

Chile: COVID-19 outbreak in mining regions

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Chilean mineworkers are being forced to bear the brunt of the health, social and economic crisis affecting the country since the outbreak of COVID-19 last March. With 280,000 confirmed infections and 5,688 deaths in Chile, mineworkers in particular face a severe threat of contracting coronavirus as it tears through mining towns and cities since May, as the ultra-right government of billionaire President Sebastian Piñera has refused to close down non-essential industries.

Three mineworkers have died in the giant state-owned mining corporation Codelco, and some 2,528 are infected, according to the Ministry of Mining. Even the corporatist unions, which have bent over backwards to appease the mining consortiums, question the veracity of these figures. The Health Ministry revealed that in the exclusively mining region of Antofagasta there has been an exponential increase in infections in the last two months: from 39 cases at the beginning of April to 8,308 cases on June 27. The rate of infection has similarly soared in other mining regions during the same period: O'Higgins rose from 26 cases to 5,606, Valparaiso from 136 to 11,307 and Tarapacá from 10 cases to 5,893.

For both native and international capital, which have over-extracted the country's natural resources and super-exploited labour for over a century, mining constitutes an industry too big to close. With an annual production of some 5.8 million tons, Chile produces about a third of the global supply of copper. The industry as a whole is responsible for between 10 percent and 15 percent of Chile's GDP. Codelco, the state-owned company, produces 11 percent of the world's copper and its Chuquibambilla mine alone churns out 385,000 tons of the metal.

Major mining consortiums, BHP Billiton, Anglo American, Tech, Glencore, Antofagasta Minerals, along with the state-owned giant, have reaped billions in profits from a workforce that under ordinary conditions numbers up to 240,000 workers, contractors and subcontractors. Another 900,000 workers are dependent on the auxiliary industries for employment.

With the outbreak of the coronavirus in China, the main destination of copper, the price of the metal fell sharply in the first quarter of 2020. Since March over 40 percent of the workforce has been furloughed and 11,700 were laid off as construction projects were shut down. The remaining staff have been forced onto onerous 14-days-on 14-days-off shifts ostensibly as a "social distancing" measure. A fraction is working from home. Yet with a much-diminished workforce,

the mining consortiums have extracted more copper ore during this year's first quarter than in the same period in 2019.

Chile's discredited former health minister, Jaime Mañalich, before resigning on June 12, attempted to blame the spike in cases on residents' "untidiness in the measures of social distancing, like clandestine parties, social meetings, that unfortunately have been maintained in this commune, in a very intense form". But social media has belied these claims with videos of empty streets and of the population practising, to the best of their ability, social distancing measures in overcrowded neighbourhoods.

The reality is that the Health Ministry delayed placing Antofagasta under total quarantine until an explosion in the infection rate and then removed the quarantine to allow the mining industry to continue operating unimpeded. The new health minister then waited another three weeks before re-ordering quarantine measures, after another sharp rise in coronavirus infections.

The present quarantines in the communes of the regional zone of Antofagasta—Antofagasta, Calama, Tocopilla and Mejillones—only apply to the urban radius and exclude mining operations and companies outside the city centres.

One of the primary sources of the outbreak in Antofagasta is the internal transfer of mineworkers, who often come from Santiago or other areas. While air traffic has dropped by 90 percent nationally, the Antofagasta region has the highest number of flights after Santiago. The Calama terminal has now been temporarily closed, but companies like BHP are sending staff to Antofagasta airport where they are provided with chartered buses to their final destination.

Another contributing factor is the viral spread in working-class neighbourhoods which lack a regular supply of water. Access to the privatised water system comes in truck cisterns and families are provided with a negligible amount, insufficient to have daily showers, let alone regularly wash hands. Another 7,600 families live in overcrowded squatter settlements in the region, also without access to potable water, electricity or sewer systems.

In other words, the mining regions of Antofagasta, Tarapacá, Valparaiso and O'Higgins are recording massive outbreaks of COVID-19 that surpass national averages as a result of the callous indifference to the conditions of the working class and placing profits before lives.

One tracker used to determine the viral spread is the “positive rate” in reference to the share of tests returning a positive result where the lower the number, the wider the testing. The World Health Organisation has recommended a positive rate of between 3 and 12 percent as a general benchmark of adequate testing. According to the online tracker Our World in Data, Italy has a positive test rate of 0.5 percent, England 1.5 percent, and the US 5.8 percent. Mexico on the other hand, has a rate exceeding 50 percent and Brazil has records that end in April, suggesting that the government of fascistic president Jair Bolsonaro has stopped publishing figures.

Chile has an average positive test rate of 30.9 percent for June 21, indicating that COVID-19 is being severely underreported amid an explosion in cases. The regional breakdown reveals an even more frightening picture. In a study conducted by investigative journal *CIPER*, the researchers showed that mining regions are registering up to double the national average.

The O’Higgins regional zone recorded a 62.4 percent positive rate; the Valparaíso region recorded 36.5 percent; Tarapacá 32.8 percent. The Antofagasta region, the heart of the mining industry representing more than half of Chile’s mining output of copper, potassium nitrate, gold, iodine, and lithium, recorded 46.1 percent positive rate.

But even under these catastrophic conditions, the entire Chilean government, with the assistance of the corporatist unions, have refused to shut down the mining cash cow. The working class in the mining industry is supporting the entire state, which in turn has since March provided a myriad of tax and financial incentives to the financial and corporate elite. Total wealth, including liquid, financial and real assets, of the 31 most powerful economic groups reached US\$490 billion last year.

Earlier in March, the Copper Mineworkers’ Federation, the CTC made a mealy-mouthed call on the government to close non-essential services. More recently, they said they wanted to “request, as the largest mining organization in Chile, a tripartite dialogue table, which is capable of unifying criteria in terms of health protocols, control measures and prevention to prevent even more mining workers from becoming infected.”

But it was their cynical advice to mineworkers that should be inscribed on the corporatist organisation’s epitaph. The CTC said workers should use the Labor Code to “interrupt or abandon their work because the conditions to protect the life and health of the workers do not exist. To that end, workers who are dismissed in reprisal for having protected their right to life and health may apply to the Labour Inspectorate and the Labour Courts for the appropriate action.”

This throwing the workers to the wolves reveals in the starkest colours the corporatist character of the bankrupt union apparatus. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the developments of globalised production, which not by accident coincided with Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet’s economic

shock measures, the national reformist unions were transformed into instruments that police the workforce and implement the corporate agenda of internationally mobile capital.

These profound economic changes in the capitalist mode of production also transformed the economic nationalist political parties like the Chilean Socialist Party which was groomed in this period for reinsertion back into the capitalist state through the so-called Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia. If the Stalinist Chilean Communist Party was unable to enter into the centre-left coalition that held power for the first 20 years of civilian rule, it wasn’t for the lack of trying.

The executive and the parliament, in the midst of the pandemic, have introduced laws to facilitate the furloughing of labour without having to pay any entitlements under the “Employment Protection Law”. They have put into practise “Electronic Settlements” allowing massive layoffs without the right of workers to make any claims, and suspended Collective Negotiations for the duration of the State of Exception decreed on March 18, 2020 and extended for another 90 days in June.

The working class is paying for this crisis with its lives and livelihoods. It can only put a stop to this carnage by advancing an independent socialist internationalist political perspective. To this end the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site* has pledged to assist the working class by providing it the essential tactical, strategic and programmatic direction. This requires above all the building of a section of the Fourth International in Chile. We appeal to workers, students, and all those who recognize the need for the socialist reorganization of the world to secure the future of humanity, to join us in this struggle.



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