

# Chilean miners rescued after ten-week ordeal

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The successful rescue of 33 Chilean miners, buried under tons of rock and rubble for nearly ten weeks, was a cause of celebration in the mining centers of Caldera and Copiapo, throughout Chile, and around the world, particularly in mining regions where workers and their families face the same dangers every day as their Chilean brothers.

The miners, trapped underground for 69 days, appear healthy despite their ordeal, which began with 17 days of total isolation while they were unable to make contact with the outside world and unaware of rescue efforts.

The final day of the rescue went off flawlessly, with each 40-minute round trip of the rescue capsule delivering another miner to waiting friends and family members, followed by a ride to the hospital where all the survivors will be monitored closely for another two days.

The rescue effort was a triumph of international collaboration of scientists, engineers and mine workers, using the most advanced technology. Three separate drilling operations were carried out until one of them made a successful breakthrough into the space where the miners had found shelter after the initial explosion that destroyed the mine.

NASA engineers worked with the Chilean Navy to build the capsule used to bring the miners to the surface through the 28-inch-diameter hole that was drilled to reach them under more than 2,000 feet of rock.

The drilling operation was exceptionally difficult because of the nature of the rock and the extensive mining operations in it. At one point, a drill bit was shattered when it struck a metal support for an abandoned tunnel that was not on any map.

The miners survived longer underground than any previous group. The last to leave was the shift foremen, Luis Urzua, credited with the survival of the trapped men during the first 17 days of isolation, when food had to be carefully rationed—including the sole source of protein, two ounces of canned tuna every 48 hours.

The scenes of rescued miners arriving one-by-one at the top of the shaft gripped the world. Live coverage of the rescue was broadcast on television networks in every part of the globe. Crowds gathered in Times Square in New York

City and at many other locations to watch on large screens.

A young laid-off Massey coal miner from West Virginia told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I think it is great. This is just wonderful. It doesn’t matter if they are miners in Chile or China or anywhere, when a man goes underground we all know the danger and we feel for each other.

“Everybody is just so happy for them. This shows that miners don’t have to die underground. The problem is that for the companies, safety costs time and money and all Massey cares about is to ‘run coal.’”

The Massey miner pointed out that the safety shelter which saved the Chilean miners in the initial disaster does not exist in American coal mines. “This wouldn’t have saved the men at Upper Big Branch, they died in a minute,” he said. “But had they had the safety containers, the 12 miners in Sago would still be alive.”

Despite the incessant invocations of God, the rescue was the product of science and engineering, human solidarity, and organized, systematic, collective labor, not religious faith.

The entombing of the miners on August 5, nearly a half mile below the ground, was caused by the capitalist exploitation of the working class, in which miners are treated as an expendable commodity, far less valuable to the multimillionaire owners than the copper, coal, nickel or gold they extract from the earth with their labor.

The criminal negligence of safety by the mining company, San Esteban Primera, has been well documented. The San Jose mine suffered serious damage in a 2007 explosion and was expected to close, but the owners resumed operations, despite being mandated to shut down because of safety violations. Twelve miners have been killed in the mine in recent years.

After the collapse, the miners could have escaped through an evacuation exit, but there was no legally mandated emergency ladder. A second collapse 48 hours later then blocked the exit. The mine galleries were shored up with wood rather than stronger steel supports because wood is cheaper.

Brunilda Gonzalez, mayor of the small town where many of the miners lived, charged that the 100-year-old mine was

allowed to operate only because of bribes to government regulators. She called for prosecution of the owners, noting that no Chilean businessman has ever been jailed for negligence leading to a worker's death. According to the Inter Press Service, in 2009 alone Chile had a total of 191,685 workplace accidents, including 443 deaths.

Mario Sepúlveda, the second miner to be brought to the surface, condemned the conditions facing miners. "I think this country must understand once and for all that we must make changes in the world of work, that we must make many changes," he said. "We cannot stay where we are. I think business must give the means to management so they can make changes in working practices."

Most of the trapped miners have worked in brutal conditions for decades. Mario Gomez, now 63, entered the mines at age 12. Victor Segovia, 48, started working as a helper for his father at age 8. Many of the San Jose miners are over 50, a product of the practice of the mining industry, which favors younger and stronger workers at the big mines, and compels older workers to seek employment at smaller mines with more unsafe conditions. (See, "Chilean miners criticized safety at the San Jose mine")

While 33 miners were saved, another 33 miners have died so far this year in Chile. The country is the 19th most unequal state in the world, according to the 2009 UN human development report. The richest 10 percent receive 40 percent of Chile's income and expenditures, while the poorest account for only 1.6 percent.

This inequality is the product of two decades of brutal dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet, who savagely repressed the working class and imposed free market policies devised by US-trained disciples of right-wing monetarist economist Milton Friedman. These economic policies have been continued under Pinochet's civilian successors, conservative, liberal and social-democratic.

A major element of these policies was the scrapping of industrial regulation. As a result, there are only 16 safety inspectors for the entire mining industry, the country's largest single export earner. In the Atacama region, where the San Jose mine is located, only three inspectors are responsible for 884 medium and small mines.

Chilean President Sebastián Piñera, a billionaire businessman who was the candidate of the party that represents the political heirs of Pinochet, has direct links to that regime. His brother José Piñera was Pinochet's minister of mining and labor, and pushed through a Constitutional Mining Law in 1981. The law cleared the way for the privatization of much of Chilean mining, thereby creating the conditions for a sharp deterioration in safety conditions.

In other words, while Sebastián Piñera has seized the media spotlight in recent weeks, presenting himself as the

advocate of the rescue effort, his own fortune is directly founded on the policies that led to the disaster.

Marta, a retired teacher living in Melipilla, a regional city an hour from the capital, Santiago, criticized the pro-Piñera propaganda of the Chilean media in comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"The situation here with the miners has been extraordinary," she said. "Locally many schools have been closed for children to watch the live coverage on the TV. The media coverage has been unbelievable. Every waking minute has been dedicated to following every ridiculous and pathetic comment by the president here and his wife. It is a complete circus, where the Chilean media has been party to every opportunity to show the president in a good light and appearing to care about these miners. When these miners were saying the place was unsafe, nobody listened to them—including the president, the media, and the company that caused the situation."

"Many people are so appalled by Piñera's attempt to take advantage of the mining rescue, that they can't bring themselves to watch it. We only turned the TV on when we knew the first miner was being rescued and then we turned it off. I think the president's whole attempt to take advantage of the rescue has backfired on him, because people have seen through his empty concern for these people who, if it wasn't for the mining disaster, would now be living in terrible poverty."

"These mines have the worst reputation—there is little protection for miners and the companies have been allowed to run these mines as they please for years. In fact, the only reason why these miners risked their lives in the first place was because they needed money; the mine was well known as unsafe."

"We feel really great that people from other countries were part of the rescue technology and that people around the world have been watching it, but looking at the pathetic president has made us sick."

Equally cynical has been effort of US President Barack Obama to share the spotlight. He appeared before television cameras Wednesday afternoon, praising the successful rescue as a miracle. He noted, entirely gratuitously, that the operator of the drill that punched the hole through to the miners was an American who had been redeployed from his job as a US military contractor in Afghanistan, where he was digging water wells for US military bases.



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