

One year since El Teniente disaster:

Chilean miners' families fight alone as management walks free and unions look the other way

Our reporter
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More than a year has passed since a rock burst tore through the Andesita and Recursos Norte sectors of Codelco's El Teniente mine, killing six subcontracted workers. For the families of Paulo Marín (48), Gonzalo Núñez (33), Alex Araya (29), Carlos Arancibia (34), Jean Miranda (31) and Moisés Pavez (33), the year since July 31, 2025 has been a grinding education in the meaning of bourgeois "justice" when the accused is the largest state-owned copper company in the world.

The families of the six Codelco victims have been excluded from official memorials. They have suffered the injury of being ignored for months and then insulted with out-of-court settlements by corporate intermediaries. They have watched a judge grant Codelco's motion to limit the prosecutor's access to evidence. They have seen the executives who concealed unsafe mining conditions fired, only to turn around and sue the company for millions in severance. And they have waited, and waited, for a criminal investigation that cannot be completed because Codelco refuses to hand over the documents.

Through it all, the unions that claim to represent copper workers—the Federation of Copper Workers (FTC), the Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC), and the rest of the corporatized labor apparatus aligned to the Chilean "left"—have done nothing but issue statements, observe moments of silence and light candles.

The families have been left to fight alone.

The Sernageomin Report: What Codelco knew

The 122-page investigation by Chile's National Geology and Mining Service (Sernageomin), finalized in May 2026, established what the workers had been saying from the day of the disaster: the deaths were not caused by an unforeseeable act of nature. They were caused by a chain of deliberate management decisions.

The mine's own seismic monitoring system had been flashing red for days. Between July 26 and 28, and again on July 30, the Criterion of Event Frequency (CFE/CFT) fell below the normal band. On the morning of July 31, operational reports noted "high seismicity" in the very sectors where the men would die. At 2:00 p.m., workers on lunch break reported hearing a blast "much stronger than the usual blasting." None of these warnings triggered any protective action. The shift supervisor noted that seismicity was "out of range" while simultaneously declaring that operations would continue without "restriction."

The report's language is unambiguous: "The chain of command

deliberately chose to ignore danger thresholds, validating the entry of contractor personnel into sectors that, based on technical data available in real time, should have been immediately evacuated. This decision constitutes a grave breach of the duty of care by the principal employer."

The report further established that after a major seismic event in July 2023—in which a ceiling collapse occurred at the exact area that would become a death trap two years later—Sernageomin had formally ordered Codelco to comprehensively update its safety procedure P-03. Codelco never did. The 13-meter over-excavation from the 2023 collapse was never addressed with higher-capacity structural support. Workers continued to transit through a zone that, in Sernageomin's words, "should have been permanently sealed."

Most damningly, the investigation uncovered that Codelco had mined out a 120-meter-wide "decoupling pillar" of solid rock, the primary structural barrier designed to prevent the propagation of geomechanical stresses between mining zones, without conducting any formal re-evaluation of safety assumptions and without informing the regulator. The report concludes that this "transformed a theoretically safe design into a high-risk configuration for the propagation of cascade damage."

The criminal investigation: Codelco vs. the prosecutor

The Sernageomin report establishes the facts. The criminal investigation into the six deaths reveals what Codelco intends to do about them: bury them under a legal war of attrition. O'Higgins Regional Prosecutor Aquiles Cubillos has been pursuing the case since August 2025. There are approximately 30 investigative targets. The potential charges range from quasi-crime of homicide to forgery of a public document to the criminal liability of the legal entity itself.

But the investigation has stalled. In July 2026, Codelco filed a motion for procedural safeguards before the Rancagua Guarantee Court, challenging 27 requests for information made by the prosecutor. The company argued that the requests were excessive, that the deadlines were unreasonable, and that some of the information sought was "strategic" and protected.

Judge Gonzalo Celedón Bulnes granted the motion in substantial part. He ruled that Codelco's right to legal defense had been violated when its attorneys were excluded from a meeting between the prosecutor and then-board chairman Máximo Pacheco. He limited the scope of the prosecutor's requests, holding that Codelco is not obligated to "process"

information for the investigation. He further suggested that some of the technical bibliography requested by the prosecutor might be subject to copyright restrictions and that the investigation should focus on “determining the essential elements of the acts under investigation and not on reconstructing the entire mining operation.”

The families were in court that day. Ana Pavez, sister of Moisés Pavez, described what happened: “The judge mocked our pain—and not just our pain, but that of our families as well.” Claudia, mother of Gonzalo Núñez, added that Codelco “mentioned us in court even though we weren’t a party to the case, and after mentioning us, they mock us—they laugh. So, what impression are you left with of Chile’s largest company, which is represented by indifferent, inhumane people?”

Prosecutor Cubillos expressed concern about the ruling, noting that the judge had referenced the Intellectual Property Law and the Transparency Law which are regulations in no way “applicable to criminal investigations.” He also revealed a telling detail: “It strikes us as highly noteworthy that, in Codelco’s view, there is now information of a ‘strategic’ nature.” The implication is that the company, having had initially cooperated, is now using every legal instrument at its disposal to obstruct the investigation.

The families are still waiting for the expert report commissioned from DICTUC, the scientific and technological research directorate of the Catholic University. That report is essential to determining the cause of the accident and establishing criminal liability. It cannot be completed because Codelco has withheld to date the required information.

The continuing toll

- In the twelve months since the disaster of July 31, 2025, the toll of death and injury at Codelco operations has continued with grim regularity:

- August 14, 2025: A 49-year-old senior electrician employed by contractor MPG was injured at the SAG1 grinding plant in the Colón sector of El Teniente. Supervisors failed to notice that a mill had been started up while he was performing maintenance work. He sustained multiple rib fractures and a spinal fracture and was rushed to Santiago for emergency treatment.

- September 30, 2025: A worker from contractor Sigma S.A. was injured at the Codelco Salvador Concentrator Plant when a support plate on a welding platform gave way, causing the structure to strike him. He sustained multiple injuries.

- January 12, 2026: Marco Monsalve Farfán, a worker at the Potrerillos Smelter in Codelco’s Salvador Division, suffered a serious accident while performing maintenance work at the Silo 4 sector. He was without oxygen for approximately 40 minutes after the incident, resulting in irreversible neurological damage. He died on January 16.

- January 28, 2026: A worker from contractor Schwager Service S.A. fell from a height at the Radomiro Tomic Division, prompting the Regional Ministerial Secretariat of Health to order an immediate suspension of work and initiate a health investigation.

Across the Chilean mining industry as a whole, 2025 was the deadliest year in over a decade. The final tally stands at 20 deaths from 14 fatal accidents, the highest annual toll since 2011, when 29 workers lost their lives. The leading cause by accident count was falls from height, accounting for six accidents and six deaths. But the most lethal hazard was being struck by rocks: just two such accidents produced eight deaths, including the six at El Teniente. Total injuries for the year reached 2,250 workers—650 of them serious. Since 2000, 645 workers have died in Chilean mining accidents.

Where have the copper workers’ unions been through all of this?

The Federation of Copper Workers (FTC) and the Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC) have not stopped production for a single hour or called a single work stoppage, let alone mobilized the working class to support the families’ fight for the truth. The union bureaucracy bears as much responsibility as management for the conditions that produced the El Teniente disaster and every death that has followed. Their role in the criminal investigations now underway against Codelco’s leadership will be examined in a subsequent article, but it is essential for workers to understand they have served as the essential guarantors of the very system that kills workers.

The open letter published anonymously by subcontracted miners in the days after the El Teniente disaster—and reported by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time—said it plainly: “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.”

“These organizations, which should be monitoring and defending the lives and rights of workers, have become mere instruments of internal control, more concerned with maintaining their privileges than protecting those who elected them. They remain silent in the face of abuse, hide complaints, and fail to fulfill their role in the face of the risks that affect us every day,” they added. The workers who wrote those words knew they were risking their jobs by speaking out. “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.”

The union bureaucracy risks nothing. It issues statements. It holds meetings. It negotiates. It collects dues. And the bodies keep piling up. This is the logical expression of a union apparatus that is politically integrated into the very parties that have governed Chile for decades. The FTC’s leaders cycle through the Communist and Socialist parties; the CTC’s founding leadership emerged from the Communist Youth; the Boric government’s Labor Minister, Jeannette Jara, was herself a Communist Party stalwart who spent her tenure enforcing the subcontracting regime that made the El Teniente deaths possible. The unions are not counterweights to the state and the corporations. They are their industrial police.

Families demand truth and justice

On July 31, 2026, the first anniversary of the disaster, Codelco organized an official commemoration. There were moments of reflection during shift changes. A commemorative plaque was unveiled in the changing rooms. At exactly 5:34 p.m., the entire division observed a minute of silence. The families of the dead miners were not invited.

They organized their own protest. Ana Pavez stood outside the Rancagua Magistrate’s Court with a banner reading “NO OBSTACLES TO THE TRUTH.” Speaking to the press, she said: “We want to know what happened. It’s been almost a year, and we still don’t have an answer. We need an answer; we want to know. Codelco [is] a company that continues to withhold information; a company that, with the power it wields, is running roughshod over all of us—every single one of us. All we

want is justice.”

The families have refused settlement offers from Codelco’s intermediaries. “As a family, we’re not going to reach any settlement, any agreement, because my brother’s life isn’t worth 100, 200, or even 1,000 million pesos. We want to know what happened,” Ana Pavez said.

Claudia, Gonzalo’s mother, addressed the broader public: “I’m calling on Chile—in fact, on Chile and the President of Chile—to put their hands on their hearts and help us seek justice.”

These families, bereaved and abandoned by the company, ignored by the unions, and mocked in court, have shown more courage and more moral clarity than every institution that claims to represent the working class in Chile. They have refused to put a price on their loved ones’ lives. They are demanding what no union bureaucracy, no government ministry, and no corporate board is willing to give them: the truth, and justice.

Their fight is the fight of the entire working class. The question is when that class—organized independently, through its own rank-and-file committees, independent of and against the corporatized union apparatus—will take it up.



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