

The global wave of miners strikes and the case for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees

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From the nickel mines of Ontario and the coalfields of Alabama to the Atacama desert in Chile and the jungles of Colombia, miners throughout the world are engaged in a wave of struggles against the world's most powerful transnational mining corporations.

The corporate media and trade union bureaucracies have withheld this vital information from workers to keep them in the dark and isolated. But these strikes are part of one global movement in which workers face the same issues: low wages, a lack of safety precautions, trade unions that are in the pockets of the companies, and profound anger over the deaths of countless co-workers who contracted COVID-19 on the job and were sacrificed at the altar of capitalist corporate profit.

In Alabama, 1,100 coal miners have been on strike against Warrior Met for two months after rejecting a sellout contract proposed by the United Mine Workers of America, which has refused to call out any other mine in support of the strike. In Sudbury, Ontario, 2,400 miners walked out against Vale Inco after rejecting a similar deal put forward by the United Steelworkers, which agreed to a special one-year contract in June 2020 to keep workers on the job during the pandemic.

Though miners speak many different languages, their story is the same everywhere. In Chile, several hundred office workers necessary for production at BHP's Escondida copper mine went on strike last Thursday, while thousands of miners are preparing for what the industry press is calling a "prolonged strike" against the Australian-owned BHP.

Even though the Escondida miners' contract is expiring, the trade union has kept miners on the job, effectively crossing the picket lines of the office workers' strike. The union issued a pathetic statement in advance of negotiations, saying it would conduct itself "entirely within a framework of respect" for the corporation, which made \$8.7 billion in profits by forcing workers at Escondida to produce 1.2 billion tons of copper in 2020. Escondida is the largest and most productive mine in the world.

In Colombia, miners in Pacífico, Bajo Cauca, Antioquia, Caldas, Córdoba and Sur de Bolívar went on strike on May 13 demanding wage increases and environmental protections for

nearby indigenous tribes whose homes have been massively polluted by the global mining corporations. Last week, miners at the Cerrejón mine (owned by BHP, Anglo American and Glencore) began blocking the entrance, stopping production. Across Colombia, mass demonstrations and strikes of industrial workers against massive levels of social inequality and state violence stopped the export of 200,000 tons of coal and caused \$80 billion in losses for the mining companies, according to the Colombian Ministry of Mines and Energy.

In Peru, iron ore miners at the Chinese-owned Shougang Hierro Perú mines are on strike because at least 24 of their coworkers have died of COVID-19, which spread through tent encampments in which miners live 10-15 men to a tent. Shougang made \$340 million in profits from the mine in 2020, a 20 percent increase from pre-COVID profits in 2019.

Across Mexico, coal, copper and zinc miners are engaged in strikes in the states of Zacatecas, Guerrero, Baja California and Queretaro. At one mine in Cosalá, Sinaloa, 175 miners have been on strike for over a year against the Canadian Americas Gold and Silver corporation.

At a Tayahua, Zacatecas mine owned by Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim's Ocampo Mining company, workers walked out on strike on May 22 and were brutally assaulted by company security goons. One local news report explained that "tempers flared and there was an exchange of blows between workers and security personnel. Workers explained that for over a year, [the company and union] have not renewed the collective labor contract even though workers have not stopped laboring during the COVID-19 pandemic, which puts the workers at risk of contagion."

In South Africa, industry publications are nervous over the prospect of renewed miners strikes. South Africa's mining output jumped 21.3 percent between March 2020, when the pandemic first spread globally, and March 2021. A pro-industry attorney wrote an editorial in South Africa's *Business Live* worrying that the trade unions may not be able to contain working class anger.

"We saw it with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), until it became known as the 'sweetheart' trade union," the

attorney notes. “Even though the NUM did the best it could for its members with agreements being calmly reached, its members lost faith in its ability to act in their best interests, suspecting union leaders had been co-opted.” In August 2012, the NUM, police and Lonmin company thugs massacred 34 platinum workers engaged in a wildcat strike.

Strikes and protests have also taken place across Europe and Asia in the midst of the pandemic. In recent months, uranium and coal miners in both western and eastern Ukraine engaged in strikes and mine occupations, largely demanding backpay. In September 2020, iron ore miners in the city of Krivoy Rog stayed underground for 43 days, demanding wage increases in opposition to the trade union, which attempted to prevent the strike from spreading.

It is not possible to list all the examples of ongoing sectors participating in this global resurgence of the class struggle. Suffice to say it goes well beyond mining and extraction and includes autoworkers in India and Virginia, steelworkers at ATI in the US, BBVA bank workers in Spain, oil workers in Argentina, and more.

Certain critical lessons must be drawn. Miners occupy a critical position in the global capitalist economy. They produce the primary materials needed for cell phones, batteries, car parts, conductors and other advanced technology, without which the entire world economy grinds to a halt.

The imperialist powers are engaged in a permanent scramble over these resources and fight to establish control through bloody wars like the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The trade unions, by advancing the nationalist lie that workers in each country benefit by supporting the corporations in “their own country,” not only pit workers against each other in a race to the bottom, they also help the capitalist class carry out its wars of plunder.

Workers in every country must understand that they are part of an international movement. This very fact opens up enormous possibilities for the development of the class struggle. The unification with workers throughout the world must become an integral element of the strategy of conducting any particular fight.

The fate of the struggles of miners and other sections of the working class depends on the development of new organs of struggle capable of harnessing the interconnected social power of the *international* working class against the global capitalist system, independent of the trade unions and the capitalist political parties.

On May Day 2021, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) issued a call for the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). In a statement announcing this initiative, the ICFI explained:

The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework

for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.

It will be a means through which workers throughout the world can share information and organize a united struggle to demand protection for workers, the shutdown of unsafe facilities and nonessential production, and other emergency measures that are necessary to stop the spread of the virus.

The ICFI is initiating the formation of this alliance on a global scale, which is the only way that the pandemic can be fought. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, with the political assistance of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Parties, will strive to unify workers in a common worldwide struggle, opposing every effort by capitalist governments and the reactionary proponents of the innumerable forms of national, ethnic and racial chauvinism and identity politics to split up the working class into warring factions.

The world Trotskyist movement—the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties—has initiated the IWA-RFC within the framework of a perspective of world socialist revolution. Workers in all sectors and in all countries must be united in a common political offensive to take power, expropriate the ruling class, and establish a socialist society based on social need, not private profit.

The developing strike wave among miners is a sign of the growing radicalization of the working class throughout the world. The transformation of this objective process into a conscious movement against capitalism and for socialism requires the building of the ICFI as the revolutionary leadership in the working class.



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