

Jim Baird**After the Coup: The Trade Union Delegation to Chile**

November 2004

**TWELVE
DAYS IN CHILE****How and why the
Delegation went to Chile****Press statement released
by the delegation in Chile***This was a press statement released in Chile by the delegation. It was not published and was returned to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra with a letter saying it was an act of interference in the internal affairs of Chile.*

In February 1974 a LAN Chile Boeing 707 made the first non stop flight over the pole from Punta Arenas in Chile to Sydney. LAN Chile was the national airline and the Airline President, Air force General Stuardos was aboard. He had come to approach the Labor government to grant landing rights for a LAN Chile service to Australia. The plane landed in Sydney after the record breaking flight but there it stayed –indefinitely. Workers at Sydney airport refused to service it. Black banned, it was grounded.

Five months after the violent coup in Chile that had overthrown the socialist government, there were still many unanswered questions about the fate of Chilean trade unionists, activists and their families.

Discussions were held between the Unions and the LAN Chile management in Sydney. Agreement was finally reached that a delegation of trade unionists would be allowed to visit Chile and report back to the Australian unions on their return. General Stuardos was able to say, "We will be lucky if union officials from your country come to Chile and see what has happened and how much happier the people now are."

It was on again then off again and the plane continued to sit on the tarmac. After much discussion, the General gave an undertaking that there would be no discrimination against those interviewed by the delegation including jailed trade unionists and former members of Allende's government. They would have free movement and protection.

The composition of the delegation was raised with a number of unions. This led to a debate about whether the delegation should go at all! In my union, the AMWSU there was opposition from some of the National Committee; whilst they supported the protests against LAN Chile they were unconvinced about the value of the delegation. Finally the decision taken was that the delegation should only proceed if it received the support of the international trade union organizations. Henry McCarthy, a journalist with the Metal Workers got to work and through his international contacts was able to secure the support of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the World Federation of Trade Unions and the Catholic International Trade Union organization. Within an hour of sending the requests, telexes of support from these organizations arrived at the Union office.

The delegation eventually comprised: Henry McCarthy, journalist with the metalworkers; Brian McMahon, an Organiser with the TWU in Victoria; Ron Masterson from the Newcastle Branch of the Plumbers Union; Steve Cooper a rank and file worker who had been in Chile the previous year and was endorsed by the Miscellaneous Workers Union; Carmen Bull who had extensive background knowledge of South America and who would act as our interpreter and myself. I was a National Organizer with the metal workers and was selected to lead the delegation.

LAN Chile finally agreed that if the bans on their aircraft at Sydney Airport were lifted, they would fly us to Chile. So in March 1974 we were off. The 707 had now been sitting at Mascot for close to a month. We were given a send off by a large group of Chileans including trade unionists and others wanting to expose what was happening in Chile.

We found we were the only passengers on the aircraft and we were well looked after by the crew. It was at Easter Island that we first encountered the military and police presence we were to see everywhere in Chile. Landing in Santiago we were met by a strong military presence and a representative from the Australian embassy who had arranged accommodation and who was to accompany us on our travels. Our link with the Junta government was through an officer of the Minister for the Interior, an Army General called Commandant Figueroa.



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Over the next few days we made some contacts. The Archbishop of Santiago, Raul Silva Henrique, arranged many of these. They included trade unionists who had been held in the infamous Stadium where many were killed, including the musician Victor Jara. The delegation split up into smaller groups to meet these contacts, some of whom were still underground, trade union officials in hiding. Some were met at night in secret after the curfew with the assistance of church members opposed to the takeover. (Carmen had unbeknown to me, gone out after curfew to find and interview people and to arrange meetings). Others we met in the prisons through the assistance of the General. We interviewed former members of the Allende government including the Minister for Education. He was 80 and guarded by two teenagers holding American sub machine guns.

Mr. MacDonald, our man from the Australian embassy was able to advise us on the location of embassies where various leaders of the deposed government had been given protection from the military after the coup. We visited the Minister for Labor in the Allende government and a leader of the Chilean trade union movement in the Swedish Embassy where he had taken refuge.

The Embassy was still being fired at and people going to and from the embassy were harassed by the military. Luis Figueroa was very familiar with the trade union situation and what had happened to the various organizations. He said, "When that plane was grounded in Sydney, the news swept through Chile and from that moment, lives began to be saved in Chile." He was able to direct us to the many buildings which had been taken over by the military when they closed the unions down. I had a small pocket camera, which I used to surreptitiously photograph the notices on the doors. These photographs proved to be invaluable evidence to the ILO inquiry in Geneva later that year.

The delegation interviewed prisoners in the Santiago Women's prison about their experiences since the previous September. We also met the daughters of a General who had been killed prior to the military takeover and heard of the harrowing way they had been treated by the military. From central Santiago we traveled through the police and military controls to a shanty town. Our arrival was at first greeted with alarm. the Australian Embassy representative was able to reassure them we were not government officers and we were not bringing the military with us. The conditions in which people lived were pitifully poor and they complained of higher prices, shortage of food and no assistance for their plight. They talked of how immediately after the army takeover, bodies had been thrown into the canal which was the boundary of the shanty town.

Some of the delegation went to Valparaiso where they contacted members of the leading stevedoring union and others who gave information on the suppression of unions in that city. It was a similar

pattern to Santiago and elsewhere with union offices and the property of community organizations, even mothers clubs being taken over.

In the first week spent interviewing people, we received great support wherever we went despite the evident and often threatening police presence. The cleaner on our floor of the hotel quietly drew our attention to the occupants of the room across the corridor. Three men with loaded shoulder holsters playing cards. She said they had been there since we arrived. We were under surveillance.

For our remaining time in Santiago we decided to split into groups. We had an "interpreter" provided by the government who wanted to be at every meeting and complained about our plan to separate. He ended up accompanying me wherever I went which enabled others in the delegation to meet with those who might be under threat if it was known they had talked to us. We were successful in keeping the interpreter away from all sensitive contacts.

We were able to interview General Bonilla who was the Minister for the Interior and one step below the Junta. He had strong connections with the church and the right wing of the Christian Democratic Party. We were told that he had expected, as in previous coups that the armed forces would go back to barracks after installing a puppet civilian regime. This had not happened it was said, because the CIA, who directed the coup operation, had advised against it.

I raised a number of questions with him including the allegations about the mistreatment of political prisoners, including those in the Stadium and the crackdown on free democratic processes including the taking over of community and union property by the armed forces. He tried to justify the military takeover on the grounds that they had restored democracy against a communist government.

I told him that was not the view we had formed and asked for the release of union officials, together with the women prisoners we had met and the Minister for Education who was in ill health and being treated inhumanely. He denied the mistreatment but we were able to point out we had already met and spoken to these people. (Hector Olivares, ex president of the Copper Workers Union and Professor Enriquez were subsequently released.)

I then raised the issue of people wishing to migrate to Australia should not be denied their right to do so or be harassed or mistreated. He gave this assurance so we then requested that the children of a Chilean family living in Wollongong should be allowed to join their parents. He agreed to make the arrangements and shortly after we arrived back in Australia we were pleased to learn that this had been done.

Our contacts in Santiago had given us a list of people who were being held in Chacabuko prison, near a large copper mine which had been confiscated from Kennecot by the Allende government. We were flown to Antifagasta and from there went by road in a small convoy to Tocopilla. The government interpreter was still with us. He proved useful in smoothing our passage through military road blocks, flashing his identification card got immediate respect from the army and police. Tocopilla was on the west coast of Chile and had a power station which supplied the copper mine. We lunched with a number of people associated with the power station, invitees of the Superintendent of the Power Station. We all exchanged social pleasantries for a couple of hours. I was quietly taken aside during the course of the afternoon and told in English to beware because two of the people we were sitting with had been involved in the murder of the President and Secretary of the Miners Union.

We then continued across the Atacama Desert towards the spectacular Andes Mountains. We stopped in small towns along the way. There were television aerials everywhere. On inquiring we were told they had been provided by the former Allende government as part of their education programs. We noted the small community buildings were locked and were told this had done by the military. In one town, the townspeople took us to a cave which showed signs of habitation, empty cans and an old cooking fire. The villagers talked reverently of a group of young priests who were attempting to escape over the Andes who had camped there. They were found by the local army group and were all killed, the bullet holes were in the walls of the cave.

We continued on to Chacabuko prison. It was called a mine but it had been a guano processing plant producing fertilizer for export. An air force officer was in charge of the prison. Obviously well educated and a pilot, he and his fellow officers had been to the United States for training. We were expected and he welcomed us, offering assistance with our investigations.

He arranged for us to meet the 20 prisoners for whom we had names. They were brought to a rotunda by young looking soldiers armed with automatic weapons who then surrounded the bandstand. Henry

McCarthy and Carmen Bull were with me and whilst I talked with some of the prisoners, others were able to get messages to Carmen for their families and information about their imprisonment. We assured them we would take back all this information with the hope of assisting in their release.

The prisoners seemed very pleased to see us and our visit at the very least had helped to build their morale. In common with many we met, they felt the world authorities had failed them. They were particularly critical of the role of the United States who they blamed for the coup. I met some of those we had spoken to in Sydney later and received their personal thanks to the delegation members and the Unions for our endeavours and their final release.

At the conclusion of the interviews we were ushered back to the officer in charge who then invited us to lunch. I declined his invitation. For us to be seen to be collaborating with the armed forces or officers of the Junta would undermine the international standing of the Delegation. He was greatly offended by this but managed to wish us well in our investigations as we left to visit the copper

**All protests should go to:
Chilean Government Headquarters EDIFICO DIEGO
PORTALES, SANTIAGO, protests can also be sent to the
Chilean Ambassador, Chilean Embassy, Canberra.**



The Australian delegation arrives at Tocopilla in the North of Chile en route to the Chacavuco detention camp and to the copper miners in Chuquicamata.

mine. At the mine site, they had made available to us a large building with a central courtyard, four bedrooms and meeting rooms. Elaborate in the Chilean style. We were at altitude and some of the Delegation were having trouble moving around. We toured the mine the next day by bus but were unable to speak to any of the people working around the job. The mine was run by the military but their presence was not immediately apparent. I decided we would go into town and try to talk with people in the streets. We received a warm welcome from those we talked to. They were not willing to say too much about the military and insisted they were all right. The shopkeepers had not been greatly affected by the military coup and whilst the mine was not operating at full capacity, things were fairly normal. We were later told that the copper miners union had not opposed the coup and they continued to benefit from the better living conditions they had enjoyed under the Allende regime.

We went down to the mine office later that evening. There were two military officers, engineers who were in charge of plant operations. Although surprised to see us they happily talked about the problems of getting the mine functioning again and complained about the lack of work being done by the mine staff.

We went to the foothills of the Andes to talk to some people on the mountainside. They made us welcome in their small rock homes and showed us the items they made from lama fleece to be sold in the towns and cities. They complained of how the soldiers took their goods.

When we returned to Santiago we had been moved to another hotel. We returned to our old one to pick up some clothes and laundry. The cleaning lady on our floor said we had been lucky. A young American attending an international banking conference had taken our old room. He was a large man,

like Henry McCarthy and had been exercising in front of the window. He was shot through the head from the street. Was the shot meant for one of us?

The delegation had been in Chile 10 days when we met with officers of the Chilean metalworkers Union who were still allowed to operate. They said that knowledge of the delegation was now wide spread throughout Chile. The sporadic gunfire we heard when we first arrived had stopped and people appeared to be moving around more freely. We were told later that following our arrival, the authorities had given instructions for indiscriminate shooting to stop.

We had to use subterfuge on occasions. While Henry and Carmen were waiting to meet with representatives of the underground coal miners, a police wagon started circulating the park. Henry grabbed Carmen and they pretended to be lovers.

We had now completed all that could be done and set about preparing a statement for Commandant Figueroa as he had requested. It was brief, a number of headings critical of what we had seen. We handed this to him just prior to our departure from the airport and reserved a fuller telling for our return to Australia.

On our last day a young man handed me a tape which he asked me to give to someone who would approach me when we got back to Sydney. I was apprehensive, was this a set up to discredit the delegation? I didn't tell the other members, hid the tape in my baggage and hoped for the best. It turned out to be a speech by a representative of the left forces which provided a morale boost to many of those who had settled in Australia and wanted news from home.

We were very tired when we arrived back in Sydney and unable to give a good account to the assembled journalists other than we were convinced of the ill treatment meted out to the Chilean people and that the suppression of rights was rampant.



Over the next months, the delegates participated in organized meetings across Australia which reached thousands of people. This generated some media publicity. We produced a newspaper in seven languages; this was distributed internationally. We passed on our information to the Australian Labour government and they subsequently refused LAN Chile landing rights in Australia. The New Zealand government followed suit.

I produced a report with photographic evidence of the suppression of the trade union movement and community groups which I used when I went to Geneva to attend the International Labour Office investigation into the suppression of workers rights in Chile.

The ILO inquiry led to the expulsion of Chile from the organization in 1974. Much later I found out that the delegation was greatly complimented by the ILO for our action in pursuing the issue even against opposition from some of our own officials.

I recently attended a commemoration of the 11th of September 1973 coup organized by the Australian Chilean community in Sydney and had the honour of addressing them on our

experience. Many in the audience had suffered at the hands of the Pinochet regime; there were others who remembered the delegation including some who had been in Chacabuko prison at the time.

While the delegation did not solve the problem of the Chilean people, it was the first international action which received publicity and exposed the Pinochet government. This resulted in worldwide condemnation of the regime and Chile's expulsion from the International Labour Organisation.