

THE PEOPLE'S FRONT IN CHILE

First in the Americas!

*The embattled liberal and radical Chilenos
have forged a fighting progressive coalition*

By Charles Wedger

TO far-off Chile goes the honor of creating the first full-grown people's front in the Americas. On March 7, a coalition of eight parties and political groups, including Communists, Socialists, and the influential middle-class Radical Party, went to the polls and emerged with nineteen out of a total of forty-five seats in the Senate, and sixty-six of the one hundred forty-three seats in the Chamber of Deputies. While the People's Front failed to obtain a majority, its achievement is none the less of historic importance and, for all practical purposes, represents a smashing victory.

In recent years, perhaps no South American people, not even the heroic Brazilians of the National Liberation Alliance, have shown a greater determination to throw off the double yoke of native feudalism and foreign imperialism than the Chileans. The stirring days of June 1932, when the Socialist Republic of Chile was proclaimed, the first socialist state in the Western Hemisphere, has never been adequately chronicled. Premature and ill-prepared to defend itself, it lasted only twelve days, but it clearly foreshadowed future success.

The five years that followed the defeat of the short-lived Socialist Republic have been a period of bitter struggle, economic as well as political, for the Chilean people. Like all semi-colonial countries, Chile serves its foreign exploiters as a source of cheap raw materials, chiefly nitrates and copper, and as a dumping ground for finished products. Before the World War, British capital dominated the Chilean market, but since then Wall Street has controlled the economic destinies of the country, increasing its holdings from fourteen million dollars in 1914 to eight hundred million today.

Foreign imperialism has so corrupted the political institutions of Chile that the government has been nothing more than a shameless instrument of the Guggenheim interests, the Electric Bond & Share Co., the Grace Line, and other despoilers of the nation's wealth. Imperialism has stunted the growth of native industry and delayed the full development of a middle class by preempting the Chilean market for its own manufactured articles. It has also hindered the modernization of agriculture by supporting the feudal landlords, with the result that the great mass of Chilean peasants are in a state of semi-servitude.

The world economic crisis brought untold suffering to Chile when copper and nitrate mining was cut down to almost nothing. To-



Scott Johnston

Chile's President Alessandri

day, the pre-war boom in these minerals is boosting production to new heights. Official Chile points to a 75-percent rise in exports during the past four years, and to a favorable balance of trade as indications that Chile is entering upon a new era of "prosperity." But it conveniently fails to mention that at least 65 percent of total exports consists of copper and saltpeter, altogether in the hands of foreign corporations, and consequently of little benefit to Chile.

Thus the living conditions of the great mass of Chileans remains at an incredibly low level. The worker in the copper mines, for example, who is paid in a fantastically debased currency and burdened with high retail prices and exorbitant sales and transaction taxes, actually earns from ten to fifteen times less than the corresponding worker in the United States. And the income of the Chilean peasant is only a fraction of what his proletarian brother receives.

IN SPITE of renewed mineral production, there are still some seventy thousand unemployed workers in Chile, a high figure for a country of four and a half million inhabitants, most of whom are engaged in agriculture. Chile also holds the unenviable record of having one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world—two hundred twenty-eight out of each thousand children born never reach their first birthday. When Dr. Enrique Dickman, well-known Buenos Aires physician and

a member of the Argentine Chamber of Deputies, visited Chile a year ago, he declared in a public lecture that living conditions in Chile were the worst he had seen in forty countries and during thirty years of medical practice.

These are the social, economic, and political conditions out of which the People's Front grew. The first stirrings in this direction were visible in 1934 when the Socialists, Independent Communists (Trotskyites), and two small, lower-middle-class parties joined hands to form a "left wing" in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate. However, the two Communist deputies, Andres Escobar and José Vega, were given the cold shoulder.

Events moved rapidly during the next two years. One event in particular lent a powerful impetus to the movement—the railroad strike of February 1936 and the terror that followed. In the previous year, a strike was lost because of lack of unity between the two chief railroad unions. Both unions finally joined forces to form the *Comite Unico Relacionador Ferrovionario*, a coordinating, united-front committee representing some eighteen thousand workers. The main Chilean railroads are state owned. Sensing the threat of the *Comite Unico* to his semi-dictatorial regime, President Alessandri, a vicious and astute servitor of foreign imperialism, deliberately provoked a new strike in the hope of crushing the railroad unions once and for all.

Alessandri was partly successful in his maneuver. Insufficiently prepared, still weakened by reformist elements within the organization, and taken by surprise, the *Comite Unico* was nevertheless forced to call the strike on February 2. The government hit hard and fast. It clamped down the "*estado de sitio*," or martial law, arrested the whole strike committee as well as all radicals and liberals it could lay its hands on, and placed the railways under military control. Altogether, some seven hundred persons were imprisoned, of whom two hundred were deported to the bleak, cold penal islands of the far south. The strike lasted only six days.

Several things happened, however, which Alessandri had not counted on. Despite the terror which the government immediately unleashed, within three days a series of sympathy strikes turned the railroad walkout into a spontaneous general strike. In the heat of battle, a "*commando unico*" was formed, the first broad united proletarian front in Chile. It drew up a program which not only backed the railroad workers, but went beyond the imme-

diate struggle on hand, demanding respect for civil liberties and democratic procedure and the abolition of the hated five-percent sales tax and other economic measures of general interest to the whole Chilean people.

Thus what at the moment was undoubtedly a bitter defeat for the Chilean labor movement actually provided the experience out of which arose the powerful People's Front. As a matter of fact, two months later, when a sudden vacancy occurred in the Senate, the Radical Party, even though it had representatives in Alessandri's cabinet, joined forces with the Communists and other progressive groups to elect a People's Front candidate to the Senate. The People's Front of Chile was definitely launched.

By the summer of 1936, the battle for the general elections of the following March was in full swing. Election periods in Chile, debased by the petty rivalries, jealousies, bribe-swapping, and gun-toting of corrupt politicians, are traditionally violent. This time the pre-election tension was at white heat. Chile has ten major parties as well as five or more minor political groups. With eight of these within the People's Front, the remaining parties, ranging from the ruling Conservatives and Liberals to military organizations like the Nazis, mobilized every resource at their command—state power, untold sums of money, press, radio, provocation, intimidation, and just plain assassination—to crush the People's Front.

The newspapers screamed denunciations of "communism" with holy frenzy. Two attempts were made against the life of Marmaduke Grove, the Socialist leader, but each time he escaped unhurt. A band of one hundred uniformed Nazis shocked the nation by shooting into a peaceful group of people at Rancagua, seriously wounding eight, including a six-year-old girl. Finally, but only after a bitter fight in the Chamber, Alessandri pushed through his infamous measure of *seguridad interior del estado*, a law designed solely to suppress the civil liberties of the progressive opposition.

Nevertheless, the People's Front forged ahead. In November, the constituent parties reached definite agreements on electoral quotas and a political program. The latter contains thirty-three points which can be summarized as follows:

I. Against oppression: (a) restitution of civil liberties and democracy; (b) amnesty for political prisoners; (c) dissolution of military parties.

II. Against imperialism: (a) nationalization and state control of mineral resources and public utilities; (b) obligation for all foreign companies to employ Chilean labor, technical and otherwise, to the extent of 95 percent of total personnel.

III. Against poverty and ignorance: (a) minimum-wage and maximum-hour legislation; (b) lower cost of living; (c) shifting of the tax burden from the workers and middle classes to imperialist monopolies, landlords, and the church; (d) social security and unemployment relief; (e) adequate public health

facilities; (f) secularization of education and construction of new schools.

Steadily gathering strength, the People's Front launched a daily newspaper, *Frente Popular*, with the slogan "Chile for the Chileans" printed on its masthead. Popular enthusiasm reached the point where a tobacco manufacturer saw fit to put a new cigarette on the market with the magic name, "Frente Popular," perhaps the first use of the People's Front as a trademark. Then, on December 27, occurred one of the most important events in the century and a quarter since the Chilean people gained their independence from the Spanish monarchy: the unification of the labor movement. The great railroad strike of the preceding February had given birth to its second child: the *Confederación General de Trabajadores de Chile* (Confederation of Chilean Workers). Juan Martínez was elected General Secretary by acclamation.

Here was the reply of the Chilean workers to the violence of the reactionaries, to the rumors of a sudden stroke that would annul the elections, as the Peruvian despot Benavides had done a few months before. Considering the conditions under which the elections were held, the victory of the Chilean People's Front is second only to that of the Spanish People's Front, which won a full majority in the parliament a year ago February. As in Spain, Chilean Reaction spent enormous sums of money not only for every sort of propaganda, but also for the direct purchase of votes, for bribing election officials, and for terrorizing workers who came to the polls. Hordes of Indian serfs were driven from plantations to near-by towns, and given huge quantities to drink and a peso or two to vote for the "right" candidate.

In the cities, however, the vigilance of the People's Front was nothing short of heroic, so that in the end it carried the large centers like Santiago, Valparaíso, Antofagasta, Concepción, and Atacama. Of particular significance was the record-breaking achievement of the Communist Party, which increased its representation four-fold. Seven Communist deputies, including Contreras Labarca, General Secretary of the Party, gained seats in the Chamber, while Elías Lafertte, "grand old man" of the Chilean labor movement who, as a member of the Commando Unico during the railroad strike, had been arrested, severely beaten, and then exiled, was elected during his absence to the Senate, the first Communist to achieve that feat.

That the People's Front failed to win a majority is less important than it may seem if we take into account the essential weakness of its opponents. Nothing less than a total defeat of the People's Front could satisfy them; hence the election results struck them as a major catastrophe. Like the Right and the Center in pre-election Spain, Chilean conservatives and reactionaries are badly split. This is due not only to internal conflicting interests, but to the rivalries of opposing foreign imperialisms.

Wall Street dominates Chilean economic life, but it must continually defend itself

against British imperialism and, of late, against the triple threat of Germany, Italy, and Japan. The Nazis in particular have made great headway in Chile. With a considerable number of fairly prosperous German farmers in the south to draw upon, they have built up a military organization which has enjoyed full freedom of action. Hitler's ambassador, von Schoen, openly maintains the closest relations with the Chilean Nazis, who, moreover, often proclaim at their frequent gatherings that "Chile is a second fatherland" to them. The local "Führer," Gonzalez von Marees, won a seat in the Chamber, the first avowed Nazi to enter the Chilean parliament.

Italian activities are less spectacular, and reveal themselves chiefly in economic relations. During and after the Ethiopian war, large quantities of Chilean nitrates went to Italy, and at the present time Mussolini is buying tons of farm products as well as important amounts of nitrates, copper, and sulphur. Just before the elections, a commission of Italian bankers visited Chile and proposed even closer economic relations between the two countries. Japan, like Germany and Italy, is also a good customer for nitrates, but at the same time carries on a clever and relatively subtle campaign for "cultural" relations. A large delegation of students recently left Chile for an extended visit to Japan as the official guests of the Japanese government.

It was only at the very end of January, and after two ministerial crises had occurred, that four of the right-wing parties, including the governing Conservatives and Liberals, could work out a common electoral program. Even then, it was only a temporary agreement, and now that the elections are over, the old animosities are coming to the front again. The resignation of Gustavo Ross, multi-millionaire minister of finance, often referred to as the power behind Alessandri's throne, can be interpreted only as a serious weakening of the reactionary coalition.

Then again, the reports of the new minister of finance, Garces Gana, point to an impending economic debacle. Already one hundred and sixty million pesos have been appropriated for which no revenue exists. The minister of finance further reminds his countrymen that heavy overhead (particularly the military budget) and diminishing income will require strictest economies and new sources of revenue.

Translated into political terms, all of this indicates that when the Chilean congress convenes on May 21, Chile will enter one of the most critical periods in its history. What sort of government will Alessandri be able to form with the new line-up in the Chamber and Senate? Very likely the best he can hope for is a coalition of the center, something like the Portela Valladares government which ruled Spain just prior to the victory at the polls. Yet it is how such a government could face the face of the deep antagonisms that would divide it and the desperate economic situation it must face.

Hitch-Hiking in Spain

The casual traveler in republican territory has his difficulties, but the charm of the people dispels them

By Stephen Spender

TODAY, in order to go from one town to another in Spain, it is necessary to obtain a safe-conduct, on which is stated the extent and nature of one's journey. In order to obtain a safe-conduct, one has to submit oneself to one of those tests of faith in exasperating circumstances which correspond to the tests to which the saints submitted themselves in other days: in Republican Spain, the counterpart of the hair-shirt, the days of fasting, the penitentiary, is the endless waiting about in government offices, the journeys in trains set on establishing new records of unpunctuality, the arrival at a destination where there may reign a perpetual Lent of no sugar, no coffee, and little meat.

Yet no experience is so charming as traveling today in Spain. I use the word "charming" advisedly, for during a war, when one is surrounded by suffering and hatred, the charming is that which strikes one immediately as the unforgettable. Even the least observant travelers in Spain notice the extraordinary contrast of the gay, the spontaneous, the charming, with the war. No one who has to wait for five hours on his way to Barcelona at the little frontier town of Port-Bou forgets his first impressions of the new democracy which is fighting in Spain.

With me, the little incident that I shall not forget was the sudden halt of a whole lorry load of militia in front of me. I was sitting on the parapet of a bridge, reading *Humanité*: they had stopped merely to greet me and ask what I was reading. I showed them the newspaper, and as I had almost finished it, offered to give it to them. At first they refused as though I were offering them some overwhelming favor; however, I managed to make them accept it, and then they thanked me with an emphasis that was related

not to the gift of a newspaper but to their consciousness of my "solidarity" with them.

It is again and again this added significance of small things—the offering of a cigarette, the raising of a hand in the "*Salud*," the refusal of a tip by a waiter—which surprises one in Spain. The truth is that the outward and visible sign of popular freedom is generosity: the Spanish people feel themselves to be free, and they behave to each other and to strangers with the generosity of those who feel themselves to be equal.

Now, on one's safe-conduct is written that "all the civil and military authorities are called upon to assist the bearer on his journey." This is not a formality; it is true. You can, for example, show the safe-conduct to the guard of a town, and he will then stop all lorries until he has found one which will take you to your destination. Recently, I have traveled from Valencia to Madrid, to the front, and circuitously back to Valencia in this way. On all these journeys, the drivers, the workers, the soldiers and peasants, who use the same means of conveyance, have amazed me by their kindness, their generosity, and their good-humor. These people share everything with each other: no one who has a bottle of wine takes a drink without handing the bottle round to all his neighbors; it is the same with cigarettes. Once I gave a soldier a bar of chocolate, and he instantly divided it into small portions and gave one to everyone in the lorry.

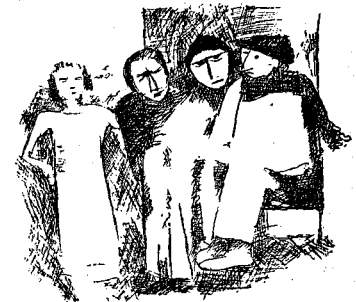
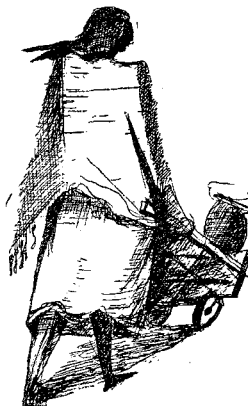
In the same way, the people show the utmost consideration in helping each other. For example, two days ago, the camion in which I was put did not go quite as far as Valencia, where I was due. The lorry driver and his three mates discussed at great length what

it would be best for me to do: whether I should sleep a night at Gandia and then proceed to Valencia next morning, or whether I should go on by train from some point. Finally they took me to a junction of the main road and railway, where I had the choice of staying a night or going by train or by road.

When we stopped for lunch at an inn, they insisted on paying for my meal. At these small villages the food is today the best in Spain. That day we chose fried eggs and lamb chops; we went into a hall where there was a charcoal fire and watched the woman cook our food in olive oil in a huge frying pan.

Usually on these journeys there is some joke current amongst the travelers—a simple, almost pointless joke about someone or some phrase, such as children have amongst each other. On this journey the joke was the phrase "To Tarracon!" Apparently before I arrived someone had said "To Tarracon" in an especially ludicrous manner. At intervals in the journey, particularly as we started again after a halt, one of the workers would shout, "To Tarracon!" in an effort to excel the original, and we would all laugh. Finally, I became infected, and although I have never learnt the origin of the phrase, I now think of it as extraordinarily funny.

Yesterday I met in Valencia an American who told me that although he had no interest in politics, he would not leave Spain unless he was obliged to do so. "Why?" I asked him. "Because I love the people," he replied. And it is a remarkable fact of this war that the foreigners who have come here to aid Spanish democracy find that it is not only an idea which they are fighting for, but a people who are perhaps the most interesting and most likeable in Europe.



Sketched in Spain by Abis