

Chilean workers protest San Jose mine's closure

Rafael Azul
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More than 300 Chilean workers jobless due to the closure of the San Jose mine—made famous by the recent rescue of 33 trapped miners—have threatened to occupy “Camp Hope” near the mine until they receive severance pay. The camp, which was used as temporary housing for the relatives of the 33 miners rescued last week from the San Jose mine, is now being dismantled, in part as an attempt to defuse tensions.

On October 18, a Catholic mass at the camp in honor of the rescued miners turned into a protest when sacked miners, who had been excluded from the religious ceremony, arrived carrying a sign that read “San Esteban: we are not 33, we are 300!” Another sign read, “We are trapped on the surface!” The San Jose miners have called on miners throughout Chile to support their demands with strike action.

The parent company of the San Jose mine, Grupo San Sebastián, has declared bankruptcy, leaving 300 miners on the street. It now claims it has no money to meet the workers’ right to severance pay. The company, a medium-sized concern by Chilean standards, has been around for about 50 years. In addition to copper mining it has sizeable interests in iron mining. The bankruptcy is likely a ploy by San Sebastián to avoid its liabilities and protect its shareholders, whose interests will undoubtedly be reorganized in some new concern.

The dismissal of the workers without severance exposes as a lie the patriotic hoopla summed up by the government’s slogan, “All Chile with the miners.” It also sheds light on social conditions for workers in Chile.

After the October 13 rescue of the 33 miners who had been trapped far beneath the earth for 69 days, the international media and politicians have left, while the miners must continue in the dire poverty endemic for the Latin American working class.

In one of the few articles that examines conditions of life for the San Jose miners, Franklin Briceno and Eva Vergara of the Associated Press describe the precarious wood and tin shacks that are homes to the miners of the Copiapó region in the Atacama Desert. Many of these shanties have no running water and no sewage connections.

There may well be book and movie deals in the works for the 33 miners who were saved by the rescue, a remarkable feat of engineering and international collaboration. But even among them there are concerns.

“Three months from now, what will I be doing? Selling candy on the beach? Wondering what the government has done for us? Nothing,” Edison Peña told the AP. “I’m very afraid and I would like for things to change.”

One of the rescued miners, Carlos Bugueño, shares his shack with 16 relatives. His family, unable to afford balloons, welcomed him home with inflated plastic bags. Neither Bugueño nor his neighbors have sewage hook-ups to their homes.

Carlos Mamani, a Bolivian and the sole non-Chilean miner rescued, returned to his adobe home in one of Copiapó’s poorest shanty towns, dubbed John Paul II. None of the 38 homes in John Paul II has running water or is connected to the city sewer. People are forced to walk down from the hilltop neighborhood to fetch water at two public taps. Mamani had only worked five days as a miner, when, on August 5, the mine collapsed.

Those fortunate enough to find jobs at other mines will face the same deadly conditions that led to the San Jose disaster.

The Piñera administration likes to peddle the image of Chile as a nation in rapid economic growth that will soon achieve some sort of “first world” status. In fact,

the government—and the wealthy elite it represents—has advanced its interests by reversing the limited gains workers had made through bitter struggle: effective regulations governing working conditions, job security, a decent retirement, the eight-hour day, one by one, have been removed. For that reason, tens of thousands of workers, including the miners, risk their lives daily, driven by economic necessity.

Copper, which had been nationalized under the Allende government in 1971, is now largely in private hands and less and less regulated, as part of a policy of attracting foreign capital. In fact, the collapse of the San Jose mine was widely anticipated and was a direct result of the neo-liberal policies of Pinochet and of the Concertación governments that came after the collapse of his regime in 1990.

The rest of Latin America has followed the Chilean example of privatization and deregulation with similar deadly results. During the week when the rescue of the Chilean miners was underway, two workers were trapped in the La Esperanza coal mine in central Colombia. All rescue efforts proved futile; the dead miners were found this Monday. An almost identical drama played itself out at the Casa Negra gold mine in Portovelo, Ecuador, where four miners were trapped by a mine collapse on October 15. The bodies of two of the miners were found on Saturday, and the other two were found, dead, on Thursday.

Tuberculosis, once all but wiped out in Chile, is now on the rise, with rates among mining families twice the national average. Health conditions are particularly dire in the nitrite fields, also in the northern desert regions, where workers trade relatively high wages for short working lives.

One disease that afflicts nearly 40 percent of all Latin American miners is silicosis, a totally preventable condition, caused by the effects of silica (SiO_2) dust on miners' lung. In Chile, some 400,000 workers are exposed to silica, nearly 6 percent of the labor force, 95 percent of whom are not provided with any protection against the condition whatsoever.

Silicosis affects 51 out of every 1,000 miners in larger mines, which tend to be better-regulated, and 220 for every 1,000, or one out of every five miners, in smaller operations such as the San Jose mine. The real level of silicosis is likely far higher, with many miners fearing retribution should they report their condition.

“We trade health for money,” declared a copper miner at a state-owned Codelco copper mine.

The conditions facing miners are emblematic of life for the entire Chilean working class. Worldwide, Chile is 19th from the bottom in terms of the distribution of income. Fully 40 percent of the national income is held by the top 10 percent of the population. That layer has seen its average per capita income rise 9 percent from 2.7 million pesos per month to more than 3 million (US\$6,000) since 2005. By contrast, the bottom 10 percent saw its income stagnate; its per capita monthly pay having inched up to 114,000 pesos from 113,000 pesos (US\$235)—far below the rate of inflation.



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