

Tunnel collapse kills 6, leaves 9 injured at Chile's El Teniente copper mine

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Six subcontract workers were killed in a deadly mining incident when a section of tunnel collapsed deep inside an underground copper mine in the O'Higgins region, 90 kms south of Santiago, on Thursday 31 July. The multi-fatality disaster took place at a new site within the El Teniente mine, the largest copper mine in the world, accounting for more than a quarter of the Chilean National Copper Corporation's total production. It is no accident that the six workers who died last week were all subcontractors. Rather, it is the inevitable byproduct of labor cost-saving measures, speed-ups and corner-cutting in safety that miners have been denouncing.

Paulo Marín Tapia (48), an electrician contracted by Salfa Montajes, was confirmed dead on the day of the rock collapse. The other five workers who remained trapped behind meters of fallen rock, Gonzalo Núñez Caroca (33), Álex Araya Acevedo (29), Carlos Arancibia Valenzuela (34), Jean Miranda Ibáñez (31), and Moisés Pavez Armijo (33)—all employed by excavation firm Gardilcic—were confirmed dead last weekend after a two-day search and rescue operation involving more than 90 people and specialized machinery.

The tragedy has shaken and angered miners (and the whole working class) who in their majority are employed by the countless contractor companies to which the State-owned Codelco outsources its operations.

At the transnational mining conglomerates, BHP Billiton, SQM, Albemarle, Anglo-American, KGHM International, Glencore, Freeport-McMoRan, Teck, Antofagasta Minerals, which control more than 70 percent of mines in Chile, outsourcing is even more widespread, accounting for close to 80 percent of the workforce.

In the past week, workers have turned to social media to not only oppose substandard and dangerous working conditions, but to blow the whistle against Codelco management which turned a deaf ear to repeated warnings weeks before the tunnel collapse at El Teniente.

In an August 1 article, *El País* reported that workers had warned Codelco and the contractor companies: "We have listened to our co-workers, who said that this had been warned about days ago. The hill was warning us, the hill was creaking, and work should have been stopped. Someone who works in mining knows perfectly well when something is going to happen, and management is also aware of all this," said Juan Gajardo, president of the Interempresa union.

In a more explosive open letter anonymously submitted to the social media of research organization Fundación Sol, subcontracted miners accused Codelco of "criminal negligence." It reads in part:

The new tragedy... once again, highlights the criminal negligence with which our lives are managed within the mine.

This tragedy is not an isolated incident or a coincidence. It is the direct consequence of working conditions that we have been denouncing for years, without being heard. Production is prioritized at all costs, even when that means sacrificing human lives.

The ineptitude of Codelco's management and its contractors is compounded by another factor that exacerbates the situation: the complicity of yellow unions that serve the interests of the employers.

We sign this statement as anonymous contract workers because we know that by speaking out we also risk our jobs. But we prefer to speak out rather than continue walking in the footsteps of our fallen comrades. Our lives are worth more than copper.

There is palpable nervousness within the state following this latest catastrophe at the state-owned giant. It could not have happened at a more inopportune time for the ruling Apruebo Dignidad coalition of President Gabriel Boric.

The November presidential elections edge ever closer, and the candidate selected to take Boric's place in the broad "progressive" electoral alliance is none other than his Labor Minister, Jeanette Jara, longstanding Stalinist of the Communist Party. Also, Máximo Pacheco Matte, who is facing growing calls to resign for his role in this social crime, was named Chairman of Codelco on March 2022 by President Boric.

Jara and Pacheco and Mining Minister Aurora Williams (Radical Party) were all selected precisely because they are tolerated within ruling circles due to decades of service and their extremely pro-business, pro-market and anti-working class policies.

The nervousness is manifest in a flurry of actions by the company, the government and the unions.

Last weekend Boric rushed to the regional city of Rancagua, 30 kms from El Teniente mine and where Codelco's headquarters is located, to lead the rescue operation.

During a televised *in situ* speech, Boric made the appeal for "accountability," knowing full well that those really responsible will certainly not be held accountable, other than possible lower-ranked scapegoats.

"All responsibility must be assigned, all questions about who is to blame and why this happened must be answered," he said on Saturday. He reiterated on Sunday, when the five miners' bodies had been found: "There must be justice... when justice is delayed and not timely, it is not justice."

Boric talked up an international audit which Codelco is sponsoring and which no doubt will serve as a whitewash. This is made clear in what Codelco chairman, Máximo Pacheco, described as the audit's objective: "to determine where we need to improve and where we made mistakes or errors" and to "take action" if any "members are found responsible."

The outsourcing of labor, along with precarious and dangerous practices and working conditions, are not merely the result of carelessness or errors, but are direct products of the insatiable drive to increase profits amid the inherent tendency of the rate of profit to decline.

This contradictory process is made very clear in El Teniente itself, the

largest underground mining site in the world, which has been exploited for more than 120 years.

Last week's tragedy occurred during work on the Andesita project, one of several new sites within El Teniente that were to begin operations later in the year as part of plans to extend the life of the mine for another 50 years.

El Teniente is an engineering feat and an extremely dangerous operation. It consists of 4,500km of tunnels and underground galleries that extend more than 900 meters deep into the El Teniente Ravine in the Andes. Each year at least 20 km of new tunnels are added to this extraordinary maze.

The operation also includes a smelter, a concentrator, a leaching plant and a solvent extraction-electrowinning processing line to maximize profits.

Over time, as the top levels are depleted and the copper ore veins reduce in grade and in ratio, more specialized techniques and technologies and enormous sums in investment and capital in the form of machinery and equipment are required to dig deeper into the Earth to keep the mine profitable.

Last year, El Teniente's output was 356,000 tons of fine copper. In 2021, it was 460,000 tons. This massive preponderance of constant capital over human labor power, from which surplus value and ultimately profits are derived, drives capital to increase the ways and means of exploiting labor. At a certain point this reaches the level of outright criminality.

A criminal investigation has been initiated partly because of the explosive allegations from the workers. One allegation circulating on social media is that miners were unable to access shelters due to them being padlocked, an allegation that Pacheco denied management ever received.

Initially, it was claimed that the cause of the rock collapse was a magnitude 4.2 earthquake 17 kms below the mine. Site manager Andrés Music stated at a press conference that seismic events were caused by mining, but they were looking into whether this earthquake was due to "plate tectonics."

On August 8, "a person with direct knowledge of the investigation" told Mining Reporters website on condition of anonymity that internal assessments suggested that geological stresses generated by the mine's own extraction processes, rather than naturally occurring seismic shifts, were the probable cause of the incident.

In a display of complete contempt for the workforce and in an indication that the company will receive no more than a slap on the wrist, "Codelco received approval from Chile's mining regulator to reopen a part of El Teniente mine," reported Reuters.

This comes after mounting pressure from global markets for El Teniente to resume operations to prevent the tightening of copper supplies worldwide. Mining Minister Aurora Williams complained that the indefinite shutdown of El Teniente was costing millions of dollars a day in losses.

The corporatized union bureaucracy, which serves as management's industrial police and helped create the conditions for the mining disaster, is now playing a central role in pushing the miners back to work.

After a few days of handwringing, crocodile tears and worthless statements appealing to the Codelco board of directors, to "take responsibility and take the bull by the horns", it was reported that the new leadership of the United Workers' Union (CUT) headed by José Manuel Díaz (Socialist Party) met with Boric to call on him to expedite the investigation.

In a display of boundless cynicism Díaz said:

We are also concerned about the prolonged closure of the mine because there are families and workers behind it, and

subcontractors will begin to lay off workers if this continues. We therefore ask the President not only to wait for the results of the international investigation, but also to act quickly because there are families waiting.

So much for their feigned concern for the workers and safety; they are practically demanding the miners be ordered back! The preventable deaths of six workers, some with families and all at the prime of their lives, is a graphic illustration that the working class, as a whole, is at a crossroads.

This was "not an isolated incident or a coincidence," to borrow from the miners' open letter, but the inevitable outcome of the capitalist mode of production, which all the parties in this year's presidential elections, from fake left to the fascist right, as well as the treacherous union bureaucracies, defend to their cores.

Workers must set on a new political course that safeguards and defends their own independent social and class interests. The only path forward is independent action by workers themselves.

In the words of the World Socialist Web Site chairman, David North, who addressed a meeting dealing with another preventable death of a skilled American worker, Ronald Adams Sr., due to company cost-cutting:

This meeting has been organized by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). It could be organized and this fight will continue because it is informed by a perspective. We are not looking to the ruling class to solve this problem. It cannot solve it. Even if it wanted to, the operation of its economic system determines its actions. The message that we put forward today is that it is critical that we take this fight into the factories, into the workplaces, that we build the IWA-RFC as a powerful instrument of working class struggle in the United States and internationally, and that we connect this fight to a struggle to change the very nature of the political and social system under which we live.



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