

Eight miners die from toxic gases in Peru's northern highlands

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Eight miners died and three more barely survived after poisonous gases filled the galleries of an informal gold mine in El Toro mountain located in the highlands of the department of La Libertad, in northern Peru, last weekend. This tragedy is the result of the ruthless drive for profits by the owners of informal mines, operating often without licenses, which have proliferated by the thousands in the Peruvian highlands, from the border with Ecuador in the north to Chile in the south.

The tragedy occurred last Saturday when the miners, after having completed their work, re-entered the mine to collect their belongings. Underlying it are the universally dangerous conditions in which the informal miners operate, without observing minimum safety regulations dictated by the central government.

Most of Peru's mining sector involves large-scale, capital-intensive operations that are in the hands of transnational companies associated with Peruvian families that have owned mines for decades, investing billions of dollars in Peru.

Such investments are a top priority for Peru's bourgeois government. Due to its orientation toward international capital, the Peruvian government of President Martin Vizcarra, just like its predecessors, has ignored the needs and conditions of those working in small, informal mines, many of whom are poor peasants working for an owner living in comfort and luxury hundreds of kilometers away in the capital, Lima.

It is reported the toxic gas that killed the miners emanated from a pipeline ruptured as a result of explosive activities that caused a roof collapse in another nearby mine within El Toro mountain itself.

Miners die for the same reasons, facing the same dangerous conditions and exploitation by the capitalist owners all over the world. These latest victims in Peru

included Francisco Rondo Baca, Isaias Vasquez Serin, Orlando Valderrama Victorio, Ulises Narro Alva, Cesar Contreras Tandaypan, Hhonatan Fumbajulca Anticono, Jose Sanchez Rodriguez and one more as yet unidentified.

Other miners and community members in the area were the first to give notice of the disaster to the police and public officials of the town to start rescue operations. One of the relatives stated, "We had to take them outside, but they are dead."

One of the survivors, Cesar Rondo Baca, narrated how when they re-entered the mine they began to feel dizzy, suffered headaches and lost their sense of hearing. He was saved because he managed to crawl toward the exit of the tunnel, which eight of his companions failed to do, staying in the sinkhole that filled with deadly gases.

Upon arrival of the Criminal Investigation Section (in Spanish, SEINCRI), prosecutor Henry Espinoza Urbina from the regional capital, Huamachuco, met the refusal of some relatives of the victims who opposed autopsies of their dead, arguing that the owner of the mine had promised them a reward in the event of a deadly tragedy. Only three were taken to the morgue in Trujillo, the departmental capital.

The disaster that claimed the lives of eight miners is a tragedy that is repeated almost every week in the informal mines of Peru. In particular, the El Toro mine is known as one of the most dangerous in illegal mining. The locals warned that "people die buried in holes or by a bullet. ... In El Toro death is a daily occurrence." A month ago, one miner was killed and three injured when the roof of a tunnel collapsed due to lack of safety measures.

There are more than half-a-million informal miners in Peru. Many have agriculture as their main source of

income, but when the price, for example, of potatoes drops, must work in mining under conditions in which they put their lives at risk.

The proposal of the ultra-right Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, founder of the Liberty and Democracy Institute, and follower of the economists Milton Friedman (founder of the monetarist economic policy) and Friedrich Hayek (of the Austrian school that defends classical liberalism), is that the informal miners be formalized obtaining title to their properties. In the past, de Soto proposed applying his “remedy” to *pymes* (small and medium-size enterprises), but the empirical results discredited his postulates, when it became known that the *pymes* experiment ended up favoring big capital, due to the high percentage of bankruptcies, with the banks taking over the assets.

Carlos Sánchez, whose brother Gilmer José Sanchez Rodriguez perished inside the mine, demanded justice: “My brother died at the mine. We were notified by the owner of the contract, and we went to the mouth of the mine and picked up the body of my brother. We ask that they close that mine, there are already many dead and everything goes unpunished. We ask for justice.”

For dozens of years these words of demanding “that they close that mine” and “we ask for justice” have fallen on the deaf ears of the centralized bourgeois state in Lima, the capital of Peru.

Informal mining in Peru—and the same can be said for Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile—is the result of poverty, corruption of public servants and ruthless hunger for wealth at the expense of the lives of the miners. Above all, the capitalist state in many Latin American countries limited its presence to the capital and other large cities, ignoring the needs of the natives of Inca and Aymara descent who populate the rural areas. The mine owners operate without respecting safety conditions because they know that it is easy to bribe public inspectors, who themselves receive poverty wages from the government.

The indifference to human life is reflected in an article published in *Mining*, the magazine of the Institute of Mining Engineers of Peru. On the front page is a photo of the general manager of the main company operating gold mines in El Toro mountain, Jaime Polar, flanked by the flags of Peru and the company. In an interview made a year and a half ago, Jaime Polar indicates that some 5,000 illegal miners

exploit the El Toro goldfields.

El Toro is owned by the Corporación del Centro Sociedad Anónima Cerrada (CDC Gold), a Peruvian mining company incorporated in 2010, which houses seven mining concessions and has reserves of 700,000 gold ounces, according to a technical report made by SGS Canada in October 2014.

This reporter called CDC Gold headquarters in Lima asking for information on whether the tragedy occurred in one of its mines. CDC Gold refused to confirm or deny its involvement, refusing to give any information.

In the interview with *Mining* magazine, Jaime Polar states that his business provided an “example of the transformation of an area where more than five thousand illegal miners operated into a future world-class operation.” This is a transparent attempt to put on a face of decency before national and foreign investors who read the magazine, while on the ground the informality continues because ignoring the lives and safety of the miners, while paying them miserable wages, is the most lucrative way to operate.

The gold-rich mountain has seen conflicts between the owners of CDC Gold and local residents of the region. In May of last year, the *Energiminas* magazine reported that for several days, protesters “blocked the entrance to the El Toro mining company in Huamachuco, after demanding that they be offered employment, the hiring of personnel from the region and compliance with payment commitments to their suppliers.”



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