

Striking Chilean copper miners defy police violence

Rafael Azul
21 June 2019

On Tuesday, the fifth day of their strike at the Chuquicamata mine in northern Chile, hundreds of striking copper miners were assaulted by government security forces. The column of striking miners marching toward the mine was attacked with rubber bullets, water cannons and tear gas.

The gendarmes prevented the strikers from rallying, and setting up camp, in front of the entrance of the world's largest open pit copper mine. The confrontation lasted an hour; the strikers left; twelve strikers were arrested.

The repression of the miner's march coincided with that of the striking teachers and teaching assistants in Calama, 16 kilometers north of the mine, whose march was met with water cannons and tear gas. Nine education workers were arrested.

Given the winter temperatures prevailing in the area the use of water cannons was particularly repressive.

The 3,200 strikers belong to three unions affiliated with the Copper Workers Federation (FTC), which cover two-thirds of workers at the mine. Another union at the mine ordered its members to cross the picket lines together with contingent employees, working under contract.

Since the acts of repression on Tuesday, government forces have continued surrounding the mine and the city of Calama, creating a police-state atmosphere.

Codelco, the state-owned company that operates the Chuquicamata mine, denounced the march. "These are illegal acts of violence, promoted publicly by some union leaders and evidence of the zero respect that they have toward their own comrades"—declared Codelco management, in reference to those workers who continue working and are forced to work up to 15 hours a day. Codelco claims the mine is operating at fifty percent production with those 1,400 non-striking

workers.

Codelco, the world's largest supplier of copper, is among the one hundred largest global enterprises and a major player among metal mining firms. It employs almost 20,000 workers and generates \$12 billion yearly.

On Tuesday, Codelco sent emails to all the strikers declaring that the company has changed and is no longer "Chile's wage setter."

It repeated its previous offer of a one-time 14.1 million pesos (US\$20,000) in bonuses and low-interest loans for 1,700 workers whose jobs will be eliminated as the mine transitions to an underground shaft operation. This has been coupled with a 1.2 percent wage increase over three years but offered vague concessions on health and retirement benefits.

"This is the maximum effort Codelco can make," the mining company said, citing the "current reality of the mining business."

The workers are scheduled to vote on the latest offer this weekend. Responding to pressure from workers, the three unions said the contract offer did not meet their demands during a meeting Wednesday night. "Codelco's offer is irresponsible," the unions said in a joint statement following the meeting. "It proposes benefits that are inferior to those included in the offer that led us to this strike."

Despite their call for a no vote, both the Chuquicamata local unions as well as the FTC bureaucracy reject any serious defense of jobs at the mine. They are also opposed to any united struggle of copper miners, teachers or any other section of the working class. The FTC unions merely ask for a seat at the table and that they have a hand in deciding which workers will be laid-off and how.

Other demands that concern workers, such as pay

parity between younger and older workers and the defense of part-time and contingent employees and full medical benefits for all are only given lip-service by the FTC.

The medical benefits are crucial given the extraordinary rates of cancer in Atacama (center of Chile's copper production), due to exposure to chemicals in the mines and arsenic in the region's drinking water. Extraordinary cancer rates are the rule, generally, in copper production regions around the world, including in Peru, Australia and Canada.

In addition to the use of government security forces to prevent the striking miners from enforcing their picket lines, Codelco has launched a campaign in the press and social media denouncing the miners for being highly paid and lazy to discredit and isolate them from the rest of the working class.

FTC bureaucracy is playing its part by isolating the struggle at Chiquicamata. Following the police assault on the miners, the FTC leaders scandalously condemned "violence on both sides."

The copper industry, nationalized in Chile in 1973, has been largely privatized by the CIA-backed military dictatorship and right-wing governments. As a result of the 2008 crisis and the US trade measures against China, Chile fell victim to falling copper prices, and falling profits. At Chiquicamata and elsewhere, the firms, and the Piñera administration aim to restore profitability on the backs of miners and the rest of the working class.

A victory for Chuquimata miners requires that they break out of their isolation, reach out to copper miners nationally, and internationally, and link up with the struggles of their class brothers and sisters. The first step must be to take the fight out of the hands of the FTC bureaucracy, by establishing rank-and-file committees to mobilize the working class to defend jobs and fight for decent wages, pensions and health benefits. This must be fused with a socialist strategy, which will include the transformation of the copper industry into a public utility under the collective ownership and democratic control of the working class.



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