

Strike at world's largest copper mine exposes Boric government and union apparatus in Chile

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In northern Chile, workers at Escondida, the largest copper mine in the world, went on strike Tuesday after contract negotiations broke down with majority owner BHP, an Australian-based conglomerate.

Escondida produces 5.4 percent of global copper output and represents 2.5 percent of the Chilean economy.

The miners voted 99.7 percent to strike, opposing threats to extend the workday, speedups, and loss of medical and meal benefits. Their demands include increased rest time, an effective access to breastfeeding rooms, adjustments to variable bonuses, and a US\$36,000 signing bonus. They have rejected the offer of a 2 percent real wage increase above base pay, which varies today from \$1,000-\$2,250 per month.

Another key concern raised by miners are the growing layoffs from automation and outsourcing. This issue reveals the role being played by the union, which has forsaken any opposition to the “right” of the company to lay off workers as it pleases. Instead, it is merely demanding the palliative that all years worked be counted for severance pay, not just the 11-year maximum stipulated by Chilean law.

Strikes at the mine in 2006, 2007, and 2011, and a hunger strike in 2015 have failed to resolve the issues of constant layoffs, unsafe conditions, understaffing and overwork.

The union, which was described by an Escondida worker in 2018 to the WSWs as an unelected “paper union,” has repeatedly used such limited strikes as a safety valve to suppress opposition and impose sellout contracts.

Chile's main union confederation, the CUT, has made an empty statement of solidarity without

mobilizing its forces, making clear that neither the Escondida union nor the CUT are willing to wage a real struggle to guarantee the interests of miners. Such a fight would risk their comfortable seat at the table with the corporations and further expose their political allies in the government of President Gabriel Boric.

Labor Minister Jeannette Jara made clear the Boric government's hostility to the strike, telling reporters: “We had in 2017 in the country an experience of a strike that had an impact on production, growth and tax revenues, and we hope that with a good disposition the parties can reach an agreement.”

In 2017, a 44-day strike at the mine tipped the economy into a recession and raised global copper prices. Street barricades were cleared violently by Carabineros police with tear gas and other anti-riot gear.

Boric already showed his willingness to deploy police against striking copper miners in June 2022. Then, the Federation of Copper Workers (FTC) shut down the strike, which involved 52,000 workers who opposed the closing of a foundry. This betrayal allowed the state-owned Codelco and the contractors to close the foundry and fire most of the 350 workers.

On Tuesday, BHP activated a “contingency plan” employing non-union workers to maintain “basic operations” at Escondida and managed to use contractors to ship copper concentrate.

While the union has denounced that the company is illegally replacing workers with scabs, it has not tried to rally the non-unionized contract workers, set up picket lines or appeal to broader sections of workers in Chile or internationally. In other words, the union is isolating the strike and preparing a defeat.

In general, the strike is highlighting how the official “left” and the union bureaucracy have become the willing enforcers of the reactionary labor regulations inherited from the fascist-military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet and the “democratic” transition governments, including the 11-year severance limit, the “contingency plans” that legalized strikebreaking, the sanctions against picket lines, and the division of workers by allowing multiple unions and contracts in one workplace.

Far from the narrative that miners are privileged and ungrateful, the union’s demands don’t make a dent in the extreme levels of exploitation and provide no guarantees for protecting jobs.

If workers took the \$8.847 billion in profits reported at the mine just for fiscal year 2023, each would get \$3.72 million—and the contract being signed covers three years. In other words, millions are taken from each worker and handed to shareholders every year. Such ill-gotten profits would also more than suffice to cover the basic needs of Chile’s 1.3 million poor.

Miners must oppose all conceptions of seeing the strike as merely a means of getting a few more crumbs for the next three-year contract. The tradition must be recovered in which the struggle of miners serves as a powerful spearhead in the fight for social equality and ending the centuries of colonialist looting, imperialist oppression and the rule of the subservient Chilean oligarchy.

The demand to expropriate and place all mines under the democratic control of workers, including Codelco, is directly posed and would win overwhelming support from all sectors of the working class across Chile, Latin America and internationally.

The 2017 strike at Escondida was an important factor in animating strikes at other mines, by teachers and healthcare workers, as well as at Walmart in 2018, and the 2019 social explosion and general strikes involving millions against social inequality.

The jobs and conditions for miners and workers in Chile cannot be secured through subordination to the Boric administration and its allies in the unions. There is nothing to appeal to, negotiate or mediate with Boric or his pseudo-left coalition. The support by Boric to the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia and his central role in the ongoing coup attempt in Venezuela to install a fascistic regime of CIA puppets make clear

which class interests his administration represents. Its “left” pretensions notwithstanding, Boric and his government are merely tools of imperialism and the transnational corporations.

Instead, miners at Escondida must turn to their class brothers and sisters across Chile and globally, which is necessary to face massive transnational corporations like BHP and the financial groups and imperialist governments behind them. This includes supporting the autoworkers at Stellantis in Michigan who are also facing mass layoffs as a result of automation and a transition to electric vehicles, which depend on the copper and lithium deposits in South America.

To succeed, workers must not only draw the lessons of the betrayals of the 2019 struggles, which were channeled by the unions and pseudo-left behind the election of Boric. Most importantly, workers must study the experience of the government of Popular Unity under Salvador Allende and the Stalinist Communist Party.

While the nationalization of copper was completed under Allende with the support of the far-right, his government’s defense of capitalism not only disarmed workers politically but involved the deployment of troops to crush the strike at El Teniente and every struggle that broke out of the control of his government. Popular Unity opened the door for the 1973 US-backed coup and the installation of the Pinochet dictatorship, which reprivatized the mines after detaining, torturing and massacring the most militant workers.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote last year in commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Chilean coup: “The fundamental lesson of the Chilean defeat was that the working class was willing and able to take political power, but it lacked the decisive element of a revolutionary leadership, a party based upon Trotskyism and the assimilation of the bitter lessons of the 20th century.”



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