Part III – The shantytowns
6. A Mobilized Shantytown: New Havana

Lavra
A Mobilized Shantytown: New Havana

Speaker: LAVRA, 24, member of the MIR, who was active in the campamento New Havana (Nueva la Habana)

The origins of New Havana

During the Popular Unity period I was politically active in New Havana, a Santiago campamento organized mainly by the MIR. The campamentos are poor housing areas on the fringes of the major cities. They consist mainly of one-room shacks with very little sanitation, running water or electricity. They’re distinct from the poblaciones, or traditional shantytowns, in being somewhat organized. This is usually on a political basis dating from the land occupations which first brought them into being.

Their roots thus lie in the housing shortage common to most South American cities. It’s widely assumed that most people in them are unemployed immigrants from the country, but this is only part of the story. In New Havana many people were regular workers, though typically with unstable jobs, in construction for instance. The point is that the living conditions in these areas aren’t unusual – they’re shared by much of the working class, not just the under-employed or unemployed.

Previously these people lived mainly in the conventillos, big, old houses in the city centre, where whole families occupy single rooms. In such conditions, and with rising rents, they became very militant about housing. This led them to organize land occupations, especially in the late 1960s under the Christian Democrat government. In this way they hoped to obtain their own houses. The Christian Democrats tried to keep up with this mass movement by setting up neighbourhood associations. But like everything else these land occupations outran their reforms to the point where they were beyond their control.

The MIR had strong support in these areas. We began our mass work with them in the late 1960s, as with the poorer campesinos. We had several reasons for attaching special importance to them. Workers as such – in their place of work – were dominated by the traditional left-wing parties. We had little chance of competing with them. The shantytowns, with their mixed population, including the city’s poorest people, were much more accessible to us. For one thing the housing problem is perhaps the most obvious contradiction of capitalism in Latin America, and the most persistent. For another, it was common to all those who lived there – factory workers, small shopkeepers, street-sellers, craftsmen. The campamento was in itself a means of bringing these groups together.

Our scope increased when the Christian Democrats’ housing reforms were swept aside by the land occupations. The ones which developed into New Havana were almost the first in Santiago – one on a university site, another on a private holding, the third on church land. The Christian Democrats panicked and tried to repress this so-called ‘movement of the homeless’ with riot squads. This only raised people’s determination. In what became New Havana, for instance, two participants were killed, and the riot squad kept prowling about and firing in the air to scare people. Meantime most of them were still living in shelters made of old cartons and rags, whatever anyone could find.

Such experience sowed the seeds of their internal organization. They formed their own militias to defend themselves from the riot squad. There was also a health front to care for the wounded – they couldn’t go to hospital, because they would have been arrested.

The internal structure of the campamento

The campamento had three main fronts, all dating from the occupations. The cultural one, concerned with leisure and propaganda, the health front and the defensive militias. Sub-divided into brigades, these militias were subject to popular assemblies, which also elected new members to them. The brigade commanders worked together as the directorate of the militias. They dealt not only with physical threats to the campamento, but also with internal security and with disciplinary matters like disputes between neighbours. In the early stages their role was central.

However, the militias couldn’t provide for our long-term organizational needs. Originally they were the vanguard, our only defence
against the daily threats from the riot squads. They were still important in
the 1970 elections, when we gave Allende our critical support and there was
danger of a coup. With the PU in power, though, the repression and the
danger subsided. We turned our thoughts to a permanent structure for the
\textit{campamento}.

The decisions involved were made by the popular assembly, though
most proposals did come from the activists in the \textit{campamento}. First a
directorate was set up. Originally there’d been one in each of the three
occupations, but these now merged. This reflected reorganization at the base,
where the key unit was the \textit{manzana}, a block of roughly forty houses. Each
\textit{manzana} had its own assembly, meeting once or twice a week, where
\textit{campamento} affairs were discussed. Each of these in turn sent a delegate to the
directorate. Finally, there was an inner directorate of seven persons, directly
elected by everyone in the \textit{campamento}. This was the core of the leadership.
Meantime the militias were replaced by perimeter guards for the \textit{campamento},
a security front for internal defence and a disciplinary commission, to settle
disputes and ensure proper conduct by comrades in office.

Most people in the directorate were active members of the MIR, but
this structure wasn’t imposed by the party. It developed itself and was
highly organic, the local peoples’ own response to what they’d lived
through. This basis in collective experience was its main strength.

\textit{The cultural front}

It was probably the cultural front which attracted most participation,
although it went through quite a crisis in mid 1971. By this time New
Havana was something of an attraction to intellectuals and artists, whose
influence was almost fatal. For instance, at one of its meetings an
intellectual from outside the \textit{campamento} insisted that the cultural front
should step up its political education. This idea was extraneous, for two
reasons. First, local people already had a profound political education
arising from their own experiences. Secondly, although many of them were
politically active, they weren’t necessarily interested in political debates by
intellectuals. On this occasion a discussion on underdevelopment was
launched. Most people at the meeting soon left. Only the visiting
intellectuals and a few real activists stayed, the latter mainly out of
politeness. Thereafter the cultural front declined – people lost interest
because it wasn’t answering their needs. In the end it was reconstituted as a
coordinating body for political mobilization and local educational
programmes.

To take these first. The comrades set up a nursery school where
working mothers could leave their children. They lobbied the educational
department for the materials for a new school, which they then built, and
refurbished buses for extra classrooms. A parent-teacher group was set up
to discuss the way the schools were run, and children were represented.
They produced some striking new ideas. Especially they challenged the
assumption that classroom education was more important than experience.
This debate with the teachers was a long one, but finally the classes did get
a much more practical orientation. The children went on outings to the
nearby foothills of the Andes for botany and biology classes. For
mathematics they visited their parents’ work-places to count the machines
and learn about angles – and this taught them to respect what their parents
were doing, in itself a minor revolution.

The effect on the teachers was very marked – most were from outside
the \textit{campamento}. Parents and children were now questioning many of the
assumptions implicit in their traditional teaching. The teachers were
gradually proletarianized. The way they spoke to the children, their
demands that they arrive clean and tidy and spot on time, when their fathers
might have kept them awake by getting drunk on the previous night – all
this was now questioned. For the first time the teachers had to adapt to their
working environment. Their own social education now went hand in hand
with their teaching.

We also launched a literacy programme using the methods of Paulo
Freire. Politically, it was an ideal time for Freire’s combination of teaching
people to read and write and also look critically at their environment. There
were lengthy discussions about what were the most interesting and
important words to learn, words like ‘government’, for instance. The
illiteracy rate was very high, and the classes were organized by \textit{manzana}.
Very few people took part at first. This was partly because the classes were
being held in the school, in the evenings. The adults were ashamed to be
going to their own children’s classrooms. So we transferred the classes to
the manzanas. Far more people then took part. By the time the coup put an
end to all this, illiteracy in New Havana was virtually a thing of the past.

We also organized leisure activities, song competitions and a youth
theatre. This was especially successful. It performed in other campamentos
and industrial cordons. Its biggest success was The Story of the Land
Occupation based on local people’s experiences. The children remembered
these vividly and devised most of the play themselves. Even the smallest of
them would say: ‘Well, this is what I was doing then’, and that’s basically
how it developed. The six-to-ten age group presented it on the second
anniversary of the formation of New Havana. This was during the bosses’
strike of October 1972. It was striking how the kids’ perception of their
elders helped to reinforce their unity, which was so critical at this period.
They completely captured the character of the land occupations’ original
leaders, even their ideological disputes – the way one leader had demanded
one thing, another something different, and so on. The extent to which the
militias’ power had gone to their heads, their swaggering style, the
domineering character of relationships between men and women – they
catched it all, from things they’d seen and conversations they’d overheard.
Somehow they put it all into perspective, affirming that a new unity had
eventually been forged from it.

The health front and the campaign against alcoholism

This new awareness, even among children, showed itself in many
ways. For instance, there was one hopeless alcoholic in the campamento,
called Panchito. From having once been teased, he became a kind of leader
for them. Even when drunk he was never violent – he used to dance and the
children danced with him. His only occupation was carving and painting
wooden flowers, and he taught them how to do it. They came to respect and
obey him, and I think it was this which kept him stable, despite his drinking.

Alcoholism was common in New Havana, as elsewhere in Chile. With generations of repression behind them, workers drink heavily as a way
of escaping from their problems. This was a major concern of the health
front. First it lobbied the National Health Service to sponsor a local health
organization – the government was supposed to send its own nurses and
doctors to New Havana, but they hardly ever came. In the end we got
permission for this, with a representative of each manzana receiving
training from the Health Service in nursing and first aid etc. The comrade in
charge of the health front had a more intensive course, which even trained
her for emergency operations. We also got a clinic, an ambulance and
regular visits from a doctor. All this was the product of the health front’s
pressure on the Health Service, especially by women comrades.

Many women were also strongly committed to combating
alcoholism. Drunken confrontations, when men came home at night, were
frequent. Alcoholism was also a mainstay of male chauvinism (machismo).
After drinking, men felt obliged to assert their authority over their wives,
especially now that many women had social activities outside the home, in
the campamento. This new independence caused some really violent scenes,
especially on paydays, when drinking was always at its heaviest.

Our first step was to eliminate the dozens of small, illicit bars where
most of this heavy drinking took place, at extortionate prices. The assembly
succeeded in doing this. Just one survived – one stubborn character set up
his bar at the very entrance to the campamento, with the wine right there in
the window. It wasn’t too successful, though, because anyone leaving it to
come into the campamento was checked by the security front and detained
if drunk. We were apprehensive about possible reactions to this, but there
was surprisingly little resistance. Our long-term solution was to increase
alcoholics’ involvement in the life of the campamento. We’d encourage
them to come home early, for instance, and join in their manzana assembly.
By these means, and by professional medical treatment, some eighty or so
comrades were cured of varying degrees of alcoholism.

This had a visible effect on the everyday life of the campamento.
You could now go out at three or four in the morning, with little danger of
being molested. I often had to, and never had problems. Outside New
Havana it was immediately different – any woman out late in a shantytown
was likely to run into trouble with drinkers. But in New Havana, no. You
were safe.
Mobilization and participation: the role of women and young people

Mass participation in all these activities was crucial. They taught much more than political harangues, and anyway little could be achieved without popular pressure on the bureaucracy. We had to mount demonstrations to get housing materials, health facilities etc. People also had to be involved in the campamento’s security system – within a few months of the PU’s election, the repression was creeping back. The riot squads appeared again, especially at demonstrations, and the only thing which kept them at bay was the level of popular mobilization. People had a tremendous pride in belonging to the campamento, and they showed it on demonstrations – when they arrived, the people from other campamentos used to shout: ‘They’re here, they’re here!’

Elsewhere, of course, reactions were different. The New Havana people were known as ‘the delinquents’ to the right-wingers, who were often terrified of them – they were just too used to assuming that shantytown dwellers would always be humble. One confrontation showed especially the difference which grassroots pressure could make. The local mayor was very right-wing, and always harassing the campamento. Sometimes he’d cut off the electricity, at other times the water supply, and often the rubbish wasn’t cleared. The carts were supposed to come every two days, but once they were missing for a week. It was summer, the stench and flies everywhere. The manzanas brought this up in the assembly, which produced a plan of action. Two large trucks were filled with rubbish, and we hoisted the campamentos flags on them. Off we went, with a New Havana security command in front and half the campamento following, to the municipal offices. When officials refused to open the gates, we drove the trucks through them. Everyone took a hand in dumping the rubbish in the mayor’s office. From then on the rubbish trucks were sent to New Havana daily.

Women were prominent in all these activities, whereas in other campamentos there were special women’s sections which precluded participation on equal terms. In New Havana there was real integration; in the directorate, on the marches, even in the confrontations. The driver of the clinic’s ambulance, which operated at night, was a woman. Women virtually ran the health front. They helped guard the campamento at night. Sometimes the husband would attend manzana meetings, sometimes the wife, if possible, both. This weakened male chauvinism at a very basic level.

Of course there was lots of resistance to this – cases of husbands forbidding wives to go to meetings, and drinking and beating them up if they did so. The assembly dealt with such cases. Its reprimands had some effect, but on the whole in this short space of time, traditional attitudes held the day. The real change was among young people. For instance, in their play on the story of the land occupation, they realized how prominent women had been. Young people also took part together in new occupations of schools, factories and land. When the girls stood up as well as the boys to confrontations, they became very much just comrades, not ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ in the narrow sense.

Talking of the young, even children played their part in the campamento. Through the youth front they took part in building houses, demonstrations and even in the assembly on subjects affecting them, like schooling. They also helped guard the campamento, especially at times when adults were scarce, like during local fiestas. They made the most of our demonstration banners, and in the 1972 stoppage, they helped maintain local distribution. One shrimp of a kid invariably led our slogan-chanting in the major demonstrations. ‘Campamento’, he’d shout: and the others would answer, ‘Nueva la Habana’. ‘Ché Guevara’, everyone called him, he wouldn’t be known by any other name. The adults were proud of their children’s involvement.

The effects of this could also be seen on an everyday level. In shantytowns the kids spend most of their time in gangs. These are often virtual teenage mafias. They’re unapproachable, aggressive, and also make life very dangerous at night. In New Havana this simply died out. Only young adults who’d previously been delinquents still occasionally had relapses. We also had one special case of a teenager who was semi-delinquent. He was an orphan, extroverted and a good singer, and he always got other kids to follow him. He didn’t have any time for school and just ran wild. But we won him round by giving him the chance to sing at campamento concerts. He began to take notice of us and take part. We
treated him as a little adult, and in return he became a comrade and organizer of many of the children’s activities.

Like the adults, few young people had time for political discussions. With concrete tasks, though, it was different. For instance they were fully in charge of the campamento’s fire precautions. The whole fire-fighting front consisted of sixteen to eighteen-year-olds, and they always dealt competently with fires.

Not surprisingly, these young people acquired quite a status with the young in other campamentos. Their political awareness was much higher. Whenever I was with them elsewhere, at football matches for example, I noticed the respect this won them, and how it influenced other young people into similar activities.

Security and people’s justice: the seeds of an autonomous system

We still had serious security problems after disbanding the militias. Defence of the campamento itself was undertaken by popular guards, with each manzana responsible for one night, in rota. One adult from each of the forty households per manzana would take part, usually the man, but some times the woman – it was left to each family to settle this. The guards were stationed at each of the three main entrances, armed with sticks, never with firearms. In the event of anything suspicious – including at times right-wing attacks – they would raise the alarm. People entering after midnight had to identify themselves. Anyone drunk was handed on to the security front, which was in charge of internal order. Any non-resident was thoroughly checked and his documents held until he left. In this way we foiled several attacks by the fascist Fatherland and Freedom Party.

Our security also depended on the maintenance of internal cohesion. Out of this need there grew the beginnings of a system of popular justice, distinct not just from the bourgeois courts, but from bourgeois legality itself. Those three years were too short and turbulent for this to acquire a definitive form, but there were real steps towards it.

These experiments also had their roots in the original land occupations, in the need for unity which they entailed. The constant threat of repression gave rise in effect to new types of offence – acts of betrayal or carelessness, which might weaken our defences. At first the militias dealt with such cases. Generally simple collective pressure would convince the offender of the social danger of his action, in view of the struggle then in progress. Expulsion from the campamento was used only in exceptional cases.

With the campamento established and the PU in power, the problems were different. Although the physical threat was less, the need for a genuine people’s justice was more obvious than ever, as we still had a bourgeois judicial system. It had little concern with the campamento’s real interests. We needed independent solutions for problems like speculation and hoarding. How to provide them? The militias’ disciplinary powers had been an improvised crisis measure. What sort of structure should replace them?

Though we never really answered this question, we did go beyond the PU’s version of neighbourhood courts (tribunales vecinales). These operated, especially in Communist-led campamentos, as adjuncts of the bourgeois courts, to deal with mild local offences like petty theft. They still neglected the basic problem of redefining the class-ridden notion of what was ‘illegal’. Instead they just delegated an already existing system, reinforcing all its values. In fact these courts usually died out, because they simply didn’t provide for the problems which concerned people most.

In New Havana we did attempt to provide for new needs. Not only did we deal locally with the traditional petty offences, but we also covered new ones, defined as such by the assembly: for instance, officiousness or neglect by members of the directorate, or infringement of our rules on hygiene. This allowed a constant response to new problems like hoarding and the black market, particularly.

So much for the scope. But we still had the problem of a structure for this new popular justice – who would take part and exactly how, and what sort of penalties would be imposed. In these respects we were improvising right up to the time of the coup. Most cases were dealt with by the directorate or the relevant manzana, depending on their importance. Family
disputes were settled at manzana level, with socially useful penalties, like cleaning the manzana or digging new drains. The number of cases which had to go to a higher level was very few. This was sometimes for traditional reasons – a woman might prove reluctant to testify against her husband – but also because the incidence of more important problems declined when people knew that they could be dealt with, ultimately by the assembly. So there were the seeds of an effective popular justice.

Inevitably we were faced increasingly with political problems – political misconduct, speculation by traders and so on. These were referred to the directorate, which submitted its decisions to the assembly. We tried to find positive solutions, by matching the penalties to the needs of the campamento – typically, street cleaning. Failing this, offenders were expelled. This came to a head with the problems posed by the lorry-owners’ and bosses’ strike in October 1972.

The bosses’ strikes: maintaining supplies and distribution

In New Havana small shopkeepers controlled distribution. Most of them were extortionists, although they did provide some employment. Within the campamento there were roughly a hundred and fifty of them. People’s purchasing on a small scale – the only one they could afford – increased the scope for profiteering.

The official means of regulating supplies and prices were the JAPs, promoted mainly by the Communist Party. In New Havana we tried instead for an understanding with the shopkeepers. They agreed to buy from official sources and also to sell at official prices. This would leave them a reasonable profit and prevent hoarding and black marketing. Like the JAPs this had little success, and for much the same reason: the penalties were weak and hard to enforce. Congress rejected Allende’s proposals for strengthening them, and the Judiciary hardly applied them, because it was also controlled by the right. So what penalty could the people impose, either with or without the JAPs? In highly organized campamentos like New Havana, offending shopkeepers could be expelled. But this was only a local solution, as they then set up in other areas where people were more easily exploited. The assembly was always discussing this problem. It reflected the PU’s weak control in this case of the distributive system, which it was reluctant to really challenge for fear of a right-wing reaction. Our local problems were those of Chile as a whole, of the PU’s limited power and programme.
By early 1973, with the shortage caused by the lorry-owners’ strike, the shopkeepers were holding people to ransom. Despite our efforts to be patient, most of them kept up their old ways. Our only solution was to force them to dose. And so instead we relied on a ‘people’s store’ (Almacén Popular). This was set up with contributions from the manzanas, while the State gave us credit for a stock of supplies. By selling at official prices, this acquired a virtual monopoly of non-perishable goods. This confined the shopkeepers to perishables, which made hoarding and speculation harder. The store belonged to the campamento and was managed by the directorate. As it extended its operations and put the small shopkeepers out of business, they were given first choice of becoming its salaried employees. This provided some conciliation, kept them in work and put their expertise to good use.

By these means we kept living standards in the campamento rising. For instance the houses, which were wooden and prefabricated, began with bare floors. By the end of three years almost all the floors were covered. Also most families began with only one bed between them, but by 1973 they managed to buy separate ones, and blankets. There was even a communal television in most manzanas.

Despite all these measures the second stoppage in mid 1973 created serious shortages. At this point the government supplemented the people’s store by sending supplies to the campamento for direct sale at official prices. Meanwhile the directorate set up a successful rationing system, which ensured that everyone got their share, according to the size of their family. We also arranged direct supplies by contacting campesino councils and hiring trucks to purchase supplies from them. These were sold at a ‘people’s market’ (Mercado Popular) which the directorate also ran, again with a rationing system to ensure equal distribution.

All these problems had two levels. While forced to confront them in terms of day-to-day survival, we were equally aware of the need for a fundamental solution to them. In our view this could be only an overall structure of popular power to which New Havana would belong. We were well aware of the limitations of changes within one campamento. In the bosses’ strikes we stressed the importance of widening the industrial cordons into communal commands. These would include the campamentos and campesinos and serve as an embryonic alternative to the bourgeois state apparatus.

Together with the revolutionary wings of MAPU and the Socialist Party, we worked for the transformation of the nearby Vicuña Mackenna cordon into a communal command including the New Havana area. We recognized that the cordon, with its industrial workers, would be the vanguard of this structure. In the bosses’ strikes the two areas achieved a number of joint actions such as factory occupations and distribution measures. It was also through this new structure that we did our best to prepare for the coup – but, as it turned out, time was against us.

The coup: the dispersal and legacy of New Havana

New Havana paid for its reputation. The military and the bourgeoisie had a special hatred for the people there because they were known not just for their words, but for their actions. Whenever they said they were going to take action, they really went ahead and took it. The almost legendary status this gave them was treated as a crime, deserving a specially brutal repression.

For the same reason the campamento came under attack by groups of fascists before the coup. Infiltration was always a problem and in October 1972, with our mobilization against the strike, threats were made against us daily. Luckily we’d just doubled our guards when the first attack came, at one in the morning. Two buses drew up at the entrance and about a hundred figures poured out. They were dressed in the white cloaks of the fascist Fatherland and Freedom Party. The alarm bell was immediately rung, rousing the whole campamento. Luckily most activists were just on their way back from meetings. Although we were armed only with sticks, the fascists turned tail, firing a few shots, as soon as they saw us. Later there were other attacks, often in answer to our anti-fascist demonstrations. Though they raised our morale, these confrontations were also a warning to the right of the campamentos’ defensive capacity. In the final months before the coup this developed strongly. Ten women’s brigades were formed, for instance, to provide first aid and play a key defensive role.
The plan was for liberated zones, of which New Havana would have been one, to support the main resistance fronts. Each would have a first aid centre and serve as a central source of supplies as well as having its own defence system. Provision was made for removing the elder women and children and combining with neighbouring campamentos. So locally, at least, we were reasonably prepared. The problem was that the revolutionary left as a whole was taken by surprise in a tactical sense, not by the occurrence of the coup, but by its timing. Our information was that we had at least a week in hand. In the event we had few resources for resisting in the campamento. In any case the overall scheme wasn’t fully prepared, partly because of the recent arms searches and the repression that came with them.

We did our best, though. At eight in the morning, when we heard of the coup, the directorate went underground, while some brigades went to Vicuña Mackenna and Puente Alto. Both areas resisted for several days. The fact is, though, that the coup was efficient. The military inadequacy of the left reflected its political weakness and indecision. In the first few hours the resistance’s basic structure was broken by the arrests and executions and the cutting of communications. The MIR’s radio station was the first to be captured, at 7.30, and one by one the others followed. Even the telephones were out of action. The only means of communicating was by walky-talky and ham radios. The truth is that we never expected such ruthlessness as the bombing of the Moneda Palace, nor the military’s technical efficiency – a serious mistake on our part, but something which also convinces me that US technicians were directly involved.

The repression inflicted on the campamento was apparently meant to eliminate every trace of what happened in those three years. They even changed its name to ‘New Dawn’. Several other campamentos have been given the names of generals. Within hours of the coup, the military began random attacks on New Havana which continued right up to the time I left Chile. The first occurred on the night of 11 September. They simply went into the manzanas, took the first sixteen men they found and shot them immediately in the main square. One day it was the army, the next the navy, the next the police – sometimes there were four or five searches a day. Women were raped in front of their men, and children beaten in front of their parents. Almost every home they went into was sacked and this cut deep, because our programme for improving the houses was due to be completed by December. It was as if the two joint struggles for new homes and socialism were both being destroyed together. Every morning there’d be fresh bodies at the entrance of the street between New Havana and the neighbouring campamento. They were clearly left there deliberately, to terrify people.

Even so they resisted as best they could. The activists in the campamento were known to almost everyone, their identity if not their hideouts. But no one denounced them, even under torture. One woman who wasn’t an activist, just a sympathizer, had both arms broken, but we know for a fact that she didn’t give any information. Once they tortured six comrades together, right there in the campamento, but again they gave nothing away. When we left a few weeks later, the campamento’s whole leadership was still intact.

Already, though, the campamento was breaking up. Dozens of families were leaving, some from fear, many from hunger. Others refused to remain in the area after the military renamed it. Every day you’d see people departing, mostly for relatives in the country, with handcarts filled with what belongings they had left.

Given the nature of the coup, the campamento, as it had become was bound to be eradicated. In fact, we’d long been asking ourselves whether what we were doing in New Havana was realistic at this stage. We’d come to feel that our concern with its internal organization was perhaps over-concentrated. One thing the coup has shown is that even the so-called sub-proletariat can’t be won over by fascism when they’ve had an experience like New Havana. But in present circumstances, the struggle does lie more clearly than ever with the workers in their factories. Though there were such people in New Havana, the basis of our unity there, over housing, now belongs to the past.

This doesn’t mean that New Havana was in vain. Several thousand people from there have joined the resistance on other fronts, including key
ones, like Vicuña Mackenna. Their struggle wasn’t a central one, but their experience belongs to the future. The further they scatter those who shared it, the more its effect will multiply.

PART IV – UNIVERSITIES

Background

Like all South American universities, Chile’s in 1970 reflected the ruling-class’s dependence on European and North American ideologies and culture. They bore little relation to local requirements, either technical or social. Their medical schools, for example, were as much concerned with heart transplants as with infant mortality. Technical training contributed little to the need for popular consumer goods or technological independence in areas like copper production. Also inadequate public schooling restricted university entrance to those who could pay for supplementary private teaching.

Student movements have nevertheless been a radical force in Latin America. Questioning first the dominance of the traditional oligarchies, they became strongly nationalist in the 1940s and 1950s. After the Cuban revolution this nationalism grew increasingly left-wing. Chile was no exception. Under Frei students won reforms which allowed them a significant part in university administration. By 1970 their support for Allende was strong, in the expectation that universities would be deeply involved in the changes promised by the PU.

Its formula was that the universities should be ‘at the service of Chilean society’. Teaching would cater for Chilean needs, and students would contribute to the development of the country, through technical studies and voluntary labour. Entrance would be open to students who hadn’t been able to afford preparation for university entrance. An agreement was made with the CUT for extension courses in the unions.

All these proposals were implemented. New courses developed and traditional ones changed. Thousands of students did voluntary work in development projects. Technical students did applied research in the factories, mines and agrarian reform centres. The universities helped to make cheap editions of the classics available to a mass public. Their own