Part IV – Universities
7. The students’ polarization in the university of Chile

Raul


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research and publications on Chilean society became integral to the social policies which the PU implemented.

Meanwhile student politics reflected those of the wider society. Student support for the PU grew, but then as polarization deepened university departments became increasingly divided. The left was weakened by the absence of staff on government secondment and the return of Christian Democrats seconded before 1970. Also, each year's new student intake injected into the university the increasingly right-wing views of the average student’s middle-class parents. Early in 1972 the PU candidate lost the election for rector of the University of Chile. The opposition now took the offensive. Eventually confrontations brought university life to a standstill, with the fascist Fatherland and Freedom Party influencing the centrist opposition of Christian Democrat students and teachers.

Raul’s opinion, as a student leader and Communist Party activist, was that left-wing students should concentrate on supporting the PU’s programme within the university. For him the left’s demise was due largely to other left parties’ excessive demands and to their student activists working on fronts outside the university, which they considered more important.

In many universities, resistance to the coup was strong. Students and university teachers have since been heavily repressed, but continue to play a central part in popular resistance to the junta.

7

The Students’ Polarization in the University of Chile

Speaker: RAUL, 22, activist of the Communist Party and student leader in the state University of Chile, in Santiago

Student politics: the campaign of 1970

Throughout the PU period I was a student activist in the University of Chile. It was always a political weathervane, an indicator of the direction in which the balance of power was moving. In the late 1960s its radicalization produced massive support for the PU in the 1970 election. Then under the PU, its ultra-leftism, to my way of thinking and that of other party comrades, was symptomatic of the polarization which ended in the PU’s downfall.

In 1968, under Frei, a university reform was passed after years of militant pressure from students. This gave them far greater participation in the running of the universities. The next year the left gained control from the Christian Democrats of the national students’ union (Federación de Estudiantes de Chile). The Christian Democrats’ youth section sympathized heavily with the PU and many of them carne over to it. It was in this same year that I was elected as a student leader in Santiago.

Previously I’d been active in a group of the ultra-left, but after the election it divided, and went mainly to the Communist Party. The PU’s victory, for which we’d campaigned, convinced us that we should be working within the mass parties of the left, now that Allende was in power. I don’t think this was the abandoning of an immature position. For me it was primarily a response to a changed political situation. Previously we’d been working clandestinely with a view to armed insurrection and concentrating our propaganda on workers untouched by the main left-wing parties, especially in small, non-unionized copper mines. This no longer made sense. In 1970 there was a new and, at that moment, a more real way forward, which we recognized as such and supported.
At the time of the election I was still formally in this group, so that my activities were only partly in the University. But already as a student leader I was involved with other students in campaigning for Allende in Santiago. With the PU parties already dominant among them, many were active day and night for weeks before the actual election. In the morning there’d be mass meetings focused at first on political discussion, and later on planning the day’s campaigning outside the University. This consisted in visiting the shantytowns and other residential areas to hold discussions and mass meetings and campaign from door to door – outlining the PU’s programme, what it would mean for people living there, answering their questions about it.

We also had propaganda brigades to go out and paint every available wall with slogans and political pictures. Though it’s hard for Europeans to imagine, this is standard electoral practice in Chile, and especially important for the left, as the right controls the conventional media. It’s also an indication to voters of the relative strength of the right and left, as both are active in it. This means it’s also a battleground. Propaganda brigades would be out every night, and when they met there were often armed clashes. These were usually started by the right, by firing at us from passing cars. Although they were much better equipped, they had to use these methods because they were far less expert at thinking up slogans and at painting. Another difference was that the right often hired its painters and armed them with guns as well as brushes, while on the left only activists painted.

The results of these confrontations were encouraging. The right became very hit-and-run, because of the mass support we had. We could feel it growing daily. Our victory on the walls was an omen of the polls. By election day we were sure we would win, though apprehensive about right-wing reactions. As results came through in the evening and through the night of 4 September, complete euphoria took over, first in the university and then in the streets of Santiago, where we all went to join it. People sang and danced in every square, oblivious of who were students, workers, housewives or whatever, aware of one thing only, that they were all of the left, which had won. That night, for once, the right stayed at home. It was as if socialism had already been established – though we’d soon discover that there was rather more to this than winning a victory at the polls.

The impact of the PU: the University and the transition towards socialism

The universities took on a new role with the PU in power. Its purpose was to put them at the service of a changing Chilean society. This idea had long been voiced by students, but now it was possible to apply it.

The basic changes were as follows. First it was made much easier for people from working-class families, and in some cases workers themselves, to study at the university. Secondly, the content of courses changed: problems were seen in more socialist terms, and designed to make practical contributions to Chile’s economic independence. Finally practice was built into theory – students now had to spend part of their time applying the skills which they were learning, as an integral part of their courses.

I was personally involved in these changes in the Faculty of Engineering, as a student member of its planning committee. The most important alterations were in mining engineering, as copper is Chile’s biggest export. Nationalization of the mines was one of the PU’s first measures, and one of the biggest problems involved was the lack of Chilean technicians. The department of mining had existed for years, but was very weak, for political reasons – there were virtually no funds for it, as politicians had played along with the foreign-companies’ opposition to the growth of national mining skills. The tacit view was that there were plenty of foreign technicians – hence our continuing dependence on companies which milked the country. So we planned a whole series of courses relating directly to copper mining, and thus to the Chilean economy.

There were many such changes in other fields, in medicine, education, art – all of them reversed since the coup. Two more of which I had some experience were journalism and social work. In journalism, much of the training was taken out of the University. Each group of students went with a teacher to a union branch or shantytown and started producing a paper with the local workers or residents, to deal with their particular problems. This taught the students that a journalist’s job wasn’t simply to hand news down to the people, but to get them to express themselves,
through a medium which they controlled. These papers became a regular feature of dozens of local organizations, however modest. Gradually the students would reduce their contributions, until the paper was self-sufficient. This gave a tremendous boost to popular communication, creative, political and purely informative. The workers who wrote in these papers used the style of their everyday life – which also widened the students’ experience and sense of language. The papers themselves became a source of important changes suggested at a popular level. For instance, in one such news-sheet a housewife in one of the shantytowns produced some completely new ideas for improving local food distribution. They were discussed in the, shantytown and eventually implemented. No public official could have devised them, because they depended on a knowledge of day-to-day problems and living conditions in the locality.

I also mentioned social work. Its traditional assumptions began to be questioned. In a capitalist society social work is seen as assistance: care of orphans and widows, dealing with personal problems etc. – in short enabling the individual to re-adapt to the society. But now a new premise was suggested: that the social worker should make society aware of its inadequacies towards such people, and help them to pressure society for a solution to their problems. And to do this collectively in class terms, through which social problems are traced to class structures, and their solutions to changes in them. So too with social psychology; for instance ‘family problems’ were shown to be the problems of families affected by a class position and its social consequences. This may sound high-flown but it gave a new meaning to very real problems like wife-beating and alcoholism. Both these fell sharply during this period.

There was also new emphasis on applied work. Each mining-engineering student had a spell in a mine like Chuquicamata, doing research on some technical problem. This became a required part of the course. Agronomy students were sent to the country to work on agrarian reform. State agencies like INDAP funded many of these projects, and their results were often applied with voluntary student labour. I was involved in one such programme, building new types of chicken coops in several agrarian reform centres. In time these projects got more sophisticated. By 1973 student research and voluntary labour were vital to big irrigation schemes. For instance that summer four thousand students worked on one in the Ligüi valley, in northern Chile, for several weeks.

For many students this was also their first direct contact with workers and campesinos. University entrance was now easier for students of working-class origin, and courses were put on for workers, training them for participation and management in the nationalized sector. But three years was too short a time to change the class nature of the university, although the students’ federation did secure some modifications. Among them were courses in basic medicine, to train people from the shantytowns to man the local clinics; and in Concepción the university did admit a large number of workers, particularly for technical courses. Also traditional class relations within the university were challenged by the introduction of measures for the participation of non academic staff – caretakers, office-workers and cleaners in the running of the university. They got 10 per cent of the votes on committees, as against the students’ 25 per cent and 65 per cent for the teaching staff. This also had a limited impact. The class nature of academic studies made it hard for them to have much to say. Yet it did produce direct contact and some political cooperation between student leaders and workers. And the latter were able to wield some influence even on matters like curriculum planning. The main changes were political, though, and also in simple class relationships. Many students were shaken, and their assumptions and life-styles changed, by meeting workers on a much more equal footing. For instance, traditional student parties became virtually limited to the right. People saw through their shallowness, because they now went to parties in the neighbourhoods where they were working politically. Quite apart from the principle, they found out how much more fun they were, which taught them something very new about the world they’d grown up in. Of course, none of these changes was isolated – by this time a number of former workers were deputies and ministers, so that traditional class relationships were being very widely shaken. Developments in the university did contribute to these changes, as well as being influenced by them.
Political developments: polarization and debates on the university left

Following the presidential election, the left gained more ground among the students, although it was always hard to maintain, as student turnover was high and most still came from conservative backgrounds. Experiences like voluntary work often changed their consciousness radically. I remember one student who lived in the same shack as myself when we were building the chicken coops. Seeing how left-wing politics related to people’s everyday problems overturned her prejudices. She almost did believe that Communists ate children on instructions from Moscow; she finally confided in me about this and everything that she’d now learnt. Later she became an activist of one of the PU parties. There were hundreds of cases like this, of conversions based on simple experience.

Yet this girl’s background was typical, and to my mind the left misled itself about the potential balance of forces within the university. Most students’ families became increasingly conservative as Chilean society began to polarize. I came from just such a family, well-off Christian Democrats whose initial tolerance of my views grew weaker as they saw that they were lasting. This meant that the average new student from a petty-bourgeois background became actively rather than passively conservative. However naive this may have been, it meant that students were increasingly hard to win over. And in time this was virtually impossible, as the confrontation reached such a pitch that few political meetings ended in anything but physical conflict.

In 1970 or 1971 it was still possible for a good speaker to hold an uncommitted audience, and even win some of it over. But by 1973 such audiences hardly existed. Even when students did have their eyes opened by voluntary work, for instance, they now had to leap a much wider gap to join the left, so few of them did so. By this time fascist groups and doctrines were highly organized and explicit: almost anything the left said was systematically depicted as part of a plot directed by Moscow.

Clearly then, we’d lost the initiative. To my mind this dated from late 1971, when the extreme left started pressing for more radical transformations of the content of university teaching. These tactics split many faculties in half and virtually halted the university. This parallels the position of the ultra-left in other fields, but the university was their laboratory, which made it the same for right-wing parties, with their counter-revolution. In this confrontation the Christian Democrats and National Party allied with one another. Their strength was increasingly apparent. In early 1972 elections were held for a new rector. Although the PU candidate was moderate, the opposition candidate won, because the right and the centre had united. They were soon to do so nationally – and this election was very much a national issue, televised throughout the country as a political barometer. This was a serious loss for the left and one from which we never recovered, as it gave the initiative to the right. The National Party revived within the university, and by 1973 the fascist Fatherland and Freedom party was making progress with some students.

From this point on each faculty was controlled either by the right or the left. Life became one long confrontation. This and the increasing conservatism of new students made it a depressing field in which to be politically active. This reinforced the tendency of members of the other left parties to work outside the university, having failed to radicalize it. The Communist Party, though, still felt it was crucial and carried on in spite of these problems. In veterinary studies and law, for example, the fascists acquired such control that by 1973 left-wing students could hardly enter the buildings. If they did get into a class they were usually spotted and thrown out. Even where the balance was equal, left-wingers could study only at the price of daily confrontations. From almost the moment when the right took a stand, student politics meant violence. First the fascists persuaded the Christian Democrats to support their tactic of occupying various faculties. Initially the left held back, until finally the engineering faculty was occupied. This was so important to the economy that all the left decided it had to be retaken. The resulting battle lasted four hours, with hundreds involved on either side. The police kept out of it, as did the government, although PU parties had given the order to resist any further take-overs. Again the whole country was watching the outcome – even this was televised. It ended when the left had stormed the Fatherland and Freedom
headquarters, but as they came up through an underground passage, the fascists threw nitric acid at them. Several people were badly burnt.

From this point on almost every meeting ended in fighting, sometimes with two thousand students involved. It’s hard to say who came off better, but politically it was what the right was after, and so they gained ground. And of course there were differences within the left. To my mind we were especially weakened by this question of how much importance to attach to university politics. As I said, our student activists stuck to them, while those of other left parties, including the MIR, went to other fronts, among workers and campesinos. This was partly because of their shortage of activists among these sectors, but we Communists opposed this tactic in principle as well as practice. It weakened these parties’ contribution to the university struggle, and we criticized this strongly.

We did manage to maintain a united facade. Before any mass student meeting the PU parties would always confer and agree to have a single speaker put forward a united position. But in fact we usually had differences, reflecting those at a national level – which made for heated discussions. Often our so-called united positions were just informative, or at best minimal agreements, rather than truly political positions. For instance the concept of popular power always generated controversy. It came to a head in the first bosses’ strike of 1972, and was always contentious thereafter. Our position was that popular power already existed, so that we should be consolidating, not inventing new versions of it. It existed in that the PU existed as a workers’ government; also in that the CUT existed as a central workers’ organization; in the sense that there were countless, recognized working-class organizations, the JAPs for instance. To me it’s a fallacy to say that the Communist Party obstructed popular power – the very election of Allende was a huge step in that direction. But there was often debate on this. I remember, for instance, how it once disrupted a meeting on how our faculty could support an industrial cordon called O’Higgins, which the Party was starting to organize. When we raised the issue of worker-student solidarity, the Socialist Party comrades demanded that the principle of popular power should be the focus of discussion – whereas we were concerned with the practical solidarity actions.

The point is that such solidarity did exist, however fragile. It existed in students’ recognition that a revolutionary process was occurring, and that they should therefore defend the government. Several times in 1973, when the right was breaking up our meetings, we turned to nearby construction workers to support us – and they did. The fascists would turn tail and we were able to go on speaking. Worker-student solidarity was a popular phrase, but it meant something only when workers and students had common interests. As we saw it in the Party, the way to promote it was to unite behind the aims of the working class, which were enshrined in the PU’s programme. This meant persuading students to campaign in the elections, to do voluntary work and help the PU to maintain production. The ultra-left’s proposal for worker-student solidarity was to integrate the university with the cordons. But this was utopian – for one thing not all cordons were representative, to our way of thinking. Also there were differences between the PU parties as to what the cordons really were, how they should be constituted, what role they should play. The whole question was highly complex, so that the ultra-left’s position of integrating with them was vague. We should join in organizing, but organizing exactly what? Organization, popular power, but what did this mean in real terms? It seemed to involve the notion that the cordons were nascent soviets, but this wasn’t how we saw them. Though some students did participate in them, the federation never did in Santiago or Concepción, where this was also much discussed. What we did was to cooperate with them to defend the government as it required.

*The end of the ball: students defend the PU*

In the first bosses’ strike, though, there was no doubt about the need to defend the government. Students threw themselves into the struggle, in the university and outside it. Students’ PU committees tried to keep classes running normally and to provide workers’ organizations with whatever help they requested. Each morning began with a mass meeting when the latest information was given, and then brigades were assigned to tasks of immediate urgency. Literally thousands of students signed on as emergency drivers for the convoys keeping supplies on the move, food, fuel and raw materials; others were assigned to defending warehouses, and loading and
unloading supplies. Also we did our best to keep the university running. The right was trying to bring every faculty to a halt as well as cripple the economy. This mean weeks of physical confrontations as the right disrupted the classes of professors who were still teaching. Often we had to surround the buildings and remove the rightists first in order to get access to them. Hundreds of students were involved in these confrontations, with everything short of firearms – benches, chairs, tables, sticks. Any number of students were injured.

Outside the university the situation was equally violent, as we were trying to keep the economy going. Student brigades went out in answer to requests from the CUT or directly from factories needing help. I don’t know how many sacks of flour and sugar I loaded and unloaded in those weeks, and like the workers we were constantly under attack. One convoy I went on, from Santiago to Melipilla, was blocked with trucks parked across the highway by landowners and lorry-drivers under the direction of the fascists. They outnumbered us. We were pulled out of the trucks, two students were killed and they took two Panamanians who were with us – being coloured, they took them for Cubans – and broke their arms. Any non-Chilean Latin American was a Cuban in their eyes, whether he came from Venezuela, Central America, they were all ‘Cubans’.

We were also involved in requisitioning commercial establishments which closed down in support of the stoppage. The Department of Industry and Commerce could authorize this for any establishment which sold basic necessities. The Department would call the Federation: ‘Comrades, we need a hundred and fifty students in Bolivar Street at ten o’clock, because we’re going to requisition the store at number 57’. Whenever we could, we in the Federation provided the number of students requested. Departmental officials and police would arrive, with the power to nominate ‘intervenors’ to run the requisitioned concern. Often students were nominated. This also meant clashes with the right. When they were well armed, we had to pull back. This happened with one requisitioning, in which I took part, of a supermarket in an upper-class residential district. They asked us for only fifty students, and we arrived to find three hundred fascists waiting. Well, we knew the game was up, so we decided to get out while we could, but I was up front and they cut us off. One of them must have recognized me, I heard him shout: ‘There’s the boss, the Commie, get him’. I saw the sticks coming down on my head and that was about the last I knew of it. Luckily the police pulled me out of it. They bundled us all into a police van, and there we were, just two of us and six of them. By now it was night, and completely dark, and the fascists were banging at the door. ‘They’re in there, the Commie bastards, kill them’. When we got back a few hours later, our comrades had given us up for dead.

We lost this battle because it was in a fancy area. There were similar ones every day, but in other areas the outcome was different. I remember another in the city centre, by one of the new underground sites. This time the fascists hadn’t done their reconnoitering. When we and the officials arrived, the fascists were waiting as usual, thinking that they had us outnumbered – then suddenly, just as they laid into us, dozens of construction workers appeared, with picks and shovels at the ready. In two minutes there wasn’t a fascist to be seen. Clashes like this were daily events throughout the stoppage of October. Another job in which students helped was checking prices for the JAPs, to report black-market operators. I was once assigned to checking butchers, and had to retreat from their meat choppers until I learnt to make an inspection when plenty of customers were present, as they were usually sympathetic.

The stoppage was a turning point which made the forces involved more apparent. So many dollars were pouring in from CIA sources to back the striking lorry-owners that the dollar’s black market price fell sharply. Many students’ sympathy was turned into a firm commitment. Previous hesitators made up their minds and stood firm right into the coup and after, by that time at the risk of their lives. In the university all dialogue ended. Nothing could escape politics, which now simply meant confrontation. Shortly after the stoppage, the students’ beauty contest was held. Among the finalists one was a known PU supporter, so PU activists campaigned for her. The results were due a few days later at a university ball, with thousands dancing and awaiting the result. The selection committee included several political leaders. They took seven hours to reach a decision! The left’s
candidate was the winner. Immediately it was announced, fights broke out among the dancers. That was the end of the ball.

The first stoppage proved the government’s strength. Not only workers, but the army and the Church stood by it, and while the latters’ support soon weakened, the workers stood firm. The right’s attempt to turn the stoppage of El Teniente copper miners into a general strike was a failure. Not a single factory backed them. The clearest indication of growing popular awareness was in the congressional elections of March 1973. I campaigned with a party candidate in Santiago. The response was unprecedented. With the level of political discussions in the shantytowns and factories, we knew we were making massive gains, despite the inflationary effects of the bourgeoisie’s economic boycott. Our vote went up by 20 per cent over the 1970 total – more evidence that despite the right’s sabotage, we were winning at a democratic level. Although they still controlled the media, we exposed them constantly. Whenever we discovered a store which was hoarding and selling at black-market prices, it would be publicly denounced, including the commodities involved. People would then flock to buy them, and we’d improvise a political meeting, pointing out that the economic problems weren’t caused by the government, as the right claimed, but by this deliberate hoarding. We’d repeat that the government was trying to control this, but that Congress was blocking its measures – so who was causing the so-called shortage? These exposure tactics were highly successful. Women, especially, changed their loyalties in favour of the PU once they realized what was happening. Again, the right’s only answer was violence. They attacked queues of shoppers outside establishments known to be hoarding. They constantly assaulted JAP officials responsible for price-controlling. They gave out rival food supplies with propaganda tucked into the parcels. It was obvious what was happening, and they were losing votes by it daily.

To my mind the biggest demonstration ever of support for the PU, a measure of genuine workers’ power, also came in these final months. After the El Teniente strike, the CUT called for a one-day stoppage to show the right that Chilean workers were with the PU and that there was no chance of winning them over. The stoppage was total. Student participation in that day’s demonstration was massive. We assembled in every faculty to march to the centre of Santiago. The right had also organized a march, from El Teniente, which was supposed to end in the square in front of the Moneda Palace, to demand Allende’s resignation. But they never got there. We dispersed them in the morning, and the left held the square – it was cold and raining, but the elation was tremendous, with Allende coming out to speak from the balcony every twenty or thirty minutes. Although the right tried to break us up, we controlled the situation completely. Workers from different industries manned each street to the Moneda by the hundreds, in perfect order. The construction workers even turned up with their cement-mixers and swore to use them to defend Allende and the constitution! The whole day through only one person died, in a shoot-out at the edge of the crowd. As I said, it was the clearest expression of popular power in all those three years.

The tancazo came a week later. The left was totally unprepared for it. As I arrived at the university I heard someone shouting: ‘The tanks are round the Moneda, they’re firing’. I’d never expected it. I ran to the Party youth headquarters, where they told us to wait in our places of study for further orders. So we went back. The faculty was already occupied, the fascists had been turned out. We waited there, organized into brigades and prepared to hold out, though we had no means of armed resistance. In the afternoon we were told that things were under control and that there would be a demonstration in front of the Moneda that evening. By seven we were there, and again there was an enormous crowd, and Allende spoke, though to my mind wrongly, repeating that all was under control. We all went home under that impression.

It soon became clear that this wasn’t the case. That same night there were more rumours of a coup – and there were meetings in the barracks, but nothing immediate came of them. I believe that at this point the PU leadership, above all Allende himself, failed to act firmly. The plotters should have been purged from the armed forces, not placated, though I wouldn’t agree with those who demanded the closure of Congress. From having never expected a coup we now went to the opposite extreme – four out of every five nights or so there were alerts. From the end of June right
The approach of the coup: the student response to the narrowing of the PU’s options

After the tancazo the PU decided to organize defence brigades throughout the country. There was also a proposal for another march in Santiago, to let the right know that if they were planning civil war, the PU was ready. It was all arranged and I was involved as a representative of the Students’ Federation. But the march was called off – it was national flag day, and the armed forces were due to parade in Santiago. This was another show of weakness.

The defence brigades went ahead, though. The MIR wanted to call them, committees for the defence of the revolution’, as in Cuba. The students took part, but this scheme was limited; it was seen only as a means of supporting a hoped-for division within the armed forces. Also it was far from efficient – as we discovered after the coup, when various infiltrators denounced us. But the crucial point was that we’d lost the battle for the loyalty of the armed forces. It was this which turned the balance of power against us, in the university as outside it. The right was gaining ground everywhere, except of course among the workers, but this left them isolated, as the second stoppage in July and August showed. We couldn’t fight back and keep things going as we had before. We tried to carry out the same tasks, but the middle class had now been won over by the centre-right alliance of Christian Democrats and Nationalists. Again we sent out working brigades, but tasks like unloading and loading the trucks were now impossible. The army and police no longer protected us. At times they even prevented us from working. What could we do? The convoys became impossible – we were shot at on every corner, and shooting back would have been suicidal. Transport ground to a halt, the shops closed and the university was paralysed. With the left’s indecision at a national level, the middle ground could see no way out – it was either civil war or the coup.

The only alternative was some new step, like a plebiscite. But I doubt if even this was possible. Had the left won it, the military would still have intervened, arguing fraud by the PU. Pinochet said as much after the coup. There was no way out, no solution that the PU could offer. Its fall was only a matter of time.

The threats and repression of students began before the coup. Since the tancazo I’d had threatening calls and letters – the scraps of paper with ‘Jakarta’ written on them, to remind us of the massacre of Communists in Indonesia. Two of our comrades were said to have been caught with plans of some barracks. They were tortured and gave details of our organization. On the tenth there was a final clash between right and left in the university. That night we held another meeting to discuss the military’s position, but we could see no way out. Next morning we controlled most faculties, and were still prepared to defend the government, through the brigades set up for this purpose. I was at party headquarters as the first news of the coup came through. They gave us the same instructions – to await orders for our part in the plans for defending the whole of Chile. Naturally there were such plans, but they were based on the assumption that some of the military would remain loyal. By eleven the faculty was beginning to be surrounded. The parties debated whether to stay or retire to key sectors. There were about five hundred of us, students and university workers, all ready to resist if we could have. But finally the PU ordered us to retire in our brigades to private houses in the city. There was resistance on some campuses, but it was isolated and crushed.

We stayed in hiding in brigades for some days, still organized and awaiting instructions. Our structure at the base was virtually intact, but we had nothing clear to act on. We were still in touch with one another, but cut off from the leadership. We realized that there was widespread resistance – we could hear fighting in the streets – but all of it seemed to reflect the same thing, a lack of any coordination. We showed our faces only once, when we went to one of the shantytowns to get a comrade’s family out, because we’d heard it was going to be bombed. The Air Force had sent a search party there on the previous night, and they’d all been killed and their uniforms taken – the bodies were still there. This type of resistance was
going on everywhere, but all of it seems to have been spontaneous. Contrary to what people think, there was some local coordination between all the left-wing parties, but it was only fragmentary, as all of them were cut off from their leaders.

Later, when I did get personal instructions, I was told to keep low because I was marked. I did so for a month, moving from one place to another, then I tried visiting the university. But I was immediately denounced and arrested. Like almost everyone else, I was tortured. More than some, less than many. How I got out I obviously can’t tell, but I was told that I had no option but to leave Chile.

What we had suffered was a defeat – not to my mind because of our differences, but because of the forces we faced. There was no immediate answer to them, though certainly mistakes were made. Particularly over the armed forces, and in our failure to control the media, which weighed heavily against us. Yet I still believe that it was an advance, through the new awareness which Chileans gained, and imperialism’s loss of prestige, in counting on fascist counter-measures. It was the same with the Vietnamese war, and look at the outcome. With each act of oppression, imperialism loses ground in the long term, especially in Latin America. That’s why I believe that the next round is ours.

Personally, I changed in those years. I realize now that I joined the Party thinking I had something to teach it. But I discovered that history isn’t as I’d imagined it, the product of political leadership by the conventionally wise. I found instead that it’s made by an anonymous people at a level far deeper than that of political petty-bourgeois, supposed intelligence. I found that this people has a knowledge and strength – to organize and make decisions – which I’d never dreamed of, which came to light under the PU. I discovered the awareness of people who would queue for hours without protest, in the conviction that come what may they had to keep struggling for the PU. Not out of obstinacy or blindness, as intellectuals might suppose, but out of the awareness they’d won. Not just in those years, but through generations. I came to understand Chilean history in ways I’d read of, but never quite grasped, as the history of a people’s genuine struggles. I realized what the Party meant to such people, from being rooted in their past, even to non-members of it. And this was because it had grown over years through conversations and conversions, with each struggle adding to the whole, despite a totally hostile setting. I realized that it was this people’s movement which lay behind the PU – a people who knew that waiting in a queue for hours was no hardship compared to the years of struggle behind it. This is why I’m convinced, quite objectively, that this awareness, and the left parties, will survive, not just in a few people’s minds but as the product of this history. However many people the fascists have slaughtered and however many more they slaughter, they’ll never destroy it, this force that we felt in every queue, in every meeting, even when times were hardest. This is why the repression is so severe; but it also means that the left will never abandon the struggle. And this isn’t something I learnt as a student, but as an activist, from the people.