

The Chilean - Stirling Solidarity Committee

At the end of February 2009 I had the opportunity to meet May Chipulina, a Swede and Chilean Patricia Pizarro in Stirling. From May and Patricia I learnt something about the story of their solidarity committee. Their account is based on their memories, their experiences and the vast records they have managed to keep.

May and Patricia explained to me that at the centre of the set up of their committee was Rowland Sheret, a socialist political activist, trade unionist and community campaigner who died at his home in Stirling on Sunday 30th March 2008. Before his death he helped to establish the Ecomemoria grove of trees planted in King's Park to commemorate the victims of the Chilean Junta.

Perhaps it is fit to dedicate this work about the solidarity work for Chile in Stirling to the memory of Rowland, a dedicated and "compañero solidario", and a friend of so many social causes related to Scotland, Chile and other countries.

Patricia and May also mentioned to me that it was very important to remember that many people were involved in the work with Chile in Stirling. Father Murray, for example, the chaplain of Stirling University, had been very much involved in helping the Chilean community of refugees in Stirling.

A bit of history

From Philip O'Brien* we know that soon after the coup a Committee for Solidarity for Chile was formed. It was known as The Glasgow Defence Committee where Philip was the Secretary according to the Stirling records. Philip said that it was formed at Glasgow University and: "*made contact with the Glasgow Trades Council, the STUC, where Jimmy Milne was in charge and he was first class in his assistance and took a very active role in setting up a wider solidarity*".

From the Stirling records we learn that a committee called: Stirlingshire Chilean Action Committee was created at the end of October 1973.

Stirlingshire Chilean Action Committee

The above committee has been formed to co-ordinate support within the area for the fight being put up by the people of Chile against the Military Junta which overthrew the Popular Unity Government.

The aims of the Committee are:

- *Support the People of Chile against the Military coup.*
- *Support the Popular Unity and all forces fighting the Junta.*
- *Free all political prisoners.*
- *No recognition of Junta. Break off diplomatic relations.*
- *Boycott all trade, stop aid and credit.*

* Phil was in 1974 a Senior Lecturer and Sociology at the University of Glasgow, previously at the Institute of Latin American Studies

From a Stirling newspaper of the 31 of October, 1973 we read about the formation of the Stirlingshire Chilean Action Committee at a meeting at the Royal Hotel in Stirling and that:

“ At the meeting last Thursday Provost Smith of Dalkeith, drew out the political lessons that the left has to learn from Chile, The main lesson, he emphasised, is that any government wishing to move towards Socialism will come up against the power of the bourgeoisie state. This means that the ruling classes will not give up political power without a fight...

One of the first task of the Stirling committee was to seek support for a rally organised by the Glasgow Chilean Defence Committee.

“being held at the McLellan Galleries, Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow at 2 p.m. on Sunday 4th November. An appeal support will be made to Labour parties, Trade Unions, Trades Councils, Students and all political group on the left.”

From the Stirling records we learned about the report prepared by the Chilean action Committee soon after the rally in Glasgow:

Chilean Action Committee

Members of the Stirling Trades Council, Stirling Labour Party, and students from Stirling University attended a rally in Glasgow last Saturday in solidarity with the fight being put up by the people of Chile against the military junta which overthrew the Popular Unity Government of President Allende. The rally was chaired by Jimmy Milne, Assistant Secretary of the Scottish Trade Union Congress and speakers included Jimmy Reid and Alex Kitson.

Folk singers and street theatre group entertained the audiences of Trades Unionists and members of various political parties and groups of the Labour Movement.

A young Chilean speaker thanked the audience for the support they were giving his people and assured them that the Chilean people were not totally defeated and that the struggle was continuing against the military junta.

Phil O'Brien, Secretary of the Glasgow Chilean Defence Committee told the rally of the growing support for the Chilean people throughout Europe and explained that a petition was being launched in Scotland demanding of the Prime Minister, Mr Heath,

- 1. That diplomatic relation with Chile be broken off.*
- 2. Ending of recognition of military junta.*
- 3. Freeing of all imprisoned workers.*

A collection aiming at collecting £100.000 within the next 4 months is being launched to raise money for aiding the Chilean people. It was also hoped to produce a bulletin to help co-ordinate the campaign in Scotland.

The Stirlingshire Chilean Action Committee will meet on Monday 12th November in the Royal Hotel, Queen Street, Stirling at 7,30pm to discuss a programme of action in

Stirlingshire in defence of the Chilean people. This Committee will co-ordinate their activities with those of the Glasgow Chilean Defence Committee.

For further information on the Chilean Action Committee write to the Secretary:

Charles McKeown...

When exactly was the Committee for Chile formed in Glasgow? I do not know! What I know is that the first group of Chilean refugees arriving in Scotland came to Glasgow and Edinburgh in the evening of the 9th of October, 1974.

It showed that in Edinburgh too there was a committee organised to receive Chileans refugees. Before the arrival of this group Manuel Fernandez, was already living in Glasgow as a refugee. He had come to Glasgow thanks to the good work of Jimmy Reid the Glasgow University Rector (1971-74). It may be that the young Chilean speaker at the rally of the 4th of November was Manuel Fernandez whose brother Hernan still lives in Glasgow.

The committee in Stirling was formed under the name of: The Stirlingshire Chilean Action Committee and in it people from all walks of life were involved: members of political parties, academics, professionals, students, workers, artists, artisans, religious people, trade unionists, and people involved in Human Right Organizations.

In addition, many foreign people were also involved: Greeks, Turks, Iranians, Swedes, Gibraltarians and Norwegians. (This was a feature in all committees for Chile in Scotland. French, Spanish, and Latin-American were also involved).

From a letter by the Stirlingshire Chilean Action Committee we read:

Dear Secretary,

It is essential for us in the Trade Union and Labour movement to learn the lessons of the recent event in Chile where a Military Junta overthrew the Popular Unity Government. We must ask ourselves, can we in Britain achieve Socialism peacefully? Are the Armed Forces and the Police neutral? These are the type of queries that the events in Chile raise.

The Stirlingshire Chilean Action Committee has been set up to co- ordinate support in the area for the People of Chile and to make it known, within the local Labour and Trades Unions movements, what has happened in Chile.

We aim to organise a petition in support of the people of Chile, raise money for them, and to publicise their case by providing speakers for those organisations who wish them.

Your organisation can help by:

- 1. Collecting signatures and donations for the enclosed petition.*
- 2. Sending donation to our Action Committee to help meet the commitments of our campaign.*
- 3. Sending delegates to our next business meeting.*

4. *Organising a discussion within your organisation on what has happened in Chile.*

We will be happy to provide a speaker to address any discussion or meeting you care to arrange.

Our next meeting will be on 26th November, 1973, at the Royal Hotel, Queen Street, Stirling, at 7.30 pm.

NB A street petition and collection will take place in Stirling on December 1st, starting at 11.00 am at the GPO Stirling.

The Secretary Charles Mckeown.

Change of name

We know that The Stirlingshire Chilean Action Committee ceased to exist at one point and that after a short gap in June 1976, The Stirling and District Chile Solidarity Committee came into existence.

We also know the aims of the committees and what its members have done and what they were meant to do. In a letter sent to Madame Allende, by Rowland Sheret the Chairperson of The Stirling and District Chile Solidarity Committee we learn a little bit more;

The Stirling and District Chile Solidarity Committee

19th September 1979

*Dear Madame Hortencia Bussi de Allende,
Mexico City
Mexico, D.F.*

On behalf of our Committee I extend our warmest greeting to you on your visit to Stirling. I am sure I express the feelings of all the labour Movement in this area when I say that we see it as an honour that you should find the time to visit us.

A Chile Solidarity Committee was first set up in Stirling in 1973, in the immediate aftermath of the terrible events of September, 1973, which cost the life of your husband. The first Committee helped to publicise the effects of the coup to the Labour Movement of this area. There was a short gap between the activities of that first committee and the present one which was formed in June, 1976, but during the whole period Stirling & District Trade council ensured that the question of Chile was always kept to the fore in the concerns of the local trade union movement and the local Labour party.

In such activities as writing on behalf of political prisoners and disappeared persons and helping settle refugees from Chile, we have been successful giving a practical aspect to solidarity work. This year we have been successful in opening links between the trade union movement of this area and the people of the town of Calama. An

initial donation has been sent by the Central Region Federation of Councils to the childrens kitchens in Calama, and it is hoped that we can soon send more.

Through public meetings, and such activities as leafleting football matches when the Scottish Football Team unfortunately visited Chile, we have tried to make the general public aware of events in Chile and the plight of its people.

Picketing food stores selling Chilean goods had been an exceptionally good way of making people aware of what has happened in Chile.

The bonds which have arisen through this work will long tie the labour movements of our respective countries. I hope this brief resume of our activities, even here in as remote a place as Stirling, will give you encouragement in your struggle to bring freedom and socialism to the people of Chile.

Yours in comradeship,

*Rowland Sheret
Chair person.*

The work of the Committee:

The Stirling and District Chile Solidarity Committee worked in different areas:

- Adoption of political prisoners
- A campaign for the disappeared people.
- Helping Chilean refugee to settle in Stirling.
- Boycott of Chilean goods, fruits and vegetables.
- Writing letters to local newspapers about the situation in Chile.
- Engaging local MPs in the Solidarity Campaign with Chile at Government level,
- Helping some individuals in difficulties in Chile.
- Providing moral and economic support to a small community of children in Calama, the desert town in the far north of Chile.

A typical leaflet to get more people involved in the Chilean Campaign leaflet,

Stirling and District Chile Solidarity Committee

Our Committee is a small but active organisation. Our main activities can be defined as follows:

- *To help the local Chilean refugee community in their difficult struggle to create a new life in our country.*
- *To obtain by means of direct lobbying, press releases and correspondence with pertinent authorities, the release of specific political prisoner. In this we keep a close liaison with other international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Chile Committee for Human Rights.*
- *To advice and maintain a continuous political education programme directed at local labour movements, trade union organisation and the general public on the Chilean experience.*
- *To raise funds for the maintenance of ‘soup kitchens’ organised by the local church organisation in the town of Calama in the north of Chile.*

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AFFILIATION

Name

Address.....

Delegate organisations

Fees:

Personal £ 1.00

Organisation £ 3.00 (3 delegates)

Whatever actions the committee decided to do, it had to find its own finances and to this effect its members had to organise a variety of activities: dinners, cheese and wine parties, jumble sales, sponsored walks, cultural activities etc.

Admirable commitment with the People of Chile

To have such a enduring and successful solidarity campaign, during a long period of time*, means that the members of the campaign had to be very motivated politically and work very hard by keeping their hands, their feet, and their minds busy. The records show that the members of The Stirling and District Chile Solidarity Committee did all of this. Their dedication was quite admirable as it was, of course, the political commitments of so many people in other part of Scotland for the People of Chile.

* The bloody Pinochet’s dictatorship was in power for seventeen years

Chilean refugees in Stirling:

When did they begin to arrive?

How many came to live in Stirling?

Who were they? Families, professionals, students,

What did they do in Scotland?

Did they belong to any political parties?

Did they work? Where?

Did they study? Where? Colleges or University?

Did they work as well for the Solidarity with Chile in Scotland?

Did they form, as happened in Edinburgh and Glasgow, their own Chilean committee, independently from the Stirling Solidarity Campaign?

A number of Chileans refugees began to arrive in Stirling some time in 1975 and soon there were between ten and fifteen people in Stirling. Most people who settled in the city were apparently middle class people already with good education, reasonable good standard of living in Chile, and belonged or said that they belonged to Chilean political parties. Some did not belong to any Party.

There were some people who were already professionals in Chile. There were others whose studies had been interrupted with the arrival of Pinochet to power.

Most people were single; others were married with or without children: Elena and Pedro, Blanca, Jose and Graciela.

Their personal stories at the hand of the Pinochet regime varied: Among those who came to live in Stirling were the Antonioletti family. Marco Ariel Antonioletti a twenty year old boy was executed in 1990 in Chile by the Pinochet's regime. Part of Marco's family lived in Stirling as refugees where they had arrived in 1975. Marco's cousins: Mario and Cristian spent their school years in Stirling.

Patricia Pizarro had been a political prisoner and tortured in a concentration camp at Pisagua (North of Chile) by the Pinochet regime. She appeared in captivity in a German documentary which was shown on British television on Channel 4. Patty was also interviewed for Channel 4 by John Snow as a consequence of Pinochet being detained in London in 1998:

"At the Studio", Patty said to me, "and not far from me, there was Pinochet's Chilean defender who kept looking at me in an evil manner" – "Con una mirada de odio." (With hate in his eyes).*

Most Chileans went to study at the Stirling University with scholarship by the World University Service (WUS) **.

Their places at the university had been organised thanks to the work of The Academics for Chile, a solidarity academic movement formed at some British Universities.

* Abogado (lawyer) Fernando Barros.

** See this webpage: Memories > Manuel Lopez > World University Service

Most Chileans lived for a while on the Stirling University Campus and then in accommodations they could afford.

Some began to move to London to work in the 70s and some of them have remained there. Others have remained in Scotland.

Did they have their own Chilean committee, independently from the Stirling Solidarity Campaign?

Chileans began to organise, as a group, at the Stirling University. The consensus is that they worked well with The Stirling and District Chile Solidarity Committee, although, in these circumstances, some worked more than others perhaps due to their commitment dealing with their studies.

In 1984 The Stirling Solidarity Committee received a moving letter* from Chile.

Tamara was a little girl of seven and wrote “Carta para fuera de Chile” (letter for outside Chile) and the S.S.C. received it and keeps it:

Mr important of outside. I want to ask you a favour you have more power than I It happened that my dad and mum are in prison for Politic I have a sister called Katia I am Tamara and my sister is five years old and I am seven years old my sister love her mum and dad and me too, I and Katia went to see them I am small and I do not understand much of it much , but yes I know that you can help me and mum and dad are in different prisons and cannot be together but more importantly for me is that they go out of prison and be with us for ever and free my mum is called María Soledad Aranguiz Ruz and my dad is called Ignacio Vidaurrázaga Manriques I do not ask you I beg you to help me.

Bye and thank you

(The letter end with her drawings of four big hearts and a small flower)

I was very much touched by Tamara’s letter and my first instinct was to ask myself what had happened to her, her sister and her parents. I managed to contact Tamara (2009). I told her that I intended to give back the letter to her because it is part of the patrimony of her family. She was very happy!: She is a journalist, a feminist, like her mother, and was thrilled to hear from me and the story of her letter in Stirling. She said that she had forgotten about it. Now, she said, could remember it and also remember that she was made to read it for a film documentary she never saw because during her time everything was forbidden.

Tamara said to me that an uncle of her, on her mother side, had been in exile in Scotland. (Gabriel Aranguiz and I knew him!). She also said that to be able to recuperate something that was part of her childhood was gold because her little sister Katia had died about twelve years ago in an accident. In any case, she said, in spite of everything, she was a happy woman, had a partner of twelve years and a wonderful daughter called Katia to remember her sister. Tamara had written a book called: “Mujeres en Rojo y Negro”,(Women in red and Black) and she was going to send it me, as a present, for letting her know about her letter.

* See it in Spanish on the Stirling Solidarity Gallery.

Engaging local MPs in the Solidarity Campaign with Chile at Government level

The amount of correspondence that exists between The Stirling and District Chile Solidarity Committee and their local MPs (Stirling memory Gallery) suggests that the committee was very busy. Their work consisted in making sure that their concern about the Chilean situation was heard at the highest level possible.

Through the hard work of secretaries - Kirsti Owe, Hugh Mclung, Jan Watson, Alan Dowie and Barbara Slater the committee maintained between 1970-1980 close contact with labour MPs for Stirlingshire- Dennis Canavan, Martin O'Neill and Harry Ewing. They were all kept very busy by The Stirling and District Chile Solidarity Committee. The MPs responded very well to its demands by working hard in helping the Chilean cause. Their work, however, became harder during the Thatcher years *

The Labour motivations with the cause of Chile

To assume that Labour MPs in Scotland worked on behalf of the Chilean Solidarity Committee is a mistake. Conscious Labour MPs, as many people on the left in Scotland, became involved in the politics of Chile in the 1970s and 1980s because they too had valid political motivations.

These MPs were responding to a world wide condemnation of a bloody regime which had suppressed, by violent means, freedom and democracy in our country. The MPs actions must be seen as a protest against all human rights abuses taken place in Chile.

I and many Chileans in Scotland learned the lesson that in capitalist countries, a source of many evils around the world, one will still find millions of "compañeras and compañeros" ready to act on behalf of a world which is distant from proper human development.

* See my webpage > Memories > A detailed Reflection of my exile and that of many Chileans in Scotland > Day 12