

Despite overwhelming strike vote

Trade union at Escondida copper mine in Chile seeks to shut down 18-month struggle

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15 August 2018

The workers at the Escondida mine in northern Chile, the largest copper mine in the world, voted overwhelmingly earlier this month to strike to demand a raise, a \$38,000 bonus and other benefits. A record 44-day strike last year, demanding a 7 percent wage increase in real terms and the same bonus and benefits, led to a three-month recession in Chile, whose main export is copper, until the trade union shut it down by imposing an 18-month extension.

This extension, along with the one-week extension of negotiations last week and an extra 24-hour extension on Tuesday, have expired. During this period, the union reduced its demand to a 5 percent raise, while the majority owner of the mine, the transnational BHP Billiton, which is based in the UK and Australia, has increased its offer at the last minute on Monday from a 1.5 percent to a 2 percent wage increase, with an \$18,000 signing bonus.

Tuesday morning, however, the spokesperson of the trade union told Radio Cooperativa, “We are on positive terms with the company, we know each other, there is nothing to hide among us,” adding: “we are working on finalizing a pre-agreement. The back-and-forth is over.”

All indications are that the union has stretched out the struggle while conspiring with management to impose a sellout contract. However, even if compelled to call a strike in the coming hours or days, as last year, the trade union will again drive the struggle into a dead end by isolating the 2,500 company workers from the 7,000 contract workers at the mine, the 65,000 other company and contract workers at BHP Billiton operations, the tens of thousands of other miners in Chile and the millions of workers nationally and internationally who are responding with growing militancy to the continued onslaught against their jobs and living standards.

That same morning, one of the company workers said anonymously to the WSWs that “if there is no clear decision, there will be a strike tomorrow.” Learning about the comments of the union official, however, he agreed that it signaled an attempt to sell out the strike. “We’ll have to see,” he concluded. A video shared online of an assembly of thousands of La Escondida workers on Sunday chanting “Strike, strike!”

signals the combativeness of the workers.

After copper prices recovered partially in 2016 and 2017, BHP Billiton and Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto, which owns one-third of Escondida, have continued shedding tens of thousands of jobs in Chile and internationally and demanded higher production, including a 37 percent increase last year in Escondida.

BHP Billiton has used the increased revenues extracted by intensifying the rate of exploitation of its workers to increase dividends and carry out buyback handouts to its ultra-wealthy financiers. These added up to about \$5 billion for the previous half year. Rio Tinto similarly handed out \$7.2 billion. Put together, the 110,000 company and contract workers worldwide at BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto could have received a \$US110,000 bonus or raise this year.

Since June, however, copper prices have fallen 20 percent in response to trade war fears and deceleration of China, which buys half of all copper and reported Tuesday the lowest fixed-asset investments in two decades. Copper, writes Bloomberg, “is often considered a barometer of economic growth” globally. Under these conditions, the corporations and the government, which owns about 30 percent of copper production, will seek to ruthlessly crack down on any opposition among workers.

At the state-owned Chuquibambilla mine, where 1,700 miners were fired in June, workers are currently carrying out intermittent walkouts and pickets increasingly in opposition against the three trade unions, and have faced the harassment by truckloads of the infamous Carabinero police.

At the Caserones mine, owned by the Japanese Pan Pacific Copper Company, almost 99 percent of workers voted to strike, with the trade union mirroring the Escondida trade union in postponing it. Across the border, miners in Peru have been threatening to strike during the last year.

On Monday, Tomas, a machine maintenance worker hired through a contractor at La Escondida, spoke to the WSWs after learning earlier that day that he had been fired arbitrarily. He explains: “I’m an outspoken defender of workers’ rights. Surely, I’m too dangerous for them in these days of confusion. There is no doubt about someone fearing my influence among

co-workers.

“The union never takes part in these affairs. The company is well-advised to avoid any legal issues. It sometimes starts with a sub-contract and no warranties for the worker. Sometimes, and this is what happened to me, the worker even works without a contract. Need and high unemployment force you to accept these conditions.”

According to Fundación Sol, miners have the highest informality rate, with 58 percent working as subcontractors or for temporary services. Since 2010, almost 70 percent of all new jobs in Chile were self-employed or informal. Covering most of the informal sector, almost 80 percent of workers make less than \$US750 monthly and a majority earn less than the measly poverty line of \$US630. At the same time, according to the 2018 Global Wealth report, about 20 percent of all private assets are controlled by 161 people who own more than \$100 million each.

Speaking about his grievances and denunciations of the company shared by his co-workers, Tomas continued: “We have a really high rate of accidents. I’ve detected that the causes are always the same. They hire workers without the experience or practice needed for the task. On top of this, they are forced to perform tasks they were not hired for. The bosses want to outsource, so they overload the workers with work and tasks. They cut down the number of workers per squad, so where there should be five or more, there are two. They have established a system called ‘tools in hand.’ They measure the percentage of progress and thus the worker is subjected to pressure, he doesn’t take breaks, he doesn’t take security precautions. In conclusion, workers are super-exploited, untrained, unsupervised, and—what is most serious—they cut down the personnel that prevent risks.”

Pablo, another contract worker in La Escondida contacted by the WSWs, declared, “There is more production with less people and they want to take away what is for future generations. I support what they [company workers] are asking for; I have a true conviction that it’s something fair.

“They also need to stop intimidating workers with firings... bringing other people to substitute workers. In terms of productivity, managers demand certain goals and security protocols, but they are the ones who receive gigantic bonuses and no one criticizes them. We do the same jobs with less people and more production.”

Tomas spoke of the human cost of the levels of exploitation: “Every week, someone dies, including personnel in the company as well as from contractors... Ask yourself, what leads a 48-year-old, athletic man to have a heart attack, and two hours later a 52-year-old? This happened in the second week of July, and a few days ago on August 8, another dead man, whose truck flipped over. Exhaustion.” Mineworkers at Escondida have seven-day weeks and up to 12-hour shifts, followed by a one-week rest.

Asked whether the trade union has helped defend his job, he

responded: “The trade-union never gets involved in these cases... It’s chosen by the company’s own management. It’s a ‘paper union’; nobody knows them nor who elects them.”

On the role of the trade unions, Pablo commented: “They ‘pick us up,’ so that we do the tasks with fewer resources, and give us orders to work when we don’t have the necessary tools... We are only asking for dignity and resources so that we can do the corresponding work, not to have to improvise to make the boss happy since that is what causes most workplace accidents.”

Opposition to the union has grown at Escondida, where 84 percent of workers voted to leave the Chilean Mining Federation, citing its complacency toward the tens of thousands of firings in recent years, and in March about 100 workers tried but failed to form a dissident union to advance negotiations.

The WSWs and the International Committee of the Fourth International urges workers to form rank-and-file committees uniting company and contract workers in each mine to take the struggle out of the control of the trade unions and to formulate their own demands, including workers’ control over production, over all firing and hiring and the distribution of goods.

Amid thousands of layoffs in recent months across different sectors in Chile and growing struggles to defend public education and against the private pension funds (AFPs), these committees have to appeal immediately to the broadest sectors of the Chilean and international working class for a joint struggle against the escalating attacks against their living standards by the capitalist ruling elite.

Workers can only defend their basic social rights by building a socialist and international movement independent of all capitalist parties and institutions, to expropriate all major corporations and the wealth of the Chilean and international financial oligarchy and place these resources under the democratic control of the working class, to meet human need and not the private profits of a tiny elite.

Both Pablo and Tomas have expressed support for building rank-and-file committees. “I think it’s a good idea,” Tomas commented, “This market society has been affecting the socialist unit, the worker... But there is hope and it’s based on the firm conviction that we cannot give up. There are people like me in every place that plant a seed,” indicating that the WSWs can count on his help to advance the call for building rank-and-file committees and a revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class.



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