

1920: The Chilean "White Terror"

An account of a wave of suppression which swept the Chilean workers' movement in the summer of 1920.

The following article is a translation of a letter received from a member of the Chilean branch of the international revolutionary rank-and-file union the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) sent to the American IWW. They state it was one of several communications received by them from authentic and reliable sources, giving an account of the almost unbelievable atrocities committed by the Chilean ruling class during and since the last week of July. These atrocities were caused by what appears to be a cleverly manipulated "wave of patriotism" on behalf of the nitrate barons of northern Chile, who dominate the whole country and its government through its chief wealth-producing industry, against Peru and Bolivia and their awakening capitalist elements. These latter have of late voiced a desire to regain possession of the provinces of Arica and Tacna, formerly a part of Peru, and Antofagasta, formerly a part of Bolivia, which were seized by Chile in the war of 1879, and held by it since the peace treaty of 1883.

As the magazine "Insurrexit," published by the University Students' Organisation of Buenos Aires, said: another war, fomented by the patriots of Chile, Peru and Bolivia, was brewing for the possession of a desert waste of fowl excrement, the guano beds out of which the nitrate is taken.

A Letter from Chile Fellow Workers:

We are passing through a period of repression which for savage ferocity has never been equalled in this country. The dominating powers and representatives of "order," of "our country", and of "god" even, are reverting naturally and easily to the instincts of the troglodyte.

The watchword seems to be, "wipe out all Syndicalists, IWW's, Anarchists and idealists, be they workers or students; destroy their publications and print shops, their offices, assembly halls and libraries," etc., in short, all agencies of enlightenment and education appealing to, or established by, oppressed workers or idealists, and all organisations aiming to replace the present intolerable regime with one of economic freedom.

There are large numbers of our comrades and fellow workers in the jails of Chile; over 100 in Santiago, 25 in Valparaiso, as many more in Concepcion, Iquique, Caleta Buena, Antofagasta, Tocopilla, Punta Arenas and other localities. Many of our fellow workers have been deported for the "crime" of having been born beyond the boundaries of the domains of the nitrate despots, or because of affiliation with the seriously progressive labour organisations, in spite of the fact that many of them have resided in this country for 25 years or more. These comrades have been arrested, subjected to violence and beatings, and abandoned in the desert on the Peruvian boundary.

They have raided and destroyed the printing plant of the libertarian review "Numen" of Santiago, of the Anarcho-syndicalist ten-day publications "El Surco" of Iquique and "La Batalla" of Valparaiso, of "La Comuna" of Vina del Mar, of the weekly "El Socialista" and the inter-daily "El Trabajo" of Punta Arenas, the latter being the organ of Magellan Workers' Federation.

They have destroyed and sacked the offices of the Students' Federation of Santiago and of the local unions of the Industrial Workers of the World in Santiago and Valparaiso. The majority

of the prisoners are of the latter organisation, and they are being tried or are awaiting trial in Santiago and elsewhere as "subverters of law and order." Those detained for trial in Santiago comprise practically all the members of the Regional Administrative Council of the I.W.W. of Chile, as well as the business managers of "Numen" and "Verba Roja," Julio Valiente and Luis A. Soza. The editors were not apprehended. Nearly all the members of the Local Administrative Council of Santiago and the editors and managers of its organ "Mar y Tierra," Juan O. Chamorro y Santos Arancibia, are in jail in Valparaiso, with Juan Vergara and Luis A. Pardo of the Anarcho-Syndicalist ten-day paper "La Batalla". In Iquique, the editor of "El Surco," Celedonic Arenas, is again on trial, and in Tocopilla, the editor of "El Socialista," Luis Rocabarren, has been indicted. In Concepcion, Fellow Workers Luis A. Jorquera and Luis A. Hernandez, editors of "La Jornada," are being tried.

Among the students being tried in Santiago, is Fellow Worker Domingo Gomez Rojas for the "crime" of being a member of the IWW, and Pedro Gandulfo and Rigoberto Soto, who heroically defended their offices and hall on the day of the assault, when the library of the social centre of the students was burned. The assault on the students' club took place at high noon, and it is pertinent to mention that the said club was situated two blocks away from the palace of "La Moneda," the seat of government of this civilized republic.

In the face of the acquiescent police, a mob of clericals and patriots, made up of students of the religious colleges and military in civilian clothes, with the national flag and the portrait of the president at their head, proceeded to destroy all that stood for enlightenment and freedom for the workers and producers. They beat up our Fellow Worker Juan Gandulfo, a student, most cruelly, because he would not obey their demands that he kiss the flag they were carrying. They also beat up in the most savage manner the student Santiago Labarco, and the professors of the University of Chile, Evaristo Molina of the department of Political Economy and Pedro Leon of the Department of Philosophy.

In Valparaiso the same acts of barbarism took place, the IWW hall being raided by police and soldiers, who entered the hall, revolver in hand, while the fellow workers were holding a special business meeting, and began to beat them right and left, until a couple of our comrades opposed their cowardly brutality and defended themselves with chairs, and then the majority of those present were taken to jail, including the most active members of our Valparaiso unions, while other police and soldiers miraculously "found" dynamite and firearms of different kinds in the hall. The furore created over this discovery by the corrupt daily press with its usual perversions, brought about another raid of the hall by the clericals and patriots pure and simple, who destroyed all the furniture and equipment in the local hall and offices of the IWW. The hall and offices of the Magellan Workers' Federation, including their printing establishment, all occupying a magnificent building formerly used as a theatre, were stormed shortly after midnight, while the workers were assembled inside.

The soldiery attempted to enter the hall but were refused, and upon being closed out fired several volleys into the building at close range, killing some thirty workers and wounding about fifty. The mob, made up of the Catholic Federation, the Patriotic League of Chile, and military and civil officials, including the governor of Magellan, set machine guns at the street corners surrounding the building, and set fire to the workers' hall at several different places at the same time, burning it to the ground along with the offices and print shop of "El Trabajo," organ of the Workers' Federation of Magellan, issued every second day.

The soldiery attempted to enter the hall, but were orgies of murder and destruction, and he forbade the fire department from putting out the fire. Afterward, according to the version of this same worthy governor, there were found in the ruins the charred remains of five victims of the assault and fire. Those who succeeded in escaping from the burning building were

seized. Some of them were shot while attempting to escape the flames, while others were shot in the plaza without further ado.

It is the supposition that not only the wave of mobilisation patriotism against Peru, but also the opposition of the Federation and its organ to the governor, Alfonso Bulnes Corres, because of his protection of the local exploiters and illegal traffickers in liquor, as well as the ultimatum of the workers comprising the Federation not to move any liquor, caused the governor to instigate vengeful action against the workers, being ably assisted by the Catholic Federation, the Patriotic League of Chile and the press, as well as mayor Paradas and other civil and military officials.

The infamous massacre was too much even for the editor of the bourgeois paper "The Daily Magellian," and another editor had to be found before the paper could be issued; while the workers of the whole region went out on a spontaneous general strike of protest and in memory of the victims of the Chilean bourgeoisie, continuing on strike for four days.

As you will see by the above, fellow workers, we are the victims of the most infamous reaction imaginable. Neither the names of the workers held prisoner in different parts of Chile nor of those deported have been allowed to be published; in this letter we only mention those we have knowledge of personally, or through other comrades.

As we are placed at a tremendous disadvantage in our struggle against the perpetrators of these terrible crimes, we ask for solidarity from all the workers the world over. We suggest that wherever and whenever possible publicity should be given to the crimes of the Chilean bourgeoisie, and that protest meetings be held.

We also ask that you endeavour to carry on a boycott on all that comes from or goes to Chile as long as our comrades are held behind prison bars, and while the vicious persecution lasts against those of us who seek a better system of society and a brighter future for humanity.

Fellow workers: let solidarity be the watchword!

Against the criminal tyranny of the Chilean bourgeoisie let us oppose the international solidarity of the proletariat!

The I.W.W. and Anarchists of Chile.

Valparaiso, Chile,
September 28, 1920.

P.S. We especially urge a boycott against members of the Chilean bourgeoisie travelling in your country, by the organised Chauffeurs, Hotel and Restaurant Workers, etc.

Discontinue sending all papers and correspondence to our former addresses; this concerns all radical papers and organisations in Chile, as our offices have been closed and our addresses being known, all correspondence for us is being seized by the police. Send papers and correspondence to Luis Pirson, Correo 2, Valparaiso, Chile.

Edited from the One Big Union Monthly, January 1921