

Chronology of the Chilean workers' movement

Coordinadora Libertaria Latino-Americana

1983

1909: The Gran Federacion Obrera de Chile (GFOC) is formed in September by the more conservative labor groups to bring together the workers' cooperatives. Cooperativism is strong in Chile at this time, with 55,000 people in 433 workers' co-ops.

1917: At the GFOC congress of 1917, a more revolutionary tendency becomes dominant, replacing the more conservative faction, and the name of the organization is shortened to Chilean Workers Federation (FOCH). Their goal was the complete abolition of capitalism and its replacement by the workers' union federation, which would control industry.

1922: The first serious effort at direct manipulation of the workers' movement by political parties occurs. A delegation headed by Luis Emilio Recabarren appears at the 2nd National Congress of the FOCH. Recabarren has just returned from the USSR and announces his intention to form a Chilean Communist Party. FOCH abandons its federalist organizational practice in favor of centralism. The domination of CP politics alienates libertarian, syndicalist or social-democratic unionists, leading to a split in 1925.

1919: The Chilean IWW is founded as an anarcho-syndicalist workers organization in Valparaiso and spread rapidly throughout the country. The IWW espouses, as its tactic, direct action, and, as its objective, abolition of wage-labor and direct control of production by the workers.

1920: Arturo Alessandri Palma is elected president and responds to worker activism by propagating a "corporatist" work code, inspired by Benito Mussolini, which aims at control of the working class.

1924: A coup d'etat takes place. At first only the IWW opposes the new regime. But a new wave of repression hits the workers' movement, with massacres, imprisonment, tortures.

1927: A new military regime comes to power with Carlos Ibanez del Campo at its head. A ferocious dictatorship destroys the unions one by one. There occur a series of assassinations of militants in plain view as meetings are letting out. Dawn kidnappings. Tortures. People forced into exile. The Chilean IWW ceases to exist. FOCH almost totally disappears.

1931: The fall of the dictatorship. The workers' movement enters a period of reorganization and Chile passes through a period of institutional crisis. The economic crisis amplifies this situation. The anarcho-syndicalist unions create the CGT (General Confederation of Workers). Though inspired by the IWW tradition, the CGT is built more on the federalist model of organization such

as the Argentine FORA. Throughout the period of 1931-34 the unions of the CGT are involved in strikes and movement-building. During this process the General Association of Teachers is formed. The various political parties, such as the Socialists (SP), Communists (CP), the bourgeois Radical Party (RP) and the right-wing Phalange, advocate a legalized, regulated form of unionism. The CGT unions reject the legalistic approach as a method for "dominating the revolutionary workers movement." Meanwhile, the CP has been trying to rebuild the FOCH but its support is weak. During this period the union movement is subject to no one but its own members, striking for its own principles and its revolutionary goals. It is not controlled by any political party seeking to dominate the labor movement for its own purposes.

1932: As always the armed forces fulfill their tragic role. On June 4 a group of politicians and military men carry out a coup d'etat and install the government of Marmaduke Grove who declares Chile a "socialist republic," but the workers and the unions have no avenue for participation. On June 16th the military bring the 12-day-old "socialist republic" to an end.

1934: The Confederation of Chilean Workers (CTCH) is formed under the auspices of the Socialist and Communist parties. The Communists adopt the Popular Front tactic of alliances with other reform-oriented parties and "progressive" sections of the ruling class. The Chilean workers' movement now finds itself divided into two camps: the revolutionary unionism of the CGT, and the party-controlled unionism of the CTCH.

1938: Pedro Aguirre Corda, candidate of the Popular Front, is elected to the presidency. Although a national campesinos organization is formed in 1939, strikes during the harvest season are outlawed by the Popular Front government. CTCH leaders are elected to parliament and the CTCH becomes committed to the defense of the government and its policies. In 1939 the CTCH fails to support a printers' strike organized by the anarcho-syndicalist CGT. Internal democracy within the CTCH begins to suffer. Due to the failure of the Popular Front government, the CTCH splits into opposing Communist and Socialist factions.

1946: G. Gonzalez Videla, a member of the bourgeois Radical Party, is elected president with the support of the left parties. Videla propagates a "law of the defense of democracy" which is used to outlaw the CP, and also a campaign of repression is unleashed against the labor movement.

1952: Carlos Ibanez del Campo, whose bloody dictatorship in 1927-31 could hardly be forgotten by the working class, is elected president. To develop a common front against the bosses, the CTCH factions appeal for unity during 1st of May mobilizations.

1953: Unity discussions lead to the merger of the CGT and the two CTCH factions; in February the Chilean Workers Central (CUT) is born. The National Committee consists of Clotario Blest (President-an independent left-wing Christian), Baudilio Cazanova and Isodoro Godoy (Socialists), and Juan Vargas Puebla (a Communist). The National Council of the CUT consists of two Christian Democrats (a reformist Church-supported party), seven Socialists, a Phalangist, a Communist and four anarcho-syndicalists (Ernesto Miranda, Ramon Dominguez, Hector Duran and Celso Poblete). The unification of the labor movement is followed by a period of unity and action. Manual workers, intellectuals, campesinos, students and professional workers join up with the CUT. The workers are developing a consensus towards a confrontation with the bosses and the State. This is reflected in a 15-point program drawn up by the National Council. The CUT develops a campaign of partial work stoppages, preparing for a general strike. The workers are demanding changes that are social and political as well as economic.

1956: It is in this social climate of rebellion that the national general strike of July 1956 takes place. For 48 hours nothing moves in Chile. Ibanez threatens to resign and give the responsibility

for running the country to the CUT. However, 70 percent of the leaders of the CUT are of the marxist parties. Ibanez calls upon the left-wing parties for a solution to the crisis. The parties of the left ask the leaders of the CUT to call off the general strike. A committee is set up by the CUT, headed by the CUT president, Clotario Blest. When the committee presents a list of demands to the Ibanez government, Ibanez demands that the workers return to work before he will respond. With the Communists, Socialists and Radicals supporting this proposal, the general strike is called off. The four anarcho-syndicalists on the National Council protest that the strike should not be called off without first consulting the rank-and-file, but they are overruled. The return to work creates disorientation and demoralization. Having gained nothing, Chilean workers cannot understand why they should return to work.

1957: A new general strike is called, to back up the original demands made during the July 1956 general strike, which had not yet been fulfilled. This strike is a failure and the government responds with strong repressive measures. After this experience, the four anarcho-syndicalist members resign from the National Council.

The 1956 general strike, and its aftermath, demonstrated the destructive role of the political parties, which prevented revolutionary unionism from accomplishing its work of social transformation. The interests of the political parties were successfully imposed above those of the workers. After 1957, the CUT became a fish pond, with the parties fighting for control of the unions. Under the government of Allende, the CUT continued as an arena for the manipulations of the marxist political parties, and the Christian Democrats perfected their competition for control, as well.

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