

## **CHILE'S SHAKY JUNTA**

On September 11 General Augusto Pinochet will be celebrating the tenth anniversary of Chile's 'liberation from communism' — the brutal military coup of 1973 that left 30,000 dead, a million driven into exile and a nation under the heel of terror. Most observers think it will be his last anniversary — if, indeed, he lasts that long.

Only 18 months ago, Pinochet seemed firmly in control and quite likely to last out his self-appointed term of office until 1989. Opposition existed, and both trade unions and left political parties had revived considerably after the coup. But the opposition was plagued by disunity, resist-

ance activity involved few, and Pinochet's support amongst the upper and middle classes seemed secure.

The monetarist economic model drawn up by George Schultz (now US Secretary of State) and his Chicago team after the coup had created a 'boom' that was lauded by monetarists worldwide. But it was only a 'boom' compared to the 'trough' that was first created in 1974-5. And it was mainly a boom for the rich. Protection for Chilean industry was removed, and exports of primary products (copper, food etc), encouraged. Exchange controls were abolished. The result was a flood of loans from private banks abroad, used to finance a consumer spree of luxury, imported goods: in 1980, Chile imported 195 times as much perfume as in 1970. Foreign competition, together with the world recession, caused a slump in demand for Chilean manufactures.

As the foreign debt caught up with the ability to repay, the whole system began to collapse. Financial empires built on foreign loans tumbled, taking the savings of thousands of people with them. As creditors chased their money, bankruptcies soared. Whole industries vanished, while farms were sold to pay debts, and then left idle. The confidence, and the pockets, of the middle classes, and even of the capitalists, was hit. Suddenly, disenchantment with Pinochet spread from the poor and working class - - who were now suffering 40% unemployment and real hunger on a wide scale — to Pinochet's traditional sectors of support. The economic crisis gave rise to a political one.

Meanwhile, the mass opposition movement too was changing. In 1978, the unions were given a narrow legal space in which to operate, and began to grow in strength, organisation and militancy. But the movement remained split between left-wingers, centrists and those who, initially at least, had supported the coup. By the beginning of 1982, however, the economic situation had become so bad that united union action was deemed necessary even by conservatives. Tucapel Jimenez, president of the white collar civil servants' union, made a call for a united opposition; he was abducted on the way to a meeting to set up the front, and brutally murdered. His death, however, became a rallying point for union unity, and throughout 1982 united action by trade unions, as well as other sections, steadily developed.

The junta was alarmed at this growing confidence of the opposition, and stepped up repression. Between 1981 and 1982 the number of arrests and detentions doubled.



*Anti-riot policemen and students meet each other. Chile, summer 83.*

But as the economic crisis deepened, and as it became clear that Pinochet's former supporters were deserting him, so popular organisations — the unions, shantytown dwellers, women's groups, sections of the church - • realised that he *could* be overthrown.

Years of painstaking, dangerous work by left activists — with the Communist Party often taking a prominent role— succeeded in building mass movements that, from August 1982, began to **mushroom**. Demonstrations in August, September and December were met with rough repression, but each time grew bigger. The junta was wavering, maintaining an overall monetarist strategy but making significant U-turns, and appearing to concede on some human rights issues. The media, including the right-wing *El Mercurio*, and state institutions like the Supreme Court, began to take a more independent, critical line. Speculation about Pinochet's end became rife, and manoeuvres to find a way out of the crisis without letting the Left near the reigns of power took place, involving the US ambassador, Nationalist and Christian Democrat politicians and businessmen.

1983 began with the longest and most bitter strike since the coup against a French-owned firm building a hydroelectric plant. The workers and their families set up a camp at the gates, to stop strike-breakers. The dispute became a symbol of resistance throughout Chile, and support flowed from unions and communities all over the country, much of it channelled through the church. Finally, in March, the strikers won most of their demands. It was a victory that inspired a fresh surge of protest. A series of mass, nationwide protest days began on March 24. These were followed by more on May 1, May 11, June 14 and July 12, each one

broader than before. An important aspect of these days has been the adoption of forms of action that enabled everyone to join in. Boycotts of schools, shops and public transport; extinguishing lights at 8pm; and, most impressively, the beating of pots and pans at the same time. Eye and ear witnesses described the amazing effect, as darkness and din spread from shanty towns and working class districts to middle and upper class suburbs. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, took part. Police and troops were used to attack barricades erected by youths in shanty towns, but in places they failed to drive back the crowds.

By July, the talk in Chile was not about whether Pinochet would go, but about when and how. Prominent Christian Democrat exiles were allowed back in while others were arrested for involvement with the protests. The army still seemed mainly loyal to Pinochet, but there were reports of dissident documents circulating in the officer corps; and the use of the army against demonstrations on July 12 — for the first time since the coup itself— may accelerate discontent. Some suggest a military government without Pinochet; others, a joint military-civilian government. In either case, the economic desperation of many makes it difficult to see how the pressure for full democracy can be resisted for long.

Mrs Thatcher has supported General Pinochet as an anti-communist and monetarist since 1979. In 1982 he became also a covert ally against Argentina. In return the junta has received military, economic and political aid. Only last June, Navy Chief Admiral Merino was in London for talks about buying HMS *Hermes*. The events planned for September by the Chile Solidarity Campaign can help cut this lifeline to the isolated junta. *Quentin Given*