



PHOTO: MARIA OLGA ALLEMAND R

■ **PEOPLE'S POWER:** Mass action has played a major role in rebuilding the Chilean Left

# Rebuilding the Chilean Left

Twenty years after the Chilean coup, the Left in that country is regrouping in preparation for the 1994 general election. WIP invited veteran Chilean politician and activist

**MANUEL CABIESES DONOSO** to South Africa to share his thoughts on those changes

**S**OMETHING NEW AND BETTER IS emerging in Chile. Twenty years after the 1973 coup, we have realised that the Left must be synonymous with fundamental values ... democracy, social justice and thorough-going participation.

The Left is regrouping around these values and trying to avoid sterile and superfluous arguments. We have to concentrate on the huge problems of

rebuilding the Left.

The true test for us will be on December 11 next year, when Chile will hold a general election. This will clarify the current political state of play, and we will know exactly how strong the Left is.

In the last election, in 1989, Patricio Aylwin — a Christian Democrat, who supported the coup — was elected president with 60% of the votes. Since

1990 the coalition government has been weakened — to what extent we'll see in December. The coalition is made up of Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party (which used to be the party of Salvador Allende). And, as its name indicates, it aspired to socialism. Yet it has accepted the role of administering neoliberalism with a socialist as economic affairs minister. He has become the most fervent defender of

## Lessons from the coup

It's not easy to 'import' lessons from other parts of the world. But South Africans on the brink of democracy can learn a lot from the Chilean coup of 1973.

Part of our problem was the narrow election victory achieved by the coalition of popular forces in the 1970 election. The coalition had a relatively weak majority of about 37%, which meant there was a lot of space in which forces opposed to change could organise.

It started to happen soon after Dr Salvador Allende won the election; Richard Nixon was in the White House, Henry Kissinger was head of state, and together they plotted to squash the process of change in Chile.

They used a range of methods, both clandestine and legal.

They pushed extreme rightwing groupings to violence — the most important of which was the assassination of the commander-in-chief of the army, General Rene Schneider, who was a 'constitutionalist'. Then the CIA started to finance rightwing newspapers and radio stations, as well as political parties and rightwing paramilitary groups.

### Blockades

On the legal side, the US organised an economic blockade. Up until then, Chile had received a lot of loans and credits. But under the Allende government, the country didn't receive a cent.

One of the first economic measures undertaken by the Allende government was to nationalise the copper mines, one of the cornerstones of the economy, which had been owned by US corporations. The high rate of compensation sought by these companies was rejected by Allende, which led to a series of international boycotts and embargoes organised by the US.

Inside the country, the CIA and the wealthy Chilean classes organised — and financed — protests against the government.

For example, for two months they practically paralysed the transport system with a truckdrivers' strike which also blocked highways and roads. This led to supply shortages in the cities. They also organised protest actions by small retailers and businessmen.

### Distortions

But we made our own mistakes, too. The political forces backing the government of Popular Unity (UP) lacked the capacity to mobilise and organise the people. We suffered some political and ideological distortions.

But our biggest problem was the fact that, in the Chilean Left, there was a strong belief that our armed forces were different from their counterparts in other Latin American countries, which had been plagued by coups.

This notion was present among a few of the military commanders of the time, some of whom were later assassinated by General Pinochet's men. The commander of the navy had to be arrested by the coupmakers, for example. The same happened to the chief of the military police.

But generally, we underestimated the ability of the Chilean armed forces to absorb the changes that were occurring.

Other serious errors stemmed from the history of our country. Chile had a long history of democratic governments. Chilean democracy had not suffered any interruption from 1925 until 1973. One product of that political history was an excessive affection and respect for the institutions themselves. And history demonstrated very clearly, at least in our case, that the dominant classes do not share that sort of respect.

If the Chilean experience confirms one thing, it is that the popular forces must prepare for a long and increasingly more complex struggle. And that we must never, ever, trust the enemy.

— Manuel Cabieses Donoso



■ **TINPOT:** Pinochet is no longer president, but he still heads Chile's army

the neoliberal system, despite all the social injustices it is responsible for.

### Leftwing alliance

The Chilean Left, which continues to fight for social changes and social justice — a project we still call socialism — is constituted by the Allendist Democratic Movement of the Left (Mida). Mida includes the Communist Party, which retains a national presence and has a strong influence in the union movement. It was, though, hard-hit by the military dictatorship which ruled Chile from 1973 to 1989.

The other members of Mida are six small splinter groups from the Socialist Party and from another group that used to have a strong presence but suffered severe losses during the dictatorship, the Revolutionary Movement of the Left (MIR).

In last year's municipal elections, Mida got 6.4% of the votes. In the coming general election, our strategic target is 10%, or 900 000 votes — which is low but nonetheless would reveal a tremendous degree of consciousness given the current realities. It would also allow us to develop a longer-term political project.

Mida is an experience in development, the seed of a greater force. I don't think it has any similarity to SA. It's a recomposition of the political forces of the Left.

### Always a minority

It is today clear (though it's always been *theoretically* clear) that the political Left is not in itself enough to bring about change. It could be very lucid, with a tremendous capacity to lead, but it will always be a minority among the people — a small cadre of leaders selected from among the people, regardless of how big the parties of the Left are.

The Left, which is more than the political parties and organisations, has to understand the broader social sectors. Therefore we should have programmes of struggle that are capable of mobilising and organising huge masses of people. I believe this is not possible using the old party formulas that were used when I was younger. Not only have we suffered an ideological crisis throughout the world, we have also suffered an organic crisis. We need to confront this with clarity and courage.

The elements which have been grouped together in Mida are working together to overcome our ideological weaknesses and become better organisations. Of course, it is also important to recover what we lost during the dictatorship because of the repression.

### **Rapid organisation**

One thing we have realised since 1970 is that we erred by trying to mobilise people very rapidly, rather than relying on more traditional methods of organising. In 1970, when Allende's Popular Unity (UP) government was voted into power, the basic social organisation was relatively weak; today it's even weaker.

The main trade union federation, known as CUT, was characterised by a top-heaviness. The unions affiliated to CUT performed rather irregularly and tended to focus on specific types of activities which basically consisted of collective bargaining once a year. Among the general population, on the outskirts of the cities, the level of social organisation was relatively weak. They, like student and other organisations, tended to be top-heavy.

### **The neoliberal project**

In rebuilding the Chilean Left, we declare ourselves enemies of capitalism — particularly its free market and neoliberal form. We have the "advantage" of having suffered the effects of neoliberalism, imposed on us by a dictatorial regime.

Neoliberalism has cost Chilean workers the important gains they achieved through long and painful struggles. The right to strike exists legally, but is practically non-existent. A union can vote and choose to strike — but after 15 days on strike, if there is no agreement with management, scab labour can be employed and the strike will fizzle out. Management is allowed to negotiate individually with each worker; so it grants benefits to workers individually, not by way of the unions. That is how you explain the fact that there are 11 000 unions, most very small. And together they represent only 14% of the country's labour force.

Chilean workers have lost access to health. The neoliberal model privatises health services, even cemeteries. Education is now private, with private universities flourishing. You will not



## **The struggle is not yet over**

**Veteran activist Manuel Cabieses Donoso founded Punto Final newspaper in 1965. In 1973, his newspaper was closed by the Pinochet dictatorship and Cabieses was detained in several prison camps until 1975, when he went into exile.**

**Cabieses returned to Chile in 1979, working underground against the dictatorship, and was a founder member of the Revolutionary Movement of the Left (MIR). He later became founder and leader of the Allendist Democratic Movement of the Left (Mida).**

**Cabieses has relaunched Punto Final and is currently editor-in-chief. Later this year he is due to face charges of slander and incitement for an article he wrote about Pinochet during the late '80s. Because of Chile's bizarre legal system, Cabieses will face charges under both the military council and the civilian government. He faces imprisonment of 800 days on each of the charges.**

find the child of a worker in those universities. There is a shortage of one million houses.

The secret of the neoliberal economic model is to push the exploitation of workers to the extreme — lower wages, long working hours, etc. A UN report estimates that between 1974 and 1989 Chilean workers were dispossessed of \$83-billion — by way of lower income, longer hours, the removal of essential services and super-exploitation. We demand that this social debt be repaid, by bringing back the social services that were taken away.

### **New conditions**

Chile in 1993 is a totally different country from Chile of 1973. This has tremendous implications for the Chilean Left which, to a certain extent, has not been able to adapt to the new situation.

To impose the neoliberal model, it was necessary to annihilate the organisations of the Left. The military dictatorship almost achieved this. The toll was horrific: There were 15 000 dead and 2 500 "disappeared". And it has proved impossible to apply justice; not a single member of the armed forces or police have been charged with any of these crimes.

But what is important today is that the popular, democratic and revolutionary organisations were virtually silenced. We have been undergoing a very slow process of reconstruction which has grown in strength a bit since 1990.

The Chilean Left is still debating the mistakes we made in 1973. We believe it would be wrong to try and repeat the road of the UP. We know what the end of that road looks like. Anyway, the masses will not follow us on that road because they know where it leads to.

I believe the road the forces of the Left must follow should be to achieve a decisive social majority which should be well-organised and should extend into all sections of our society, including the armed forces. This demands profound changes and adaptations in our organisations and their methods of working.

Luckily, the events of the past few years, the changes in political and ideological thinking, have opened the possibility — at least for the Latin American Left — to develop styles of working and organisation that are democratic, and to abandon authoritarian habits. We are stimulated by these new realities.

And although the road forward is not altogether clear, we have in our favour, across the world, the tendency towards building these democratic social and political forces. ■

● This is an edited version of a presentation to a public forum at Johannesburg's Phambili Books. WIP is grateful to Phambili Books, and to CUSO for their support in bringing Mr Cabieses to South Africa