

Capitalism and the Chilean miners

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The editorial pages of two of the most prominent newspapers of the US ruling establishment rushed to claim the recent rescue of the 33 miners in Chile as a triumph for free-market capitalism.

Most provocative in this regard was the *Wall Street Journal*, which published an October 14 column by the deputy editor of its editorial page, Daniel Henninger, entitled “Capitalism saved the miners.”

The *Washington Post* followed suit the next day with an editorial headlined “Chile's mine rescue caps record of successes”.

The patent aim of both pieces was to exploit for ideological purposes and class interests the international euphoria over the successful effort to rescue the 33 men who had been trapped 700 meters beneath Chile's Atacama Desert for nearly 70 days.

The two editorial pieces spell out the unstated conceptions underlying the general media coverage of the events in Chile, which treated the plight of the miners as a kind of television reality show with Chilean President Sebastián Piñera as its host. While there was undeniable drama in the miners' situation and the extraordinary engineering feat that was mounted to rescue them, almost entirely ignored were the conditions that led to them being trapped underground in the first place.

According to the *Post*, the successful rescue is attributable to “the rewards [Chile] has reaped from a 20-year record as Latin America's most-free country.” The paper's editorial affirmed that “it's not often enough recognized that Chile...has embraced free markets and free trade to a far greater extent than” its neighbors.

The editorial went on to praise the government of President Sebastián Piñera, “a successful entrepreneur,” for having “quickly committed itself to the politically risky goal of saving the trapped men.” (Presumably Piñera's “risk taking” in accumulating his billions in personal wealth proved to be a key asset to the rescue.) “Thanks to Chile's openness to the world and embrace of entrepreneurship, it was able to effectively deploy cutting-edge technologies,” the *Post* continued.

The *Wall Street Journal* minced no words. “It needs to be said. The rescue of the Chilean miners is a smashing victory for free-market capitalism,” its column began.

While the author acknowledged that “it may seem churlish to make such a claim,” he justified his assertion by adding, “These are churlish times, and the stakes are high.”

The column goes on to spell out what he means: with official unemployment hovering near 10 percent, hostility to capitalism is growing. “We're in hard economic times,” states the *Journal*'s Henninger “and the future requires understanding which economics work and which does not work.”

The thin reed upon which Henninger rests his contention is “the

Center Rock drill bit”, developed by a privately owned company in Pennsylvania, which was used to drill through the rock to the miners. The presumption is that only the profit motive could have yielded such technology.

The obvious question is, if capitalism is responsible for rescuing the Chilean miners, what economic system was responsible for leaving them trapped deep underground and initially given up for dead in the first place?

Or for that matter, what was the system that drove 31 Chilean miners to their deaths last year and produced more than 12,000 recorded mine fatalities worldwide?

To ask the question is to answer it: capitalism, a system based upon the ruthless drive to maximize profits by cutting safety costs and putting the lives of miners and other workers at risk.

While the *Journal* and the *Post* proclaim “free market capitalism” and “entrepreneurship” as the central elements in the rescue of the miners, both conveniently ignore that the operation was directed and largely financed by Chile's state-owned copper mining enterprise, Codelco, created when the country's Socialist Party President Salvador Allende nationalized privately held companies in 1971. And the key advice given in keeping the miners alive and healthy during their long ordeal came from the US government space agency, NASA.

Even more important in the survival of the miners was the behavior of the miners themselves, which was characterized by a powerful solidarity and collectivism that stands in stark contrast and opposition to the dog-eat-dog individualism of the capitalist free market.

The equal distribution of starvation rations that kept them alive during the 17 days before the first drill reached them was not merely forced upon them. Since their rescue, they have pledged to continue this method, sharing anything that they gain from books, etc., equally.

There is no mystery as to the role played by capitalism in the Chilean mine disaster as far as the miners themselves are concerned.

“People say that we're heroes, and no, no were not heroes, we're victims,” one of the miners, Franklin Lobos told the Chilean daily *El Mercurio*. “We fought for our lives, nothing more, because we have families. We are victims of the businessmen who don't invest in safety...victims of the businessmen who earn millions and don't think about the suffering of poor people.”

In the case of the San José mine, this assessment is indisputable. The facility, whose record is typical of Chile's privatized medium-sized mining operations, has been plagued for years by a series of fatal and maiming accidents, with the government largely looking

the other way as the owners reaped hefty profits from super-exploitation.

“San José is a nightmare,” another miner said to the media. “It is dangerous; I know it, everybody knows it. There is only one motto: productivity.”

In the immediate aftermath of the mine disaster last August, the miners attempted to escape through the ventilation shaft but discovered to their horror that the ladders required by government safety codes were missing.

Part of Chile’s embrace of “entrepreneurship” and “free market capitalism” has been its severe weakening of regulations on workplace safety. The government employs just 16 inspectors to supervise more than 4,000 mines scattered across the country. Chile is one of the few countries in the world that has refused to sign the International Labor Organization treaty on mine safety and health.

In his interview with *El Mercurio*, Lobos, a former member of Chile’s national football team, added, chillingly, “The great majority of us thought that the company was going to leave us there. It would be cheaper to leave us to die than to rescue us.”

Similarly, the miners’ shift foreman, Luis Urzúa, recalled the first indication of the approaching drills that would signal their rescue. “When we heard noise...we thought they were working in the mine.” In other words, with the price of copper having hit a 50-year high, the miners assumed that the owners were digging out the precious metal rather than trying to save their lives.

This is the grim reality for the working class of the “free market” and capitalist entrepreneurship extolled by the *Journal* and the *Post*.

Neither the *Post* nor the *Journal* cares to deal with how Chile became “the most free country” in Latin America and such a haven for the “free market.”

President Piñera and his party are the political heirs to the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, who seized power in a CIA-backed coup on September 11, 1973, and ruled the country with an iron fist until 1990. But the links of Sebastian Piñera to the Pinochet regime go back to the beginning of the dictatorship. The current president of Chile made his original fortune in the credit card business in the 1970s.

Pinochet used to say: “Not one leaf moves in this country if it is not me that is moving it.” Piñera made his fortune with Pinochet’s blessing under conditions in which tens of thousands of Chilean workers, students and intellectuals were murdered, tortured, imprisoned without trial and driven into exile. During the same period, the current president’s brother served as minister of mining, introducing the policies of privatization and deregulation that created the conditions that claimed the lives of some 373 Chilean miners over the past decade alone.

While the editorial champions of capitalism in New York and Washington feel free to skip over this history, it is something that the miners and their families know all too well.

Luis Urzúa, the shift foreman, was praised by NASA and others as a “natural leader.” His mother told the media she was not surprised, describing him as someone who was “very disciplined” and “the boss over his six brothers.”

As with the mine disaster, this was a role thrust upon him. As a youth, his father, a miners’ union leader and member of the Communist Party, disappeared at the outset of the 1973 coup. Then his stepfather, a union leader and member of the central committee of the Young Socialists, was kidnapped and murdered by a military death squad known as the “Caravan of Death” and thrown into a mass grave.

During the past “20 years” of Chile being “Latin America’s most-free country,” hundreds of women—mothers and wives—have spent countless days digging with shovels in the Atacama desert sand hoping to find the bodies of the relatives who disappeared in the years after Pinochet coup.

While the name of the town of Copiapó, where the mine is located, and the tent city dubbed *Esperanza* are now world famous because of the rescue, there are other locations in Atacama whose names will never be forgotten by the Chilean working class, including the families of the trapped miners. There is La Serena, where victims were buried in unmarked graves; Pisagua, used as a concentration camp where the remains of those buried in the aftermath of the coup were discovered in 1990; and Calama, where the remains of 13 people murdered in October 1973 were found, also in 1990.

For many, the disappearance of the miners and their subsequent rescue has brought back painful memories of pulling the remains of other miners—murdered by the military defenders of the capitalist market—from the same ground.

In this context, the seemingly delusional attempt by the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* to invoke the Chilean mine disaster as an advertisement for free market capitalism has a sinister character. The deep crisis of capitalism and the growing struggles of the working class internationally are creating conditions in which the financial aristocracy is once again contemplating the bloody methods employed in creating the so-called Chilean economic miracle.



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