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June/July 1977

Film Review:

The Battle of Chile: The Fight of An Unarmed People

"The Battle of Chile" is an historical documentary that looks with honest and critical eyes at the events that unfolded from the time Salvador Allende and the UP (Popular Unity) government took over the reins of government in Chile. Produced by a collective of young Chilean filmmakers, the film shows, through actual footage and candid interviews, what occurred in those crucial years. What emerges is a political statement in support of the UP government and the Chilean people.

The first two segments of the film—the third has not yet been completed—had their U.S. premiere to sell-out audiences (over 1500) in Berkeley, California last month. "The Uprising of the Bourgeoisie" covers the period between February 1, 1973 and June 29, 1973, the date of the "Tancazo," an aborted military coup attempt which many considered a dry run for the eventual bloody overthrow of the UP. This section reveals the steps taken by the U.S. and the Chilean bourgeoisie to subvert and overthrow the Allende government, and the initial actions taken by the left to oppose it.

"The Coup d'Etat" picks up where the first section leaves off and, much more than the first, delves into the contradictions within the Chilean left which prevented a more effective opposition to the imperialist offensive.

"The Battle of Chile" was made primarily for the Chilean people, to help them better understand the process they were living. According to Federico Elton, the production manager of the crew, their goal was to present an objective—but not a politically neutral—film. Although the subtitle "The fight of an unarmed people" seems to imply a political judgement on the part of the filmmakers, in an interview with the *Guardian*, Elton was much less willing to make a definitive statement on that question. "We lost the battle," he observed. "At this point we can't say whose fault that was. If the people were armed, would the coup have come anyway? Arms are for people waging a war of liberation," he commented. "We weren't in a liberation war, although we were engaged in a political, economic and social struggle. There's no answer to this question now."

The film, like Elton, doesn't give the answer, but rather presents various arguments. At one key point in the film, a worker from a base-level committee stands up at a meeting to eloquently argue against the government's back-stepping on the question of expropriations of the businesses and landholdings being sabotaged by reactionary owners. Although a leader of the CUT (Chile's Trade Union Federation) gave several reasons for supporting the policy, much of the audience applauded when the worker concluded his plea for the government to have more confidence in the people, by providing them with arms to defend their land and their country.

The film crew operated with scant equipment and kept a low profile during the year they were filming. Since they had credentials from a local bourgeois television station and from French TV, they were able to interview and film all sectors of the population, including the reactionaries working openly against the Allende government. Elton credits this low profile with facilitating their getting themselves and

their material out of the country after the coup, although this wasn't accomplished with total ease. The director, Patricio Guzman, was arrested and held in the National Stadium for 15 days in the first massive sweep by the military Junta. Another crew member, cameraman Jorge Muller, was arrested and is among the many "disappeared" prisoners in Chile. The film, Muller's first long feature, is dedicated to him. In his conversations with the press and before each showing of the film, Elton made an impassioned plea for public pressure on the Junta for the release of Muller and the other 2000 "disappeared" prisoners.

In questioning at a press conference prior to the first showing, Elton also attributed their lack of footage of the Chilean countryside to their lack of equipment. This limited their filming basically to the city of Santiago, and is viewed as one of the weaknesses of the film.

Although the film was made primarily for Chileans, Elton feels it is useful to the left in this country and elsewhere. "What happened in Chile is a universal problem," he explained at the press conference. He emphasized that the film did not present one ideology or party line. "For that reason, it has been found useful by all sectors of the Chile solidarity movement throughout the world," he noted. In the U.S., the film's focus on the role of imperialism in Chile make it an important educational tool. However, a major drawback of the film is a presupposition of knowledge about the history of the UP government. The film never says what the UP was, how the coalition of parties that made up the UP grew or the history of the Frei government and U.S. influence before the UP came to power.

By failing to define explicitly what the UP was, the film glosses over the importance that the different alliances between the parties played in determining the crucial events before the coup. Thus, for example, Allende's efforts to ally with the Christian Democratic Party are overemphasized, giving the impression that the CDP might have agreed to the alliance, and that if it had, the coup would have been avoided. The decisive factor—that of relying on the people more—is obscured.

The film, however, remains an important historical document, especially useful for those already familiar with or in the process of learning about the Chilean revolutionary process. Despite the one major drawback, the film presents an honest overview of the Allende years, through the eyes and voices of those who lived through them. In this sense, the film is a tribute to those who helped build Chile from 1970 to 1973, and stands as a condemnation of the role of the U.S. and the reactionary Chilean forces that helped usher in the present military dictatorship. This legacy is testimony to the unfinished battle of Chile, and to the victory of the popular forces.

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