case and made a thorough-going revision of every aspect of production. Working conditions were improved, excess technicians were transferred and wage differentials were reduced. Through voluntary overtime, production was raised sufficiently to cancel the company’s outstanding debt. Despite their lack of management training the workers themselves reorganized things from start to finish.

It was argued that these changes would destabilize production – but far from this happening, it was in sectors where participation was weakest that there was real instability. In copper, for instance. Officials in this sector refused to contemplate real changes, because it’s such a vital export. So what happened after its nationalization? The workers regarded the State like a traditional employer, and demanded wage increases way above the rate of inflation, even in 1973, when the economy was in crisis. The government refused, and right-wing, white-collar and higher-skilled workers saw their chance and carried other workers with them. And of course the right-wing parties supported them, financially and with their propaganda. The government had to give in, and its whole wage policy collapsed.

This could never have happened if there’d been effective participation in this sector. As in the case of the Solimar factory the PU failed to understand that the ideological battleground was among the working class itself, not just among the ‘middle sectors’: that its loyalty could be held only by giving it a real role in the process of building socialism. Without this it could at best be passive, and at worst manipulated.

The industrial cordons, the bosses’ strikes and the rise of the communal commands

It was out of these actions by vanguard workers that the industrial cordons developed. What crystallized them was cooperation between the workers of different factories to counteract the ‘bosses’ strike’ of October 1972, which would otherwise have halted production. Afterwards they continued expanding right up to the time of the coup. The workers realized that the stoppage was no isolated event, but part of a struggle ultimately for control of the means of production. The cordons were both a defence measure and a step in this direction, an embryo of popular power. The PU did recognize them, but only in the restricted role of defending the government on its own terms – while much of the union hierarchy opposed them. Their real basis was in the working class itself, in the face of a daily mounting conflict. This was the most important effect of real workers’ participation, especially in state-owned enterprises. These were the vanguard of the cordons, and as such the seeds of the revolution, which participation germinated.

The debate on popular power began soon after Allende’s election. The more radical parties – MAPU, MIR and the left wing of the Socialist Party – envisaged Cuban-style ‘committees for the defence of the revolution’, one in every neighbourhood. But this was utopian. Our problem wasn’t one of defending an established socialism, but rather of countering attacks on our limited advances towards it, especially in the factories. From the outset the right campaigned ferociously against the PU’s nationalizations. In Congress it obstructed them and starved the government of funds to run the nationalized concerns. In the courts it tried to declare them illegal. In the media, still largely controlled by the right, it swore to Chile and all the world that state-owned industries couldn’t work – which it was already trying to ensure by sabotage and boycotts in the private sector.
The right even tried to enlist the workers. At which point their lack of participation became a really critical weakness. Alienation made them prey to sophisticated propaganda which identified the managers in the public sector as the ‘new bosses’. Many workers were saying as much, because in the circumstances there was some truth in it. They were being asked to produce more, on the grounds that the factories belonged to the workers – but this was contradicted by the lack of real participation.

Their disenchantment reached such a pitch that the right-wing’s accusations came true – state-owned enterprises began to run into real problems. Wage claims ran even higher in the public than in the private sector, machinery wasn’t properly maintained, raw materials were wasted. Far from their showing profits to fund additional nationalizations, the government had to subsidise them, and workers’ demands went on increasing. It was like an infection – when one group of workers made a demand, the next would make a bigger one. The situation was close to chaotic.

It was this which finally prompted us – the more radical parties – to produce our own version of participation. Instead of the official Production Committees we proposed much stronger ‘Committees for the Defence of Production’ (CDPs). Their members were directly elected by the workers, instead of consisting of union officials who weren’t answerable to them. Union officials weren’t excluded – but they had to be chosen in their own right. Secondly, the CDPs, through mass meetings, directly informed and consulted the workers on all aspects of production budgeting, profits, planning options. Although one could exaggerate their contributions to these decisions, the workers put forward their own ideas – on how to improve machines, for instance, in ways which technicians had never noted. In exceptional cases, as I mentioned, this led to a complete overhaul of the whole basis of production. Also political questions were raised, like the role of unions in the process through which we were living, the results of wage demands etc.

The CDPs took root especially in plants where the revolutionary parties were strongest. Their intelligence commissions helped in this. When we learnt of some new right-wing tactic we’d publish it and inform the workers, through the CDPs and later the cordons. This meant that subversion not only failed, but united workers to defend production and the PU, through the CDPs.

The development of the CDPs varied from factory to factory. Typically, the original Production Committees turned gradually into CDPs, as events confirmed the need for these. There wasn’t often a conflict between them. Nor was the legitimacy of the official unions questioned. The problem was that while the CUT was strong at regional and national levels, it was weaker at the base, which was now so crucial in the struggle – not because it lacked a following, but for want of local organization. The CDPs and later the cordons filled this gap. Their leaders never undervalued the CUT. Rather they hoped to persuade it to give the struggle a clear direction.

There were differences of opinion even within the radical left as to the extent to which the workers should control each factory’s Administrative Council. We in MAPU felt that the MIR was obsessed with this, with ‘workerism’ (’obrerismo’). In the face of the mounting crisis, though, we overcame these differences. The first CDPs developed in the South, especially round Concepción, but by the time of the first bosses’ strike, they’d spread to most industrial areas. We’d discussed coordination between them, but little had yet come of this, except in the strongest working-class areas like Maipú-Cerrillos and Vicuña Mackenna, in Santiago. The bosses’ strike was final proof that this coordination was urgent. Immediately CDP delegates and union officials from different factories in the major industrial areas discussed joint action against the stoppage. Embryonic cordons already existed in vanguard areas. Now they spread to every big city.

This was done in the following way. Their immediate purpose was defined as the collective defence of production and of the PU government. Delegates to each cordon were requested from all the factories in its area, not just those of the public sector. Typically, most worker members of each firm’s Administrative Council accepted. If they declined, though this was rare, the cordon’s leaders advised the workers to elect a delegate for each section of the factory. The leadership met regularly and formed various
commissions – transport, security, maintenance of production and so on. This working structure developed precisely in response to the needs of the moment. Again, there was suspicion that this was a form of parallelism, supplanting the government and unions – but the fact was that existing bodies just weren’t adequate for the crisis. In our early attempts to solve the problems of distribution, we found that the state mechanisms, like the Ministry of Economic Affairs, offered only the vaguest solutions. They couldn’t maintain even minimal supplies of power or medical items, for instance. It was the workers, through the cordons, who decided to keep the factories producing when the bosses ordered them to stop. Cordon workers manned public transport and fought the lorry-owners’ thugs to keep basic raw materials moving, organizing their own convoys between the ports and factories. They faced up to fascist squads and organized distribution centres in working-class residential areas. Together with the campesinos they set up markets, selling fuel, food and clothes; these markets were improvised, but immense. They were based on examples like those of the textile workers in Viña del Mar, who’d long since distributed their products direct to lower-income consumers.

While the CDPs had begun in the South, the first cordons were in Santiago, as it was there that the stoppage hit hardest. This shows how closely linked the cordons were to the solution of real problems. By the time the stoppage ended they existed at least on an improvised basis in virtually every major city. With the workers’ understanding of what the bosses’ strike had meant, they became the core of the revolutionary process – a means not only of defending but also of advancing the workers’ gains. For instance, cordon leaders confronted the local authorities, including the right-wing ones, with specific demands: for workers’ houses within reach of the factories, for example. We always encouraged cordon leaders to maintain immediate objectives like this, although the crucial issue was the class struggle, the question of power. We never forgot this, however far we may have been from carrying it through.

The missing factor at this point was a coherent political vanguard, united on a revolutionary strategy: the PU leadership had no answer to this stage of the confrontation. But in spite of this, and of disillusionment, these beginnings of popular power continued expanding right to the end. The vanguard cordons developed into communal commands, which integrated the shantytown dwellers, campesinos and students with the factory-workers’ organizations. This consolidated their previously improvised solidarity. For instance the communal command of Punta Florida, in Santiago, was recognized by the local authorities as a consultative body. The command was led by the cordon, but through it the shantytown dwellers in particular came to speak with a new voice. They disputed the local authorities’ assumption that the main streets should be repaved when those of the shantytowns never had been; they demanded industrial estates to provide employment in the area. They backed the demands of the nearby campesino council for an end to delays over legal land expropriations, which the landowners and the courts were obstructing. Industrial cordons and the communal command took action to enable their campesino comrades to occupy the land and maintain its output.

None of this was straightforward. No process as complex as that of Chile, no revolutionary process, is pure. As a system goes into crisis and one form of society collapses, every social class is affected. Workers suffer, as well as the privileged, and like them they can be corrupted. For instance, while the bourgeoisie’s sabotage instigated the black market, workers also contributed to it against the interests of their class. When Allende visited Sumar, a huge textile factory, he spoke openly of this – he told workers they could have covered the road from Santiago to Valparaiso with products which they had blackmarketed. It was their means of surviving the economic crisis. The important thing was that when the coup carne, these Sumar workers fought the fascists empty handed. They held out for days against aerial bombardment. Yet even they had shown that the revolutionary process is full of human contradictions – that was how I saw it, how we always had to approach it. To do so in terms only of ideals as against objective conditions, is to fail to understand it. You have to remember that Chile’s working class wasn’t in power. We were barely beginning to establish forms of popular justice, for instance – the judicial system was still defending bourgeois interests. This is where the political vanguard is crucial – in creating the conditions to maintain the
revolutionary process and overcome such contradictions. And this in my judgment is where the PU leadership failed in its final year.

The confrontation and the future: reflections

I believe it made two basic errors. The first was the incorporation of military men into the cabinet in moments of crisis – in the bosses’ strike, and then again after the tank revolt (tancazo) of June 1973. This was a show of weakness. It seems that Allende, for want of a more effective answer, convinced himself that the military were neutral, not allies of the bourgeoisie. The second error was to curb the growth of working-class power in the hope of saving the situation with a Christian Democrat alliance.

Some comrades believe that the PU was merely reformist. This to my mind is a simplification. The problem was that having provoked pre-revolutionary conditions, it then stepped back, and this could only encourage the reaction. In the first bosses’ strike, the bourgeoisie had been the loser. It attempted to bring down the government by economic means, but what happened? The workers stepped in and took everything over. They broke the boycott. The March elections of the following year dispelled the opposition’s last hope of a democratic victory. Force became their only option, and therefore the one they were bound to adopt. This meant that the PU’s struggle also had to be fought on these terms. The second stoppage, in July 1973, was thus quite different, a clear request for military intervention. At this point economic actions by either the bourgeoisie or the workers were not going to change the situation. Only the military apparatus of one class or the other could do this. The bourgeoisie knew this. And so it won. It was not a new lesson.

The workers knew also, the vanguard at least. But what resources did they have against Hawker Hunters and machine-guns? Armed resistance would have been class suicide, in the absence of a political vanguard actively committed to it. Only this can split the army along class lines. The PU apparently hoped that this would happen spontaneously, and the workers paid dearly for this illusion. Their recognition of what was happening explains in part why the coup was so simple. Despite the cordons’ determination, there was deepening disillusionment following the government’s decision to rely on conciliation rather than popular organizations.

It was after the tancazo that this disillusionment became general. At this point the balance might still have been turned within the army, had the rebels and their supporters been crushed, as the workers were openly demanding. On the night of the tancazo Allende spoke to a massive crowd from the balcony of the Moneda Palace. People in the square were shouting up at him: ‘arrest the plotters’, and ‘dose the Congress’. Instead Allende presented the chiefs of the armed forces as the saviours of the day. Fights even broke out between supporters of his position and those demanding more radical measures. The latter were certainly a majority. But Allende maintained his position to the end, even confiding in Pinochet as the apparent leader of the constitutional wing of the army.

This speech from the Moneda was televised throughout the country. Everywhere the reaction was similar. Workers I talked to told me: ‘We’re through with politics. Comrade Allende would never betray us, but he has made a fatal mistake. Why should we fight when the battle’s been lost for us?’ In fact, like Allende, most of them did – even after the humiliation of the PU’s allowing the military to ransack left-wing areas and torture activists before the coup. They fought on against the fascists and on 11 September died shouting for arms which never came.

This is not to say that the PU experiment was just a defeat. For one thing it showed that the working class is capable of challenging imperialism at its heart in Latin America. For another, any such experience is a lesson, if not a new one. Workers everywhere should remember that Chile was called ‘the England of South America’ for its alleged democratic traditions. If our experience reminds them of the nature of the bourgeois state and the seeds of fascism within it, Chile will not have been in vain.

For us the lessons are now very clear. There is no longer any midway between fascism and socialism. Chilean workers have no illusions about recreating the bourgeois state which international capitalism and national fascism have destroyed. Such a proposal would be to betray them. Also two
left-wing strategies have now clearly failed in Latin America: the pluralist, reformist way adopted by the PU and equally the foco strategy based on the Cuban revolution. In recent years this has also failed to combine a revolutionary vanguard with a mass proletarian base – the essentials of any future way forward.

We’re also realizing that with our commitment to this struggle our personal lives will have to be different. Our families, for instance, can’t be what they were. I have to learn to know my children as people who may die in this struggle, like anyone committed to it. We’re different people from the ones we were, yet still the same as other people whose solidarity we need – experiencing fear, depression, contradictions, as well as hope. Things we can overcome only by continuing the struggle every hour.