

1872-1995: Anarchism in Chile



Article by Chilean anarchists which details the history of the anarchist and workers' movements over the previous 130 years.

We begin in 1872, when the Chilean Section of the International Working Men's Association was established in Valparaiso, a major coastal city. Tragically, this was also the year of the anarchists' expulsion from the International, and the section was not destined to last for long. However, it planted the seeds among the workers, for the growth of a strong and developing movement, spreading libertarian ideas throughout syndicates and work-places. Libertarian ideas were becoming particularly strong amongst the Nitrate miners in the North of the country.

But this process was interrupted by the outbreak in 1879 of the Pacific war. Chile had occupied Antofagasta in the North (then Bolivian territory, and rich in Nitrate deposits) and declared war on both Bolivia and Peru. However English Capital also held major stakes in the conflict - having bought up huge amounts of mining land cheap during the war. The eventual victory of the Chilean State brought prosperity to the English enslavers, Chilean bosses, and the State (via Nitrate taxes) but spelt misery and death to the people. As ever - it was the exploited who paid the price; and the rich, who enjoyed the benefits of the spoils of war. Unfortunately for them, the war wasn't enough to stop the social struggle or to tame the people.

In 1887 the Union Republicana del Pueblo (People's Republican Union) was formed, with a clear anarchist platform.. There followed, shortly afterwards, a series of largescale strikes by railworkers, miners and others, culminating finally in the first national general strike in 1890. The strike was joined by workers stretching the whole of the country and was the first of its sort in Latin America. The strike was brutally put down with the violence we have come to expect from all governments.

In 1891 another conflict took its toll on the working class: President Balmaceda, who was rapidly losing control of Congress, nevertheless continued to assert his presidential authority - attempting to press through reforms against the wishes of both Congress, and - more significantly - the interests of English Capital in Chile. This led to a civil war of quite unexpected dimensions that finally deposed Balmaceda from government. History, or rather, official history, tries to hide from us the actual genesis of the conflict, citing violations to the constitution, but we're not stupid and we won't be deceived by these lying so-called 'intellectuals' who fill the schoolbooks with crap and crummy arguments. Constitution is not a strong argument: after all constitutions are brandished and used by all governments for their own purposes.

Between 1892 - 1897 many societies were established including 'Sociedad de la Igualdad' - formed by Francisco Bilbao, Santiago Arcos, Victorimo Lastarrias and Eusebio Lillo - which fought for what they called the 'Sovereignty of Reason', 'Universal Fraternity with common and natural life' and 'People's Sovereignty in Politics'. The group consisted of artists, workers and intellectuals and published the paper 'El Amigo del Pueblo'. From its inception on April 4th 1850, until its final day, 29th April 1859, the group were a constant headache to the state and all those who had been involved from the beginning were exiled on its dissolution. The society had shared some of Proudhon's ideas around federalism but didn't call themselves anarchists. This was the first experience of this kind and was a model for those to come.

Among the other societies forming during this period were "Sociedad de Proteccion al Trabajador y mutuo apoyo" (Society for worker's protection and mutual aid) and "Centro Social de Trabajadores - El Grito del Pueblo" (Workers Social Centre - The People's Scream). Newspapers and magazines appeared, including "El Oprimido" (The Oppressed) and "El Proletario" and many important faces in Chilean Anarchism came to light: Magno Espimozza, Escobar Cavallo, Luis Olea....

In 1898 there was a general strike in Iquique, accompanied by the creation of new societies ("Rebellion" - a carpenters' society., "Caupolican" - an Indian (mapuche) name, FFCCE - railworkers resistance, etc...) new magazines ("La Tromba" - The waterspout - "El Rebelde" - The Rebel , "La Antorcha" - The Torch - "El Pueblo" - and "El Jornal") and the first May Day demonstration. This was a time of strong social movement and the "Partido Obrero Francisco Bilbao" - Francisco Bilbao Worker's Party - became an anarchist group in 1899. The following year saw the first demonstration against military service and the army - under the slogan: 'The Army is the Academy of Crime!' and was organised exclusively by anarchists.

Between 1900 and 1906 a lot of anarcho-syndicalist and resistance organisations emerged, all of them clandestine, except for a few trade unions. In 1902 harbour workers staged a 60 day strike and in 1903 there was a general strike in Valparaiso resulting in the murder of more than 100 workers by the oppressor dogs. The rebellion spread to Antofagasta, Iota and Coronel and lasted for 43 days.

The famous "Semana Roja" (Red Week) in 1905 was a crucial event in our early history. Workers had had enough of the inhuman conditions in which they were forced to live, the rising cost of living and the taxes on meat coming from Argentina. A worker's committee "Centreo de Estudios Sociedad Ateneo Obrero" called all workers to join the strike and to support the cause. On October 22nd, 30,000 people joined the uprising, inspired by the revolutionary ideas sweeping working class public opinion. Among them were butchers, shoe makers, tanners, cigar makers, truckmen, tapestry makers, typographers, telegraphers, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, bakers and the brave FFCCE workers who blew up the railways. The 1800 strong police force were no match for the crowds. And the ruling class were forced to form a "White Guard" of 300 armed rich boys to pitch in to massacre the popular forces. Despite the 250 victims, the movement continued to grow steadily.

In 1906, two important federations were formed: "Federacion de Trabajadores de Chile," - FTCH and "Federacion de Estudiantes de Chile" the latter comprising one of the most important forces in Chilean Social Struggle

However 1907 saw one of the most tragic episodes in our history (and possibly the worst example of mass slaughter in a labour dispute in world history). In the North of Chile, in the isolated desert pampas, the Nitrate miners went on strike for basic living conditions. The mining camps or villages were built by the bosses solely for the purpose of production - they built the substandard housing, stocked the stores, paid the workers in tokens redeemable only in the company stores and held strict control over the day to day life on the camps.

The strikers descended on the town of Iquique with their wives and kids to make their demands and were joined by other workers in the city; solidarity flourished everywhere. A strike committee headed by Jose Pariggs was formed - Luis Olea was also an important member of the committee and both were remarkable anarchist militants. The strike headquarters was established at the Santa Maria School. Overall there were around 4,500 strikers and supporters in the school and another 1,500 or so camping in tents around the square.

The army were called in by the bosses, martial law was declared, stores were locked and on December 21st at 3.45 pm the slaughter began. The first to be shot were the members of the committee. Chilean, Argentinean, Peruvian, Bolivian and European workers were slain with an astonishing ruthlessness, with their wives and children. All dead. The number of victims was reckoned to be up to 3600. Luis Olea was murdered by Roberto Silva Renard's gun (he is now known as "Carmicero de Iquique" - The Butcher of Iquique).

An eye witness gave the following account of the massacre " On the central balcony...stood 30 or so men in the prime of life, quite calm, beneath a great Chilean flag, and surrounded by the flags of other nations. They were the strike committee...All eyes were fixed on them just as all the guns were directed at them. Standing, they received the shots, As though struck by lightning they fell, and the great flag fluttered down over their bodies...There was a moment of silence as the machine guns were lowered to aim at the school yard and the hall, occupied by a compact mass of people who spilled over into the main square.. There was a sound like thunder as they fired. Then the gunfire ceased and the foot soldiers went into the school by the side doors, firing as men and women fled in all directions."

Despite the great sacrifice of these comrades, the movement was impossible to stop. The large numbers of people working at the mines, their diverse places of origin, and the bitter conditions forged one of the strongest forces in the Chilean workers struggle (unfortunately, condemned to disappear after the 1st world war) and their revolutionary spirit spread throughout the territory like wildfire.

This movement directly lead, in 1909 to the formation the 'Federacion Obrera de Chile' - FOCH. It aimed to pull together all the societies involved in the struggle, through delegations, to form a national federation. There were anarchists, Marxists, democrats, etc... The various working class movements rapidly began to organise themselves within the new federation and in 1910 the FECH formed the popular university Victorino Lastarrias (in honour of one of the founding members of Sociedad de la Igualdad 1850). The university forged vital links between workers and students and offered basic education to the exploited.

During this period, the strikes, building of barricades and rioting against the police continued. In 1912 Federacion Obrera Regional de Chile - FORCH was formed with the remarkable participation of Juan Onofre Chamorro. This was also the time noted for the militancy of Manuel Rojas - one of the most important Chilean writers who described the situation of the working class in books such as "Hijo de Ladron" - Son of a Thief - "Lo obscura vida radiante" - The dark bright life etc., and is internationally recognised as Chile's best novelist.

In 1917 the IWW arrived in the region and the following year the FECH organised the "Asamblea Obrera de Alimentacion" - Assembly for the Nourishment of the Workers. The FOCH, IWW and POS (Partido Obrero Socialista - Socialist Workers Party) all participated. In September 1919, the AOA (or WFA) called a general strike, which was brutally put down by the authorities. San Fuentes (the president) instigated legal proceedings against the strikers and many workers and students were sued.

As the Nitrate mines began to produce less profits and workers were laid off, miners, highly politicised and practiced in revolutionary organisation were returning to their villages. Strikes were breaking out throughout the country, the state was in substantial debt to foreign banks and to deflect attention from its

domestic problems, the government invented a war with Peru. The war never happened, but troops were deployed to strategic points and nationalist and rabid anti - Peruvian propaganda was disseminated by the state.

The FECH was opposed to any armed conflict, and openly condemned the government for its belligerency. On September 21st a column of rich scum broke into the FECH's headquarters burning books, furniture, and ultimately the whole building. "We have to teach a lesson to these so-called Chileans, who have sold out to Peru's gold" said one of the authorities. Most of the "Traitors to the country" were jailed after being sued in the courts under what the government called the "Subversion Trial" (pathetic isn't it?). One of those jailed - the Law/Spanish student Domingo Gomez Rojas went mad from torture and was sent to a sanatorium, where he died four months later, he was only 23 yrs old. Overall 1920 was a year of brutal repression for the workers movement - many locals were burnt down, many agitators were murdered, workers were sent to prison etc. and the following year witnessed the almost forgotten San Gregorio Massacre where hundreds of miners were killed mercilessly.

By 1925 there were 214 syndicates in Chile boasting the active participation of more than 200,000 people. And it was the first year where a Chilean delegation of the IWW were able to participate in an IWA Congress. Henceforth our participation became more regular. But on June 5th 1925 more blood was shed in La Coruna (Nitrate mine encampment) - on this occasion more than 500 rebels were tortured in Iqueque.

In 1930 the Chilean economy was hit by disaster: German scientists discovered a synthetic Nitrate, far cheaper than the natural one, and the mines which had provided a (meagre) living for thousands of workers and where revolutionary syndicalism had been bred, began to close down rapidly. Of course, the proletariat bore the brunt of the crisis and were powerless to stop it. They were forced, by famine, to move to the South, where the overcrowded cities were almost collapsing. As no pain comes alone (Chilean expression) the year before - 1929 - had been the year of the Wall Street Crash and the beginning of a worldwide recession. The situation was therefore even more desperate than ever.

Also in the 30s an important figure in anarchism emerged on the scene: Pedro Nolasco Arratia. Today, a French collective uses his name.

In April 27th 1934, the FOCH headquarters in Santiago was assaulted by the police and the 'white guards'; 7 workers died in the attack, a child was slain, and 200 workers were badly injured. In June the same year, 477 peasants were slain in Alto Bio-Bio, Ranquil and Lonquimay. In December 1936 the Confederacion General de Trabajadores - CGT was formed with the participation of the IWW and the FORCH. Some important objectives achieved by the IWW were: i) the 8 hour working day, ii) dominical (Sunday) rest, iii) Indemnity for accidents at work, iv) Monetary recognition of years of service, v) the right to retirement and vi) the right to an old age pension. By this time the FACH - Chilean Anarchist Federation- was active and sent some International Brigades to support the Spanish comrades in the Spanish Civil War (1936).

On January 28th 1946 at Bulmes Square (Santiago) 8 workers were murdered and many more were seriously injured by the police dogs. In 1947, Pisagua (an infamous concentration camp) was opened and a period of fullscale of persecution of anarchists began. Anarchist organisations had to go underground and one such clandestine initiative was the Luisa Michel cultural centre, which operated with the clear aim of giving a rational education to female workers. In 1953 its name changed to "Luisa Michel Libertarian School". It was run by comrade Flora Sanhueza R. and had over 70 students. With time, it began to accept children as well. It worked non stop until 1957, and we have to praise the strength of libertarian women who were able to resist the authorities for a period of ten years!

In 1950 Ernesto Miranda incorporated 12 federations and several syndicates into the Movimiento Unitario Nacional de Trabajadores -MUNT. Its aim was to unite all the independent syndicates in this area of the world. This aim was achieved in 1953 when the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores - CUT was formed. Its initial statement of aims and principles was drawn up by 3 anarchists from the CGT. However in 1957 a split shook the organisation: the anarcho-syndicalists abandoned the CUT in protest at its involvement in an electoral pact with the FRAP (Frente Amplio Popular) during the lead up to the presidential election in 1958. FRAP was a political institution of left wing parties and CUT's involvement (with the FRAP) in the electoral process was seen as a betrayal of working class independence.

Miranda, after being declared "illustrious son" by Fidel Castro himself, created the "Comite de Defensa de la Revolucion Cubana". Whilst on the other hand, the Anarchist Federation, FACH, declared in 1960 that "At that pace, Cuban Revolution will end married with the Russians". On August 15th 1965, in the Liberation Hall, the MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria - Revolutionary Left Wing Movement) was born. The first secretary was the Trotskyite Enrique Sepulveda but Miranda and Clotario Blest were on the Committee (two dedicated anarcho-syndicalists). Originally the MIR was an attempt to create a strong anarcho-syndicalist movement, but in 1967 Miguel Enriquez and Luciano Cruz took over, polluting the MIR with Marxist Leninist ideas / practices. Miranda, Blest and their anarchist comrades quit.

The next year, the VOP was formed (Vanguardia Organizada del Pueblo) by a group of young men who rejected the authoritarianism of the MIR. There were two tendencies within it: Panekoism (sort of anti authoritarian Marxism - weird eh?) and Anarchism. Both the MIR and the VOP had their influence and during 1969 they intervened within many work-place struggles forcing the bosses to sign agreements drawn up by the working class (and, admirably, financing their activities from the rich through bank robberies).

However, the authorities continued to take their revenge whenever they could - for example, during this period the Homeless Peoples' Committee of Puerto Montt occupied some fields in the south to build themselves housing. This led to an order to attack by minister Perez Zujovic and the resulting Irigoyen Pampa's massacre claimed the lives of 9 people including two pregnant women.

In 1970 the new (relatively popular) Socialist President, Salvador Allende declared an amnesty for all political prisoners. VOP benefited from this and agreed, on the president's request, to form part of the GAP (Grupo de Amigos Personales) - the president's personal guard. In March 1971, VOP members of the guard, warned the president about a rightwing plot to topple the government. The most important of the plotters was the traitor Edmundo Perez Zujovic. Allende refused to heed these warnings, but the VOP used direct action to prevent Zujovic from succeeding in his plans - on June 8th, 1971, Perez Zujovic was executed. The VOP had also found him guilty of the Pto Montt massacre 1969 (detailed above). However the VOP paid a very high price for its promise to protect Allende as he began to lose control of the government and the country. Not only were its members pursued by the state, but also by the right and left wing. The Rivera Calderon brothers were cowardly murdered by the secret police, unarmed and holding a white flag, in apparent revenge for their participation in the just execution of the bastard, Zujovic.

In 1972, partly as a reaction to severe food and other commodity shortages, (the US had imposed a trade and credits embargo in retaliation for the nationalisation of the US owned copper mines) the workers began to take over their work-places. Neighbourhood committees distributed goods direct from the worker controlled factories and the anarchist aim of self organization was achieved in many areas of life. The FTR -Frente de Trabajadores Revolucionarios played a major role in this process - demonstrating that workers were quite capable of running a factory by themselves, that government and bosses were no longer necessary and the government were taken completely by surprise. Allende, baulked at the

prospect of workers self organisation and sent 'observers' to the affected factories, whom, in practice, did the same obnoxious job of any traditional boss: gave orders. At the same the peasants were taking over agricultural land and organising through the MCR (Movimiento de Campesinos Revolucionarios).

The pressure against the popular government was mounting, boosted by millions of dollars pumped into the rightwing opposition from the US (Henry Kissinger had stated that he did not see why the US should stand idly by "and let a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people") and on June 29th 1973 there was an attempted Coup d'etat. This was a sort of test to see how the people would react a real one. The army began to attempt to search and inspect the industrial cordons (to seize activists) but people erected barricades in the popular neighbourhoods and prevented the incursion into their factories or homes by the police or the army.

But the real coup came when the tanks rolled into the streets of Santiago on September the 11th 1973. This is remembered as the most terrible day this century, as a nightmare where thousands and thousands of people were tortured , raped and murdered relentlessly. The people were defenceless against the new dictator Pinochet having only a few or no weapons - those that escaped death were sent as political prisoners to concentration camps in the north. Pinochet was to rule for nearly 17 years.

These first camps as a dreadful and cruel irony, were established upon the remains of the old Nitrate Mine villages - the original cradles of class consciousness. Many others, however, were sprouting like mushrooms after rain in the rest of the country. The most notorious were Pisagua (in Tarapaca), Chacabuco, Calama, Tocopilla's mines, Copiapo, La Serena's police stations (Coquimbo), Buque de Escuela Esmeralda, Escuela de Mecanica de la Armada, and Quillotas police stations (in Valparaiso).

Those who were executed were thrown into the sea or buried illegally in Chinolco or other clandestine places. In Santiago the incarcerated revolutionaries (called by the army "prisoners of war") were sent to National or Chile Stadiums, to the concentration camps and to secret jails (or dungeons) such as : Villa Grimaldi, La Venda Sexi, Jose Domingo Canas, Tres Alamos, Cuatro Alamos, Londres 38 etc.. There were other camps in Lota, Coronel, Concepcion, and Santa Barbara. By 1974, the prisoners who had been killed at the hands of Pinochet's officers were called "disappeared prisoners", for the government publically denied all knowledge of these people. All political parties and trade unions were banned, some courses at Universities were closed down - denounced as focuses for revolutionaries. People were cowed by fear under the terrible shadow of the DINA (Direccion de Inteligencia Nacional) - the secret police. In 1978, Victoria (Nitrate mine) was closed due to its reputation of being a cradle of political extremity.

However by the onset of the 80s people had regrouped and were beginning to fight back. In 1980 the syndicates affiliated to Norway's IWA obtained the freedom of the VOP members who had now been in prison for 9 years and 4 months (they had been arrested 2 years before the coup and had been transferred to concentration camps by Pinochet). They exchanged prison for exile.

MIR (a marxist movement as explained before) assassinated Roger Vergara - the chief of Army Intelligence. And in 1982 the textile workers went on strike after many years of fear; the Government couldn't intimidate them with repression any longer. They decided to risk police brutality for the sake of the whole workers' movement.

The strike kept on going until its bitter end. On May 11th (1983) a solidarity strike was called: at 2pm workers would go straight to home, children wouldn't go to school, teachers wouldn't give any lessons, people wouldn't buy anything and vehicles would march slowly through the streets. At nightfall, lights would be extinguished and people would march hitting empty pots. Everything happened as planned, although there were some incidents at the universities. At 8pm the sound of empty pots began. The police tried to silence it by throwing tear gas bombs at the buildings. Two were killed in La Victoria (a popular

neighbourhood) and Lo Plaza, and 600 were arrested with several wounded. Between 1983 and 1984 mass protests became more frequent and the people defended themselves against the police with molotovs, stones and barricades.

Anarchists were, of course, involved in these uprisings but they did not especially try to spread their ideas; the struggle against the dictator and the fight for human rights took precedence over ideological differences. All the revolutionary movements were in the fight together- there would be more appropriate times for ideological arguments in the future.

Anyway, in 1984, in Talca, a libertarian magazine called "La voz del Naturismo" was distributed and in 1987 black flags reappeared in Santiago, Concepcion and Osorno. Social centres began to appear - a centre for social studies "El Duende" - The Elf in Santiago, and the "Kolective Anarkista Liberacion" - KAL in Concepcion both under the umbrella of TASYs - "Taller de Analisis Sindical y social" - Studio for Social Studies and Analysis, created with the aim of providing space to the oppressed. A newspaper called "Acrata" - Anarchist - was published by Colectivo Anarquista Concepcion and the bulletin "Liberacion" by the KAL. "Accion Directa" was published by anarchist comrades in Santiago. In 1989, Pinochet was finally forced to admit defeat and 'democracy' was restored to Chile.

In 1990 "El Duende" hosted the creation of "Coordinadora Anarquista Estudiantil", and in Concepcion "Solidaridad Obrera" supported strikes of any kind. On January 2nd 1991, in an assembly, here in Concepcion, the Anarchist Intercities Federation "Federacion Anarquista Interciudadana" was established. Then, again, in Concepcion, the JAM (Juventudes Anti Militaristas) and, in Santiago, COSMO (Colectivo Contra el Servicio Militar Obligatorio) were formed. After this appeared other movements such as MALO (Movimiento Anarquista Luis Olea), COSMO Temuco, FAI Concepcion, "Kolectivo Kultural Libertario Malatesta" in Concepcion, "Red Anarquista" - Anarchist Web in Villa Alemana, Osorno, Tenuco, Concepcion, Valparaiso, Santiago, etc.....the FAL "Federacion Anarco - Libertaria"etc....

There was also an attempt to create a libertarian editorial called "Peste Negra". Some of the most recent publications are "Rebellion", "Ni Dios Mi Amo Contra Toda Autoridad", "El Duende Negro", "Milikk - Ya Al Servicio? - Ni Cagando!", "El irreverente", "Accion Libertaria".... and "Tiempos Nuevos" - coming soon! (This is ours).

As regards our collective, the last year was a time for re-organisation. Some people left, others joined us as we finally decided to dissolve the KAL. Our collective, "Arbol Negro" - Black Tree - sent a delegation of two people representing Concepcion and Santiago respectively to the IWA congress in Spain in December. Thus we were recognised as a section of the IWA in Chile and we took over the work left by the IWW.

Jose Antonio Gutierrez Danton of Colectivo Arbol Negro and "Solidaridad Obrera", 1995

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