

# *The 33*: A drama of the 2010 Chilean mine disaster

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It has been five years since the mining disaster in Chile's Atacama Desert. Between August and October 2010, the entire world looked on as 33 miners spent 69 days trapped in a poorly equipped refuge in the depths of the San Jose Mine. They had little food and no means of communication with the world above ground.

Thanks to the international collaboration of scientists, engineers and rescue workers, as well as the solidarity and expertise of the miners themselves, all of them survived. The disaster exposed once more the brutal conditions under which miners are forced to work, not just in Chile, but worldwide. *The 33*, a new English-language film from Mexican-born director Patricia Riggen (*Under the Same Moon*), aims to tell the story of the miners' ordeal.

As the film opens, the copper and gold miners board the bus to work, having just celebrated the impending retirement of a colleague with 46 years of experience underground. Before their descent, shift foreman Luis "Don Lucho" Urzúa (Lou Diamond Phillips) warns the mine owner of structural instability inside the mine. He is told not to worry about it, that his only responsibility is to haul 250 tons per day out of the mine, a higher quota than ever before.

Once the miners have begun their day's work, it does not take long for Urzúa's fears to be realized. As the mine collapses all around them, the workers are left with no option but to retreat to the mine's emergency shelter.

Here they discover that the refuge intended to keep 30 men alive until rescue is stocked with hardly any food or first aid equipment. The communication system is not even installed. To make matters worse, installation of the legally mandated ladders that could have allowed the miners to escape through long, vertical tunnels was also never completed.

Mario Sepúlveda (Antonio Banderas) is given the responsibility of rationing out what little food is available and becomes a leader of the stranded workers. The miners brace themselves for the ordeal ahead, never entirely sure if help is on the way.

Back on the surface, it becomes clear the mine owner is fully prepared to let the men die. Their families protest, demanding to know why rescue teams have not yet arrived. Sympathy for the miners spreads throughout Chile and eventually the world. The administration of President Sebastián Piñera (Bob Gunton) steps in to prevent a political scandal for itself. Piñera reluctantly sends Mining Minister Laurence Golborne (Rodrigo Santoro) to oversee rescue operations.

When the drills of rescue workers finally break through to the miners, finding them alive, it ignites a media frenzy. Supplies are sent down to the men. While no longer starving, they remain in danger. The long and difficult process of bringing them to the surface will take months. Live coverage of their rescue is watched by more than 1 billion people worldwide. *The 33* contains more than a few moving moments. Actors Antonio Banderas and Lou Diamond Phillips, in particular, give what are surely among the best performances of their careers.

Among the most appealing features of the film is the sense of solidarity among the miners themselves, something that is challenged, fought for and reaffirmed during the course of the story. It serves as an answer to the cynicism and selfishness of the Piñera government.

It is a solidarity that appears to have remained intact to this day. Since the 2010 disaster, the miners have split all earnings from the telling of their story, including the money made from *The 33*, equally among themselves. They do not appear to have courted fame

and fortune at the expense of one another.

What Rikken's film lacks is a deeper understanding of or interest in the social circumstances that led to the disaster in the first place. What made such a disaster possible? How is it that the mine owners were found not guilty of criminal negligence, as the film informs us, even after the illegal conditions that existed in the mine were exposed to the world?

There are important historical connections that go unexplored in the film, and, along with them, the dramatic possibilities they might have presented.

President Piñera was himself a billionaire who amassed his fortune when the country was under the rule of military dictator Augusto Pinochet. His brother, José Piñera, was Minister of Mining during the Pinochet regime and spearheaded the privatizations and free-market "reforms" that helped create the conditions for disasters such as this one.

The film has also transformed Mining Minister Golborne into quite a hero. He is portrayed as a somewhat naïve but warm-hearted figure in the Piñera administration. He fights tirelessly for the workers underground.

In reality, Golborne is a right-wing political figure. In 2013, three years after the events of the film, he was forced to abandon his candidacy for the Chilean presidency when he became embroiled in a financial scandal stemming from abuses carried out during his time as CEO of Chilean retailer Cencosud in 2006.

In the absence of a more penetrating and truthful portrayal of events, and the characters involved, the story works its way toward the banalities that are the staples of nearly every disaster film, whether entirely fictional or based on real events. It becomes yet another story of human perseverance treated in the most abstract terms. Too often the film finds itself in the territory of faith and religiosity (Rikken's next movie, *Miracles from Heaven*, has been described as a "Christian family film").

For all its sympathies with the miners underground, the film remains largely on the surface of things.



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