

"For us it is hard and inexplicable that this Chilean government is defending Pinochet so strongly"

Interview with the president of the Association of Relatives of Executed Political Prisoners in Chile

By Vicky Short
8 October 1999

Hearings to decide the immediate fate of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet took place at Bow Street Magistrates Court in London between September 27 and 30. A daily picket was set up outside the court, mostly by Chileans opposed to Pinochet. There was also a small pro-Pinochet demonstration.

WSWS reporters spoke to some of those on the picket demanding Pinochet's extradition to Spain, to be tried for genocide and torture during the period of his military regime.

Patricia Silva Soto is the president of the Agrupación de Familiares de Ejecutados Políticos de Chile (Association of Relatives of Executed Political Prisoners in Chile). This is an organisation that is under the influence of the Communist Party of Chile. Patricia Silva Soto had travelled to London to witness the Bow Street hearings.

WSWS: What are the aims and history of your organisation?

Patricia Silva Soto: It was set up soon after the coup of 1973 in the first year of the dictatorship, during the period of searching and finding bodies of some of the people who had disappeared. It became official publicly in 1978. Three years ago, it was legalised as an NGO (non-governmental organisation) in Chile. It is a non-profit-making organisation and will continue the fight until justice is achieved.

We represent the families of executed political prisoners. More than 4,000 men, women and children were summarily executed in Chile during the dictatorship. All those who were assassinated in one or another form we consider as being politically executed. In the first years, the executions were carried out by war councils set up in the camps where our comrades and relatives were imprisoned. These councils were totally illegal, unlawful. The prisoners were sentenced to death and just murdered.

Another law—the jailbreak law—was also utilised to justify the killings. Other forms of assassination were carried out. During the dictatorship, people fought to end it through mass passive protest. Many people died then. The government sent all its repressive forces onto the streets, who would then indiscriminately shoot men, women and children.

Another form was the “false confrontations”—set-ups—in which people were killed when they supposedly confronted the armed forces. It was all fabricated. We even have judicial proof that they were murdered. One of the most notorious cases was the so-called “Operación Albania” in Corpus Kristus, where two young people were mowed down. They were said to be terrorists, planning to carry out acts against the population, who had confronted the government forces, etc. One of those young people was my brother, Ricardo Silva. Even the initial investigations showed that

there was no such confrontation. Ricardo and all those who died with him had been abducted. The following day he appeared dead, with big signs of torture all over his body. Also, all the ballistic examinations showed that the bullets had been fired from less than 80 centimetres, at short distance.

There were also the “dinamitados”—people who were arrested, then set free, loaded with a rucksack full of dynamite and told they could go free. Then the dynamite was exploded.

Of over 4,000 people politically executed, we have prioritised 213 whose bodies have never been found. We have proof that they were assassinated, sentenced by war councils, but their bodies have not yet been found. All their families received was a death certificate. These stated: “shot”.

Last December, 15 bodies of women assassinated by the “Caravan of Death” appeared. This was like a retinue that travelled by helicopter through Chile visiting the detention centres, where they selected prisoners arbitrarily and shot them. They have admitted to 76 shootings done by this “caravan”. For example, there is the case in Copiapo of a journalist and lawyer who was sentenced to 62 days imprisonment. He had 18 days left to finish his sentence. The “caravan” arrived and shot him.

The main demand of our association is to know the truth, the complete truth, not just in part. We already have a part, we know our relatives were shot, some of us have buried them: for us to know the truth means to know who detained them, where they were kept, when were they abducted, who shot them and who gave the commands. We demand justice, that the tribunals investigate the truth. And above all, we want to restore dignity to our relatives. They were very badly treated by the government and the media. We demand that the government recognise that their only crime was to fight for a better world; first there were those who formed part of the constitutional government of Allende and leaders of organisations who supported Allende, and later those who opposed and fought against the tyranny of the dictatorship.

WSWS: What is your opinion about the selection of Judge Ronald Bartle, a conservative and member of Margaret Thatcher's right-wing outfit the “Royal Society of St. George”? One of the reasons why this case has dragged on for so long was the Law Lords' decision to set aside an earlier judgement that Pinochet should be extradited, after Lord Hoffmann, one of the five who reached that original decision, failed to disclose his close links with Amnesty International.

PSS: Bartle undoubtedly lacks objectivity. But I think that the evidence is so crushing. Perhaps there is confidence that justice will be done, that

the separation will be made between the judicial and the political, and that no political pressures from the Chilean government will prevail.

I think that Pinochet will be extradited. I think that the matter will have to be resolved by the team of prosecution lawyers, if it is seen that the judge's relations with the organisation headed by Margaret Thatcher leads to a lack of objectivity. If they haven't done it yet, I think it is because there is much confidence in the evidence that we have for Pinochet to be extradited and they don't want to put more obstacles and delay the process even further. We also hope that he acts ethically as a judge.

In Chile in particular there was collusion between the different state powers, these lost any independence; the legislative power was constituted by the members of the military junta, the judicial bodies acted in unity with the executive, constituted by Pinochet.

WSWS: What do you think of the report in the *Daily Telegraph* that the British government would be prepared to free Pinochet from his house arrest if his lawyers don't appeal against a decision to extradite him to Spain?

PSS: This is the campaign of the Chilean government, which is the only way left open to them. Judicially it is impossible that Pinochet goes back to Chile. For us it is hard and inexplicable that this Chilean government is defending Pinochet so strongly, not only the principle but the person. He is recognised internationally as a big dictator who violated human rights. You cannot have humanitarian attitudes toward someone who never exercised them. I would ask, where was his humanity when he murdered children? I remember Claudia Velazquez who was six years old when she was shot together with her parents in the courtyard to her house. Her brothers, aged three and nine, were wounded. She was shot, not hit by a stray bullet, but deliberately shot at close range. What humanity is it when pregnant women were shot?

Behind this stood the military. Frei's government is an extremely weak government. Everything they do is because the military forces stand behind them, and everything is a consequence of the fact that they made a secret pact, behind the people's back, giving the military political impunity.

They deceived the people, promising justice when they knew they had made a secret pact that would make justice impossible. And now they are paying the consequences. The Mesa del Diálogo (Table of Dialogue) is part of trying to calm them. They have big problems; they are not carrying out the pact, which said that the military would not be touched. And now we see, beyond Pinochet, that many members of the armed forces are being brought to trial—for example, the successor of Manuel Contreras, the first director of the CNI. The situation is very worrying for this government, because the military are not going to let up, the Commander in Chief in Chile has declared that they are going to defend their men.

WSWS: What do you think of the Socialist Party being part of the Frei government?

PSS: It is a disgrace. It is shameful that they are compromised, because being part of the government they form part of the same policies. It is a betrayal. Of course not all the socialists are 100 percent compromised, there are socialist sections who are opposed to the "Mesa del Diálogo", who are in favour of Pinochet being extradited to Spain, even when they are part of the government, there are shades. But I consider it a betrayal.

WSWS: What would be the reaction of your and other organisations, as well as the people of Chile, if there was such deal carried out?

PSS: There is in Chile today a mood of wanting to show the yearnings for justice. Until recently these yearnings were inside, they were suppressed for fear. But with the detention of Pinochet the way has been opened up for people to begin to bring the theme of human rights violation in Chile into the open. The youth are very interested, very motivated, as was shown September 11 when around 50,000 gathered to commemorate the anniversary. It showed the capacity of our people to mobilise, in spite of all the odds, in spite of all the beatings and murders.

So we expect that if there were a verdict against us, there would be a great mobilisation of protests in the whole country. We are also preparing other actions, directed towards the international community. During this entire legal process there have been situations like this, where the decision could go against us, so we have always been on the alert, watchful, that if they suddenly let him go we would have to use other avenues. There are some initiatives we have ready.

I think the protest will also be reflected in the vote in December, there will be a vote of punishment for the government. Remember that in the last year there have been three votes of condemnation of Chile for denial of justice, from the United Nations, the Inter-American Commission, and so on. So this is a government which is not free of problems.

WSWS: What is the social and political situation like in Chile today?

PSS: In Chile we are living through quite a difficult situation, from the social point of view. The application of this neo-liberal model has intensified the social problems. The very high level of unemployment has led to important labour mobilisations, for example in the docks. This is very important because Chile is a country with a long coastline. The soup kitchens from the time of the dictatorship are emerging again, as well as occupations protesting the lack of housing. There are also big conflicts with natives, such as the *mapuches*, big confrontations with the government. And then there are the conflicts with the students, who are being deeply affected by the economic crisis facing the country.

We are in a pre-election period, and the dominant themes are Pinochet, the military, the "Mesa del Diálogo," which was imposed against great resistance, particularly on the part of the human rights people. It contains no representatives from any organisation dealing with defence of human rights. There are only two human rights lawyers. They are in crisis because there have been advances in some important cases, such as the "Caravan of Death", "Operación Albania" and others. Last Saturday we presented a charge in Chile for genocide against Augusto Pinochet, the members of his junta, those responsible for the repressive bodies, and also some civilians who are today designated as senators, but who at the time were ministers and were responsible for many of the deaths of our comrades. This is a charge which globalises all the individual cases and which is backed by more than 4,000 Chileans and which has enormous weight. This is very important because we think that we have to insure that there is justice in Chile beyond Pinochet. Pinochet can die tomorrow, or something can happen to him, but the cases are open now against him and all those responsible.

However, Pinochet cannot be tried in Chile because he still has parliamentary privilege. Of course, the government is trying to project to the world an image of both sides talking and negotiating, sitting at the same table, we are big friends, and so on. Don't forget that there is an Amnesty Law. That would have to be changed by amending the constitution. But there has never been a political will on the part of the government to change this law, never. It could do it with a plebiscite, but the government had never wanted to change it.

This is the reality—Chile is not a country of brothers, a country reconciled, or that we are going to reconcile—with whom are we going to reconcile? The class differences have always been there. There is a lot of unrest, on the part of the youth particularly, to know what happened, the true history. We could say many things but they will not publish it.

WSWS: Is there much discussion in Chile about Allende's role and the fact that he appointed Pinochet to his post?

PSS: Pinochet was never part of Allende's government. As far as I know he was appointed by Allende to be Commander in Chief of the Army after the resignation of General Pratts, days before Allende's demise—August 23, as I understand—so he was Commander only for a few days.

That part of history, the history of the popular government of Allende is not yet clear, there are many gaps in how it is explained, particularly to the youth. The right wing and the military instruct the youth in schools,

give lectures about what Allende did, and put out a lot of propaganda. But unfortunately we are in danger of being left behind. We have to write books, tell the real history, take it around the country. We think we have a big responsibility with the new generations. There is a new group now that has emerged, their name is "Acción, Verdad, Justicia" (Action, Truth, Justice). They are young, they are the sons, nephews and grand children of the disappeared, of executed political prisoners. They are very committed to fight for truth and justice. They are independent and it is good, because it is another way of deciding, of organising and demanding they have their perspective. It's very inspiring.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>