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The Detained and Disappeared Social Workers of Chile

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2023 marks the 50th anniversary of the military coup in Chile. The coup unleashed incredible violence in Chile particularly focused on those people who were involved in activities meant to improve the quality of life for the majority. These people were tortured, killed, exiled, and disappeared. This entry discusses some of the disappeared social workers of Chile.

Across the world social workers are committed to defending human rights. But social workers themselves have also been victims and survivors of human rights abuses. This essay will examine the stories of social workers in Chile who were detained and disappeared by the military-civic dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet beginning in 1973 and will provide a brief summary of and context for social work and human rights in Chile at that time.

Social work's commitment to social justice, human rights, and multiculturalism has been discussed extensively (Eroles, 1997; Ife, 2001; Mama, 2001). "Social work and human rights have a very close relationship" (Eroles, 1997). This relationship calls on social workers to be active in the construction of a new reality so that the human rights of all are respected. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) consider it imperative that social workers commit themselves fully to the promotion and protection of human rights without reservation (Eroles, 1997). Social work in Latin America has a long history of being in solidarity with social movements on the front lines for human rights.

In the 1960s there was a reconstruction of social work in Latin America. This movement emphasized social work's commitment to "respond to the social, economic, political, and cultural reality of a continent that was underdeveloped and dependent" (Ander-Egg, 1995). Social work saw itself needing to change to be reflect the present reality (Sánchez & Rodríguez, 1990) to bring about the conditions necessary for the respect of human rights. The commitment was to change the reality, not to adjust to it. This required conscientization, solidarity, and work within social movements. In this way, social work in Latin America broke with hegemonic definition coming from the United States and Europe (Vera Quiroz, 2016); in Latin American,



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social workers saw, and continue to see, the people they worked with not as clients but as partners.

During the presidency of Salvador Allende in Chile, the concept of *poder popular* (popular power) became important (Castañeda & Salamé, 2016). This emphasis on people power or power from below influenced social workers to see themselves alongside people in poverty working to construct a new Chile. Three years into this work there was a violent coup that led to 17 years of dictatorship. There were massive human rights abuses including torture, assassination, exile, and disappearances. After the coup, social workers returned to the work of “assisting” others rather than collaborating in solidarity. The majority of schools and programs of social work were closed (Vera Quiroz, 2016), and many social workers were exiled (personal communication with exiled Chilean social worker, 2004). The schools stayed closed for many years. Schools that were permitted to reopen had to adhere to the new Chile—one where people thought only about themselves.

There were at least 19 social workers who were detained and disappeared during Pinochet’s rule (Vera Quiroz, 2016). “The act of making people disappear is, without a doubt, one of the cruelest forms of human rights violations. It is horrific” (Vera Quiroz, 2016). Many other social workers, however, risked their lives to defend human rights (Muñoz Arce, n.d.). Some worked in poor neighborhoods while others worked in large human rights organizations like the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* (Vicariate of Solidarity) and the *Fundación de Ayuda Social de las Iglesias Cristianas* ([FASIC], the Foundation of Christian Churches for Social Assistance). Unfortunately, there were also social workers who worked with the regime turning people in and stealing the recently born children of political prisoners to have them adopted by military families.

Those who were disappeared were of various ages, social standings, and political affiliations. They were all committed, however, to building a new Chile based on equity and respect. Some of their stories follow here.

María Cecilia Labrín Sazo was dedicated to change in Chile. She actively participated in the process to reform the university system (Memoria Viva). Her family was proud of the work that she did. She was taken from her family’s home on August 12, 1974. According to her mother (personal communication July 16, 2004), the military police had been coming to their home almost daily since August 3 to look for her daughter. She had been offered asylum a few weeks before but refused. María Cecilia was a social worker with the *Corporación de Viviendo*, the Ministry of Housing. When she was taken, she was 3 months pregnant. María Cecilia was taken to the infamous torture center known as *Londres 38*.

Jacqueline Paulette Drouilly Yurich chose to study social work to “strengthen her commitment with the poor and neediest [in Chile]” (Vera Quiroz, 2016, p. 212). She was detained on October



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30, 1974. Her neighbors were witnesses to her detention. The military police remained in her home until the next day so that they could also detain Jacqueline's husband. There are reports that she passed through the *Cuatro Álamos* concentration camp. People who were detained with her noted that she was badly tortured. After her disappearance, the dictatorship reported that she was killed in Argentina along with 118 other disappeared Chileans. That was a lie (Memoria Viva, n.d.; Vera Quiroz, 2016). Jacqueline was 3 months pregnant when she was taken.

María Teresa Eltit Contreras began studying pedagogy but switched to social work because "she was always looking for answers to so many social questions" (Vera Quiroz, 2016, p. 234). She found herself working in shantytowns helping people improve their lives. She was taken from the street on December 12, 1974. Witnesses said they saw her at the notorious concentration camp *Villa Grimaldi* where she was tortured for days at a time, along with her boyfriend. Because she was actively involved in organizing against the dictatorship, she was considered a prize detention for the military police.

María Teresa Bustillos Cereceda grew up as the middle child of three in a home with a single mother. Her mother was often ill, and María Teresa was her caregiver. She was preoccupied with the quality of life of others, which led to her commitment to working against injustice and for human rights. She was one of the first social workers to work in the "Health Train," going to the poor areas of the south of Chile to primarily work with the Indigenous Mapuches people. She was taken on December 9, 1974. At the time, she was being treated for a stomach ulcer. She was held in *Villa Grimaldi* until approximately December 24, then was taken away again in the morning and never seen again. In her absence, her mother suffered a mental breakdown, and her father had a seizure that left him paralyzed for the rest of his life (Memoria Viva, n.d.; Vera Quiroz, 2016).

Jaqueline del Carmen Binfa Contreras was known as a rebel during her teen years. She spoke out against injustices and societal norms. She went to study social work at the University of Chile, but she spent most her time in the shantytowns working with people to improve their lives. She was taken in November 1973 along with her younger brother. He was let go the same day, but she was detained for 12 days before being released, then detained again on August 27, 1974, while walking in Santiago. She was taken to the *Jose Domingo Cañas* torture center, then transferred to *Cuatro Álamos*. She was last seen by other prisoners October 1974.

Modesta Carolina Wiff Sepúlveda studied social work at the *Universidad de Concepción* in the south of Chile. She was married and had a daughter when she was detained by the military police in Santiago on June 25, 1975. She was last seen in *Villa Grimaldi* by another prisoner (Memoria Viva, n.d.).

Elizabeth Cabrera Balaritz was in charge of the Student Well-Being Department at the *Universidad del Norte de Chile*. She was detained with her husband, Nenad Teodorovich, on



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September 14, 1973, and executed the next day. Her remains disappeared until 2015, when she was located and buried in the General Cemetery in Santiago along with others assassinated by the dictatorship. She had one son (Archivo Dignidad, n.d.). In an article she published in 1969 she said that social work “should play a key role in transforming our actual reality” (Redacción, 2021).

Elizabeth Mercedes Rekas Urrea was detained with her husband, Antonio Elizondo Ormaechea, on May 26, 1976, outside of her job in the center of Santiago. She was 4 months pregnant at the time. She was taken to Villa Grimaldi and was not seen again.

Others about which little has been recorded:

José Alberto Salazar Aguilera – Disappeared December 13, 1974

Luis Jorge Almonacid Dumenes – Disappeared September 16, 1973

Juan Ernesto Ibarra Toledo – Disappeared June 25, 1974

Sonia Valencia Huerta – Disappeared December 31, 1977

In 2006 a plaque honoring the known disappeared social workers in Chile was placed at the School of Social Work at the *Academia de Humanismo Cristiano*. This school is in the same building that the School of Social Work of the *Universidad de Chile* was located before it was shut down by the dictatorship in 1973.



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