



Chilean mineworkers seek international solidarity

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Cristián Cuevas is president of the Copper Miners Union Confederation in Chile, member of the peak trade union body CUT (Workers United Centre of Chile) and of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Chile (CCP). During a recent visit to Australia organised by the CFMEU in NSW a campaign was launched in solidarity with Chilean mineworkers. While in Sydney he was interviewed by Hannah Middleton for The Guardian.



Cristián Cuevas, Tony Oldfield, Hannah Middleton.(Photo: Denis Doherty)

Hannah Middleton: Could you please tell us about your union's campaign for mine safety in Chile?

Cristián Cuevas: First of all I would like to tell you about a phrase that the president of Chile used in front of the whole world. He undertook in front of the whole world that after that terrible accident with the 33 Copiapó miners, never again will anything like that happen in Chile. He committed himself to workers' rights and to ratify all the conventions for safety for the miners in Chile.

We decided to launch an international campaign to improve mine safety while we are here in Australia so that the Australian people and the workers here can support this initiative in order that the Chilean government ratifies the International Labour Convention 176. [ILO Convention concerning Safety and



Health in Mines – Ed]. We are promoting this campaign among the people and the trade unions in Australia and including a petition that we are going to present to the government in Chile with all the signatures of Australian people collected here. This is because there are many Australian mining investments in Chile. The aim is to ensure the government keeps its word made to the whole world at that time those investments were made.

HM: So comrades in the mining industry in Chile would like as many workers as possible in Australia to sign the petition?

CC: Yes, that is the idea, as many people to sign as possible because people to people solidarity is worldwide, has no borders.

HM: We all heard about the 33 miners that were trapped, but is the level of mine safety in Chile very bad, are there many accidents, could you perhaps give us some statistics?

CC: Before I get to the incident involving the 33 miners, I must tell you that in 2007, the workers and their union asked for that mine to be closed but the government allowed the mine to continue functioning. But it wasn't just the 33 miners who were trapped there; there were over 300 workers in there. There was an unannounced tragedy. After that accident more than 15 miners have died in different accidents as a result of safety issues in the mines. Under the neo-liberal model, the role of the state has shrunk so it does not have the human resources to do that job. There is also a deliberate policy to stop any intervention from the state. All the small to medium sized mining companies do not have the means to create the necessary safety anyway.

HM: You are saying the small and medium mines do not have the ability to really impose good safety standards? Is it really that they don't have the ability? I am sure they are making profits. Is it that because the state does not make the rules for safety the small and medium companies can get away with not looking after safety? Again, is it about the choices that are made rather than the actual resources available?

CC: The smaller and medium sized mining companies do not have the resources to invest in safety programs. Even though these small mines do sell to the bigger mining companies further up the chain as well. Of course, there is a level of ignoring all the needs of the people on the part of transnationals, there is an intention just to make money and not care about anything else.

For example, the response from the right-wing government at the moment has been to outsource, to privatise safety for the workers. They say there is a need to improve safety, so they privatise it. So, again there is not going to be any assurance that there will be safety for workers.

CODELCO, the company Allende nationalised 40 years or so ago, is today responsible for 28 percent of copper mining. But the current government, the Piñera government, is adamant that it wants to privatise it or to shrink it in such a way that it has no power whatsoever for investment – to choke it.

HM: You mentioned BHP Billiton as one of the companies that has investments in the Chilean mining industry. What other Australian companies have investments there? What are the working conditions, not just safety, but health underground, wages, and other matters for Chilean workers working in mines owned by Australian companies?

CC: Xtrata, Rio Tinto, for example. We are talking about big investments, these are the bigger companies. We have to differentiate between the workers as such and the subcontractors. For instance, in a big mine called La Escondida (BHP) where there are about 8,000 workers, and only about one third of those are permanent workers. The rest are all subcontractors. That is pretty much the case in all



the other mines.

There are striking differences between the conditions of those two groups. Safety issues, the pay they receive, the treatment they get, the accommodation they get – are all so different. For instance, a subcontractor who might get silicosis, which is a pretty common disease among miners, doesn't get any benefits, no compensation. But a permanent worker would deal directly with the company and get compensation. A subcontractor might deal with many different companies.

So it is a social drama. We have said that this is a pillar that is sustaining the neo-liberal model of economy. In May last year, workers from the Collahuasi copper mine at Iquique went on strike in the companies of Xtrata and Anglo American. The strike of subcontracting workers was immediately repressed with help from the government that sent military aircraft into the desert.

HM: Were the strikers the permanent workers or the subcontractors?

CC: The subcontractors.

HM: What is meant by subcontractors? Are they body hire, just hiring out workers or are we talking about a business that takes on a particular part of the process and then brings in their own workers? Or body hire were the company says it needs another 30 workers and they don't employ them directly?

CC: Let's say there is a big mine like La Escondida of CODELCO, and they have different contracts. So there are different companies working for that mining company to provide services and mining workers. For instance, there are different companies that would deal with food, a company that would deal with the heavy machinery, and there are other companies that deal with more, the engineering. So they contract workers. Many of those companies are related to the executives of the bigger company. So there is a vicious circle and it is pretty corrupt.

HM: In relation to the campaign for solidarity, are there any particular requests from your union, from the movement, that we could undertake in this country in solidarity that would be of benefit to your struggle?

CC: I think it is important to have protests against BHP, Xtrata and Rio Tinto here exactly the same way as they do in Chile. Right now there are 400 catering workers at Escondida, one of the BHP Billiton mines, who have been on strike for 28 days or so, they are also being repressed. The company washes its hands, saying it is a private matter, because a private company hires them. They pay it \$250 a month for the work, and don't want to know anything about it.

That union is part of the confederation that is Communist, they quash that kind of movement as soon as possible so that it doesn't spread. They do it in all the mines.

The mining industry is trying to prevent the mines ever being nationalised ever again. La Escondida finances in Chile a film festival that is called "A Thousand Cinemas" and they give little tokens to the people but at the same time they are taking our wealth outside and they use that as propaganda.

HM: At the BHP Billiton, La Escondida, they were on strike 28 days, and the strike was repressed. How was that done, what happened on the ground?

CC: After 18-20 days on strike, they were confronted by the police, gassed, beaten and attacked by the police. These workers were actually camping in front of the company on a picket line. Whole families were there, the children were there, not just the workers. They camped in plastic tents, and they were gassed, fired on with large water canons, these have always been used in our history.

In CODELCO, in what has been the national copper mining company, they did win some rights, but not



in any of the other private mines.