

# Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

## Clotario Blest (1899-1990), Catholic labour leader in Chile



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(Marcelo Montecino, 1988)

**Blest, Clotario** (1899-1990), Catholic labour leader in Chile, was born on 17 November 1899 at 48 Brasil Street in Santiago de Chile. He was the second of three children of Ricardo Blest Ugarte, an army officer, and Leopoldina Riffo Bustos (d. 1958), a school teacher. Ricardo Blest Ugarte was a first cousin of the writer Alberto Blest Gana, and grandson of the Sligo-born physician William Cunningham Blest (1800-1884), who arrived in Chile in 1823 and founded the first school of medicine in the country.

As a child, Clotario Blest, together with his mother, brother and sister, had to survive a difficult life, exacerbated by his father committing suicide at a relatively young age. His eldest brother died in Punta Arenas at the age of twenty-five while on service in the army, and his sister, a nun with the Buen Pastor order, died of tuberculosis in Santiago. The penury of Blest's infancy would strongly influence his life and ideas in the future.

Clotario Blest was sent to study at the public school in Almirante Barroso Street and then, with the aid of a scholarship, he entered the Catholic seminary of Los Angeles Custodios in Santiago. This was followed by studies of theology, law and chemistry at the university, together with systematic athletic activity. In 1918, Blest received the first of the minor orders and the following year he was transferred to the seminary of Concepción. However, problems arose with the director, who supported, and demanded his students to support, the political campaigns of the Conservative Party. Blest rebelled against this unjust requirement and was banished from the institution. 'Sometimes,' he used to observe, 'the priests do not understand Christ's message. They learn theology [...] What can they study about God? Nonsense. There is no other divine science than the life of Christ' (Salinas 1991: 6). Some progressive teachers however, like Fernando Vives Solar S.J. and Fr. Alberto Hurtado, had a significant influence on Blest's ideas regarding social justice for the labouring class.

The initial jobs that Clotario Blest engaged in after abandoning his studies for the priesthood were minor positions at a pharmacy and a law firm. Finally, in 1922, he was hired as an office cleaner by the Tax

Treasury in Santiago, where he would work for thirty-two years. Blest started his political life by joining Casa del Pueblo, a labour institution founded in 1917 to unite the Catholic unions. He was also active in the Union of Catholic Youth Centres (UCJC), Fr. Guillermo Viviani's Social Studies Circle 'El Surco', and the Popular Party. In Casa del Pueblo's headquarters, 208 Salas Street in the Vega Central quarter, Blest built the small chapel 'Jesús Obrero' - a name that would identify the progressive segments of the Catholic church in Latin America in the mid-twentieth century, in opposition to those of a reactionary background - for instance, Acción Católica - who used the emblematic 'Cristo Rey' as their trademark. The chapel was eventually closed by the Vicar-General of Santiago.

In 1927, Clotario Blest was appointed president of the UCJC, which opposed the official National Association of Catholic Students, supported by the hierarchy. In UCJC, a 10,000-member institution, membership was open to Evangelical and communist workers, a fact that was disapproved of by the bishops. For Blest, it was a time of intense social struggle, together with profound spiritual searching.

During this period, Blest started up a relationship with Teresa Ossandón, who was four years younger than him and a member of the Young Catholic Women's organisation. Two years later they decided to end the relationship and dedicate their lives to their mission. Ossandón joined the order of the Carmelites and died in 1989.

Between 1932 and 1939, Blest acted as president of the 'Germen' group, founded under the leadership of Fr. Fernando Vives. This organisation, whose emblem was a Christian cross with the communist hammer and sickle, published a newspaper and denounced the growing gap between the church and the poor.

In 1934, Blest worked at the Treasury office of San Antonio Port, and in 1949 he was transferred to San Miguel in Santiago. During this period union-bashing was prevalent among the governing elite, and legislation passed by the administration of President Arturo Alessandri prevented state workers from forming their own trade union. In order to evade this ban, in 1938 Blest and a group of labourers founded the Sports Association of State Institutions (ADIP), which would become the National Association of Fiscal Employees (ANEF) in 1943, uniting workers at the Treasury, Internal Revenue Service, Civil Records Office, Roads and other state offices. During the 1940s and 1950s Clotario Blest would successfully lead ANEF, achieving national prominence and challenging the government with frequent large-scale strikes, in particular the work stoppage at the Post Office and the state bank, and the teachers' strike of 1950 that brought down the national cabinet.

The most important organisation founded by Clotario Blest was the Workers Only Union of Chile (CUT) established in 1953, and led by Blest until 1961, when he resigned as a result of internal feuds among members. In the 1950s and 1960s he was repeatedly imprisoned - by his own account twenty-six times - a fact that only served to increase his prestige among labourers. He was often offered official posts and favours by private companies, privileges which he consistently rejected. When Braden Cooper, a US American mining company in Rancagua, presented Blest with a generous gift in cash, he refused it publicly with a strong reply, 'váyanse a la mierda [go to hell]' (Salinas 1991: 17). On 13 September 1954, in order to separate him from the trade union leadership, Clotario Blest was transferred to a Treasury office in Iquique, in the north of the country and far from the capital. He was therefore forced to retire from service.

Dedicating himself full-time to trade and political campaigning, in 1952 Blest chaired the National Command against the Military Treaty with the United States of America. Together with poets Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral, he joined the National Committee for Peace in Chile, a committee which supported global disarmament and rejected atomic weapons. In 1955 he was appointed member of the World Peace Council Assembly in Helsinki. His name became recognised in international circles for his demands for peaceful negotiations among nations, the solidarity of the Latin American peoples, and struggle against global financial bodies such as the International Monetary Fund.

Inspired by a deep-seated religious ethos and a strong affiliation with the poor, Clotario Blest was a firm supporter of the Catholic church's new approach to its flock. He worked together with communists and others who were officially atheist, including long-standing friendships with Ernesto 'Che' Guevara and Galo González, the secretary-general of the Communist Party of Chile in 1949-1958. He challenged the Chilean religious hierarchy, denouncing their close relations with the ruling class and the economic powers. He

received occasional support from certain bishops, like José María Caro Rodríguez, Archbishop of Santiago during 1939-1958. On 11 August 1968, Blest was among the priests and lay people of the *Iglesia Joven* group who peacefully occupied the cathedral in Santiago to protest against the methods of the traditional Catholic church leaders who neglected the poor.

In 1971-1973 Blest supported the elected government of Salvador Allende. After Augusto Pinochet's coup d'état on 11 September 1973, various diplomats offered him asylum in foreign countries but he did not accept. On 24 October 1973 his house was raided by the army. His property and books were confiscated and he was mistreated and abused. However, Blest was not arrested because of his international renown. He challenged the state terror of Pinochet's government while working at the Human and Labour Rights Defence Committee (CODEHS), which he had founded in 1970 together with students and workers. Clotario Blest was, according to General Pinochet, 'a Romantic' (Salinas 1991: 35).

Contemporary reports describe Clotario Blest as an ascetic and peaceful person, with blue eyes and of tiny, fragile build. He ate frugally and drank only water, and sometimes milk. He slept briefly on a bronze bed with a worn mattress, and worked intensively for long hours and with great energy.

From 1981, when the first constitutional government after the military regime took power, Clotario Blest worked to reorganise the trade union movement. He was appointed honorary president of the new CUT. However, his greatest concerns during his last years were of a spiritual nature. At home, he lived in abject poverty. In 1989, when he was hospitalised for acute malnutrition, he weighed just thirty kilograms. Without a suitable place to live, he was accepted into the infirmary of the Franciscan convent in Santiago. On his ninetieth birthday, he was presented with a Franciscan habit and appointed lay friar. He died on 31 May 1990.

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