Part II - The countryside

4. The Campesinos and popular unity: agrarian reform in the Central Valley

Enrique
The Campesinos and Popular Unity: agrarian reform in the Central Valley

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Agrarian Reform: the PU develops a programme

During the PU, I worked for CORA in an area of the Central Valley – I'll refer to it as San Fernando. The Valley is Chile's most fertile region and traditionally one of large estates. Its market towns like San Fernando are completely controlled by the big landowners. In my three years there I experienced changes typical of those occurring in much of the Chilean countryside. Politically I belonged to a generation disillusioned by the Christian Democrats' failure. This led us to found the MAPU, and later the MOC, to which I belong.

I was involved in the transfer of land to the campesinos. This meant talking to them about the legal and technical details, as the PU laid great stress on maintaining democratic procedures. The central question, though, was how the land would eventually be worked – collectively, as private holdings, or on a mixed basis. Our usual recommendation was a mixed system for three to five years, then a final decision.

This process was naturally conditioned by what had happened in the last few years. Under Frei the campesinos acquired the right to unionization. Though superficially progressive, this was shrewdly implemented. The bourgeoisie and its Christian Democrat politicians wanted an economistic, sectional campesino movement, not an independent, political one. So they created and controlled two campesino federations, Triunfo Campesino and Libertad. This weakened the older, more radical Ranquil federation led by the Socialist and Communist Parties.

Frei’s reforms threw the left off balance, as it had pressed for them for years, only to see them introduced by a bourgeois government. At first this weakened the left’s appeal to the campesinos, but not for long, as the Frei regime became less successful and more repressive. When expropriations fell behind schedule, the campesinos began occupying the big estates – but the government hit back by exempting these from expropriation. Also the programme was politically selective. The reforms were concentrated in areas controlled by the Christian Democrat confederations.

All this brought a rapid growth in campesino organization. The PU’s rural vote in 1970 was bigger than we had expected, but still much less than the Christian Democrats’. Only after Allende’s victory was there a dramatic reaction – an avalanche of land occupations, reflecting the last few years’ frustration. In effect the campesinos were saying: ‘One betrayal is enough, take note’. This was warranted – but for the PU the occupations were a problem. They were spontaneous and indiscriminate, occurring here, there and everywhere, on properties of quite different sizes. Even reformed asentamientos were occupied by landless workers. All this posed an obvious threat to the medium-sized rural bourgeoisie – the twenty-to-eighty-hectare-farmers whom the PU hoped to win over, or at least to neutralize. The occupations had to be checked, as the PU depended on legal procedures. One mustn’t forget that in 1970 our victory was unexpected and fragile – its best defence, as Allende observed, was to stick to the rules. If only for this reason, we had to try to operate within a strictly legal framework.

On the whole we succeeded, by speeding up the expropriation of properties over eighty hectares. This brought home to the campesinos that the PU was their ally – and that some restraint was needed. The immediate pressure was relieved, except in rather special cases such as the Mapuche Indians, whose occupations were inspired by generations of collective memories of how the land had been taken from them. Apart from this things settled down. Even the industrial bourgeoisie was reasonably sympathetic to doing away with the big estates, as they obstructed capitalist growth.

The turning point came in the following year. The PU’s programme – the elimination of ‘large estates’ (latifundios) – was ill-defined. Formally, it meant those over eighty hectares, but others envisaged going beyond this –
a move which would threaten the modern agrarian bourgeoisie, not just the bigger, traditional holdings. This vagueness was typical of the PU. Probably it was the only means of achieving any consensus among the various PU parties. This was feasible at first, but once the first stage was implemented, positions had to be more precise. This brought the differences to the surface.

Moreover, as soon as the medium landowners came under pressure, the opposition coalesced. This class began to look for allies among the smaller landowners and also in the judiciary. This openly opposed the PU. It obstructed expropriations with rulings devoid of legal basis – for instance with ‘measures for the defence of material interests’ (medidas prejudiciales precautorias). These enabled rural magistrates to restrain even CORA from taking possession of properties due for expropriation.

In short, there was rapid polarization not only between the right and left, but also within the left itself on how to confront it.

The implementation of the programme: San Fernando

The debate on the left involved two quite different strategic conceptions of the PU’s agrarian programme. One saw it as a holding operation, with the campesinos being won over by continuing land redistribution – though this would now be more effective and democratic than in the past. The other proposed more decisive moves to socialise agriculture, both in principle and as a means of providing for all the campesinos, including the poorest categories like migrant workers and smallholders. This divergence of views between a cautious and a radical approach was fundamental.

The PU’s explicit programme was closer to the first position, but it still involved substantial changes. The Christian Democrat style of reform was blatantly paternalistic, as well as openly committed to expanding rural capitalism. Under Allende the campesinos began to participate in the programme. We were instructed to consult them on virtually every decision. This was unprecedented. Previously, for example, CORA even bought farm machinery for cooperatives without consultation. The campesinos just weren’t involved in expropriations. No one asked their opinion about which properties should come first, and how best to set about it. The whole operation was bureaucratic, which is why it was ineffective.

Under the PU all this changed. The original schedule was to expropriate all holdings over eighty hectares within three years. But with pressure from the campesinos – to which the PU responded – this was later reduced to two years. Officials in each zone began by consulting the local campesinos. Meetings were called which often lasted for up to three days. These were attended by delegates of campesino organizations and even by non-unionized workers. Discussion was intensive. The campesinos would propose an expropriation programme for properties in the area. This was then discussed in the light of technical and political considerations: the soil conditions, for example, the sizes of the properties and the number of expropriations – as each region had an annual quota.

Political questions arose immediately. For instance, many campesinos worked in wretched conditions on medium-sized holdings, yet the PU was anxious not to encroach on these at this stage. This made little sense to the campesinos surely, what mattered was their conditions? In answer we’d explain the alliances that we were trying to develop, and the legal constraints within which we were working. The atmosphere was deeply emotional – the campesinos were beginning to feel for the very first time that their world was in their own hands. When they realized that this time the land was really to be expropriated, they could hardly find ways to express their joy. This was even more marked at expropriation ceremonies, as these were attended by ministers and CORA officials who came right to San Fernando to formally transfer land titles. These usually took place in the local stadium. It would be packed with campesinos determined to witness a ceremony which signified such a change in their lives. They were unforgettable fiestas! You could sense that these people suddenly felt that society now recognized them as equals, as human beings who could make decisions. After the landlords’ feudal sway, which had made them feel inferior to city-dwellers in every way, all this was a complete awakening. For us it was profoundly moving.

The land-reform unit we proposed was the CERA (agrarian reform centre). This was much more collective than the earlier cooperatives, which
simply combined individual holdings. Also CERAs were run by all their participants, unlike the cooperatives, where hired workers had no rights in decision making. In CERAs there were no such workers, merely members of equal status, including women—though this found very little acceptance. One part of the CERA was designated as pasture, another for cultivation. The economic arrangements varied, but the basic pattern which we encouraged in San Fernando was as follows. Most of the land was worked collectively and the profits divided equally, apart from a margin of 15 per cent. This was put aside for reinvestment and social expenditures such as health and education.

The opposition story was that this was simply a state farm. The campesinos would ask us questions like: ‘Is it true that on a CERA we’ll be woken up at five o’clock by a man from the government blowing a bugle and ordering us all to work?’ In fact the CERAs were midway between state farms and cooperatives. In any case they were provisional. Nevertheless the right’s propaganda was sometimes successful, so that some campesinos did opt for the old, cooperative pattern. Some virtual state farms were established, known as production centres (centros de producción), but only in special circumstances. For instance when infrastructural investment in the property was high, or when it involved a strategic product. One in which I was involved produced certified rice seed for the whole San Fernando area—this made it especially important. Although this too involved campesino participation, it was run by a government official, with the last say in administrative matters. It belonged to the State, as did the profits, while the workers had a salary, a good one. But in fact these production centres were rare.

The CERAs naturally reflected the ambiguities of our programme, as an approach towards socialism within a still bourgeois society. In the main one I dealt with, two groups developed. One was more politically aware and all for collective organization. The other was more individualistic. At first they agreed to make no distinctions with respect to rights and profits. This produced very good results. Productivity increased enormously. But soon their collective spirit weakened. One group started saying that they worked harder than the others, that they were more skilled, that it was unjust that they should own nothing privately and so on. For instance: ‘I work harder than you, yet we both get the same, it’s unfair’. Or: ‘You were drunk on Sunday, you didn’t come to work the next day, but I wasn’t drunk, so I came to work—but we’re still going to get the same, we have to divide things equally. That’s not right to my way of thinking’.

Also with the better wages and purchasing power in the cities, demand went up and profits too, especially as the black market developed. This made them hanker after individualistic arrangements. This too was a product of our transitional situation—of our still having a market economy. So although both groups on this CERA remained PU supporters, the division between them grew deeper and deeper. Finally they divided the CERA. One part was still worked collectively and the other on a more private basis. To the end, these two groups remained in conflict. Similar divisions occurred elsewhere. My personal conclusion was that collectivization at this stage was utopian, in all but exceptional cases.

Campesino awareness: its limitations

What campesinos did develop was a new political awareness in the sense of an unshakable solidarity with the PU. For most of them ‘socialism’ meant simply Allende and the PU, but the class feeling in this was strong: it was they, the campesinos, together with the urban workers, who now had control of Chile’s destiny. And they were determined that yesterday’s bosses should never be allowed to regain it.

What grew was their sense of exploitation, rather than of socialism as a well-defined answer to it. For instance, I was once settling the details of expropriation with a landowner, when one of his campesinos appeared and overheard what we were discussing. It happened to be his reserve (reserva), the section of his property which a landowner was allowed to retain—a contentious issue, as the landowner tried to get the best land and the campesinos to give him the worst. This itself showed how far they had come from their traditional subservience. On this occasion it really came out, as the campesino intervened: ‘All this time you’ve been starving us, and you still have the face to argue about keeping the best land for yourself’. And so he went on, berating him. But although they knew about exploitation, their notion of socialism was vaguer—rather, it was much
the same. ‘Socialism means we’ll be our own bosses, that we workers will have our rights and that exploitation will be ended’. This was how they’d talk about it.

Nevertheless, their determination put the PU under pressure, and even forced us to alter decisions. With the magistrates opposing reforms, the campesinos became aware of the judiciary’s class nature, and that of other public bodies, including CORA. They sensed that this was the root of the PU’s limitations. This soon produced new types of protest. Not only were occupations renewed when magistrates delayed expropriations. Huge sympathy strikes began as well, by campesinos throughout the area, over this and over wages and working conditions on properties where they were worst. This solidarity was quite new. For campesinos to support others not personally known to them was a real change, and it became increasingly common.

I’ll give you an example of how this solidarity developed – the origin of the CERA I mentioned, the one which eventually divided. It also illustrates the exploitation which lay behind it. A campesino came to my office and asked that the property on which he worked should be considered for expropriation. This was an almost daily event, so I told him I’d look into it and give him an answer the following week.

But two days later he was back. We talked once more, and this time he asked me to visit his home. It was as if he couldn’t rest until he knew that he’d convinced me. He was an interesting character. He’d been illiterate, but taught himself to read and write, and there was nothing he didn’t know about the agrarian reform.

Well, I accepted his invitation to visit the property. As we went there, he told me various stories about it. One was a vivid illustration of the world against which they were now revolt ing. Ten years before the owner had forbidden the campesinos recognized the full depth of the issues. Their awareness was also limited by the uncertainties of the programme – as to whether it meant socialism, or just interim reforms. Once expropriation had removed the ‘enemy’, the old landlord, there was no clear way forward for them. I personally doubt if there could have been. What most of them still longed for at heart was their own patch of land which they could work independently, and the security it offered. They’d sometimes say: ‘We’re against private property’, but this wasn’t borne out in practice. The landowners had encouraged this by allowing them small patches of land where they could grow things for themselves. This pattern was usually maintained in the reformed units, even the CERAs. They insisted on it, and fair enough, but the trouble was that it didn’t stop there. They’d start with half an hectare per family, and CORA would agree to this, but within months this would start to creep up to a whole hectare, then two hectares. Neglect of the collective sector often led to heavy losses, while the campesinos individually might be making spectacular profits, usually through the black market.

A lot of resources were spent on ideological education, but in fact only concrete changes affected the campesinos’ outlooks. Courses were combined with technical aid, on the assumption that socialism must be seen to give results. We emphasized that a collective system would raise their returns, not just their ideological standards.

Up to this point they could be sympathetic. The problems began with the question of how to divide the profits. This brings me back to the historical, transitional nature of that moment – one in which I just don’t think that this problem could have been solved successfully. Expecting campesinos to share their profits was asking the impossible, while capitalism was still the rule. Their situation is quite different from that of a factory, which workers don’t see as divisible into separate interests or set apart from the wider society – they have contacts in it and feel that they belong to a class, not just to a productive unit. Not so the campesinos. We’d spend weeks discussing collective work. We’d put it like this. ‘How much will this land produce if one of you plants lettuces here, and another plants lentils over there? Compared to the yield if you all plant and work it together?’ They were sometimes convinced, but it rarely lasted.

The nearest we got to socialist patterns was with the system of discipline which developed in some CERAs. Often it was more rigid than under the old landlord, as the campesinos now saw it as a question of common interest. In some cases drunkenness, even on Sunday – almost a
Campesino tradition – was regarded as possible grounds for expulsion, as it meant that the drinker might be unfit for work on Monday. One campesino told me that on his CERA this got to the point where they weren’t allowed to celebrate or even drink in their own homes without asking the directorate’s leave. Instead they’d arranged to have two big fiestas each year, during which there’d be no work and no restrictions. Systems like this were rare, though campesinos remained suspicious of any authority, even their own, which tried to impose them.

The confrontation: the campesinos in the last months of the PU

For all their doubts on socialism, the campesinos reacted strongly to the right’s increasing mobilization against the PU. Like every confrontation, it brought things out into the open. In the first bosses’ strike, for instance, in October 1972, one good lady in San Fernando, an ex-landowner, drove round inciting the campesinos to strike. As they knew who she was, her actions couldn’t have served us better – it produced the opposite of what she had expected.

The campesinos took a firm stand. ‘It’s obvious enough. The people to keep this country going are the ones who work. The idle rich won’t stop it – if anyone does, it’s going to be us. Otherwise it keeps working. If they want to stop it, we’ll show them it doesn’t depend on them, but on the workers and campesinos’. They meant this. They took over all fuel distribution in the countryside, for example, and transport to and from the city – on tractors, with goods piled high on the trailers. When this cut into their normal work, they added extra shifts at night. There’d never been so much petrol in the countryside as in that October, when the lorry-owners were trying to stop it and all the right was backing them. It enriched the campesinos’ awareness of their own strength like nothing before it. You’d see them everywhere, with their wives and children, loading the trailers with essential goods for distribution. It was almost a holiday atmosphere, full of gaiety and banter, as well as new self-confidence. The second strike was similar – whatever its economic effects, it was another vital lesson for the people’s political awareness.

This is looking ahead, though. After the first bosses’ strike the fascist tendency of the right – the military, politicians, businessmen and the lorry-owners – was becoming more apparent. Campesino leaders got together to renew and extend the distribution measures which they’d developed in October. They now established rural distribution centres (centros de abastecimiento rural), warehouses at central points to which campesinos brought their products and sold them at official prices. They implemented these centres themselves, and they were popular and successful. Despite the right-wing propaganda and threats and sabotage against them, they kept food items available at official prices.

This new-found strength was centred on the campesino councils (consejos). These combined all the campesino organizations in the area, as well as non-organized campesinos: rural wage-labourers, sharecroppers, smallholders from the reformed sector and so on. Their role was seen in different ways by the different forces within the left. The PU leadership saw the councils as spokesmen for government policy – as a means of participation, yes, but within the dominant strategy of gradualism and non-provocation. Others within the PU regarded them as the seeds of what they described as popular power in the countryside – a necessary antidote to a government compromised, in their view, by working within a bourgeois context. They argued that the PU should devolve a proportion of its powers to these councils created by the base. The reply was that the highest expression of popular power was the PU itself, as a workers’ government, whatever the limitations imposed on it by the bourgeois State. Independent initiatives by ‘popular power’ organizations – or, in effect, the parties behind them – were a dangerous parallelism. At worst a betrayal of the PU.

This was one of the issues that split the MAPU and led to the MOC, which I myself joined. Broadly speaking, I was convinced by the PU leadership’s position, in terms of my own experience. In San Fernando the issue was something of a stalemate. The campesino council just didn’t function as an organ of ‘popular power’ in the sense of taking independent, effective decisions. Partly because it was given no such power, but also because of its composition. In the countryside generally, few campesinos are wage-earners. There was thus no means for this one truly revolutionary
sector to be the vanguard of the council. It was dominated by smallholders, including the cooperative sector – a group with decreasing sympathy for a revolutionary process. To my mind devolution to it could therefore even have strengthened the right. In any case our local council didn’t urge it.

Nevertheless the campesinos were being increasingly radicalized. This was obvious in the mid-term congressional elections in March 1973. As elsewhere these usually go against the government parties, but this time the whole working class, campesinos included, was on the offensive not against the PU, but against those sabotaging its efforts. There was inflation, food shortages – the ideal preconditions for a government defeat. Yet by now, people understood that these were not the government’s fault, but that of the right and the bourgeoisie. With three years’ experience the campesinos could now see through right-wing propaganda. For instance they’d seen that all the tales about state farms were idiotic. This sort of thing had undermined the right’s traditional credibility. If anything, their propaganda now had a negative effect. The campesinos noted carefully the opposition’s stated aim of winning the two-thirds control of Congress needed to impeach Allende. ‘They want to throw comrade Allende out, we won’t let them do it’. This simple argument was a real mobilizer. ‘They want to throw Allende out because of the expropriations. They won’t, because we’re going to defend him’.

Traditionally the campesinos had always voted as their landlord ordered. ‘So-and-so’s the one,’ he’d say. The campesino simply had no other source of information, like activists or union leaders – the landlord forbade them to enter his property. All this had been changing since 1970, mainly in the PU’s favour – the Christian Democrats’ hold declined as the campesinos recognized their increasingly right-wing position, in alliance with the National Party. This even came to the point of their driving out campesino spokesmen for the Christian Democrats, and telling them never to come back. They rightly saw them as allies of their former landlords, and this was something they couldn’t forgive them. In one case a right-wing senator was visiting a former landlord, who summoned the local campesinos to hear him. But as soon as he started to speak – and this was unimaginable a few years back – the campesinos shouted him down, so that finally he had to leave. With his tail between his legs, as the campesinos put it. This incident made quite an impact – rumours travel fast in the countryside, and this candidate ended up with hardly a single vote from the area.

The PU’s rural vote was a marked improvement on 1970, despite the problems we were facing. But this, if anything, reinforced the determination of the right. Its boycott of agricultural production had been highly organized from the outset. While the reforms were criticized for causing shortages, the real reasons for them were quite different. As soon as Allende came to power, the ranchers started removing their cattle over the border to Argentina: stocks were soon halved. When landlords knew that they were due for expropriation, they immediately stopped planting and removed the machinery etc. The campesinos’ answer was resolute. Often, to maintain production, they’d go and plant with their bare hands. Otherwise production for the whole season would be lost. Up to 1972 this sabotage by landlords did produce very serious problems, but subsequently the balance was turning. Production schedules went up steeply in San Fernando. Take wheat, for example. By August 1973 we had already exceeded output for the whole of the previous year, and we still had a second crop to come. All this fell into the hands of the junta.

What we underestimated was the right’s adaptability. The National Agricultural Society, once the preserve of the biggest landowners, became an increasingly militant organ of all the agricultural employers. It mobilized increasingly widely, especially at local levels. In San Fernando, immediately after the 1973 elections, small landowners’ associations began to develop. These were directed by the former bigger owners, some of whom still had their reserve. The other members had anything down to a few hectares. It was on this basis that fascism began to develop in the countryside, inspired by the big bourgeoisie, but using the fears which they aroused among smaller owners.

At first this movement was less violent than in many other areas. But as agitation, it was efficient. Once when I was using the phone at a property being expropriated, I saw on the table the owner’s instructions for mobilizing the smaller owners for actions against the campesinos – a
system of communications and meeting points for their cars and tractors. As time went on they turned their attention to the cooperatives, even. Inflation, the profits of the black market, the shortage of inputs, all the factors resulting from producers’ boycotts, contributed to this alliance. But we could do very little about it. Its basic strength lay outside the country, in the cities and at the national – and international – political level.

The terror and the coup in San Fernando

The March elections convinced the right that their chances of retaining power by legal means were now past history. Their first response was the tancazo, the armoured regiment’s rebellion. Like the stoppage earlier, this produced some positive results for the left. As always it was events, not theories, which raised popular awareness. The campesinos stood unhesitatingly by the PU. As soon as we heard of the rebellion all rural properties were occupied, in accordance with the CUT’s instructions. These provided for a general strike and occupation of factories and land in the event of a military coup. It was one mass occupation. The campesinos were ready to defend Allende with their lives. The whole thing was over by midday, but from that moment on campesino leaders were increasingly aware of the crisis. Whenever Allende or other PU leaders mentioned the need to maintain production, the response was immediate. They starting working incredible hours including night shifts. They held back on demands for price increases and stepped up direct distribution, independent of private retailers.

This was their mood when the final stoppage of the lorry-owners, retailers and professionals began in July and August. The right responded with the terror campaign which turned out as a prelude to the coup. When the campesinos went out with their tractors, they were stoned by organized fascist bands. By now the military and police were just standing by and watching all this, and most campesinos were unarmed. They kept trying to get produce through to the towns, but soon they were having to turn back daily.

In San Fernando the terror mounted. Enormous explosions shook the town almost every night. A few minutes later the local right-wing radio station would announce the result. ‘The bomb that just went off was in the house of so-and-so, municipal councillor, member of such-and-such a party’ – invariably one of the PU parties. Five minutes later another explosion, and a similar radio announcement. It was clearly a run-up to the coup, a systematic intimidation of PU supporters. It created an atmosphere of total terror. No one slept. PU supporters patrolled the streets but to little avail. My house was bombed twice. The second time the louts who’d thrown the bomb were detained, but soon afterwards they released them. They didn’t even take their names. We put the children to sleep elsewhere and sealed all the windows and doors – those last few weeks were a time of sheer terror. The fascists’ plan was working perfectly. When the coup finally came, most people were so intimidated that mass resistance was out of the question, despite the CUT’s long-standing instructions.

By mid-morning on 11 September, the military had taken over all communications in the area. There was no contact with the government, and the radio began blaring the military’s fascist propaganda. They threatened to shoot every single resistor, armed or unarmed. To my knowledge there was only one case of armed resistance in the area, but it was a massacre – campesinos resisting with .22s against machine guns. No one survived. Many people did stay in their places of work, offering the passive resistance agreed on. The military went round systematically ordering everyone to leave, then executed those who refused. They included many campesinos whom I had come to know in the area.

I was arrested two days later. My interrogation was a farce, because the idiots questioning me hardly understood their own questions. They beat me about a lot, demanding a confession that I was a Marxist, and asking me where ‘the weapons’ were. They used all the standard tricks. Once two of them were interrogating me with another comrade, for instance, and one took him out and I heard a shot, and the other who’d stayed with me said: ‘He’s dead, you’d better talk fast’. And so it went on. I was there for ten days before I got out, by means which I can’t now disclose. There were nearly three hundred of us in a room about ten by twenty metres. We were literally piled on top of one another. I got off lightly. Other comrades were tortured daily. Some had their arms broken, others their teeth. Some disappeared. Several went out of their minds, mainly those who were
submitted to simulated executions. They were blindfolded, put up against
the wall and given the last sacraments, then blank rounds were shot. Some
of them, even after it was over, were convinced that they were dead.
Imagining everything was some dream. Most of us were tortured with
electric shocks. One comrade was stripped and hung by his feet from the
ceiling and strangled so violently that his throat was reduced to a pulp. It
was like a nightmare underworld, Dantesque. In the evening they’d let us
out for a while, then we’d go back in to try to sleep, piled on top of one
another. To wear us down, they kept loudspeakers blaring all night with
military marches and propaganda.

One thing we noticed was that few key activists were there. This kept
people’s spirits up – it suggested that the party structure was intact. Most of
the prisoners were from the base – campesinos and workers. The sense of
solidarity was as deep, perhaps deeper than before. Sometimes, in the
evenings, when people’s spirits often went down, some of the comrades
would put on charades, to see us through. The little food we got was shared.
When I first arrived, at two in the morning, two or three campesinos offered
to share their ponchos with me, as the guards hadn’t given us blankets.

Even after I got out it was hard to come by information. But I did
find out that the military had summoned surviving campesino leaders and
told them that there would be no changes: that the junta wasn’t against them
and the expropriations would stand. Soon afterwards, though, properties
were handed back to their former owners. In spite of the terror, the news
spread like wildfire. Some of the better-off campesinos were seduced by the
promise of firm land titles, but very soon they were having to sell them, and
realizing that they were returning to the old system of land concentration.
Meantime those who did speak out began disappearing. The repression was
getting more systematic.

But so too was the determination of most campesinos, even then. One
shouldn’t underestimate the military, at least their powers of repression. But
at the same time it would be a mistake to forget the half a century behind
the workers’ movement in Chile, as well as what happened in those three
years. Whatever they do, they can’t be repressed.

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The Campesinos and Popular Power: building the revolutionary
alliance

Speaker: PEPE, 31, MAPU activist who worked for INDAP, the Agrarian
Development Institute, in southern Chile and later in the central
provinces of Aconcagua and Valparaiso

Experiences in southern Chile: the Christian Democrat reforms and the
case for a revolutionary programme

In 1965 I started working as an agronomist in southern Chile, in the
province of Cautin, for INDAP – the agency dealing with technical aspects
of the agrarian reforms of Frei. The local campesinos were some of the
poorest in the country. Many are Mapuches, indigenous Indians, the only
ones who resisted the Spaniards right into the nineteenth century. Once they
were finally defeated, they were confined to reservations (reducciones).
These were too small to support the number of people on them, and usually
comprised the worst land. The best of it went to the big landowners, and
these were forever cheating the Indians out of what little land they still had.
Typically they’d lend them money, then demand their land as repayment.
Or they’d get them drunk and persuade them to sell it. Instead of protecting
Mapuche interests, the Institute of Indian Affairs (Instituto de Asuntos
Indígenas) was controlled by the right and legalized these transfers of land,
which were known as running the fences forward (corridas de cerco).
Often they were just that – boundary markers would be moved, and their
new positions legally sanctioned.

In this way the Mapuches were pushed to the margins of Chilean
society. Better-off families had maybe one hectare, some even less than a
quarter of a hectare. This they supplemented by working on the big estates
for miserable wages, the lowest in Chile. They were always on the hunger
line and hardly felt themselves to be Chilean. Many of them detested
‘Spaniards’, as they still called non-Mapuches. The feeling was mutual.
Other Chileans regarded them as drunkards and thieves, and they
sometimes did have to steal to avoid starvation. They had no effective rights