Part II - The countryside

5. The Campesinos and popular power: building the revolutionary alliance

Pepe
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 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
as workers. Their employment was temporary, and a working day was from dawn till dusk, often fourteen hours. Minimum wage laws were ignored and their housing and health conditions were terrible. They had no bargaining power. If the farms had been smaller and closer together, they might have been able to organize, but conditions made this difficult – the distances, working hours, the hunger.

The Christian Democrat reforms made little difference in Cautín. Many properties were just under the eighty-hectare limit, and the owners of the bigger ones divided them among their children, to avoid expropriation. Overall the reforms were token, often opportunist. For instance, take the law for the unionization of rural workers – it actually weakened them. Not only was it difficult for them even to form a branch – which had to have a hundred members – but the Christian Democrats founded two confederations, so that those who were unionized could never put their weight together. In a typical zone you’d find one branch belonging to Triunfo Campesino, another to Libertad – both Christian Democrat-controlled – and a third belonging to the left’s Ranquil. Probably there’d also be a smallholders’ association (Asociación de Pequeños Agricultores), say four in all. They couldn’t possibly face up to the big landowners’ association, the National Agricultural Society (Sociedad Nacional de Agricultura), controlled by the right-wing National Party.

Even INDAP’s technical assistance was paternalistic and ineffective. It consisted mainly of credits, which smallholders often couldn’t pay back – it seemed little more than a buying-off process, to keep them from absolute hunger and protest. This made many of us younger members of INDAP deeply frustrated. We’d gone into this field with some ideals, though many of us, including myself, had no political commitments. These experiences produced them. Many of us joined the MAPU, looking to its partly urban base to help build the worker-campesino alliance. Only this, we felt, would provide reforms to genuinely affect the Mapuches and others like them.

I was responsible for eighteen campesino committees, or provisional union branches, some consisting of Mapuches, others outside the Mapuche areas. Each had sixty to eighty members, the purpose being to give them technical help and credit. It was difficult work. Their every involvement with Chilean society had meant increased exploitation: first we had to convince them that we weren’t there to steal their land, as experience led them to expect. Their first instinct was to avoid us, or ask us to leave the reservations. At first this really upset me.

I later learnt to go slowly. I’d go round the reservation with them, where they were going, not where I wanted to, or I’d work with them, at their manual work, without at first trying to make any changes. Eventually they’d take me to their homes. Sometimes I’d stay there, and they’d get to know and trust me. Only then I’d suggest a meeting of all the members of the reservation, or of all the local campesinos. I’d put it to them that our technical assistance wasn’t enough, that they’d have to struggle for more basic changes. For the restoration of their land. For better terms of employment. For a local school – many Mapuche children had no means of getting to one. For the prompt reform of the big estates, so that future changes could be based on local planning, not just piecemeal.

The campesinos already knew that these were the important issues, but now they saw that some of us were recognizing them – and this offered new possibilities. They began to form campesino councils of all the committees and union branches in an area, to develop joint programmes – the expropriation of particular estates, the building of a road and so on. The councils launched land occupations to force expropriations through before the landowners subdivided. This already foreshadowed the PU situation, when it was equally true that real changes depended on pressure from below, from campesino councils etc. Of course, these councils and their proposals were beyond INDAP’s official programme, and much more revolutionary. Meanwhile INDAP was recruiting new staff through the usual Christian Democrat channels; but most of these were young and rapidly came to share our position, because it arose from results, not theory. Like I said, I and many others still had no party affiliation, though I felt myself to belong to the left. When the councils were formed and the land occupations began, we were immediately accused of being ‘Communists and subversives’. All sorts of pressures were put on us, but they only brought us closer together and forced us to define our position.
Of course this was happening elsewhere in Chile – I’m talking now of 1968-9, the dose of the Christian Democrat period. One national result was the formation of the MAPU, which most of the younger staff of INDAP immediately joined in Cautin. This provoked a sharp reaction from our Christian Democrat superiors. They harassed us in every way, transferring us from one region to another, to try and force our resignations. So INDAP struck, or rather most of its junior staff did. We occupied its offices throughout Chile. In Cautin we even held a joint meeting of all the councils in the province. This was in Lautaro, in May 1970. The campesinos supported us fully, and helped us to occupy the offices. Of course they were active in other provinces, but nowhere else were they so organized. Later there was an inquiry, and I was charged with being responsible.

The next day they transferred me to San Felipe, in Aconcagua, a thousand kilometres from Lautaro, way up in the Central Valley. They gave me four days to get there. Other comrades were also transferred. We consulted with the campesinos – many of their leaders were now members of MAPU. They offered to fight to keep us there, by reoccupying the INDAP offices. The government could hardly overreact with the elections in the air. But we decided that mass pressures should all be turned towards the campaign – the important thing was that the campesinos had discovered their strength. Individuals were less important, and the same work had to be done elsewhere.

So in May 1970 I arrived in Aconcagua. I brought with me the lesson I’d learned in Cautin – that the only means of changing the campesinos’ lives was a revolutionary programme, and that this meant strength and pressure from below, through the campesinos’ own organizations.

Aconcagua: the campesinos and the elections

Aconcagua’s very different. It’s a wealthy agricultural zone of medium as well as poor smallholders, alongside the usual big estates. It was a Christian Democrat stronghold. Of the thirty-three functionaries in INDAP, all but one were Christian Democrats. They also controlled the rural unions, apart from a couple belonging to Ranquil, the left-wing confederation. On most estates there was no union or provisional workers’ committee – the old order was unchanged and there was no way of penetrating them. The smallholders also had some associations, but among these, too, the left was weak. The MAPU was virtually nonexistent.

Luckily, though, my closest colleague was also disillusioned with the Christian Democrat reforms. We became close friends and fairly soon he joined the MAPU. I was dealing with the technical and he with the social organization. By the time of the election campaign we’d already put the MAPU’s position across, and some campesino leaders were with us.

Though this was a wealthy area, its social conditions were as bad as Cautin’s. The agrarian reform had made little impact. Wages were wretched. The campesinos houses, as everywhere in the Central Valley, were made of adobe one-room houses, sometimes divided by a curtain, with a lean-to kitchen. In heavy rain they often collapsed.

Our work began in Catemu, a smallholders’ zone still dominated by large estates. The smallholders wanted to form a committee to channel technical assistance. We went there from INDAP to supervise elections to it. In the discussions three smallholders insisted that real changes in the area depended first and foremost on expropriating the estates. As the reforms were going so slowly, they concluded that this would depend on themselves and not on public functionaries. These three and two other young people were elected as officers of the committee. They proved vital to all our work in the area.

Very soon they were members of the MAPU, and helping us in the campaign for Allende. They set out to convince the other smallholders and workers on the neighbouring estates that there had to be effective changes. This work was clandestine – if it had been open, we’d have been banned from the estates. These three comrades would contact friends on an estate, and we’d meet in one of their houses at night. We went on foot, as a vehicle would have attracted attention. Three or four campesinos would be waiting and often we’d talk through the night. We’d discuss how to press for basic changes if the PU were elected, and how the Christian Democrats had obstructed them by dividing the unions. The Catemu comrades did most of
the talking. They'd put it quite simply to the others: how could they expect changes from Christian Democrat politicians, when these were often landlords or their relatives, or lawyers?

Without these three we’d have got nowhere. They made all the contacts. As public functionaries we weren’t allowed to be politically active, though of course the Christian Democrats were – but they were in power. But the situation was also difficult for the three comrades – many a campesino had been bought with Christian Democrat favours. They had to tread as carefully as we did. As the weeks went by, we developed PU cells on most estates. We never held public meetings – these cells would continue on their own, each person talking to those he knew well.

The PU’s base grew rapidly from these beginnings in Catemu. It also spread to the tiny mines in the sierra, with only a few workers each. Many of them came from estates, so this was another good source of contacts. They also helped us penetrate the asentamientos. Often these were harder ground than even the unreformed estates. The Christian Democrats, after all, had made them miniature landowners. An asentamiento of a hundred people might have only two or three left sympathizers. These comrades from the mines had courage, as the Christian Democrats had organized a real Mafia in these strongholds. If they discovered left activists on an asentamiento, they’d give them a hiding. Campesinos don’t mess about in these matters – no talk, just blows. Our advantage was the sharp decline of the Christian Democrats nationally. Even Christian Democrat campesinos preferred Allende to the National Party’s Alessandri.

Nevertheless, the PU made few gains in Aconcagua. This was true of most of the countryside, with the Christian Democrats’ hold on it. These comrades’ help did win new votes though. More important, we laid the basis for what followed, with the PU in power.

Launching and defining the struggle: unionization and class alliance

Like any government the PU felt that only its supporters would implement its programme fully. Within a short while I was head of INDAP in Aconcagua. Although most of its staff were still Christian Democrats, others did come over to us. Of course this made it much easier to launch the PU’s measures.

The first was on which all sectors of the left agreed; to increase unionization among the workers on estates, including those below eighty hectares which were exempt from expropriation. The MAPU’s later position went beyond this; to combine all types of rural workers into campesino councils, and over this there was disagreement, particularly with the Communist Party. However, we were all agreed on this prior need for unionization and for completing the expropriation of properties over eighty hectares. In the MAPU’s view this would have to be backed with land occupations if necessary – if the landowners opposed it, or if CORA hesitated, as the Christian Democrats still controlled it. So during this first year our target was the large estate.

The Christian Democrats’ recognition of rural unions was only weakly implemented. In Aconcagua in 1970, less than a third of rural workers were unionized. This was INDAP’s first priority. The Christian Democrat Confederation, Triunfo Campesino, was strongest in the area and so we urged its leaders to help us. We’d call meetings in non-unionized areas to persuade the campesinos to form one. Once a hundred wanted to join, elections were held for the positions in the union, which was then legally recognized.

We spent days with them, mapping out a programme. INDAP’s resources were put at their disposal, and we went round the farms and estates together. The first step was to form a workers’ committee on each unit. On the big estates this committee would then demand expropriation; on smaller ones it would organize to improve the wages and working conditions.

The landowners were all against unionization; they had no legal right to obstruct it but they invariably did so. Their powers of intimidation were enormous. Whatever the law, the only authority known to the average campesino was the landlord (patrón). So we still had to count on discreet persuasion. The campesinos’ first thought was usually the landlord’s reaction to unionization. In most cases it was quite clear; any worker who
joined a union was out – out of a job, out of his house, and off his plot of land on the farm, where he’d probably lived all his life, hardly knowing even the nearest town.

I remember a typical incident in this campaign for unionization. I arrived at a farm of some sixty hectares with representatives from the Triunfo Campesino. The owner met us at the gate. The foreman and some workers were with him. They were armed and had two mastiffs on a leash. The neighbouring farmer must have sent word that we were coming. The owner didn’t even open the gate. ‘I know who you are. You’re the agitators who are driving the owners off their land. Get out, or I’ll set the dogs on you’. So I showed him my INDAP papers and explained that we’d come about unionization, an official government measure. This had nothing to do with expropriation, we explained. So he turned to the workers. ‘Do you need a union? Do you have any problems?’ ‘No, sir’. ‘Tell the Communists you don’t need a union’. ‘We don’t need a union’. So I explained that he had no right to forbid us to enter. He could attend the meeting but if he went on threatening us, he was putting himself above the law and I couldn’t answer for the consequences. Reluctantly he let us in, and heard us talk to the dozen or so workers. As usual we explained to them what unionization was about – their rights on wages, housing, working conditions etc. We told them a branch was being formed at a meeting that night, outside the farm. We asked them if they had any questions or problems which they wanted discussed, but they said no – the landlord was still there. We made it clear that if he prevented them from attending, the union could take legal action.

About half of them came, the young people mostly. I talked to them, but they said very little. They were nervous and kept to themselves. Then, as the hall filled up, they began to mix with the others and talk. In the end there were over a hundred campesinos, so we were able to form the union, including them as members. Afterwards we talked again, about the committee they’d have to form, to negotiate with their landlord. Their manner had changed. Seeing a hundred of their comrades from other farms, some known to them, had given them confidence already. They told me what the landlord had always said about unionization – if they meddled in it, they’d be out, and he’d ensure that they’d never get work on any other farm in the province. And now they admitted that they’d always had problems – wages way below the minimum, bad housing, long hours, threats from the foremen. They went back and formed the committee, eventually all the workers joined, and conditions improved dramatically.

Results like these were our best propaganda. Within two years 80 per cent of rural workers in Aconcagua were unionized, but farm by farm, struggle by struggle. Right to the end we had little impact on the more isolated farms, where the workers remained in the landlord’s grip. For the others, though, it was broken. He was now obliged to negotiate with union officials, in front of the workers and with witnesses to every agreement. As the unions got stronger, the owners had to agree to the legal norms – or they faced a strike with support from other union members, or even an occupation of the farm. The servility of the past almost vanished.

Typically, the owners who resisted weren’t the wealthiest – they were often those with some sixty hectares, and perhaps a dozen workers. Although they weren’t due for expropriation, the bigger landowners dominated them. Their National Agricultural Society convinced these medium-sized owners that they would be expropriated and encouraged them to boycott production. And they believed them, although they were actually benefiting from the increased demand for food and better technical assistance. These fears were self-fulfilling. We in the MAPU were convinced that this would always be their position, that as the new rural bourgeoisie, they would boycott the PU, come what may. So we did feel that this sector would have to be expropriated for the reforms to be successful.

This raises the whole question of strategies for the rural sector among the PU parties. As I said, all of them were agreed on the need for further unionization – as were some Christian Democrats. But this was only the beginning. It raised the question of unionization for what end, apart from improving working conditions? We insisted that unionization should be the keystone of socialist goals: that unions should oppose the landowners’ boycotts, with occupations if necessary, they should press for a new law to expropriate all properties above forty, not just eighty hectares; that these should form large CERAs, as a means of effective planning; that this whole
programme should come from initiatives from below, from the campesino councils. In terms of a class alliance we wanted to combine the full strength of the exploited – the workers, landless and smallest owners – against even the middle bourgeoisie, whom the Communists wanted to conciliate. We believed that such conciliation would prejudice any effective planning, not just the prospect of socialism.

Towards a revolutionary strategy: land occupations, the CERAs and the rise of the campesino councils

The work of unionization brought these questions to the fore. The only left-wing confederation of rural unions was Ranquil, controlled by the Communist and Socialist parties. They urged the unions to align with the CUT and with their conciliation of the medium-size owners who, as we saw it, would never accept their overtures anyway. These meant, for example, that the unions shouldn’t challenge landowners’ boycotts on production; that occupations should be discouraged, and less emphasis placed on CERAs and genuine participation by the campesino councils. Whereas we argued that conciliatory unionism was a gift for the Christian Democrats – as their policy was also reformist, new unions still joined their confederations. This seemed inevitable, unless we offered more drastic changes through campesino participation. So we did our best to put this across in our dealings with unionization.

This too meant hours of talking to campesino leaders. Our eventual plan was to found a new confederation to press for a revolutionary programme. We didn’t present this to campesinos in terms of the need for socialism for its own sake. We tried to show them that only these policies would bring practical results. For instance, if there were just conciliatory, sectional unions, instead of campesino councils – uniting smallholders, sharecroppers (medieros), wage-earners, asentamientos and CERAs – how could they press for their common interests? For a new school, say. For a road, or for the expropriation of a landowner diverting their water. For all of them real changes depended on collective pressure. We’d put it to them that the first step in this direction was a new confederation.

Once again we were supported by the comrades at Catemu. They took the initiative in proposing a local campesino council. Their leaders needed no persuasion, but they also had a practical case: they’d realized that only these policies would bring improvements – in their case a school and effective irrigation system. We always stressed this point in meetings, which these comrades continued arranging. Often the most important were with perhaps three or four union leaders. Generally they’d been elected not on a political basis, but because they were known and trusted by the other campesinos. To make headway with them, we had now to win their trust. The Catemu comrades helped us in this. They made the concrete issues central and the leaders went back and raised them in their unions.

By mid 1971 our case for the ‘new agrarian reform’ was winning over many of them, though formally they still belonged to the Triunfo Campesino. The same was happening in other provinces where the MAPU was strong. In 1971 the Triunfo held its congress at Chiloé in southern Chile, and our supporters spoke out together. They demanded expropriation of all holdings over forty hectares, and increased powers for the campesino councils. We’d known that these measures would never get through – the Christian Democrats opposed any further expropriations – but a third of the delegates walked out and formed a new confederation: Worker-Campesino Unity (Confederación Unidad Obrero-Campesino). Local federations were formed in each province, mostly under MAPU leadership. Ranquil’s leaders reserved their judgement. They welcomed the Christian Democrats’ setback, but were also aware of the implications for policies within the left.

We were now better able to raise our demands. The first was for the rapid completion of the programme for the expropriation of properties over eighty hectares. We differed from the MIR on this question. Their occupations, often of smaller properties, were too spontaneous and isolated. Since the land reform existed, the first requirement was to advance within the existing legal framework. This meant occupations, but only to pressure the state apparatus into a more effective approach over holdings due for expropriation. We wanted to prevent landowners from evading reform by sub-dividing and intimidating their workers; to ensure that neighbouring
holdings were expropriated jointly and converted into productive CERAs. Otherwise there could be little coordinated planning.

Our provincial federation was called ‘Liberty and Progress’. It first planned its demands for expropriations. These would be backed with occupations if necessary – as proved the case, since the CORA bureaucracy still resisted popular pressure. The Catemu smallholders and unions launched the first of these occupations, under the federation’s direction.

The properties were selected on the basis of size and working conditions. We also stressed that their joint expropriation would facilitate local planning. The landowners had already reacted to this prospect by beating their workers and getting them gaoled on trumped-up charges. So one morning they woke up to find their properties occupied. The campesinos had closed all access, set up several Chilean flags and demanded official intervention. This meant that CORA and INDAP officials had to go and mediate between the owners and the campesinos. I was there in my official capacity, when one of the landowners arrived. The campesinos forbade him to enter. For perhaps the first time ever, one of them stood up and spoke before he did. ‘You can’t come in. We’re occupying the property because you’ve been boycotting production and refusing us our rights. Now we’ll work it for ourselves. We’re demanding its expropriation. We won’t be discussing it with you, except through the land-reform authorities’.

This really threw the landlord off balance. The most he’d ever been used to hear from a campesino was ‘good morning sir’, and here they were telling him to get lost. Although they abused their workers, landlords regarded them as children, and expected them to reciprocate with subservience and complete dependence. And suddenly, this. The landlord went purple, looked round and saw me and the others from INDAP. He must have thought that if he could deal with us, everything would return to normal. He went straight to his car and came running back with a revolver he was a cousin of Pinochet, imagine the fury of someone like that being turned off his land by his own campesinos. He made no secret of his intentions, waving the revolver at us, shouting his head off. ‘They’re the ones, those agitators, they’re the ones who’ve caused this trouble. The workers on this farm have always been loyal, and you’ve stirred them up, I’ll kill you’. He was on the point of firing when three of his workers grabbed the revolver and threw him down. Now it was their turn to talk.

“You’ve had this coming to you, thinking you could exploit us for ever. You thought we were stupid, but we’re not. If we seem so, that’s your doing’. Then they handed him over to the police, as he was threatening to kill them now. This was nothing unique – campesino leaders and left-wing officials were constantly threatened by the landowners, and after the coup, of course, many were murdered.

Well, all these properties were rapidly expropriated, without the owners being able to subdivide or run them down first. We went on to further occupations, all planned in the same way, some twelve altogether. These widened support for the federation and its programme. The Communist Party and Ranquil opposed them, because occupations were ‘illegal’, but this only made our position clearer, as the results were indisputable.

The main one was that the CERAs were a success in Aconcagua. Following expropriation the union leaders and INDAP officials got down to planning how to work the various farms together – the number of workers to be involved, which crops to grow, credits, marketing, electing a directorate etc. Unlike the asentamientos, CERAs abolished the boundaries of former holdings, and hence the various distinctions and privileges deriving from them. Above all they had no employees in the capitalist sense. A typical asentamiento would have, say, twenty members, with exclusive control of decisions and profits, and another twenty wage labourers, with no such rights – former temporary workers (afuerinos) full members’ sons and so on. CERAs involved all these former categories on a strictly equal basis. Also, women had full voting rights, while they had none in asentamientos. The other aspect was economic. In our view the need to maintain production would be better served by this larger scale, collective system, and indeed it was. The CERAs were obliged to invest their profits and sell their products at official, not black-market prices. They brought equal benefits to all their members, to their region and to the economy generally.
Aconcagua wasn’t typical, though. While CERAs were part of the PU’s official programme, they were token where expropriations were bureaucratic and isolated. This prevented planning and made CERAs weak because their members had not been involved in collective action. As on the asentamientos, they produced inefficiently and sold their products on the black market, exclusively in their own interests. This happened especially in provinces where official support for them was lacking – those dominated by the Communist Party and its MAPU sympathizers, who subsequently formed the MOC. Their few CERAs drifted away from collective production, even sub-dividing the land, and made little investment. They also had discipline problems, with drink and absenteeism etc., because they lacked a collective ethos.

Also in these areas, and for the same political reasons, the campesino councils were weaker, and brought no pressure on the CERAs to operate in everyone’s interests. The councils were also officially recognized as consultative bodies combining all the exploited sectors. Again, though, they were only effective where the reforms had been pushed from below by all these sectors. In other areas, they had only union delegates and existed almost only on paper. They were instruments of the bureaucracy, rather than a source of mass pressure for genuinely socialist measures.

In Aconcagua it was the unions belonging to our federation which were most active in the councils. These were organized in the following way, to maximize participation. Each council was based on a zone, with delegates from each type of unit – CERAs, asentamientos, unions and smallholders’ associations – and local delegates, all elected. They met each month to discuss local problems, dealt with meanwhile by sub-committees: production, marketing, planning, credits and defence were the main ones. They also had a political commission. Delegates would report back to assemblies within their area or organization. Hence all these cooperated over matters of common interest, particularly local planning – schools, roads and water supplies and so on. The production front, for example, would seek advice on the best source of seeds and arrange to get them. They also exchanged ideas – for instance, the Catemu comrades took up a suggestion for processing citrus, instead of selling their fruit at low prices to profiteering middlemen.

Catemu was typical of how the councils originated from practical issues which took on a political meaning. The smallholders there had several problems which might have swung them against the PU, if it failed to offer any solutions. First, they had no local school – they got one through the council. They also had irrigation problems, because bigger landowners up the valley diverted the water. This too was solved, though not without a confrontation – but this strengthened commitment to the council. As in Cautín before 1970, they realized that unity was their one strength. You’d often hear campesinos say; ‘There’s so many of us, yet we’re so weak – why?’ They realized that the answer was their traditional fragmentation, and so we overcame it. The council united the different sectors, especially smallholders and wage-earners, which had never before combined against the same exploitative system.

Apart from Catemu, the wage-earners’ unions were usually the vanguard on these issues. For instance, the irrigation problem was solved mainly by pressure from workers on the farms concerned, when the issue had been raised in the council. At first the big owners resisted, but the unions forced them to give way. This militancy aroused disagreement over the councils among the various political parties. The Communists argued that they were a form of parallelism – that they were competing with the government and the CUT. Our view was that they were strengthening the PU with popular pressure: that they would align it with popular interests, instead of reform and bureaucratism.

As the political crisis deepened, this offered a means of defending the government through a popular power structure, in which provincial councils – combining those of different zones – would link up with the industrial cordons. In Aconcagua a provincial council was formed by mid-1972. This combined nine local ones, with a membership of some five or six thousand. All of them were already prepared to defend the PU if necessary. To our mind the Communist Party’s opposition to such popular organizations indicated its divorce from the base and its failure to grasp the problems of power.
In 1972 I left Aconcagua for Valparaiso, though I continued working in both. My transfer was a party decision. In Valparaiso province *campesino* organization was weak; its delegates to the Chiloé congress hadn’t joined our confederation. Its CORA and INDAP offices were dominated by the Communist Party. A couple of councils did exist, but only on paper. They consisted merely of some union and *asentamiento* delegates, who never consulted with their base. They rarely met, and did little more than sanction bureaucratic decisions. There’d been no attempt to build an alliance including the sharecroppers and small-holders. This left them exposed to the propaganda of the right, which local officials were conciliating. Even unionization was still very low, because workers hadn’t been mobilized properly. There had been few land occupations, and the whole province had only two CERAs.

This meant that smallholders, for example, were completely isolated. When I arrived, there had just been an earthquake. Many *campesinos*’ houses had collapsed and they were living in appalling conditions. Some prefabricated houses had been sent for, but CORA and INDAP had failed to distribute most of them. In the absence of councils there was little pressure on them to do so. On many *asentamientos* full members had been rehoused, but the non-members were living in shacks. Being unorganized, most of those in this situation were unaware that others shared it.

I and a comrade in INDAP set about remedying this, suggesting to the *campesinos* the need for a grassroots organization to pressure the bureaucracy. The problem of the Communist Party’s opposition to such organizations, in favour of subordination to the CUT, was the latter’s weakness at the local level. We were insisting that this level was crucial, not only because of these practical problems, but as a base for the PU.

Within weeks, as we dealt with the housing problem, several new unions were formed. These went on to cooperate in forming *campesino* councils. These were elected by the base, instead of involving union officials, as did the two existing councils – officials who typically held their positions because of their influence in party circles. The first of these new councils were in Limache and Quilpue. Like those in Aconcagua, they demanded the final expropriation of all properties over eighty hectares. This was in order to incorporate them into their overall plans for their areas. CORA resisted these demands, which led again to land occupations. Once more these were carefully planned to include several neighbouring units, which would then form a CERA. The number of CERAs grew month by month, as did the *campesino* councils. By late 1972 they were setting the pace of agrarian reform throughout the province; the bureaucrats who had failed for so long had virtually no choice in the matter.

The result was that I was publicly denounced, and the comrade working with me sacked, since he was junior to me. Immediately the Limache council organized a mass protest. They seized the main road out of Limache and demanded his reinstatement, and a meeting with Jacques Chonchol, then Minister of Agriculture. He came and promised an inquiry, but this didn’t satisfy them. One new leader of the council, who until a few months ago had had almost no political experience, got up and berated him. ‘We know all about the bureaucrats. We’re not satisfied with an inquiry unless we’re represented on it. If you’re a revolutionary and this is a revolutionary government, how come everything depends on bureaucrats who don’t listen to us?’ It was the first demonstration on this scale in the area, hundreds of *campesinos* were there, and Chonchol accepted their demands. An inquiry was held in which they took part and the comrade was reinstated. Shortly afterwards the local head of INDAP was replaced by a comrade from the MAPU.

**Worker-campesino unity: the bosses’ strikes and popular power**

When six local councils had been formed in Valparaiso, a provincial one was also established. Its office was in Quillota. Reformists within the PU argued that all this was divisive, but the opposite was the case. For example, many *asentamientos* traditionally influenced by Christian Democrats – and hence opposed to the PU – joined the councils. This won them over politically. The reason was simple. Although the councils demanded that *asentamientos* should improve their wage-labourers’ conditions, they also brought them the benefits of popular pressure. For instance, the provincial council improved marketing and distribution. With INDAP’s help it began exporting new local products. It also organized their
sale from local councils to the urban poblaciones (popular neighbourhoods). This more than outweighed the asentamientos’ previous returns from selling their products on the black market. Successes like this convinced us still further of the PU’s need to rely on its base as a source of strength.

This was confirmed in Aconcagua and Valparaiso when the lorry-owners’ strike began. With INDAP’s trucks at their disposal and these marketing links already established, the provincial councils maintained food supplies to the cities. The trucks hardly stopped throughout the strike. Campesino escorts gave them protection. At this stage they had the upper hand. Though the trucks were sometimes sabotaged or attacked on the road, they usually got through. These experiences also led the councils to take an increasingly vanguard position. They demanded that the PU commandeer the strikers’ lorries and establish a state transport system.

The growth of campesino consciousness in this period was impressive. They grew sharply aware of the question of power. Following the first bosses’ strike, they regularized their contacts with the urban workers and industrial cordons. Many distribution arrangements developed in the strike were maintained. The two sectors held regular consultations, political as well as practical. Campesino participation in the March 1973 elections was higher than it had ever been, especially in Aconcagua. Several left candidates were elected in previously Christian Democrat areas. At the same time the councils were making increasingly political demands. Their leaders held meetings everywhere, linking campesinos’ concerns to the more basic political issues, especially the question of popular power.

We in the MAPU, together with the MIR and sections of the Socialist Party, made this question increasingly central. It was not utopian, but was based precisely on this new popular mobilization. By now most campesinos could see that real benefits depended on their own organization. The right’s propaganda – that ‘the Marxists wanted to take their land and make them work for the state for nothing’ – was made ineffective by what they experienced.

Despite bitterness at the PU’s failure to deal decisively with the tacazo, this mobilization continued right up to the coup. In the second bosses’ strike, the right was far more militant – they could see that the PU was retreating. Yet the provincial councils’ response and that of the cordons was far more developed than in 1972, especially in Valparaiso.

As Aconcagua is less urban, these links were less strong there. It’s also more easily controlled, as the main road out of it goes through a gorge, which the striking lorry-owners blocked. In Valparaiso by this time, though, there were communal commands which combined the councils and industrial cordons into a single working structure. This was what we had always aimed for, in naming our confederation ‘Worker-Campesino Unity’. Between the two strikes the cordons’ workers had helped the councils’ land occupations, and the councils had supplied food to workers occupying factories. In the second bosses’ strike regular convoys were established between Quillota and the cordon Cordillera, in Valparaiso. Workers helped to protect these convoys, which took food to the cordon and manufactures back to Quillota.

By now the government’s attempts at a deal with the Christian Democrats were strengthening the right enormously. Attacks on the convoys became increasingly open and violent. Roads were blocked, though the campesinos often removed the lorries with tractors. On one occasion the lorry-owners fired on one of our trucks and killed the driver. Then they turned it over and set it on fire, with a wounded comrade still inside it. In Quillota the campesinos protested, demanding action from the PU and arms and new powers for the popular organizations.

Although we recognized to the end that factory workers were the vanguard, the campesinos were also central to this struggle. In some ways they were even firmer than factory workers. Less involved in traditional political structures, they tended to go straight to the point in these situations of confrontation – to think not of compromise, but of how to take a firm decision. In several joint meetings of the communal commands, it was they who inspired decisions when the others were still hesitating. The left must realize that the campesinos are fundamental to the revolution in Latin America, within a proletarian alliance.
The councils were increasingly clear about the solution to the crisis. They talked in terms of a popular power through which the masses would take decisions and also provide a defensive system. The plan was for a provincial command which would be elected in its own right from councils and cordons throughout the province. Above all, it would have new powers to defend the government.

The problem was that the government was not consulting with the masses, but with the right. It was buying time and abandoning power, without a struggle.

*The reaction: the coup and the campesinos*

This meant that despite our mobilization, the tide began to turn against us. Organized terrorism was launched against campesino councils. The police no longer intervened, and the campesinos had few weapons.

After the *tancazo*, for instance, when campesinos occupied farms near Quillota which were boycotting production, they were attacked by groups from the fascist Fatherland and Freedom Party. They were armed with machine guns. I was there when they attacked, at midnight, as the police were changing shifts. It was obviously fixed – the first shift left before the other one came to replace them. The campesinos, like the workers in the cities, felt increasingly isolated, except from one another. Without arms, they could make little even of this solidarity. On 4 September they staged a massive demonstration in support of the sailors detained by the navy for having denounced the plans for the coup. The president of the provincial council spoke at this meeting, demanding again that the PU should allow the people to defend it. Demonstrations continued throughout that week in Limache. By now they were regularly under attack, but they refused to be dispersed.

The coup was efficient. I was in Limache. By dawn on the eleventh all communications were cut and the town was surrounded. Two campesino comrades came to take me into hiding. One of them kept me in his home for several days. He kept repeating: ‘How could the PU have ignored us when we were ready to defend them?’ Everything had been prepared, but the party’s orders never reached us.

Four days later I was back in Limache when I was trapped in a house-to-house search. It was the beginning of a year of torture in gaols and concentration camps. From one of them up in the Sierra I could see an *asentamiento* where they’d got new houses after the earthquake. I used to wonder what was happening there, as we had no news of the outside world.

My only contact with the campesinos was with a leader from one of the councils. He was with me in La Legua, one of the boats they use for prisoners in Valparaiso. He’d only become an activist a few months before the coup, and was completely disoriented by the torture, half out of his mind, unclear what was happening. We were next to one another in the hold. But as he began to get used to it, he gradually recovered his senses. We and other comrades began to talk. About the past, about the future. Even in the hold of La Legua, new cells were being formed.