

THE STRUGGLE OF CHILEAN WOMEN FOR DEMOCRACY

1983 was the year of massive mobilization against the dictatorship in Chile. The first national protest took place on May 11, and this protest changed the trends of the whole political process.

On August 11, the government placed 14,000 army men in the streets of Santiago to control and repress the massive demonstrations. Many people were arrested and some were killed. Repression concentrated on the poor urban areas, and the military shot unprotected people such as children, women, and young people. They swept the squatter settlements, the slums and poor neighborhoods, arresting all men older than age 18.

In September the government said it was open to hold conversations with some of the opposition leaders.

National protests continued every month and so did the repression. Social leaders were arrested all over the country and there was no progress at the conversations table. The opposition leaders wanted to change the political agenda of the dictatorship in terms of a quick return to democracy.

Unfortunately, the political leaders, being able to appear on the public scene for the first time in many years, were more concerned about their own interests than in the political process as a whole.

In October 1983, an old man, the father of two young people kidnapped by the government's intelligence agents, committed suicide in front of the Cathedral in Concepcion, burning himself in a desperate action to keep his daughter and son alive. He died and his children were recognized as

having been arrested. As you know, this is a problem we have faced from the very beginning of the dictatorship. People are arrested by civilians, their relatives go to all police stations looking for them, but those in charge deny any knowledge of their whereabouts.

Such an incredible action shocked the consciousness of the Chilean people very deeply. A group of women from the Christian Democracy invited some women friends from other political parties, and also politically independent women. At a small meeting, altogether these women decided to prepare a press conference to express our horror and outrage as women, and our decision to create, as a pluralistic group of women, a movement to help recover democracy. 79 women signed the document where we announced our agreement and commitment, and where we invited all Chilean women to join us.

We said "Freedom has a woman's name" ("La libertad tiene nombre de mujer") and "Today, not tomorrow, for life" was our first slogan. We wanted to show that the will of all these women together was powerful, that no difference could be so strong as to divide us. Unity was the only alternative to change things. The crisis had run too deep.

We were critical of our political leaders, but were convinced that, as women, we would be able to go a step beyond and prove that it was possible to work together. We invited all the women of Santiago to join us in a rally at the Caupolican Theater, the largest in Santiago (capacity for 10,000 people) to seal our agreement and commitment to work together actively "for life." We invited all women organizations to work with us in the preparation of the rally, which we felt should be the result of joint work.

Our struggle "for life" goes against unemployment, hunger, drugs, exile, torture and repression, uncertainty, against the destruction of the country.

It has been a long time since we lived that experience. We have witnessed some changes in the political situation; but our initial motivations are still valid.

Advances at the mobilization level culminated in October 10, 1984, with a successful general strike. The government declared a stage of siege and hardened the repression against political and social organization.

The process of unification within the opposition at the level of the political parties has moved on very slowly, if moving at all. In 1984 there were three political coalitions in the opposition: the Democratic Alliance, the Popular Democratic Movement, and the Socialist Coalition.

In 1985 the struggle was even harder: repression and control increased; new ways of scaring people were developed by the government, such

as kidnapping relatives of social and political leaders, raping students, beating women, threatening officers of the human rights institutions, etc. Every day new seeps took place in the poor headquarters, arresting young people to be checked as delinquents.

In March 1985 three professional members of the Communist Party were kidnapped and killed by policement, as is being established by judicial investigations.

We, "Women for Life" with all other women organizations, have been working without rest during this time. Press conferences to denounce violation of human rights, small but punchy silent demonstrations, support to social and political leaders, collective fasting, meetings to discuss the political situation, a poster campaign denouncing the murder of a young woman who,

after being kidnapped by civilians was tied up to an electric tower and then blown up. Later she was accused of being a terrorist. Her partner, who was in the same situation, woke up before the dynamite exploded and escaped. He was able to tell such a horrible story. And so on ...

Which has been our contribution to the political process, since the problems that lead us to mobilize are still present?

Two years of careful work have made possible the development of a profound confidence between women at different political positions and from different social sectors.

We constitute the group with the widest political spectrum in the opposition, from Christian Democrats to the left. We participate as women and not as political activists, even though ours is a political task. This fact has led us to be the organization, or group, that convokes the largest number of women, independent women of all sectors.

Our demonstrations are made possible because of the active participation of "base" or grassroots women organizations. We have learned to work together, respecting the perceptions and sensitivity of each group. We practice democracy as deeply as possible when in large assemblies we discuss the details of the activity being prepared. Those assemblies are the decision making level, and each organization respects such agreement. It means that many times one sector has to compromise his own position accepting the interests of the majority.

Furthermore we have been able to open up new dimensions of the political problem: How can we face fear successfully under such a dictatorship? How can we deal with such subjective, inner feelings, and still support women to mobilize?

Confidence is at the base of our political work. Confidence between us has made it possible to overcome fear, to face repression on the streets, to tolerate tear gases, the water cannon, etc.

At the same time we want to raise women's consciousness regarding our role in politics, not only concerning the end of the dictatorship, but in terms of a future democratic society.

However, as I said before, ours is an almost invisible work. The dictatorship controls almost the totality of the mass media and it is not easy to overcome the patriarchal habits of our leaders. In spite of our efforts, little attention is given to us in the political parties and in the mass media. We do not have power within the political parties, and undoubtedly the dictatorship does not want to make our struggle noticeable. So, very seldom does the press speak about our demonstrations.