

Rebellion by Chilean miners comes into conflict with unions

Mauricio Saavedra
7 September 2021

One hundred and ten workers were fired last month by Sigdo Koppers, a transnational engineering and construction company, days after some 500 workers launched a wildcat strike against “subhuman” working conditions. The incident took place at the “Salares Norte” silver and gold mine project owned by Gold Fields, located 4,000 meters above sea level in the northern mining region of Atacama, Chile.

The incident was brought to light September 2 on the Facebook page *La voz del minero* (The voice of the miner) run by the Morenoite International Workers Movement (MIT), an organization dedicated to preventing workers from breaking from the moribund trade union framework.

The events were relayed in a letter submitted by the fired workers.

The letter states, “We are more than 110 workers fired from the Sigdo Koppers company in the Salares Norte project of the Gold Fields company... as a reprisal by the company for paralyzing work because of the terrible working conditions.”

“On August 14, more than 110 workers of the shift in struggle received a letter of dismissal for false ‘abandonment of work’(w)hen our decision was only not to get on the buses as a protest, but we never abandoned the work sites,” the workers stated. The day before “more than 500 workers decided not to get on the shift bus because of the bad working, living and accommodation conditions. They also demanded a bonus for (working at high) altitudes and a bonus to end the conflict.”

The fired workers were employed as subcontractors on an engineering and construction operation for the South African gold mining giant Gold Fields. The US\$860 million project, scheduled to be completed in late 2022, was initiated in 2020 as the country was suffering a peak of COVID-19 cases. The northern mining regions were among the hardest hit.

The letter continues “The mobilization began because we, the workers, could no longer put up with the terrible working conditions that we have had since the beginning of this project. Seven workers were hospitalized due to food poisoning. The working conditions in the middle of winter are subhuman, with buses stuck in snow storms at 24 degrees below zero, the company put all the workers together in just one bus. The workers who complain are dismissed...”

“We denounce the union delegate of SINAMIND (National inter-company trade union for industrial assembly, civil works and industrial services) who did NOT support the mobilization and met

with the company behind closed doors and behind the backs of the workers. These leaders are not trustworthy and are on the side of the company. That is why the dismissed workers of SIGDO KOPPERS are organizing ourselves to fight against our dismissals, in court and in organization. Workers who want to join us are invited to contact our trusted media ‘La Voz del Minero,’” the workers wrote.

In another dispute also reported by *La voz del minero*, Acciona Ossa Pizarotti workers initiated a wildcat strike last week, the third in so many months due to terrible working conditions at the Chuquicamata underground site in the region of Antofagasta.

Chuquicamata, one of several mines owned by Codelco, the largest copper company in the world, directly employs about 2,770 workers. However, the majority of the workers are employed under inferior conditions by subcontractors such as Acciona Ossa Pizarotti.

The workers launched a wildcat strike earlier in May in defiance of their union’s closed door negotiations with the employer that threatened worse conditions than the contract in force.

“We got tired of the decreases in wages and conditions,” reported one worker. “The ones who really lose are us. We are working our asses off and traveling thousands of kilometers away from our families and inside the mines is not a stroll in the park. Moreover, COVID is infecting many people at work and nobody seems to be interested in that.”

The three-day picket last May was ultimately broken when the subcontractor, Codelco and the company union prevented a shift change, stopping other Acciona Ossa Pizarotti employees from joining. Workers are flown in on chartered flights to the mine which sits in the desert-like Andean ranges at 2,850 meters above sea level and 215 km away from the closest city. Moreover, the workers were deliberately isolated by the other unions on the site, which prevented their members from joining the picket with threats and intimidation.

The eruption of wildcat strikes outside the control of the unions is a significant development in the multi-tiered mining industry, a key sector of the Chilean economy. The fight launched by Sigdo Koppers and the Acciona Ossa Pizarotti employees is connected to an incipient rebellion against the much-hated corporatist unions which have served as industrial policemen for the capitalist class.

Mass casualization of labor and increasing precariousness that is so ubiquitous in the mining industry today could not have been imposed without the connivance of the trade unions. These

organizations, under the control of political representatives of the Socialist Party, the Stalinist Communist Party or Frente Amplio, have over the last 40 years been a crucial pillar of capitalist stability.

This year, collective bargaining agreements have been or will be negotiated covering some 20,000 miners permanently employed by the giants of the mining sector: Codelco, BHP Billiton, Lumina Copper, Collahuasi and AngloAmerican. In some cases there exist several unions representing employees in one company. Codelco's El Teniente mine in the O'Higgins Region, for instance, directly employs 3,300 workers, yet they are broken up into five unions—Caletones, El Teniente, No. 7, No. 5, Unificado—each bargaining separately. Their agreements are again different from the deal reached with Codelco Andina in Valparaíso, where the 1,070-member union signed a 36-month contract that does not include a single pay increase. Instead each member will receive a one-off bonus equivalent to US \$5,800, and incentives are thrown in for production goals met.

Yet this bears almost no relation to the reality confronting the vast majority of the casualized, subcontracted workforce in Chile that in the last 22 months suffered mass layoffs and furloughs. On Monday, the National Mining Society (Sonami) reported that there were 219,000 workers directly involved in mining in May-July 2021, as compared to May-July 2020 when there were 185,000. But in 2019 there were 236,000 employed (likewise in the auxiliary industries there were 602,000 employed in 2019, 510,000 in 2020, 542,000 in 2021.)

This level of joblessness, insecurity and precariousness amid non-stop mining activity, 10-year-high record copper prices, bonanza profits and massive dividend payouts to shareholders is what is driving the class struggle and the growing conflict with the union apparatus that has for so long done the bidding of big business.

But just as workers come into direct conflict with these moribund institutions, the satellite pseudo-left forces like the Morenoites of the MIT intervene to prevent workers from making a decisive break and instead push them back into the fold. How the Morenoites do this is by firstly glorifying the spontaneity of the workers, as though sheer militancy is all that is required to overcome the domination of and the limitations of syndicalism as well as the betrayal of the unions.

“The workers are bypassing the union bureaucracy and taking the struggle for their demands into their own hands, using the most effective historical methods of the class struggle, such as production stoppages, rank-and-file assemblies and self-organization,” wrote the *La voz del minero* on August 14, referring to the outbreak of the Sigdo Koppers wildcat strike. Yet on the day of publication the 110 workers were fired.

The Morenoites make no attempt to provide any political leadership, any guidance to the struggling workers. Instead, from a safe distance, they “encourage” workers and passively report on the unfolding of events without having to hold themselves accountable for the inevitable defeats.

That is because the main purpose of the MIT's intervention is to keep the workers straitjacketed to the unions and the capitalist state. It makes criticisms of the “bureaucracy that does not want to fight,” only to promote the illusion that with mass pressure or with

founding new, more militant unions, the union bureaucracies will be forced to fight.

As one of many examples, on April 23 *La Voz del Minero* wrote, “We call on the leaders of (all the major union federations) to move from words to action, organizing unitary assemblies in all the workplaces and divisions of the country, without differences of unions, plant workers and contractors, so that this April 30 will be a general strike of miners and workers in other areas.” Of course this pipe dream never happened.

This is the method of classical Pabloism, shared by another Morenoite party in Chile, the Revolutionary Workers Party (PTR)-*La Izquierda Diario*, which last May also implored the union bureaucracy to “show solidarity and support Acciona's strike in an active way.” The bureaucracy did become active, threatening workers with intimidation tactics.

In reality, the unions long ago stopped functioning as social reformist organizations claiming to represent the interests of workers in the capital-labor relation. The actual existing corporatized trade unions function as an institutionalized police force, determined to protect the corporate and financial interests of the ruling elites and their governments against growing popular resistance.

The working class can take forward its fight only by breaking with the trade unions, fake left capitalist parties and the Pabloite organizations. The class struggle has reemerged among a historically significant section of Chilean workers. It is part of a developing strike wave and radicalization of the working class on a global scale whose objective significance is the fight against capitalism.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has intervened into these struggles advocating the creation of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces, on an international scale, as new organs of struggle, setting up the framework for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Most notably it has helped establish workers' committees among striking Volvo and Dana auto-parts workers, teachers, health workers among others. We call on the Chilean workers to take up this fight and develop rank-and-file committees in every mine, factory and workplace.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact