

CHILE

Copper union leads movement against Pinochet's rule

By John Dinges

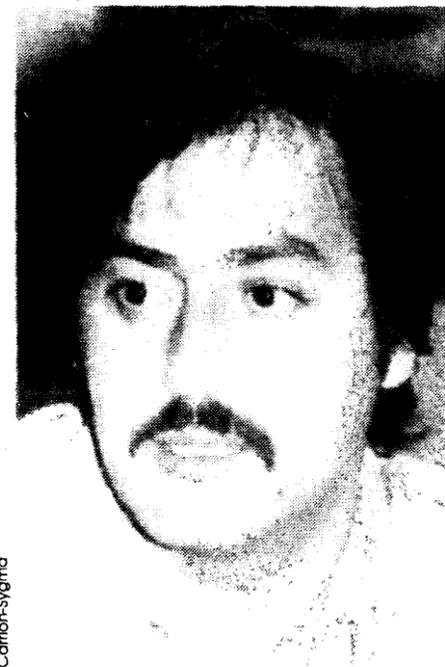
SANTIAGO

IN MAY AND JUNE CHILEANS TOOK to the streets in what amounted to by far the largest protests in the almost 10-year-old dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet. For the first time, Pinochet's political survival has been placed in doubt. His base of middle class, business and military support has shrunk to the point that only the latter is now considered firmly behind him.

The protest movement appears to have reconciled much of the bitter division and political polarization among Chileans that arose during President Salvador Allende's experiment in pursuing a "parliamentary way" to socialism in the early '70s. In national days of protest on May 11, and especially the most recent on June 14, affluent and slum neighborhoods rang with the loud banging of pots and pans while leftists, centrists and rightists together signed petitions asking for a return to democracy.

The primary impetus for the protests has been the devastating economic crisis, blamed almost across the board on the inflexible dogmatism of Pinochet's young monetarist economists—nicknamed the "Chicago boys" for their training by Milton Friedman of the University of Chicago. Elimination of banking regulations, interest controls, tariffs and for-

Rodolfo Seguel



Carroll-Sygnia

foreign currency restrictions led to a dam-burst of foreign private bank loans and imports of consumer goods, giving the appearance of an economic boom from 1978-81. But when the bills came due, the country owed \$18 billion in foreign debt—the highest per capita debt in Latin America.

Almost 4,000 businesses, inundated by cheap imports, had gone bankrupt, 30 percent of Chileans were unemployed (including thousands subsisting for years on rock-bottom wages of government emergency employment programs) and production plummeted 14 percent last year and continues to drop.

In the past Pinochet kept his opponents divided and off balance by a combination of repression—5,000 executed in the days after the coup, 1,000 disappeared, thousands imprisoned and tortured, at least 10,000 political exiles banned from the country—and a decisive patriarchal style. He engineered a plebiscite in 1980 to approve a constitution and de-

crees allowing him to remain in power until 1989 and postponing independent elected government until 1997.

With the economic crisis uniting his opponents—even those on the right now argue that a democratic system would have forced the government to change its economic course long before it was over-



Only the military is still firmly behind Pinochet.

whelmed by the present economic disaster—Pinochet responded erratically. He railed in speeches against the "Senores Rusos" (Russians) spending millions to plot against him and called his critics in the business community "traitors."

But the deep discontent of the Chilean people in general remained latent until called into the streets in May by the newly militant leadership of the country's largest union. The Confederation of Copper Workers, which set off a national union unity movement against the government reminiscent of Poland's Solidarity, left the Chilean political parties playing catch-up to regain their traditional leadership.

One man, Rodolfo Seguel, the copper union president, has come to symbolize the opposition movement. The 29-year-old high school graduate—sometimes described as Chile's Lech Walesa—was elected to his first union post only seven months ago. A month after his election as president—originally seen as a stand-in for a veteran union leader prevented from taking office by a provision of the government's restrictive labor laws—Seguel galvanized the union's 24,000 members into approval of a program translating their economic grievances into a general call for a return to democracy as the only definitive solution to workers' problems.

A call for a May 11 copper strike was squelched by military maneuvers near the mines, but the government action backfired. Seguel transformed the strike call into a call for all Chileans to protest and said that similar protests would be held monthly—on or about the 11th of each month—until the government agrees to begin the quick return to democracy.

On May 11, thousands banged pots and pans—the symbol of economic hardship originally used to voice protest against Allende 10 years ago—and kept their children home from school. Two people were shot by police during street demonstrations, and the government rounded up thousands in raids on poor neighborhoods. Two weeks later, the copper workers, led by Seguel, met with four union organizations representing almost all of Chile's organized labor and forged the groups—traditionally divided

along ideological, partisan lines—into a National Workers Command. The Command called a new protest for June 14, and the political parties, which are in the process of creating a so-called multi-party coalition of opposition to Pinochet, signed on in support. Professional organizations—doctors, lawyers, journalists, nurses, teachers—issued a joint statement calling for profound changes and a return to democracy. The truck owners, who had played an instrumental role in the fall of Allende, declared their opposition to the government. It was a clear rebuilding of the disparate movement against Allende that the military had often referred to as justification for their takeover of the government.

In the June 14 protest, five people died of gunshot wounds inflicted by unidentified motorists firing on demonstrations. Seventeen others were wounded. In some

ership in the movement of national protest?

It wasn't me, but the Confederation of Copper Workers. The way was very simple. First of all, our organization has all political tendencies, from right to left. And we were always able to work within a good consensus. I learned that and wanted to bring the same thing to the rest of the union organizations. We were successful, and thus were able to achieve unity and create the National Workers Command.

The agreement we reached was that we cannot continue to live under a dictatorship as strong as the one to which we have been subjected for 10 years. And there is agreement about action, that we have to end the dictatorship with actions that are peaceful but at the same time demonstrative. We can't get rid of the dictatorship with weapons because we don't have weapons, nor with force because we are not advocates of force. But, yes, we can use peaceful actions—demonstrative actions—to show the government we are tired, that we are fed up and want to return to full democracy.

The final goal is the return to democracy. If that means the departure of this government, then so be it. You can also change some of the people in it. Don't make me say his name. Everybody knows who he is. And many of the people who work closely with him will have to leave.

What government do you want to follow this one?

We have also reached agreement that we should have a period of transition, of at least two years, in which to re-establish many things in the country. That period will be one in which there is an agreement between civilians and military to govern for a fixed time, after which they will return to where they belong and there will be elections and parliament. Then it will be up to the political party that wins the largest majority to form the government.

How long have you been working in this movement?

I was elected to a union leadership post last December 13. On January 15, I was elected to a national office [in the union], and on February 22, I was elected president.

How did you rise so fast?

The people are asking for very strong, very abrupt changes, and they want leaders who will be honest enough to tell the workers the truth about what is happen-

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Says Copper Workers Union President Rodolfo Seguel, "We have agreed we can use peaceful actions to show the government we're fed up and want to return to full democracy."

cases, the gunmen and their cars were linked to police operations by eyewitnesses who saw them talking on two-way radios and reconnoitering with police vans. But the protest had its greatest impact in its peaceful, planned actions—the massive clatter in neighborhoods all over the city and streets clogged with cars honking in protest.

Twelve hours after I interviewed Seguel at his union headquarters in Santiago the afternoon of June 14, five men in civilian clothes broke down the door of the house where he was sleeping and arrested him. There were no identification cards or arrest warrants, and at first opposition leaders feared Seguel would be "disappeared"—the secret police tactic of arrest and murder followed by government denial that the victim had ever been in custody. The next day, however, Seguel appeared in jail and was subsequently charged with seeking the overthrow of the government. His arrest led the copper union to call a 24-hour warning strike that lasted in some mines more than three days. It was the first time the \$4-million-a-day copper industry was halted during the military government, although workers at the largest mine, Chuquicamata, procrastinated and ended up not joining the strike.

Then, in a move political observers saw as precipitous, the truck owners called a national general strike on two days' notice for June 23. The government clamped on strict censorship, forbidding radio and TV stations and the press to mention even the words "strike" or "protest." There was little chance for a national strike movement to get organized, even if the political parties had been enthusiastic—which they weren't.

Although the National Workers Command officially joined in the strike call, few workers actually stayed home from work. The taxi and bus owners—part of a coalition led by the truck owners—also paid lip service to the strike call but kept most of their vehicles on the road. The truck strike fizzled after two days.

The following interview with Seguel was conducted on June 14, a day of national protest.

How did you come to a position of lead-



Laughing at the unlaughable

By Alfie Kohn

AN ACTOR DRESSED AS A huge cockroach appears on stage and reads the evening news. Humans have finally blown themselves up, he reports, but "food distribution [for us insects] will not be a problem, except perhaps for the vegetarians among us."

A folk group switches from the standard ballads to a new ditty, entitled "The Atomic Two-Step." "I've got a stash of Campbell's soup that will last an eternity," they croon.

A 30-page pamphlet resembling a government manual offers helpful advice for surviving World War III. "Depending on your distance from ground zero, you could experience temperatures of up to 4000° Centigrade," it cautions. "Why not prepare for this by spending 10 to 15 minutes a day in your clothes dryer?"

Across the country, writers and performers have found nuclear war a ripe topic for humor. Or, more accurately, given their political orientation, they have found a new strategy for dealing with an issue that already concerns them. In any case, more people are "not only thinking about the unthinkable, but laughing at the unlaughable," as San Francisco improv comic Charlie Varon puts it.

Together with Fran Peavey, Varon has developed a series of sketches and taken them on the road to conventions of the American Civil Liberties Union, the Association for Humanistic Psychology and Colorado's Libertarian Party, among other audiences. One bit has Varon playing a driving instructor who now coaches nuclear weapons users. "When two missiles reach an intersection at the same time, which has the right of way?" he quizzes the audience. "(A) The one heading from east to west? (B) The one heading from west to east? or (C) The one with the better human rights record?"

Fit to print?

But is this really a fit subject for humor? How can we laugh at the potential extinction of the human race? Fran and Charlie defend the idea in terms of aiding the disarmament movement. "It's hard to sustain the gaze. Activists are especially susceptible to psychic numbing. Laughter

frees up energy and allows you to act creatively. That's why I'm interested in comedy," Fran concludes. "I'm a strategist."

Compare the refreshing relief of laughter as a response to nuclear war with other people's tactics, they urge. Too much motivating people through fear "creates a powerless, impotent mass," according to Fran, and this is exemplified by a character in their skits—a well-known lecturer they call "Helen Holocaust." Like many others working on the issue, she has no use for humor. The arms race is not funny, period.

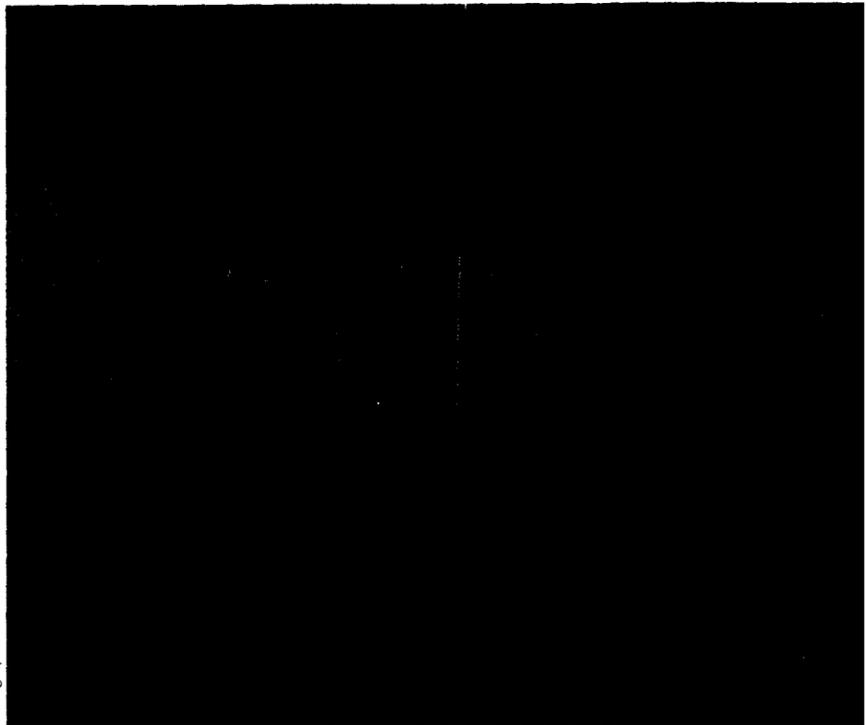
This is just the reaction Tony Hendra got from segments of the antinuclear movement when his brilliantly funny parody pamphlet *Meet Mr. Bomb* was released not long ago. "To be humorless and pompous about the whole thing makes as many enemies as friends," he believes. Formerly a performer with Monty Python and then editor of the *National Lampoon*, Hendra turned to writing parody because of its devastating effectiveness. "Human beings who can sit around and construct scenarios on what is clearly inhuman deserve ridicule, and satire is a far more dangerous weapon than straight attack. Your opposition above all doesn't want to be laughed at."

Meet Mr. Bomb grew out of the lead editorial in Hendra's *Off the Wall Street Journal*, published last year. In it, nuclear war was defended as zero-based budgeting at its best. The current piece, subtitled "A Practical Guide to Nuclear Extinction," is written in the hearty colloquial style of government brochures aimed at the average citizen. "Mr. Bomb will be extending to many, many more Americans than ever before an honor that to date we have limited to our fighting forces," writes "Ronald Reagan" in a preface. The pamphlet reassures us that armageddon really isn't so bad as all that. Says one caption: "[A nuclear] blast is actually no worse than if a 500,000-ton baseball, hit on a line drive, were to strike your home."

The easiest target for satire is civil defense planning, which often resembles self-parody to begin with. Steve Ben Israel, a New York comedian with a delivery that recalls Lenny Bruce, remembers



HUMOR ON THE LEFT



being told, "Just in case there was a thermonuclear war, all I had to do was go underneath my desk and I'd be OK. I still have my desk. I'd suggest you go back to your old neighborhood and get your old desk, too."

A number of songs, such as "The Atomic Two-Step," a creation of the Spatz family in New England, lampoon civil defense in similar style. Fred Small, a singer/songwriter who gave up a career as an environmental attorney to perform full time, recently recorded a single called "Dig a Hole in the Ground":

We're sure to give you notice up to seven days before.

But it's wise to recognize the warning signs of nuclear war.

If the temperature is rising in a flash of blinding light,

Grab your toothbrush and a flashlight and shut the windows tight.

Comedy of the absurd.

Instead of frontal assault, some comic efforts point up the horrors of nuclear war by way of showing the absurdity of protective measures. This is the thrust of *Meet Mr. Bomb*, which suggests canaries will do nicely as radiation detectors (though "you will need several, as each canary can only detect radiation once"). Steve Ben Israel takes the same approach when he soothes us with the news that "radiation is just like having an x-ray. All day."

Other jokes rely on understatement, such as the bumpersticker that reminds us "One Nuclear Bomb Can Ruin Your Whole Day" or the cartoon featuring a lunch counter customer who, noticing a mushroom cloud out the window, tells the cook, "Better make that to go." On the other hand, Berkeley's Plutonium Players, prefer a complete reversal, adopting personnas to invite ridicule. Creators of the Reagan for Shah Committee and the righteously anti-feminist Ladies Against Women, the Players' characters think nuclear war is just fine. "We want nukes! We want war! We think oil's worth fighting for!" they chant. One of their characters, a Dr. Mel Practice, defends apathy as a means to stress reduction.

Father of nuclear comedy.

One of the first performers to bring black humor to its *reductio ad absurdum*

was mathematician-turned-cult-fig Tom Lehrer. Just about the time Steve Ben Israel recorded "Who's Next?" and "Long, Mom," which invited uneasiness about nuclear proliferation and World War III. The latter, sung to a bouncy tune, ended with: "Rememb-



mommy, I'm off to get a commie, send me a salami/ And try to survive somehow. I'll look for you when the war is over—an hour and a half from now!" Almost a decade earlier, Lehrer had composed a gospel parody called "We Will All Go Together When We Go," the cleverest short treatment of the date:

We will all bake together when we bake.

There'll be nobody present at the wake.

With complete participation in that grand incineration:

Nearly three billion hunks of well-done steak.

Lehrer, who no longer seems to find such topics appropriate for humor, has ceased writing comic songs. But the