



RESCUED CHILEAN MINERS GREETED AS HEROES BUT THEY'RE ALSO VICTIMS

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Abstract. Many in the international labor movement have complained that news accounts have ignored the poor treatment of workers by the mining company. It's important to note that working conditions in Chile are notoriously unsafe. There were more than 191,000 workplace accidents, including 443 deaths, in a country with only a population of 17 million people in 2009, an astronomical rate for such a small country.

Resumen.

La tragedia minera de los 33 mineros atrapados hizo pública la difícil situación laboral y social de miles de mineros que trabajan en el inhóspito desierto de Atacama de Chile. El milagro minero sólo cubre a las grandes empresas y oculta la real situación laboral y de seguridad de las decenas de minas ilegales o legales que trabajan en precarias condiciones.

The 33 Chilean miners trapped underground for 69 days have been treated like heroes since their rescue. They were invited to the country's Presidential Palace for a special soccer game. A Greek mining executive offered to pay for them to take an all-expense paid trip to Greece to just relax for a few weeks at beaches. Many other companies have made huge donations to their families.

They are being viewed as heroes, but some disagree with this characterization.

"The miners are not 'heroes,' as they have been called around the world for surviving underground for over two months," Néstor Jorquera, president of the Chilean mineworkers union, CONFEMIN, told the Inter Press Service. "They are victims."



Many in the international labor movement have complained that news accounts have ignored the poor treatment of workers by the mining company, which initially refused to pay their wages after the miners were trapped underground on August 5.

San Esteban, the company that operates the mine, claimed they had no money to pay the workers who were trapped under the mine. In fact, the company was apparently so broke that it couldn't even pay the costs of the recovery. The government of Chile was forced to pay for a rescue that some say could cost anywhere between \$10- \$20 million.

As a result, the president of Chile, Sebastian Pinera, vowed to make major changes to the way workers are treated in Chile. *"Never again in our country will we permit people to work in conditions so unsafe and inhuman as they worked in the San Jose Mine, and in many other places in our country,"* he said.

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President Pinera set up a commission in August to write a report on workplace safety, which is due to be delivered on November 22. The president also announced the creation of a new mining agency to more strictly enforce mining safety laws and increase funding for safety programs.

But Jorquera, president of CONFEMIN, says this is not enough. He called for Chile to agree to the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Convention 176 on Safety and Health in Mines, like most industrialized countries around the world have done.



Whether or not Chile signs on to that convention will make clear how serious the country's leaders are about reforming mine safety laws. It won't be much of a surprise if the media, which often neglects workplace safety issues, quickly moves on after the rescue and ignores mining safety issues in Chile and elsewhere. But let's hope Pinera, and the rest of Chile's leaders in government, act now to ensure we never have to watch another harrowing subterranean story like this unfold.

ground -- after spending 69 days deep in the lower reaches of earth and surrounded by 700,000 tons of unstable rock the world watched in awe and tears. The men appeared remarkably healthy after their ordeal. Emotions were understandably high after the survivors completed their half-mile journey to the surface; predictably, the men's thoughts were on family and faith. Mario Sepulveda, an ebullient man and the second to emerge from the bullet-shaped rescue tube, said, "I was with God. I was with the Devil. God and the devil were fighting over me, and God won. I always knew they would get me out. I always had faith in the professionals here in Chile and in the Great Creator." At 56 years of age, Omar Reygadas, one of the older miners, became a great-grandfather for the fourth time while he was trapped underground, while Jimmy Sanchez, the youngest miner at age 19, has a four-month-old baby, and Richard Villarroel is due to become a father in November.

Chilean President Miguel Juan Sebastián Piñera Echenique, Ph.D, declared that what "started as a possible tragedy" ended up "as a real blessing from God." Piñera, in contrast to American President Barack Obama's actions during the BP oil spill disaster in the United States, was intimately involved in the rescue operation. The Chilean president, his wife, and his top-level staff Mining Minister Laurence Golborne, Health Minister Jaime Manalich, and the engineer who coordinated the rescue, Andre Sougarret were visibly present and obviously competent throughout the crisis, informing and rallying the nation and declaring their commitment to the miners' rescue. Piñera said, "It will take time, but it doesn't matter how long it takes to have a happy ending." As "experts" from around the world began second-guessing the Chilean plans, Golborne showed his competence: "There is no need to



try to start guessing what could go wrong. We have done that job, and we have hundreds of different contingencies." One of the miners' relatives summarized the determination of the nation: "This won't be a success," she said, "unless they all get out."

To grasp the significance of this mining rescue requires understanding that the miners were trapped underground longer than anyone in recorded history. Further, no one even knew whether they were alive for seventeen days after the August 5 cave-in. The world was stunned on August 22 when the bore hole reached the miners' refuge and a note was returned disclosing news of their survival. Luis Urzua, shift supervisor of the mine, was the driving force in keeping the men alive and relatively healthy; his leadership is credited for the plans that doled out 48 hours' worth of rations to hold the men until food could be sent down to them nearly three weeks into their ordeal. In addition, he drew the maps that enabled the rescuers to locate the men with the precision necessary for the successful rescue. When he emerged from the entrapment, Urzua proudly proclaimed, "We have done what the entire world was waiting for. We had strength, we had spirit, we wanted to fight, we wanted to fight for our families, and that was the greatest thing."

Also, it was impossible to escape the religious significance of the rescue. The first rescuer made the sign of the cross as he was lowered into the mine to begin evacuating the trapped miners. Some reports identified Mario Gomez, the oldest trapped miner at 62, as the spiritual leader of the men. Gomez credited the Vatican for providing a "literal and spiritual" lifeline for the miners when they sent down 33 mini-Bibles and 33 rosaries. But not all of the captured miners were Catholics; the presence of evangelical believers reveals significant religious changes that are sweeping through Latin America and South America.

The Baptist wire services told the story of a Baptist pastor, Marcelo Leiva, and one of the miners, Jose Henriquez, who collaborated on the Bible studies that Henriquez



was conducting for fellow evangelical believers underground. Henriquez's brother distributed T-shirts to those at Camp Esperanza, the tent city called "Camp Hope" set up for those awaiting the miners. The shirts bore a Bible verse: "To Him be the glory and honor. Because in his hands are the depths of the earth, and the heights of the mountains are His" (Psalm 95:4).

There is no question that the Chilean rescue involved expert planning, top-notch engineering, quality equipment, and the ingenious problem-solving of experts from a number of countries around the world. In addition, the miners give appropriate credit to their leaders, who kept them strong emotionally and physically. Villarroel said, "We had a boss ... every day he would tell us we had to be strong. we didn't have hope. Strength comes from internal energy and prayer. I never used to pray, [but] here I learned to pray. I got closer to God." In fact, Time Magazine reported that the miners often sang hymns and described the atmosphere underground as being like a church service. Jimmy Sanchez, one of the outspoken believers, said, "There are actually 34 of us, because God has never left us down here." Ultimately, Villarroel and the other rescued Chilean miners recognized as we must all learn to do that their fate rested not in human hands or expert plans alone, but in the providence of God. Villarroel surely spoke for the other miners many fell to their knees in prayer as they came out of the rescue capsule when he thanked God for a second chance at life. Omar Reygadas clutched his Bible as he exited the rescue capsule, and he knelt in prayer when his feet touched ground. His first words were "God Lives." From the first to the last rescued Chilean miner, these 33 men have learned much they can teach us about faith and what is real.

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