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Chile

# Chilean copper miners on indefinite strike against BHP

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### **About 2500 workers have been on strike since February 9 at the Escondida mine in Chile's north.**

Owned by two Anglo-Australian mining giants, BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto, Escondida is the largest producer of "red gold" in the world. The mine extracts about 900,000 tonnes a year. This represents 20% of copper production in Chile, the country with the largest copper reserves in the world.

After the announcement of an "indefinite" strike by Escondida's work force, the business consortium paralysed activities at the mine, a move that set off alarm bells in London's Stock Exchange.

Despite threats from the mine's president, Marcelo Castillo, and pressure from the government of President Michelle Bachelet, the mine's workers have stood firm. They have set up a permanent picket line and campsite just outside the mine (at an altitude of 3100 metres in the desert of Atacama), supported by donations to a solidarity fund.

Economics minister Rodrigo Valdes wasted no time in denouncing the workers' struggle and lending legitimacy to the transnationals, declaring: "This strike could affect Gross Domestic Product more than the forest fires – the worst in Chile's history – that ravaged the country at the end of January."

Yet it was only after collective negotiations broke down, and in the face of the company's stubbornness, that the main trade union at Escondida launched the strike. Its central demand is revaluating salaries at a time when the price of copper has risen by 27% last year. Copper prices are expected to continue rising at a similar rate until 2020, mainly to the benefit of foreign shareholders.

"The minimum we ask for," said trade union leader Jaime Thenoux, "is to maintain the benefits we have in the existing collective agreement" – particularly for young miners who have recently joined the payroll at Escondida.

Over the past few years, mining companies have consistently sought to increase labour casualisation, at the same time as eliminating thousands of jobs, with many replaced by subcontractors. For its part, the main union at Escondida is demanding a wage rise of 7% and a special bonus of about US\$38,000 a person.

The miners are often referred to as a "labour aristocracy" because of their relatively high salaries when compared to most Chileans, but these workers have to labour in dangerous work conditions. Above all, it is the strategic position they occupy in the country's "primary-exporter" neoliberal economy that lends important weight to their resistance and demands.

In the context of a fragmented trade union and workers' movement, inherited from the years of military dictatorship followed by 25 years of post-dictatorship neoliberalism, this strike could pave the way for future class conflicts. This is especially the case given the Unified Workers Central (CUT, Chile's main national trade union centre) remains in the hands of a bureaucracy with little legitimacy that has been largely coopted by the parties of government, including the Chilean Communist Party.

Over the past few days, the ghost of the great strike of Escondida of 2006 has reappeared – much to the disgust of the conservative media and the bosses. That bitter conflict, which lasted 25 days, shook the world mining sector and

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contributed to the revitalisation of the trade union movement across the country.

In his time, socialist president Salvador Allende (overthrown in a 1973 military coup) noted just how much copper represented “Chile’s wage”. Today, these resources are once again largely in the hands of transnational capital. In these conditions, the call to renationalise mining resources under the democratic control of the people and workers resonates with force.

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