

CHILE SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN TRADE UNION CONFERENCE

SATURDAY OCTOBER 25 1975

REPORT TO DELEGATES

No.2 REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS

Alex Kitson (T&GWU), opening the conference, set the tone for the very practical discussions that followed throughout the day. "We are not here," he said, "to talk about resolutions, but to firm up the possibilities of more pressure on the Junta and on British industry".

Luis Figueroa, President of CUT (the Chilean TUC), gave a detailed account of the continuing repression in Chile, which now extends to priests and church leaders, and to persons who were initially favourable to the coup d'etat. The Junta, he said, were trying to pretend that they had liberalised their regime, and were preparing to invest vast sums in a public relations exercise to improve their image. But it would all be lies. All forms of elections were still forbidden in the trade unions and other organisations. There had been a 60% drop in real wages since the coup, and unemployment was now running at 60%. More than 100 trade union leaders had been executed for opposing these policies, and yet still the struggle continued, with hundreds of strikes and go-slows in the factories. The Junta's efforts to create a corporatist trade union movement like that of Franco's Spain had met with complete failure. Unity of the opposition to the Junta was growing fast.

Fascism, he continued, had been imposed on Spain during a period of international retreat of progressive forces. Now, conditions were different. Events in Chile must serve as a warning to the world of the dangers of the power of the multinationals - "states in themselves, that place themselves above the power of nations" - which seek to perpetuate their power by any means. There was growing a new understanding among the working classes of the developing countries that their enemies were not the developed nations as such; on the contrary they should be seeking alliances with the working class of every country, against the monopolies and the multinationals.

Solidarity was important not only for the Chilean people, but because by its expression, British workers would be strengthening their own position for democratic advance.

Tom Pelfold, Chairman, London Association of Trades Councils, spoke on human rights and the adoption of prisoners. Southwark Trades Council had adopted Manuel Rosales, a municipal worker who had been detained without trial. The adoption had been successful, Rosales had been released, and Tom Pelfold himself "had the honour and privilege of buying him a drink here in London last night". The conference applauded this statement, and throughout the day delegate after delegate pledged his union to adopt a prisoner. Delegates from organisations which had already done so told of the excitement their members had felt on receiving replies to letters they had sent to Chile. In a few cases the prisoner him- or herself or their families had been able to write to express their thanks, their hopes and needs. It was stressed that there is great difficulty in establishing contact. Often the prisoner's full name has not been listed and it can take months to identify the prisoner fully. The Junta would place endless obstacles in the way of a prisoner's release. But the mere fact of an adoption would be valuable pressure in the prisoner's favour, and a tremendous source of encouragement to him or her and the relatives.

Adopting organisations will not have to pay the prisoner's fares to Britain in the event of release -- this is done by the UN. While it is helpful to find offers of work and accommodation, this is not essential. If the adopting organisation is unable to assume responsibility for 'their' prisoner on release, and arrival in Britain, then the Joint Working Group for Chilean Refugees in Britain would do so.

Geoffrey Drain, General Secretary of NALGO, related how his union had made adoption of prisoners official policy. He undertook to send a further circular to NALGO branches to encourage them in this work. To loud applause, he said, "Chile must not be another Spain, with four decades of fascism. The cause of democracy must be won in Chile and won swiftly".

Sid Easton, T&GWU Region No 1 Executive, reminded the conference that we could not be content with obtaining the release of prisoners one-by-one. We must not rest there, but go forward to defeat the people who put them in prison in the first place. In defeating fascism in Chile and Spain we would be defending our own position.

Len Willett, POEU Executive, reported the special concern felt by POEU because of the crucial role of communications in Chile, and because of the activities of ITT. He urged the adoption of women prisoners.

Reg Williams, CPSA Executive, stated that his union had advised its branches to affiliate to the Chile Solidarity Campaign. But he felt that they had done less than NALGO, for instance, and would urge that his union take up the adoption of prisoners as official policy.

Alex Kitson, concluding the morning session, urged delegates to go away with a firm decision to get more British trade unionists involved in the campaign. He reported on the decision by the Labour Party NEC to press for the seizure of Chilean assets in Britain, since the Chilean Junta was refusing to pay its debts to Britain. Pressure to this end must be brought to bear on Jim Callaghan and Dennis Healey, who did not accept this argument.

Alex Ferry, AUEW Glasgow District Secretary, spoke of the work done for Chilean refugees in Britain, and the role of the trade union movement in this, particularly in Scotland. Reception committees were vital to ensure a warm and friendly but not paternalistic reception for the new arrivals. Shop stewards committees should be involved so that the Chileans could get to know people in the movement. Usually there were more offers of temporary accommodation than refugees available to take them up. Permanent housing was much more difficult, but trade unionists could be helpful by bringing pressure to bear upon councils. It was advisable not to place all the Chileans together in the same street, where they could become isolated in a kind of ghetto. Finding jobs was often difficult, and the Chileans must accept that in most cases they would not be able to work in their own professions. Work must be continued to avoid the refugees' becoming isolated, and they should be encouraged to join in solidarity work. Pressure on local education authorities and colleges would normally secure English classes for the refugees.

"But the real success", Mr. Ferry said, "will be when we are saying Cheerio to the refugees and they return to free Chile. We'll not rest until we've achieved that".

Wendy Tyndale, Secretary, Chile Committee for Human Rights, stressed that on her (3) visits to Chile since the coup d'etat, wherever she went, Chileans had thanked her for the work of British solidarity. Even peasants in the Chilean countryside knew of the work of the British trade union movement, and begged that it be continued and strengthened.

Pedro Cornejo, National Councillor of CUT, gave thanks to the conference on behalf of the 1200 Chilean refugees in Britain. "I knew of your solidarity actions," he said, "while I was still in prison in Chile. It was for us an injection of moral strength to continue our struggle which we will carry on until we are victorious". He asked that British trade unions invite refugees to speak to them to explain what had happened and was happening in Chile.

David Shonfield NUJ/Sogat IDS Chapel, explained how the adoption of Pedro Cornejo in NUPE Hammersmith Branch had helped to raise not only the humanitarian issue, but the further question of how to isolate the Junta. With unemployment as it is in Britain, blacking action was no easy thing, but it was important to remember that trade with Chile was relatively insignificant for Britain, but very important for the Junta.

Gina Nicholson Hammersmith & Kensington Trades Council, reported that there were some 40 ATTI branches in the London area interested in doing work for Chile. But response on the Trades Council had been mixed, and it seemed to be weaker in particular from the industrial unions. It was important to build anti-fascist consciousness in the younger generation of workers, who had had no direct experience of fascism.

This point was echoed by many delegates.

Brian Anderson, AUEW Construction Section, Liverpool, made the financial appeal. The Chile Solidarity Campaign, he said, now had 6 million affiliated members. It was a campaign against fascism based on a correct perception of proletarian internationalism. Yet CSC could afford to pay only one full-time worker, and could not reach out to the movement without hard cash to do so. He stressed the need for regular and sustained donations, as well as the immediate response to the collection. The collection totalled £322.11.

A letter of greeting to the conference was read. It came from Madame Allende, widow of President Salvador Allende. She appealed for complete financial and economic boycott of the Junta, and for Britain to persist in refusing to re-negotiate the Junta's debts.

Jimmy Symes, Chairman, Merseyside Docks Shop Stewards Committee, spoke with great frankness about the difficulties of boycott action. Calls and resolutions of conferences like the present one were not enough to achieve a boycott. The essential thing was to take the matter to the rank and file, and to win over and convince them. The conference needed to make concrete plans for action, or risk serving only to clear our own consciences. Dockers were continually asked to carry out boycotts for 24 or 48 hours. Yet at the end of that time they saw the same cargoes being shifted. They were bound to become cynical. They also resented the fact that the onus always seemed to fall on them, rather than on other transport or production workers. For this reason the dockers welcomed the decision by the National Union of Seamen NEC. They had joined the picket line put out for the ship Ortega. Other unions must support the NUS. Chileans must be invited to speak to trade union branches and put the case.

Mr. Symes also stressed the need for more international cooperation and coordination of boycotts. Ships can always be diverted, goods trans-shipped or brought in 'through the back door'. But the question of rank-and-file support for action could only be solved by much better publicity work, getting Chile back onto the front-pages of the press.

S.H. Pierce, Oldham Trades Council, stressed that we talk too much about us helping our Chilean brothers and sisters. On the contrary, it is they who are helping us, since they are in the front-line to defend us against our common enemies.

John Connibeer, Vauxhall Luton Shop Stewards Committee, stressed the importance of Chile for his members, because of the role of General Motors in Chile. They would see if any Chilean copper was used at the plant, and try to stop it. They would also adopt a prisoner.

Noe Saude, Member, Executive Council of National Union of Angolan Workers, brought greetings from his members, and was given a standing ovation.

Harry Smith, National Organiser, AUEW-TASS, stressed the need to refute every effort to white-wash the Junta. All the delegates at the conference, had they been born in Chile rather than Britain, would be dead, tortured, in prison or exile, for the role they played in the trade union movement. He spoke of the multinational corporations which operate both in Chile and Britain. "These companies," he said, "in which we sweat, make profit out of the misery of the Chilean people, and gather experience of new methods of exploitation". In Britain, we were only protected because of the power and strength of our trade union movement. We must seek to use to the full our advantages to sustain the Chilean people, and to destabilise the Junta.

Mr. Smith outlined the principal points in the Conference Declaration, and urged delegates not only to adopt the declaration, by acclaim, but to take it back to their organisations and discuss it there, so as to bring life and energy into the commitment of the approximately 9 million trade unionists represented at the Conference. Three Spanish words, Mr. Smith said, have now become the property of the international working class, and they were words of great importance to the movement in Chile. They are:

UNIDAD POPULAR VENCEREMOS

Joe Kenny, National Union of Seamen, Liverpool Branch, and NEC member, spoke of the doubts some delegates had expressed about the willingness of workers to take boycott action. He stressed that leadership had to be shown. If positive action had been taken over Spain, Franco could not have lasted so long. The boycott decision of the Seamen must be a catalyst. There had been no lack of response. There were 600 seamen unemployed in Liverpool, but not one of them was willing to sign on a ship bound for Chile. "If this isn't a response", Mr. Kenny said, "following the leadership or our NEC, then I don't know what is". He urged support for the Conference Declaration, especially where it urged trade union organisations to send resolutions of support to the seamen. "We've spoken for 2 years," he said, "but now we need positive action: NADA PARA LOS FASCISTAS --NOTHING FOR THE FASCISTS".

Barry Denny, of the NGA London Region Political Committee, asked delegates to be frank in recognising that there was plenty of opposition from within the ranks of the movement itself to action on international issues. It was important to stress the resistance to fascism, and the role of the multinationals.

Joe Kelly, T&GWU Birkenhead Docks Branch, urged concerted boycott action of both transport and production workers. Tom Hanley, Cardiff Trades Council, urged support for the lead given by the Seamen. "Only action", he said, "will get our Chilean refugee comrades back to Chile".

Eddy Kelly, Yarrows Shop Stewards Committee, described the difficulties faced by the stewards there in attempting to get work on two frigates for Chile blacked. He described the efforts that had been made to expand the work, writing leaflets, organising meetings, helping the refugees, etc. He promised to recommend the adoption of a prisoner by the yard.

John Burgess, SLADE NEC, urged a campaign which would take people out to knock on doors and ask for material help for the Chileans, as had been done by Fleet Street workers in the thirties, when they collected money for an ambulance to send to Spain.

George Smith, Westminster Trades Council, urged that the great unity of the campaign be maintained and expanded.

THE DECLARATION was adopted unanimously, after being formally moved by Joe Kenny of the National Union of Seamen.

Luis Figueroa, President of CUT, made a concluding speech, which received a standing ovation (full text apart). Through a conference like this, he said, "one can get to know a class beyond the boundaries of nation, flag and language, and perceive the true nature of the international workers' movement".