

## **Remembering September 11: Metalworkers ground a LAN Chile jet against Chile's military coup**

© Don Sutherland, August 2013 (Based on a memoir by the late Jim Baird, an interview with Steve Cooper, Steve Cooper's personal papers, AMWU archival material, and discussions with Chilean political refugees and exiles.)

### **The other September 11 – We Shouldn't Forget**

The September 11 terrorist attack on the New York Twin Towers in 2001 is one of those moments in history where everyone remembers where they were at the time.

But it is another September 11<sup>th</sup>, in 1973, which holds deep memories for many others albeit for different reasons. On that day Chile's military under General Pinochet conducted a bloody military coup that liquidated the democratically elected government of President Salvador Allende's "Popular Unity" government. Under the rule of Pinochet thousands of activists including trade unionists were executed or disappeared with tens of thousands more imprisoned and tortured.

In February 1974 at Sydney airport, AMWU and TWU members grounded a LAN Chile passenger jet, and refused to service it, in solidarity with Chilean workers and the broad Chilean population.

The jet had landed in Sydney after it had flown from Chile over the South Pole to show the possibilities of commercial passenger flights between Chile and Australia.

The metals and transport workers took this action to support the people of Chile and their democratically elected government, and to bring to the attention of the Australian population the situation in Chile.

The coup was backed and actively assisted by the US State Department and the CIA. Pinochet's ruthless dictatorship conducted a reign of terror against the population in favour of its own wealthy elite. Thousands of unionists, and student and community leaders were tortured, jailed and executed. Many Chilean metalworkers at all levels of their union were similarly treated.

Sydney airport's maintenance and transport workers had learned enough to be deeply concerned about what was happening to their Chilean brothers and sisters. But they wanted to know more and find a way to build stronger support.

The fortieth anniversary of the coup, and the years of bloodshed and mayhem against unions and the Chilean people that followed, will be marked soon by commemorative meetings, seminars and cultural activity.

Details of commemoration events in Melbourne can be found at this web site <http://chile40years.org/> . The Sydney events are detailed in the attachment to this email.

AMWU officials, officers and members are encouraged to support these events.

### **A determined, creative role by members of the AMWU**

With the LAN Chile jet grounded, negotiations with Lan Chile's executives led to an "invitation" for an Australian union delegation to visit Chile and see for itself. After a lot of discussion among a number of unions and in the growing solidarity movement, the AMWU's Commonwealth Council (as it then was) in January 1974 endorsed the delegation with some conditions.

The delegation was led by AMWU National Organiser Jim Baird, Henry McCarthy (AMWU journalist), Steve Cooper (rank and file, Miscellaneous Workers Union, and later AMWU Research Officer), Brian MacMahon (TWU), Ron Masterson (Plumbers) and Carmen Bull, who acted as a brave, astute and resolute interpreter. Steve Cooper had travelled through Chile with friends earlier in 1973 and so had some inside knowledge that helped the delegation during its visit.

Jim Baird described the background and the delegation's 12 day journey through fascist Chile in his memoir that can be read at [Rough Reds](#). Jim's memoir captures some of the horrors of daily life under the generals.

**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.

*(Jim Baird – centre, Carmen Bull on his left)*

The delegation travelled widely, usually under observation by the Generals' security police, and visited Santiago, including its Women's Prison, the copper mining region, the Swedish Embassy,

destroyed union headquarters, and the Chacavuco concentration camp ("allegedly the 'nicest of the camps'", Steve Cooper). They interviewed many people, including the dictatorship's Minister for the Interior, union leaders living secretly, prisoners, and people in the street.

The delegation directly sought the release of union officials and women prisoners and re-uniting of children with their parents who had been forced to flee to Australia without them.

The delegation reported to the AMWU's Commonwealth Council in May and September 1974. Based on direct observation and reports of the terror, the meticulous report called for further action at the national and international level of the union movement and the ILO. Subsequently members of the delegation spoke at dozens of meetings around Australia.

A 4 page broadsheet – "12 Days in Chile" – explained to union members what was happening, and reported on many aspects of the union delegation's 12 day exposure to a new military dictatorship. It included direct appeals from Chilean workers and union leaders living "underground" to Australian workers, stories of resistance by Chilean metalworkers and others, graphic photos, and a letter to the then-President of the ACTU, Bob Hawke, from his equivalent in Chile, Luis Figueroa. Figueroa was sheltering in the Swedish Embassy under diplomatic immunity.

After the coup, the Monthly Journal of the union regularly reported on events in Chile and solidarity actions continuing in Australia and the rest of the world.

In September 1974, the first anniversary of the coup, the Commonwealth Council elaborated on its opposition to the coup and extended its solidarity actions at the national and international level. In part, it said:

“This Commonwealth Council deplors the destruction of the democratic Allende government in Chile where the right of the people to progress to socialism through democratic development was under test.”

#### A terrorist coup produces neoliberalism’s first experiment

The Chilean dictatorship’s economic experiment established the basis for the neoliberal policies of Thatcher and Reagan, including privatisation and corporatisation of state and public owned agencies, anti-union laws, and stronger powers for bosses to exploit, and cuts to the social wage. They drew upon the economic theories of the USA’s Milton Friedman and transferred masses of wealth from the poor and working class to the wealthy elites and American TNC’s.

#### Chilean refugees bring their knowledge and culture to Australia: “the workers united ...”

Many Chilean political refugees, some of them dedicated union and student movement activists, fled to Australia, settling in all of our capital cities and other places.

The delegation and its report helped to build a strong and determined Chilean solidarity movement across Australia.

This included visits to Australia of the outstanding Chilean music and cultural groups that were a part of Chile’s New Song Movement. The music of Victor Jara (who had been tortured and murdered by the military in the national soccer stadium), and live performances on tour by [Quilapayun](#), [Inti Illimani](#), and [Los Parros](#), thrilled and inspired thousands of Australians.

“The people united will never be defeated!” This and its variation “The workers united....” are still popular chants in union demonstrations today. However, this chant originated in the great, stirring working class anthem of the “Popular Unity” coalition party that was spread around the world by these groups, especially Quilapayun.

The tours were organised by the Chilean Solidarity Groups, and there were sell out concerts without any significant mainstream media support.

The AMWU was strongly committed to working class cultural activity and played an important role in supporting and facilitating the tours.

#### Chile’s dictatorship and today’s neoliberal policies

It is impossible to consider neoliberal and austerity policies today without remembering that it took a bloody military coup to get it all started.

The action of the airline workers in grounding the LAN Chile passenger aircraft at Sydney airport a few months after the coup was one of the most significant because of its contribution to international pressure on the military junta and the growth of the Australian and international solidarity movement. It led to, as Jim Baird said, “the first international

action which received publicity and exposed the Pinochet government. This resulted in ... Chile's expulsion from the International Labour Organisation."

And also, even though Labor under Whitlam had recognised the dictatorship despite principled opposition from Tom Uren and others, the Labor government "subsequently refused LAN Chile landing rights in Australia".

Chile returned to parliamentary democracy in 1990. The dictator Pinochet died in disgrace after being held to account (although never convicted) for his crimes. And those actions of Australian trade unionists from nearly 40 years ago remind us that workers' action on behalf of the oppressed, holding brutal oppression to account, can really make a difference.