

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Alan Angell
Anarchists in the Chilean Labour Movement
1972

Excerpted from *Politics and the Labour Movement in Chile*, pp.
25–29.

theanarchistlibrary.org

Anarchists in the Chilean Labour Movement

Alan Angell

1972

There were three early working-class political organizations in Chile: the Democratic party, the anarchists, and the socialist movements which gave rise to the Socialist Workers' Party (POS), which later became the Communist Party (CP).

The anarchists stood for a diametrically opposed form of action to that of the Democratic party. Their ideas influenced Luis Emilio Recabarren (whose early writings rely heavily on the works of Reclus, Kropotkin, and Malatesta), though he had rejected these ideas before he left the Democratic party. As early as 1904 he was to affirm against the anarchists that it was necessary to enter the world of politics to realize the aims of the working class.¹

The lines between socialists and anarchists in many cases were not clearly drawn before the impact of the 1917 Russian revolution in Chile; and there were many libertarian socialist groups that could be fitted into both camps. It seems, however, that at least in

¹ Lafertte, p. 12, quoting from Recabarren's article in the newspaper *El Marítimo* (Antofagasta), 20 Aug. 1904.

the first decade of this century the anarchists were the best organized, most advanced, and most publicized of the radical groups, especially in their resistance societies. They were also the first to receive the brunt of attacks by employer and government. They were principally organized in the Santiago and Valparaíso area, in occupations such as printing, baking, and shoemaking, and in the port area, with some strength also in the coal mines near Concepción and in some Northern districts. Many of these early anarchists were immigrants from Spain, Italy, and Germany who had mostly settled in Santiago.² The anarchists attempted the first real organization of workers there with the Federation of Carpenters and Similar Trades, which played an important part in the strikes in Santiago in 1906–7. Though they rejected alliances with politicians, they co-operated with students, and many prominent student leaders of the time were anarchists.

The anarchists' ideas were typical of such movements elsewhere. They emphasized direct action and rejection of external aid, especially from politicians, for they regarded politicians, whatever their expressed affiliation, as exploiters of the working class. They were especially opposed to the organization of working-class parties. They attacked Recabarren and attempted to prove that he had sold out to the bourgeoisie.³ Relations inside the worker movement deteriorated even more after the Russian revolution, the formation of the Chilean CP, and the conversion of the Chilean Workers' Federation (FOCh) to a section of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). The anarchists argued that the FOCh had become totally dependent on Moscow, and acted as a divisive force inside the working class; they constantly attacked the CP with the slogan 'down with all governments, proletarian or bourgeois'.⁴

² Barría, *Movimientos sociales 1900–10*, p. 128; Jobet, *Recabarren*, p. 41.

³ G. Ortúzar & I. Puente, *Hacia un mundo nuevo* (1938), p. 12; Osvaldo Arias, *La prensa obrera en Chile* (Memoria, Univ. Chile, 1953), p. 45.

⁴ Arias, p. 49. Apart from the work of Arias there is not a great deal written, especially by anarchists themselves, apart from newspapers of the time. One

its hostility to state, church, and capital, was an important element in the tradition of the Chilean labour movement.

the Popular Front in 1936–8—it lost a great deal of the mass support among the marginal elements that it had been able to mobilize in mass protests, most notably against taxes on food, high rents, and the cost of living.¹⁴ In comparison with the communist and socialist giants in the labour movement, it looked and became irrelevant. Heredia, a convinced anarchist, writing in 1938, was very pessimistic about the prospects for his movement; he no longer believed that it could overthrow the state by a general strike, and he admitted that he did not know what force would make the revolution, though he added that in any case a European, or at least major Latin American, upheaval was necessary first. Chilean anarchism, he concluded, had no future by itself;¹⁵ and events proved him right.

Yet the influence of anarchism on the labour movement was far from negligible. Many future CP leaders, both intellectual—like Carlos Contreras Labarca,¹⁶ a CP secretary-general—and proletarian—like Juan Chacón, a former port worker in Valparaíso and later a member of the Central Committee and spokesman on agrarian affairs—had passed through the ranks of anarchism.¹⁷ Similarly, in the Socialist party Oscar Schnake, a leading Socialist and cabinet minister in the Popular Front, had been a member of anarchist movements; and the old disputes between Marx and Bakunin were echoed in the debates of the Socialist party congresses until the mid-1940s. The radical stance of anarchism,

¹⁴ Gurrieri, p. 89.

¹⁵ Heredia, pp. 78–9.

¹⁶ A student leader in the 1920s. The anarchist journal *Acción directa* circulated widely among students and their own journal, *Claridad*, carried many articles on anarchism (A. Chelén, *Trayectoria del socialismo* (fig. 68), p. 33).

¹⁷ Only briefly, but his account pays tribute to the energy and enthusiasm of the anarchists of the period 1910–20 (J. M. Varas, *Chacón* (1968), pp. 21–7). He refers also to active contacts with Argentinian anarchists at that time.

Anarchists were active in many of the protest movements of the time. They claimed involvement in the Valparaíso strike of 1903; and in the Red Week (*Semana roja*) of 1905 when they had helped to organize the Committee for the Abolition of Tax on Argentinian meat, the failure of which one anarchist writer attributed to a lack of theoretical knowledge of the general strike. They were strong in the Shoemakers' Federation, which organized a series of successful strikes and direct action in 1917–18. They were also prominent in the early FOCh, which was by no means initially an exclusively communist group. In 1913 the anarchists established their most successful newspaper, *La Batalla* (The Struggle), which ran until 1925.⁵

The real heyday of organized anarchism was reached with the creation of the Chilean branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which held its first congress in 1919. This was anarcho-syndicalist rather than purely anarchist. Its newspaper saw syndicalism and anarchism as two parts of a common ideal. The IWW, it argued, was not anarchist; industrial unionism was the most modern syndical form, avoiding the anti-organizational impotence of anarchism and the state bureaucracy of socialism.⁶ At this congress the Chilean branch adopted the tactics of the IWW—the strike, boycott, and sabotage; and announced its enemies—capital, government, and the church.⁷

The Chilean IWW remained united until 1925 and was strong amongst the port workers of Iquique, Valparaíso, and Antofagasta. It was organized in seven associations, on an industrial basis, with

work which does reflect on the anarchist tradition and which tries to offer some (pessimistic) guides to the future is by Luis Heredia (who introduces himself as a worker of little formal education) in *Como se construirá el socialismo* (1936). This comes down very firmly on the side of Bakunin against Marx.

⁵ Fanny Simon, 'Anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism in South America' *HAHR*, Feb. 1946, p. 52.

⁶ From *Acción directa* (Santiago, 1920–6), cited in Arias, p. 49.

⁷ Simon, p. 53.

an estimated 9,000 members.⁸ It declared all paid posts abolished, leaving only a secretary-general whose function was to summon meetings of the executive. The IWW found considerable support amongst the students and one or two teachers' organizations, especially the Chilean Primary Schoolteachers' Association. Though the IWW had unions in a number of industries—bakers, construction, shoemakers, printers—it was never as strong as the Foch, and indeed was outnumbered by some of the Catholic and clerical unions. It was not to remain united for long; port workers, printing workers, and bakers soon broke away from its ranks. A major dispute took place over the type of organization, some preferring a federal or regional structure by profession rather than industrial unions; and the former group broke away to form the Chilean Regional Workers' Federation (FORCh) in 1925–6.⁹

The anarchist unions suffered heavily from repression by both government and employer. In 1920, for example, many of the IWW leaders were arrested for having dynamite in their offices in Valparaíso, though they firmly held that it was planted there by the police.¹⁰ They suffered particularly under the dictatorial military regime of Carlos Ibáñez (1927–31), partly because they were the group most opposed to him, partly because Ibáñez pressed for the application of the labour code and crushed opposition to

⁸ Poblete, *Organización sindical*, p. 36. This was its peak in 1928; in 1924 it had an estimated 2,000 (Simon, p. 53).

⁹ Barria, *Breve hist.*, pp. 27–8.

¹⁰ Heredia, p. 47.

it, strongest amongst the anarchists.¹¹ Their organizations were virtually destroyed and their leaders were exiled.

Though the formation of the General Workers' Confederation (CGT) in 1931 falls outside the period covered in this chapter, it is convenient to deal with it here, for it was the last time that the anarchists achieved any organizational importance. The CGT was organized on a regional rather than an industrial basis, and united the remnants of the IWW and FORCh. It drew its members from the same groups, and estimates of its numbers at its peak vary from 15,000 to 25,000;¹² it included among its members some of the best-paid workers in Chile at the time, for many of them were skilled artisans and their unions very combative—for example, the Leatherworkers' Industrial Union. Their tradition was carried on to the present day in the Federation of Shoemakers & Leatherworkers (FONACC).

Yet by 1946 the CGT was reduced to little more than a skeletal organization. As industrial structures became less artisanal and more modern, the social basis of much anarchist support declined. By its total opposition to legal unions, it lost the support of many who saw advantages in legal protection and profit-sharing. By rejecting conciliation and arbitration it suffered more repression than other unions. The violence of its activities lost it supporters when those tactics not only proved unsuccessful but brought about mass dismissals of workers.¹³ In the waves of popular enthusiasm that swept the electorate and the Chilean people—Alessandri in 1920,

¹¹ In 1924 the civilian regime was overthrown by the military. Ibáñez—then a major—emerged as the dominant leader and held formal (as well as informal) power from 1927 to 1931. In 1932 he was overthrown and the regime returned to civilian rule with the election in 1933 for the second time of Arturo Alessandri as President.

¹² Barria, *Breve hist.*, p. 36; Escobar, p. 217.

¹³ Even the Trotskyists of the time, then concentrating their attacks on the 'conservative' and 'bureaucratic' Communist party, condemned the CGT for adventurism and irresponsibility (CPCH, *En defensa de la revolución* (1933), p. 113).