How Chile’s “progressive” government and union bureaucracy covered up the El Teniente disaster

By our reporter
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In May 2026 Sernageomin, Chile’s mining regulator established that the six contract workers killed at the El Teniente mine on 31 July 2025 were not victims of an unforeseeable natural event. They were killed by a chain of command that, over a period of years, systematically ignored seismic warnings, concealed unsafe mining conditions from the regulator, falsified safety reports and kept workers in areas known to be dangerously unstable.

This happened through the mechanisms of a state-owned corporation operating under the relentless pressure of the world capitalist market. It also happened on the watch of Gabriel Boric’s “progressive” government, with Communist Party member Jeannette Jara serving as Minister of Labor, and with the active complicity of the copper miners union apparatus.

The chain of events that led to the deaths of Paulo Marín Tapia (48), Gonzalo Núñez Caroca (33), Alex Araya Acevedo (29), Carlos Arancibia Valenzuela (34), Jean Miranda Ibaceta (31) and Moisés Pavez Armijo (33) can be traced with precision.

In July 2023, a rock burst at El Teniente’s Loop 1 intersection left a 13-meter over-excavation in the tunnel ceiling. Codelco repaired the damage with substandard support systems.

But the company did something else as well. An internal draft report dated 5 December 2023 analyzing the causes of the 2023 event, contained references to a sector called “Panel Invariante”—a mining zone that had been operated without the foreknowledge of Sernageomin, let alone the necessary valid permits.

When Codelco submitted its final report to the regulator on 18 December 2023, all references to Panel Invariante had been removed. The corporation only revealed this information after public prosecutor’s request of internal documents following the 2025 tragedy. On 13 February 2026, Codelco released the suppressed emails which gave the instruction that “the report we will submit to Sernageomin is a report with a lower level of detail than this one and does not mention Panel Invariante due to the permitting processes we have underway in this sector.”

This was not an oversight. It was a deliberate falsification of a document submitted to a state regulatory authority. By redacting Panel Invariante from the report, Codelco made it impossible for Sernageomin to conduct a realistic risk assessment. The regulator was being asked to approve safety conditions based on information that had been doctored.

The Sernageomin report of May 2026 also established that Codelco had mined out a 120-meter “decoupling pillar” of solid rock—a structural barrier that the 2018 project approval had explicitly designated as the primary safety mechanism to prevent the propagation of geomechanical stresses between mining zones. No formal re-evaluation of the geomechanical assumptions was conducted following the removal of the pillar, and the operation continued under conditions radically different from those originally approved. Sernageomin concludes that this “transformed a theoretically safe design into a high-risk configuration for the propagation of cascade damage.”

Then, in the days before the 31 July 2025 disaster, the mine’s own seismic monitoring system had been flashing danger red. On the morning of 31 July, operational reports noted “high seismicity” in the Dacita Sur, Recursos Norte, and Reno sectors. At approximately 2:00 p.m., workers on their lunch break reported hearing a blast “much stronger than the usual blasting.”

None of these warnings triggered any protective action. Management ordered that operations continue. The shift supervisor, operating under a procedure that delegated evacuation decisions entirely to the shift level with no mandatory escalation to geomechanics specialists, noted that seismicity was “out of range” while simultaneously declaring that operations would continue without “restriction.”

At 5:34 p.m., a rock burst measuring 4.3 Mw tore through the mine. Six men were dead.

Production fraud

The concealment of safety data is part of a broader culture in which the reporting of figures is subordinated to the imperatives of meeting production targets, maintaining the share price of Codelco’s internationally traded bonds and protecting the bonuses and careers of the executives who ran the corporation.

In May 2026, an internal audit commissioned by the now Kast-controlled Codelco board, revealed that the corporation had overstated its 2025 copper production by approximately 27,000 metric tonnes, roughly 2 percent of total reported output. Internal emails leaked to the Chilean press revealed that the inflation of production figures was a coordinated operation, planned and executed at the vice-presidential level.

On 9 December 2025, Codelco’s vice president for marketing, Braim Chiple, emailed CEO Rubén Alvarado discussing efforts to account for “non-traditional products”—slag, metallurgical powders, foundry bricks, calcium arsenites—as finished copper production to meet year-end targets.

“In November, we processed as much as we could,” Chiple wrote. “We continue to work with the divisions to maximize the value of all copper-bearing material.” The email was also copied to the vice president of operations and the vice president of strategy and management control.

A pattern of impunity

The production fraud and the safety cover-up are not separate scandals. They are expressions of the same corporate culture, and they follow the same class logic: the high command is insulated, lower-ranking executives are sacrificed when exposure becomes unavoidable and the working class pays the real price through job cuts, intensified exploitation and, in the worst cases, with their lives.

The pattern is visible across every crisis that has engulfed Codelco. When Codelco's own internal investigation finally forced the dismissal of three senior executives in February 2026, Vice President of Operations Mauricio Barraza, El Teniente General Manager Claudio Sougarret and Projects Manager Rodrigo Andrades, the corporation presented this as evidence of accountability.

But Barraza, whose annual salary was over CLP 700 million (approximately US$740,000), immediately filed a labor lawsuit against Codelco for $1.142 million in severance pay, denying all responsibility and claiming the dismissal was "a mere pretext to clean up its image in the eyes of the public." Sougarret, whose annual salary exceeded CLP 119 million, departed with his severance intact.

The CEO at the time of the disaster, Rubén Alvarado, remained in his post until the end of his tenure in July 2026—nearly a full year after the collapse.

The chairman of the board throughout the period of the cover-up, Máximo Pacheco, completed his term and handed over to his successor, Bernardo Fontaine, without ever having been compelled to testify before the Public Prosecutor's Office. He remains a defendant in the criminal investigation, but as of August 2026, he has not been summoned.

The production fraud followed the same trajectory. César Márquez, the corporate Budget and Management Control manager, was dismissed. Seven others were disciplined. Márquez, was a mid-tier functionary. His superiors, vice president Chiple who orchestrated the fraud operation and CEO Alvarado, who was kept informed of its progress by email, were not dismissed. Alvarado issued a statement claiming that the emails reflected "routine operational reviews" and that it was "incorrect to claim or imply that I participated in preparations to inflate production." The board accepted this explanation.

Meanwhile, the costs cascade downward. The suspension of the Andes Norte project at El Teniente in August 2026, prompted by the same deep seismic risks that the company had spent years concealing, has placed approximately 3,000 contract workers in immediate uncertainty. The division's general manager, Gustavo Reyes, told the Senate Mining Committee that 700 workers whose contracts were expiring would not be included in relocation plans and simply be let go.

Of the remaining 2,400, perhaps 600 to 700 could be reassigned within the mine. For the rest, there were no guarantees. The company set a 42-day deadline to present a mitigation plan, during which wages would continue to be paid but beyond that, nothing was promised.

This is the mechanism. The executives who falsified safety reports, concealed the Panel Invariante mining sector from Sernageomin, mined out the decoupling pillar, ignored the seismic warnings and inflated the production figures continue to draw their salaries, collect their severance, and contest their dismissals in court. The workers, the 3,000 whose jobs hang on the Andes Norte suspension, the families of the six dead men, the 61,000 contractors who work under the permanent threat of contract non-renewal, absorb the consequences.

The Boric-Jara administration: The political framework of the cover-up

Every element of this catastrophe unfolded under the government of Gabriel Boric and his "Approve Dignity" coalition, which included the Broad Front, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, and other forces of the Chilean "left." Boric had been elected in 2021 on a wave of social opposition following the 2019 anti-capitalist social uprising, promising to "bury neoliberalism." He appointed Máximo Pacheco Matte as chairman of Codelco's board and Jeannette Jara of the Communist Party as Minister of Labor.

Jara's tenure as Labor Minister was not a departure from the anti-working class policies that characterized every past government but continued and deepened its impact. Her signature "reform" was a pension law that, in the words of José Piñera, the architect of Pinochet's privatized pension system, expanded the private savings model by 60 percent and consolidated its validity "indefinitely." The subcontracting regime that made the El Teniente disaster possible, under which 78 percent of Codelco's workforce is employed through contractor firms with inferior wages, no job security and no effective safety representation, was administered by Jara's ministry.

When the disaster occurred, Boric rushed to Rancagua to lead the rescue operation, promising that "all responsibility must be assigned" and cynically adding that "There must be justice… when justice is delayed and not timely, it is not justice." The families of the six are still waiting.

Máximo Pacheco, chair of the Codelco board, commissioned an audit whose terms of reference were designed from the outset to treat the disaster as a matter of administrative fine-tuning rather than criminal culpability. His audit was handed to Mark Cutifani, former CEO of Anglo American, whose entire career has been devoted to maximizing profits from mining operations across six continents.

Codelco's true stance on the deaths is revealed in their response to the criminal investigation conducted by the O'Higgins regional prosecutor's office last August. On July 4 of this year Codelco filed a motion with the Rancagua Guarantee Court to limit the scope of the prosecutor's requests for information arguing, in effect, that the investigation should not be permitted to examine the full historical record of the division's operations. This is the "accountability" that Boric promised.

The role of the union apparatus

No analysis of the Codelco disaster is complete without an examination of the role played by the union apparatus. The Federation of Copper Workers (FTC), the Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC), and the Unified Workers' Central (CUT) are not representatives of the working class in any sense of the word, but rather, are instruments through which the Stalinist Communist Party, the nationalist Socialist Party and the pseudo left Broad Front exercise control over the working class on behalf of the capitalist state.

The FTC, which represents Codelco's direct employees across 26 unions, has been dominated for decades by leaders formed in or aligned with the Chilean "left." Its current president, Héctor Roco, is an unregistered socialist who has spent 19 years in the federation's leadership. His predecessor, Raimundo Espinoza, also socialist, held the presidency from 1993 to 2018, a quarter-century during which the subcontracting regime was deepened, direct employment was cut and the conditions that led to the El Teniente disaster were consolidated. Amador Pantoja, president of the Sewell and El Teniente unified union and a former FTC president, was a Communist Party member for three decades. The FTC's national board includes leaders who publicly endorsed the fascistic Pinochetista and anti-working class Kast in the 2021 presidential election, which is itself such an indictment of the "left."

The FTC's response to the El Teniente disaster was instructive. On 6 August 2025, six days after the collapse, the federation issued a public statement. It expressed condolences. It called for "a thorough review of the company's safety model." It demanded that "Occupational Safety and Health be elevated to the level of a Vice Presidency." It declared "a state of alert." What it did not do was call a strike. What it did not do was demand the arrest of the executives responsible. What it did not do was mobilize its 12,000 members to shut down production until safety was guaranteed. Instead, the FTC participated in the "Strategic Pact" with Codelco management, a mechanism of class collaboration that the federation's own general secretary, Aldo Binimelliz, admitted had "yielded zero results."

The federation's posturing throughout the subsequent crisis has been consistent: it appeals to the state to defend Codelco as a state-owned enterprise while refusing to wage any struggle against the conditions inside it. When the Republican Party proposed privatizing the mining giant, the FTC responded with its usual issuing of statements, holding press conferences, threatening to "take to the streets." On the question of the safety of workers, the wages of contractors, or the prosecution of criminal executives, the federation falls silent. The reason is not difficult to discern. The FTC represents 15,694 direct employees. Both the direct workforce and contract workers are unified in production and share a common class enemy. However, the FTC has exacerbated the system brought in by the Pinochet regime to drive a wedge through the most powerful section of the Chilean working class and keep them divided.

The CTC, which nominally represents the 61,000 contract workers, is even more directly an instrument of the Communist Party. Its long-time president, Christian Cuevas, was a PC member who served as labor attaché in Spain before returning to Chile to lead the confederation. The current president, Ana Lamas, operates within the same political framework. The CTC's principal achievement, known as the Acuerdo Marco (Framework Agreement), is presented as a victory for contract workers.

In reality, the Framework Agreement is a mechanism for regulating and containing the struggles of the most exploited section of the mining workforce. The agreement does not set a base salary. It establishes benefit floors and CPI adjustments while leaving the fundamental wage relation and the subcontracting system itself intact. When the CTC calls mobilizations, as it did in January and March 2026 over the renewal of the Framework Agreement, it does so within carefully controlled parameters: brief blockades at mine entrances, a few hours of disruption, then back to the negotiating table. The objective is not to end subcontracting but to secure marginal improvements that reinforce the legitimacy of the subcontracting regime and justify their own existence.

The CUT, Chile's national trade union centre, is headed by figures from the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. After the El Teniente disaster, CUT president José Manuel Díaz (PS) met with Boric not to demand justice but to urge the government to "act quickly because there are families waiting," meaning families waiting for the mine to reopen so that workers would not be laid off. This is the language not of class struggle but of industrial policing.

The open letter published anonymously by subcontracted miners immediately after the disaster captured a reality they know so well:

> 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.
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> 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.

A class chasm

The social relations of copper production in Chile are defined by a chasm between those who extract the wealth and those who appropriate it, a chasm that runs not only between workers and owners but within the workforce itself.

At the summit sit the mining dynasties. In the single year to January 2026, the fortune of Iris Fontbona, matriarch of the Luksic family which controls Antofagasta Plc, rose by 91 percent to US$55.6 billion. The Luksic family's Antofagasta Minerals pays its CEO, Iván Arriagada, approximately US$3–4 million annually; BHP's global CEO, Mike Henry, received US$8.5 million in total compensation for the year to June 2025.

At Codelco, the CEO, Rubén Alvarado until his departure in July 2026, received a gross annual salary of approximately CLP 525 million (roughly US$553,000). The top vice presidents and division general managers earned between CLP 500 million and CLP 700 million (US$530,000–$740,000). Board members received annual fees of CLP 70–88 million (US$74,000–$93,000) for part-time governance roles.

According to Codelco's own reporting 15,694 direct employees earned an average gross monthly salary of approximately CLP 5.99 million (US$6,300) in 2025–26 while at BHP's Escondida, the claim is that 2,376 workers of Sindicato N°1 earn an average of CLP 5.5–6.5 million monthly.

These averages conceal the real internal differentiation. At the upper end of the direct employee category sit the professionals and middle managers—mining engineers, geologists, production planners and area heads earning CLP 8 to 14 million gross monthly.

In the middle band are the specialized technicians and tradespeople, electricians, electromechanical workers, process controllers, who earn between CLP 2.3 million and CLP 3.9 million gross monthly, while experienced tradespeople and shift supervisors can reach CLP 4–6 million.

At the base of the entry-level direct employees at Codelco are operators, service workers, who earn approximately CLP 1.8–2.2 million gross monthly, with additional bonuses for night shifts, rotation, zone and production that can lift effective take-home pay above that floor.

Then there are the contractor workers. Codelco's own figures show 61,000 contractor workers, a ratio of nearly 4:1. These workers earn between CLP 1.1 million and CLP 1.7 million monthly gross (US$1,160–$1,790). At the private transnationals, like Luksic's Antofagasta Minerals, where contractors account for close to 80 percent of the workforce, the "ethical wage" floor was CLP 630,000 gross monthly in 2024, a figure so low that, as one contractor noted, it barely covers rent in Calama or Antofagasta.

The six men who died at El Teniente on 31 July 2025 were all contract workers. They were the disposable tier of the workforce, the ones sent into the most dangerous sectors, the ones whose deaths would not trigger bonuses for direct employees, the ones whose unions do not shut down production for. This is the class structure of the Chilean copper industry and society more broadly.

The Kast government has used the accumulated crises of the Boric era as the defining indictment of state management of Codelco, preparing the ideological ground for the privatization of what remains of Chile's state-owned copper industry. The narrative is already being assembled: Codelco, under state management, concealed safety data, got workers killed and inflated its production figures. The solution, the argument will run, is to bring in "professional" management, private capital and market discipline.

The FTC and CTC, for their part, have responded to this threat exactly as middle-class middlemen who are about to lose their privileged existence by rallying to the defense of Codelco as a state-owned enterprise, issuing declarations that "Codelco is not for sale," and threatening to "take to the streets" against privatization.

The El Teniente disaster was caused by the relentless pressure to cut costs, outsource labor and maximize production that is inherent to the capitalist mode of production, a pressure that operates whether the owner is a state corporation or a private shareholder. The subcontracting regime that put six contract workers in harm's way is the same regime that prevails at BHP's Escondida, at Anglo American's Los Bronces, at Antofagasta Minerals' Los Pelambres, at every other mine in Chile and around the world. The falsification of safety reports and the inflation of production figures are not pathologies unique to Codelco; they are the logical expression of a system in which the drive for profit overrides every other consideration, including human life.

Nor is the solution to exchange one set of capitalist managers for another. The Kast government's program of privatization will not make the mines safer. It will intensify the exploitation, deepen the subcontracting and accelerate the extraction because private capital, answerable to shareholders and the demands of the global copper market, is even less constrained than the state in its treatment of labor.

The answer cannot be found in the existing union apparatus either. The FTC, the CTC and the CUT have demonstrated, over decades, that their function is not to lead the working class in struggle against capital but to suppress that struggle by dividing the working class. The Communist Party, which exercises decisive influence over these organizations, has been a counterrevolutionary force since the 1930s, when it adopted Stalin's "two-stage" theory and subordinated the working class to the so-called "progressive national bourgeoisie." The results of that policy were written in blood by Pinochet's forces in 1973.

What is required is the building of independent rank-and-file committees that break with the union bureaucracy and unite direct employees and contract workers in a common struggle. Ending that division is the precondition for any serious fight for safety, for wages and for the transformation of the mining industry.

The working class must develop its own political party, based on a socialist programme, that fights for the expropriation of the banks and major corporations, the placing of the mines under the democratic control of the workers themselves and the integration of Chilean mining into a planned economy organized to meet human needs rather than to generate private profit. The international unity of the working class—across the divisions of contractor and direct employee, Chilean and foreign-born, across the borders that separate Chilean miners from their brothers and sisters in Peru, in Bolivia, and in every country whose wealth is extracted by transnational capital—is the only force capable of ensuring that no more workers are buried alive in the pursuit of copper.

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