Part I - The industrial sector
3. Building the Industrial Cordons: Maipú-Cerrillos

Pablo
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.

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Building the Industrial Cordons: Maipú-Cerrillos

 Speaker: PABLO, 25, activist of the Socialist Party who lived and worked in Maipú-Cerrillos, Santiago, a pioneer industrial cordon

Workers’ participation in factories: origins of the industrial cordon

Maipú-Cerrillos is one of the biggest industrial zones in Santiago. Its population is over a quarter of a million and almost wholly working-class. The firms there range from affiliates of the multi-nationals to tiny workshops. Under the PU it was well known as one of the first and most advanced industrial cordons. I grew up and worked there, and was active in this process, as a trade unionist and member of the Socialist Party.

The cordon emerged in part from the question of workers’ participation. The PU programme provided for this, but only on a limited basis, and mainly in nationalized enterprises. The government intervenor would set up an Administrative Council, with his own nominees in a majority over the workers’ representatives. The government men were all technicians and this body made all the major decisions – over accounting and investment, production schedules, etc. The workers themselves had little influence.

Pretty soon a reaction set in, with comrades on the shop floor saying: ‘It’s time we made the important decisions. The PU is a workers’ government. We’re the ones who put them in power and argued for nationalization’. The problem was that the PU scheme was technocratic. It was far more concerned with production than with political questions. So the workers proposed a different scheme, in which they themselves would make the decisions.

The first instance of this was in the PERLAK detergent factory. I was there when it happened. The workers felt that nothing had changed with its nationalization. So they called an assembly and simply dismissed the Administrative Council, or rather voted themselves the right to have an elective majority on it. What they said was: ‘Right, we’re the ones to decide
41 what policies this factory follows. From now on we’ll deal with personnel. Full details of the balance sheet must be disclosed to all employees. We’re also going to deal with production planning and distribution. We want to know who buys our products, because we want to work for everyone, not just for the wealthy’.

When this sort of workers’ control was established, a new political awareness developed. The technical problems weren’t neglected, but what came first were political aspects of the workers’ participation. Activists like myself believed that as workers we should be our own bosses – that there must be a real change in the relationships of production. Factories should really belong to the workers – belong not in the bourgeois sense of being their private property, but in the revolutionary sense of belonging to a workers’ State in which the workers made decisions. Only this would counter the bourgeois offensive which was developing from the outset.

In my experience this didn’t prejudice production, as the Communist Party argued. In fact concerns under workers’ control achieved the most success economically, as well as in a political sense. There was no conflict between the two. The workers worked and produced as before, the difference being that they now decided what they were going to produce, and also on its distribution. For instance, when meetings were held in work hours, the lost production was made up later with overtime or weekend work. The workers themselves enforced these rules, which meant a basic change of awareness.

You could see the same thing in the innovations which workers produced in these circumstances – in the local Nestlé’s plant, for example, which also came under workers’ control, following its nationalization. This also showed how technical factors weren’t overridden by political debates, far from it. The Nestlé’s products were expensive, way beyond most workers’ pockets. The problem was how to socialize them while we were still in a market economy. We wouldn’t gain anything by lowering prices and bankrupting the factory. So what did we do? We maintained the prices of traditional products with mainly middle-class consumers, and decided to launch a cheaper product for mass consumption, to be subsidized from our existing profits. It’s here that the technical aspect comes in. The chief technician was fairly right-wing, but nevertheless this aroused this interest. He cooperated with the workers and left-wing dieticians to devise this low cost product. The National Health service had been trying to do the same thing for years and had failed. At Nestlé’s they succeeded in two or three months – precisely because the workers felt, and even convinced the technicians, that it gave their work a social meaning. They also saw it as a test of workers’ control and an answer to the propaganda against it. ‘We’ll show what we can do’, was the way they put it. And that’s how it came about, in no time, a cheaper and far more nutritious product. Workers’ control produced any number of technical innovations like this, with a fundamental social importance.

Workers with these experiences supported the struggle in other factories for nationalization and workers control. They knew that the process could survive only if it advanced. It was this which made them the vanguard of the Maipú-Cerrillos cordon.

Building the cordon

The industrial cordon really reflected the workers’ growing recognition that only they could defend their interests and that this must lead eventually to a confrontation with the bourgeois State. For this they needed an organization which was independent of it. It was precisely as the bourgeois counter-offensive developed that the cordon came into being, and were subsequently widened into the communal commands including local shantytowns and even nearby campesinos. Through the cordon the concrete details of the devolution of power began to be coordinated – food distribution, local transport, education and health measures and certain security provisions.

Each cordon was based on an important industrial area. It was in the first bosses’ strike of October 1972 that they became widespread and their revolutionary role apparent. Of course in this sense they weren’t part of the PU’s electoral programme, and not all the PU parties backed them. The parties really committed to them were the Socialist Party and the MIR, the MIR especially in shantytown areas. Also later on the MAPU. Other parties disagreed at least with this interpretation of the role of the cordon.
Communist Party participated in them only once it realized how much power they had, and as we saw it, to neutralize them – which some of the Party’s base opposed, producing a serious internal division. Its official line was that the cordons should simply support the PU, rather than becoming an alternative power (*poder alternativo*); whereas we argued that this depended on the PU’s serving working-class interests. And this to our minds wasn’t always the case.

This was very much the cordons’ position, in that they confronted the bourgeois offensive while the PU tended to compromise with it. In these circumstances the workers felt that instead of simply depending on the parties, they should organize as a class vanguard. This is what the cordons reflected, and for this reason their main achievements were in cities where the working class was strongest – Santiago, Concepción, Valparaíso and Antofagasta. And eventually in smaller cities like Temuco and Constitution. The main ones in Santiago were Maipú-Cerrillos, Vicuna Mackenna, Estación Central, Barrancas and Santiago Centro. The first two depended almost entirely on leadership by factory workers. In Barrancas the shantytown dwellers also helped to show the way, as there weren’t many factories there. Generally, though, cordons and commands were mainly led by factory workers. We discussed this a lot – the likelihood of their losing sight of the main objectives without such leaders. That this didn’t happen, even in communal commands, was due I’m sure to their being acknowledged as the vanguard by all sectors.

My own experience was mainly in the Cerrillos cordon. This began to emerge in early 1972 – together with Vicuna Mackenna, it was about the first in the country. The starting point was a joint demand for nationalization by workers’ leaders in several factories producing consumer durables kitchen stoves and freezers etc. The idea was that cooperation would help them to deal with legal problems and to defend their industries against right-wing retaliation. From there they went on to coordinate their production schedules, particularly as the boycott by the private sector mounted, causing problems with inputs and so on. They realized in the most practical sense that these required joint solutions and a corresponding organization. From the beginning, what was to become the cordon developed in direct response to concrete needs, not to theoretical preconceptions divorced from what the workers wanted. And the first of these needs was the extension of nationalization.

This is the sort of thing that happened. The comrades would come to us – the workers and party members active in this process – and tell us: ‘Look comrades, the boss in our firm is trying to cut back production and we’re heading for a crisis’. They realized clearly that this wasn’t just an incident, but – for the bosses and themselves – a crucial stage in the class struggle. So we’d tell them: ‘Comrades, this is what you have to do. First, present all the evidence. We can then help with the legal aspects of your demand for intervention by the Ministry of Labour. And failing that, we’ll mobilize’. It didn’t always work out easily. Sometimes intervention was refused because the government was soft-peddling the Christian Democrats, or even because the owners had influence – there were many reasons why the government was often reluctant. In these cases we had to bring pressure to bear, whatever the short-term repercussions.

Our strength always lay in taking joint action. The most important case of this kind was in July 1972. Five large firms, including Polyester Textiles, were occupied by their workers, who then demanded expropriation – of some because they were virtual monopolies, of others because they were cutting production. They’d already asked for intervention, but the government wouldn’t give firm answers. So the workers said: ‘Well, if they won’t take over the factory, we will – we can’t let things go on this way. If need be, we’ll take this whole area over’.

This meant coordination on a scale no party activists had considered, but the workers themselves didn’t hesitate – and where trade-union officials wouldn’t support them, though this was rare, they overrode them. ‘We’ve come to a deadlock – whatever happens, we’re not stopping short. If it means a showdown with the police, we’re ready for it’. So they mobilized, occupied the factories, hoisting the flag up on the roof, and demanded government intervention. The government again said no, that they were crazy. So the chips were down. An official from the Ministry of Labour came down to one of the factories and got into a confrontation with one of the leaders of the occupation – he was later murdered, during the coup.
‘You can’t do this to the Popular Unity’, the official said. So the comrade replied: ‘It’s the bourgeoisie we’re attacking, not the Popular Unity. If you take their side, that’s your decision. Nationalize the factory, and we’ll deal with the bourgeoisie together, which is a very different matter’. But this didn’t work. The official just called him an ultra-leftist and a CIA agent. That got him mad. She, the official, had been a worker too, he said, but now she’d joined the bourgeoisie. That was too much for her – she gave him a smack in the face and left. We got no further answer, so the whole area was taken over. Barricades were put up across the two roads leading into Maipú-Cerrillos, cutting it off from Santiago. The campesinos chopped down trees and the workers added petrol drums. We told the Minister that we’d give up the area only when he came to sign intervention decrees in front of the workers. Soon afterwards he came and signed them.

This was the sort of concrete action from which the industrial cordon developed. The problem then arose – from about mid 1972 – of giving it some formal structure. At first the provisional leadership consisted mainly of local union officials, but few of them really involved their members in the issue of the cordon – they simply carne as union officials and treated it as union business. Neither in principle nor practice were they representative of the workers with respect to the actual cordon. Then again, not all the factories in the area were involved. Also of course there were certain parties which told their activists not to take part. All these were serious obstacles.

Our answer was to try and relate the concrete tasks and political issues. We held discussions about how to democratize the cordon and through it avoid the differences within the left. Another goal was to include the shantytown dwellers and campesinos, but the question was, through what sort of structure? The most immediate problem was sustaining interest in the cordon. For instance, after participating in the campaigns for expropriation, many workers took no further part in activities at a cordon level. The groups of workers with such horizons, except at moments of obvious crisis, were fairly few. Perhaps the main reason was the party activists’ vagueness as to the cordon’s main objectives. In meetings they tended to produce the same old ideological wranglings which many of the workers detested. So they stopped coming. We’d ask them about it: ‘What happened, comrade? You came to the meetings when the cordon was supporting your factory occupation, but now we don’t see you. What’s the problem?’ ‘Well, we did go to later meetings – remember, we carne to three or four? But no one talked about anything concrete, it was all fancy political stuff, and we prefer to be doing something. Frankly we’re not too interested in all that discussion between the parties’.

The leadership did become more democratic, although it still consisted mainly of union officials as delegates, until we formed the communal command and all delegates became elective. This was only right at the end, though, in June 1973. Meanwhile the delegates’ assembly elected a president and vice-president, a comrade in charge of transport, another in charge of food distribution, health and education etc. These formed committees to deal with problems raised by the delegates’ assembly.

Support for the cordon depended on its achieving concrete advances. It wasn’t just a debating forum on soviets and the bourgeois State. We tried to deal with tangible problems of food supply and distribution, and cases of expropriation. On the strength of this we did go forward from our originally vague position to the point of even winning support outside the factories, from shantytown dwellers and campesinos. This meant that we were developing from the original industrial cordon into the communal command.

From cordon to communal command: factory workers form the vanguard

One central feature of this was the campesinos’ participation. Maipú-Cerrillos was somewhat unique for Santiago in including agricultural units. In industrial zones like Vicuna Mackenna there weren’t any, though some in Concepción did have them. It was this which gave us a starting point for forming the communal command, with its wider basis.

In fact, the workers on these units weren’t campesinos in the usual sense of people with close ties to the land – they were pure wage-workers. Also they lived within the community, not on the agricultural units, to which they simply went to work. This made them relatively aware. From the start they witnessed and supported the factory workers’ struggles. They
were unionized and had long since pressed successfully for the implementation of the original land reform, on properties over eighty hectares. Most of those in the area were smaller than this, though, but highly productive – market gardens of between forty and eighty hectares, selling their products in Santiago. One belonged to the son of Pedro Vuskovic, the Minister of Economics. Others were divided among different members of single families – a means of dodging expropriation under the agrarian reform law. The workers on these medium-sized, but equally valuable, units considered it wrong that they were exempted simply because they didn’t cover eighty hectares. So the campesino council, with delegates from each farm unit, demanded immediate expropriation of holdings over forty hectares.

This was early in 1973. The campesino council had already supported the cordon in the occupations I described, and now they asked the cordon for its backing. We agreed, as their position seemed correct – they weren’t asking for sub-division of the land, but for the more collective CERAs. The units over forty hectares were occupied immediately, with the help of workers from the cordon. Most were from the factories which had previously been expropriated with support from the campesinos. From this point on, in early 1973, there was virtually a permanent alliance between the two sectors – the basis of a communal command.

In these months events moved rapidly, as we were between the two bosses’ strikes, which meant new tasks to undertake and a widening awareness of them. Our first step was a new leadership structure for the communal command, distinct from that of the cordon, which was now superseded. Delegates were now directly elected from each factory and farm unit, to form the assembly of the command. This then reflected the president and the various committees on transport and so on. The assembly met regularly to discuss the committees’ operations and had the right to revoke appointments. It also now included delegates from neighbourhood associations and JAPs (people’s supply control committees). In this way the shantytowns and local consumers were directly represented. This structure was in operation by June 1973, the time of the second bosses’ strike.

Another important novelty was the participation of women, which was almost unknown before the PU. They’d played an important part in the JAPs and now the health committee was organized mainly by women. They were also active in education and propaganda, though problems like security remained very much the domain of men – such changes came slowly.

Certainly the communal command was never a self sufficient unit, as the coup was to show – though with the pace of change, a few more months would have made a difference. The cordon’s original limitations were past history by this time, but the work of many of the committees was only beginning, especially security. As the bourgeois offensive mounted, we were dealing with problems on a day-to-day basis, without the time to find radical long-term solutions.

The key committees were those of supply and distribution, transport and health. Others also got well under way, especially the education committee. This set up libraries with books from the state publishing house, which was issuing low-cost editions of the political classics etc. This supplemented the new awareness which experience was creating. Even in those tense circumstances people read these books very widely. We also had talks and discussion groups at a popular level, with participation increasing steadily. In the health committee there were plans for creating multi-purpose clinics to serve the workers in the area and to be permanently staffed by doctors. Previously people had to go outside the area for medical treatment. The first clinic was built with voluntary labour by the health committee, and left-wing doctors began to work there – a gesture for which many of them were tortured and murdered after the coup.

Food distribution was a major problem when shopkeepers started joining their boycotts, so a people’s market place was set up. This was quite a struggle. An unused area was chosen, belonging to the municipality, but as we had a right-wing mayor, he refused to let us use it. So together the campesinos, factory workers and neighbourhood associations occupied it, producing pamphlets explaining their action. The campesinos then carne there and distributed their products through the JAPs and people’s stores (almacenes populares). It wasn’t just PU followers who bought their food
there, but members of the petty bourgeoisie who couldn’t afford black-market prices. This had an important impact. It showed that we could control distribution and also that the shortage was not the PU’s fault but the private sector’s. When the mayor tried to close the market, the whole community resisted. Right up to the coup this dispute went on but the market continued, thanks to the wide support we had.

This process produced a new generation of local activists. These were much more political than the older, trades-union leaders with their mainly economic concerns for better wages and living conditions. Most factories produced these new leaders, who seemed able to grasp the situation and pull the communal command together. One I knew well had little formal education, just a few years of primary school, and he wasn’t really an activist when his factory was expropriated. Once it came under workers’ control, though, he started taking a leading part and became a delegate to the assembly. All this was in a space of months. The same thing happened in countless factories and neighbourhoods, at a speed unique to a pre-revolutionary period.

The testing point of the command was the bosses’ strike, the second one in July 1973, when most lorry-owners stopped work and private factories and stores closed down. This soon caused a shortage of raw materials, which threatened to halt production completely. So we pooled the trucks of all the factories in the command and coordinated their use. This was improvised, but we were strong enough to take over some municipal trucks and requisition private ones. Convoys then went to bring the food from the farm units. Most of the life of the area was run by the communal command at this stage. Factories also now sold direct to the consumers, and we set up special points for this – the main square of Maipú was one and another was the people’s market. This went well beyond the role of the official peoples’ stores, which lacked the versatility to deal with this situation. The trucks were simply loaded and driven to the distribution point, a ramp was set up, and the products were sold. The command’s main distribution committee coordinated the local ones to deal with the details – each sector’s requirements, the pricing and actual selling etc.

The assembly made the main decisions concerning the work of the committees. By now it was meeting almost daily, with over a hundred people present. Originally party activists had dominated its discussions, but this was changing rapidly. The great majority of those who came, including campesinos and women, were taking part and making suggestions almost without any hesitation. By now we had a genuinely integrated structure, and its impact was widening rapidly to the mass of the local population, as it proved able to solve their problems. I wouldn’t say that even by this time the communal command was wholly established in people’s minds or in place of previous institutions – after all, we’re talking about a few months – but it was on its way towards this.

Meanwhile, as activists we were living with a day-to-day intensity which meant that most of us hardly slept. We had our committees in our places of work, party meetings, the assemblies – we hardly ever saw our families, sleeping away from home if at all. Yet at the same time we were all aware of the special nature of this moment. The parties all knew that a showdown was coming. But despite this knowledge, we had few resources for it. The ideological differences within the left were still too great to allow for coordinated action. It was only after the June tancazo that we started to mount a defensive plan for the full-scale coup which was clearly coming.

The coup: resistance and conclusions

All the parties involved in the command participated in this plan, but even so it was rudimentary. Time was short and the military were naturally suspicious of Maipú-Cerrillos. Four days before the coup, twenty truckloads of soldiers armed with machine-guns and mortars, moved into Cerrillos and set up campo. The arms searches grew more violent, but we imagined that their immediate objective was to demobilize the command – so our efforts went into providing for this, instead of preparing for the coup. When it came, we were virtually helpless. Maipú-Cerrillos was in the flight path of the jets bombing the Moneda. People were weeping, screaming at them, but what could they do?

Nevertheless there was widespread resistance, reflecting the structure of the command as the new vanguard of the area. Though many leading
The comrades had been captured during the previous night, it was the factories like PERLAK which put up the fiercest fight, some of them for four or five days. To understand what this represented, you must remember that we had only light firearms and home-made weapons against helicopters, which flew overhead and machine-gunned us from several sides. That was during the first two days. On the third they began using mortars and shells, and a number of factories were badly damaged. Their tactic was to strike violently, regardless of the casualties. The coup had to be rapid or mass resistance would have spread. The cordons and commands were especially feared, so they suffered the bloodiest repression. About three-quarters of my comrades in the Maipú-Cerrillos command were captured and many of them were later murdered. A few escaped, but very few, while some like myself went underground before the military caught us.

I don’t want to give a false impression of the impact of the coup, though – in many factories political work is still going on, despite the repression. Comrades less openly compromised have stayed on and set up underground unions. Although the parties were so hard hit, there have already been several strikes in Maipú-Cerrillos. In these conditions they’re dramatic proof of the organization and awareness achieved by the dose of those three years.

What the left must do, not just in Chile, is to learn from these experiences, from their positive and negative aspects. To my mind the first lesson is the impossibility in practice of the peaceful way to socialism. If this is learnt, our defeat will not have been in vain. In countries like Chile, winning more or less votes is no longer the key to the achievement of socialism – it simply means more or less repression. The left has been idealistic about this. While mass consciousness is obviously central, the sheer technology of revolution is something we must consider more carefully. Without this the greater the mobilization, the more we are putting our heads in the noose. Our view of the bourgeoisie is outdated: it takes little account of its modern resources. Perhaps in Lenin’s time there was some real ground to be gained within the bourgeois state apparatus. Today its counter-revolutionary techniques present a different situation. In Chile this meant the deaths of thousands of our comrades – we have to give this urgent thought, at the tactical and strategic levels. I suggest this less as a criticism of any particular left-wing party than as a problem for all of us. We must redefine the struggle for power from our own experience.

This is not to deny the continuing validity of basic Marxist-Leninist tenets. It is precisely in terms of these that we can redefine the problems. But perhaps the most important lesson which we experienced in Chile is the scope for widening people’s awareness and giving it new, concrete forms. The cordons and commands were to my mind the PU’s most significant feature. Through these, people were developing an answer to the power of the bourgeois State, an answer which could have meant victory if it had been more widely agreed on. This comes back to the negative aspects, but the price for these has been paid. The lesson is there for all to see. Recriminations offer nothing. Instead we should look at these positive aspects like the cordons and commands as a basis for new confidence and new ways of building socialism.