

Seven miners dead in three weeks: The bloody toll of Chile's copper crisis

Mauricio Saavedra
15 October 2026

Thirteen workers have been killed in Chile's mining industry so far this year. With more than two months remaining, the death toll is fast approaching the 20 fatalities recorded in 2025, itself the highest figure since 2014. Seven of the dead were killed in six accidents just between September 23 and October 14. The carnage is the direct product of a profit drive that has intensified to the point of outright criminality, and it has created a situation that the ruling class, the government and the trade union apparatus all recognize as explosive.

The dead are not statistics. They are workers, each with name, age, workplace and an employer. They are:

- Marco Monsalve Farfán, who died on January 16 after an accident on January 12 in the Silo 4 sector of the Potrerillos Smelter, part of the Salvador Division of the state-owned National Copper Corporation (Codelco), in the Atacama Region.
- Heriberto Ossandón, 74, who died on May 10 in a cave-in at a mining site in the El Huacho sector of Combarbalá, Coquimbo Region.
- A worker of approximately 60, who died in early June after being struck by an explosion during blasting operations at the El Aguilucho mine in Andacollo, Coquimbo Region.
- A worker who died on August 7 at the Dulcinea mine in Tierra Amarilla, Atacama Region.
- A 56-year-old worker who died on September 15 after being struck by a rockfall while performing bolting work at the Zulema mine in Taltal, Antofagasta Region.
- Carlos Humberto Rodríguez Soto, who died on September 23 while performing maintenance on a mining shovel at Minera Escondida, the world's largest copper mine, operated by the Anglo-Australian giant BHP, in the Antofagasta Region.
- Waldo Castillo Barraza, 49, a mechanical maintenance technician employed by the contractor Berliam, who died on October 1 in the crushing and materials handling sector of Codelco's Radomiro Tomic Division in the Antofagasta Region.
- Nelson Torres Parra, 46, a specialist operator for the contractor IMOPAC, who was found dead next to a drilling rig on October 6 at the Los Colorados mine in Vallenar, Atacama Region, operated by the Pacific Mining Company (CMP).
- Guillermo Guajardo López, 53, and Diego Ponce Ponce, 34, both employed by the subcontractor San Lorenzo, providing services to the contractor Aura, were killed on October 11 when a snow and mud avalanche struck the section of the open pit mine at Codelco's El Teniente Division in the O'Higgins Region where they were conducting inspection work.
- A 66-year-old worker, identified by the initials R.A.B.Á., who died on October 13 after falling into a rock crusher at the Nueva California mineral processing plant in the Aucó sector of Illapel, Coquimbo Region.
- And J.L.R.V., 61, a bulldozer operator for the contractor Transportes Santa Elvira, providing services to Minera Las Cenizas, who died in the early hours of October 14 when his bulldozer veered off the road and fell

approximately 50 meters at the Rajo Aguilucho mine in Taltal, Antofagasta Region.

The ages of the dead are themselves an indictment. Ossandón was 74. The Illapel worker was 66. The Taltal bulldozer operator was 61. The Andacollo worker was around 60. These are men who, in any rational society, would have retired years ago. They were still descending into mines and climbing onto heavy machinery because the pension system created by the dictatorship and preserved by every government since obliges workers to sell their labor power until their bodies give out. Five of the eight workers killed since September were employed by contractors and subcontractors, the disposable tier of a workforce that is now roughly 80 percent outsourced across the industry.

This toll follows a year in which 20 miners died, and 225 workers were killed across all industries in Chile. That is 67 more than the 158 recorded in 2024, a rise of 42 percent. The deaths are overwhelmingly the product of precarious working conditions, precarious employment and precarious contracts imposed under the subcontracting regime that the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet created. This same regime has been preserved and deepened under the center-left governments of the *Concertación*, the "progressive" administration of Gabriel Boric and now the ultra-right government of José Antonio Kast alike.

Feigned concern, real fear

Amid this carnage, the unions, the government and the ruling class are visibly alarmed, not for the workers, but for themselves. The statements issued in recent days are a study in the management of an explosive situation.

Economy and Mining Minister Daniel Mas intoned that "every life lost at a mining site affects us all." Manuel Viera, president of the Chilean Chamber of Mining, addressed workers directly: "You are the last line of defense... Your family is waiting for you tonight. Come home."

This is feigned concern of the most duplicitous kind. The same Chamber of Mining that now sheds tears for the dead has spent decades demanding the subcontracting, the speed-up and the erosion of safety that killed them. The same Kast government that now convenes "safety roundtables" has introduced a 2027 budget that dismantles public services while showering tax breaks on the mining monopolies.

The real reaction of the ruling class is not one of grief, but of fear. The concern is genuine only insofar as it reflects a deteriorating economic situation in Chile and on a world scale. US imperialism's criminal war against Iran, launched in February, has deepened the global crisis, sent energy prices soaring and destabilized the entire world economy. Imperialism's war budget and the assault on social programs are a single class policy, and its consequences are being felt in every working-class

household.

Within this global crisis, the crisis of copper production in Chile has a specific and terrifying significance for the bourgeoisie. The country is failing to produce copper at the highest price in history. In August, national production fell 13 percent year-on-year to 369,500 metric tons, the worst monthly figure since February 2011. The consulting firm GEM Mining Consulting has issued a warning that applies with equal force to Chile, Peru and Argentina: “Announced copper is not delivered copper.” The firm’s analysis, which examines a Chilean investment portfolio of US\$104.5 billion for 2025–2034, a Peruvian portfolio of US\$64.1 billion and an Argentine financing framework of up to US\$7 billion, concludes that a large portion of these investments is geared toward sustaining existing operations rather than adding tonnage, and that the International Energy Agency’s baseline scenario projects a gap of nearly 25 percent relative to primary copper demand by 2035.

This is the context in which the ruling class contemplates the prospect of the working class paralyzing the industry. If the miners were to shut down the mines, if the contract workers and the direct employees were to unite, if the struggle were to break out of the corporatist union straitjacket, the already-catastrophic production crisis would become a disaster for the bourgeoisie. That is the fear that animates every statement, every roundtable, every “dialogue.”

The two events of October 14

The significance of this fear was laid bare by two events that occurred on October 14, as the death of the 13th worker, the 61-year-old bulldozer operator at Taltal, became national news.

The first was the signing of an agreement between Minera Escondida and Union No. 2 of Supervisors and Staff, hours before the 1,020 workers were to go on strike. The union approved the company’s offer by a margin of 64.14 percent, with 601 votes in favor and 336 against. The deal includes a settlement bonus of approximately 30 million Chilean pesos (CLP) per worker (US\$30,570), broken down into a 28 million peso conflict-resolution bonus (including a CLP 3 million soft loan) plus an additional CLP 2 million, along with a CLP 1.5 million vacation bonus and various benefits.

This is a sellout deal, stitched up before things got out of control. Escondida, the world’s largest copper producer, owned by BHP, is itself the site of one of the recent deaths: Carlos Rodríguez Soto, killed on September 23. It is a company with bumper profits: after-tax profits of US\$6.732 billion in fiscal 2026, up from US\$4.237 billion the year before. And it is a company with the highest number of complaints in the industry. Since 2003, Minera Escondida-BHP has accumulated 143 fines for labor infractions, including the dismissal of sick and disabled workers, union harassment and irregular subcontracting.

In September 2022, 96 percent of Union No. 1’s members voted for strike action specifically over safety infractions, after a Sernageomin inspection established “conditions representing an unsafe state for mining activity.” Sernageomin ordered the closure of at least two areas of the mine within days of each other. In October 2024, the union again denounced BHP for violating safety regulations continuously since 2022, accusing the company of “eliminating safety and personal protection systems in favor of production.” An inspection in February 2026 ordered 31 corrective measures seven months before Rodríguez Soto’s death.

The union leadership had declared, just weeks earlier, that “if we go on strike, Escondida will come to a standstill.” Then it called off the strike, delivering a contract that leaves base salary untouched and the safety regime intact. The “pressure and solidarity of the rank-and-file members,”

which the union’s statement now celebrates, was used not to win the struggle but to extract a slightly larger one-time bonus before the apparatus shut the struggle down.

The Centinela strike, meanwhile, appears more like a protest than a strike. The company is still operating. The 709 workers of the Minera Esperanza and Distrito Centinela unions, who have been on strike since October 7, are protesting outside the company’s offices in Santiago, conducting hunger strikes and camping in the financial district, while the mine continues to function. The unions have not called out the whole workforce because they have not sought to unite with the other unions, the contract workers, or the broader working class. The strike is being conducted as a moral appeal to the Luksic family, the owners of Antofagasta Minerals, rather than as an industrial confrontation.

In other words, the unions are trying to tamp down a volcanic situation with their posteriors. They are sitting on the eruption, hoping to contain it, while the pressure builds beneath them.

The second event of October 14 was the convening of a Mining Safety Roundtable, which will bring together the unions, mining company executives, trade associations, members of Congress and Sernageomin. The government’s stated aim is to “promote concrete actions to strengthen mining safety” and advance toward “zero fatalities.” Sernageomin has announced the activation of Regional Mining Safety Committees, the requirement that each shift begin with a safety session, and intensified inspections.

This roundtable is a corporatist fraud. It brings together the very forces responsible for creating the conditions in which such tragedies occur, the companies that profit from the deaths, the state that guarantees their profits, and the unions that police the workforce.

The entire structure of the Chilean mining industry—the subcontracting regime, the pension system, the labor code, the safety apparatus—was shaped by the corporatist model of the fascist military regime, and every government since has preserved it.

The cynicism of the “concern” is demonstrated by the condition of the National Geology and Mining Service (Sernageomin) itself. The agency operates on a budget that has been effectively frozen since 2013. It went from 18 inspectors nationally in 2010 to a peak of 73 in 2014, and has since slid back to 54 regional inspectors in 2026—fewer than a decade ago, even as the number of registered mining installations has grown to more than 13,000 active installations. The Sernageomin workers’ union has stated that there have been no budget increases since 2013 proportional to the tasks added to the service. In 2026, an investigation by *El Desconcierto* exposed internal messages in which Sernageomin executives discussed removing technically rigorous evaluators to accelerate project approvals, including the Recursos Norte project, adjacent to the site where six workers died at El Teniente in 2025.

This is the institution now being asked to guarantee “zero fatalities.”

The fraud of the Framework Agreement

The same corporatist logic governs the Framework Agreement advanced by the Confederation of Copper Workers (CTC). The CTC—whose president, Ana Lamas Aguirre, is a militant of the Stalinist Communist Party of Chile (PCCh)—presents the Framework Agreement as a historic conquest for contract workers. In reality, it is the structural form of their subordination.

The Framework Agreement is a framework for sectoral negotiation between the CTC, Codelco and the contractor employers’ federation, under the tutelage of the state. Its entire method is negotiation and dialogue, petitioning Codelco, petitioning the Labor Directorate,

petitioning La Moneda, petitioning the Senate Mining Commission, petitioning the Constitutional Tribunal. When Codelco unilaterally suspended the tripartite talks on March 18, 2026, one week into the Kast government, the CTC's response was not to mobilize the 65,000 workers it claims to represent, but to deliver a letter to the very government that had just reorganized Codelco's board. The CTC's own documents describe 80 percent of Codelco's workforce as subcontracted workers, meaning the single enterprise controlling 80 percent of the relevant labor force is simultaneously the "guarantor" of the workers' rights instrument. This is not a relationship of labor struggle; it is a dependency relationship dressed in union verbiage.

The Stalinist pedigree of this method is not incidental. The CTC traces its lineage to the Confederación de Trabajadores del Cobre founded in 1951, which was born directly out of the wreckage of the Popular Front labor movement. The PCC's line—the two-stage schema of first consolidating the "democratic" bourgeois republic, then socialism in a future that never arrives—translates into a union practice precisely of the Framework Agreement model: extract negotiated improvements from the capitalist state-enterprise, restore "social peace," repeat.

This is the historic contribution of Chilean "leftism" to the safeguarding of weak and venal Chilean capitalism. The myth of Chilean exceptionalism, the "peaceful road to socialism," runs through its veins. It was the Communist Party and the Socialist Party that, during the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende, subordinated the working class to the "progressive national bourgeoisie," deployed troops to crush the El Teniente strike, and delivered the working class to the 1973 coup. It is the same Communist Party, the same Socialist Party, and their successors in the Broad Front (Frente Amplio) and the Democratic Socialism bloc that today staff the union apparatuses, administer the Framework Agreement, and channel every eruption of working-class anger back into the dead end of company-level bargaining and state mediation. The pseudo-left satellites—the Morenoites of *La Izquierda Diario* and the centrists of *El Porteño*—tailgate their every maneuver while posing as their left critics.

The only way forward

The working class can advance only through direct confrontation with the bourgeoisie and its agencies, in particular the "left" and the unions, which are the most effective instruments of capitalist rule precisely because they claim to represent the workers.

The historic importance of Will Lehman's challenge to the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the United States lies here. Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and a Trotskyist, has waged a rank-and-file campaign for the presidency of one of the richest, most powerful and most state-shielded bureaucracies in the world. One Trotskyist worker, against the entire machinery of the capitalist state and the union apparatus that serves it. What do they fear? They fear the idea that a worker can stand for the political independence of the working class, for the abolition of the union bureaucracy, for power to the rank and file. They fear the revival of the genuine socialist idea: workers' control over production, distribution, safety, conditions and wages, in accordance with the needs of the working class and society as a whole.

That is the perspective the Chilean miners need. The resources exist to provide every Chilean with a decent life. The copper barons—BHP, the Luksic family, whose matriarch Iris Fontbona saw her fortune rise 91 percent in a single year to US\$55.6 billion—are extracting enormous profits from the very scarcity their own investment strike has produced. What is lacking is not money, but the political independence of the working class from the parties and unions that serve as instruments of

capitalist rule.

The miners at Centinela and Escondida, the contract workers who are dying in the mines, and the entire Chilean working class must build independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file committees that unite direct employees and contract workers, that take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy, and that link the fight for safety and wages to the political fight against the Kast government and the entire capitalist order. The struggle against the deaths in the mines is inseparable from the struggle against imperialist war, against the assault on living standards, and for the socialist reorganization of society. The lives of the workers are worth more than copper—and only the working class, organized independently and internationally, can make that truth a reality.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact