

SOCIALIST UNITY

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CHILEAN RESCUE OPERATION: A GLIMPSE OF ANOTHER WORLD

Filed under: [Chile](#) — John Wight @ 10:00 am

The rescue of the thirty three miners who were trapped deep underground for sixty nine days, after a part of the San Jose copper and gold mine in northern Chile's Atacama Desert collapsed, must count as one of the most outstanding successful civilian rescue operations ever mounted. Nothing like it has ever been achieved in an industry synonymous with accidents and fatalities, and the tributes to the rescue operation and everyone involved, including the trapped miners themselves, have rightly poured in from all over the world.

The manner in which the thirty three men organised themselves underground, especially during the initial seventeen days after the mine collapsed before they were found and which they survived with only forty eight hours of rations between them, was truly exemplary, reflecting humanity at its best. Also exemplary was the way the rescuers kept the men fed and continued to monitor their physical and mental condition throughout the length of their ordeal. It was an operation that captured the imagination not only of Chile but the entire world.



The sight of each miner arriving at the surface in the rescue capsule used to winch them to safety, before being reunited with their friends and loved ones, was inspirational, evidence of how valuable and precious life is and the lengths to which humanity is able and willing to go in order to preserve it. The Chilean President, Sebastian Pinera, was at the surface to personally meet and greet each of the rescued miners when they arrived, and the scenes of euphoria which the arrival of each miner unleashed at the surface were deeply moving.

The fact that Pinera is a billionaire and the men who were rescued were earning a paltry £1000 per month working in a mine that was known to be unsafe was temporarily forgotten in the ensuing drama. Over the past few days of the rescue operation's climax all that mattered was the sanctity of human life and the effort to bring every one of the thirty-three trapped underground to safety.

For the men and their families many challenges lie ahead. The psychological damage suffered after being trapped three miles underground for so long is likely to have lasting consequences to varying degrees. Add to that their new found status as national and international celebrities and adjusting to life after being rescued will not be easy.

But however hard those challenges might be, it is likely they won't compare to life working deep underground in Chile's copper mines. The mining industry across the world has long been considered more dangerous and arduous than any other, measured in the number of accidents and fatalities which take place year on year.

Chile's San Jose copper mine in which the rescued miners were trapped is a case in point. The mine is owned by Empresa Minera San Esteban, a company with an atrocious safety record. Several miners working at the mine have been killed in recent years, with the company receiving 42 fines for breaching safety regulations in that time. In 2007 the mine was temporarily shut down after relatives of a miner who'd been killed sued the company. It reopened in 2008, despite the company failing to comply with all of the required safety regulations. Even more damning is the fact that up to this most recent accident there were only three inspectors for the Atacama region's 884 mines, due to budget constraints.

The aforementioned clearly constitutes grounds for a criminal investigation, which given the profile of the most recent disaster and the ensuing rescue operation, is now hopefully in the pipeline, along with an overhaul of the industry's safety procedures.

Mining is a major industry in Chile, but as with any industry in which workers risk their lives, safety has been sacrificed in the quest for profit and shareholder dividends.

The figure of Chile's populist right wing president, Sebastian Pinera, who lost no opportunity to capitalise on the rescue

operation and its attendant publicity, reflects the mammoth inequality which has crippled the region for so long. The son of a career diplomat, Pinera grew up as part of Chile's privileged elite during the brutal reign of General Pinochet. Privately educated first in the US, where his father was Chile's ambassador to the UN, then later Chile, he completed a postgraduate degree in Economics at Harvard University, before finally returning to Chile to take up a teaching career in 1976.

There is no record of any direct involvement or support for the Pinochet regime, but a career in business which saw him own Chilevision, Chile's biggest national terrestrial television station, which he is currently in the process of selling to US giant Time Warner, along with substantial shares in the airline industry and various other major national and international companies, suggests he was no dissident either. Unusually for a Catholic conservative, he voted *No* in Chile's 1988 national referendum which effectively brought Pinochet's regime to an end. On the other hand in 1989 he headed the presidential campaign of Herman Buchi, a former finance minister in the Pinochet government. Interestingly, Pinera's brother, Jose, served in Pinochet's cabinet, initially as Secretary of Labour and Social Security from 1978-1980, then rather ironically as Secretary of Mining from 1980-1981. Jose Pinera now works in the US for the Cato Institute, a right wing, free market think tank based in Washington.

Described by opponents as Chile's 'Berlusconi', the current President of Chile was embroiled in a corruption scandal in 1982, when a warrant was issued for his arrest. He was accused of violating Chile's banking laws whilst general manager of the nation's Bank of Talca.

Pinera's election in 2009-2010, after a run off vote, marked the election of the first right wing president in Chile in 52 years. His trademark is a propensity for mentioning God in his speeches, and during his election campaign he held raffles to give out household appliances. He also promised the poor a one-off cash bonus.

It is unlikely that the paths of the 33 men who spent 69 days trapped deep underground would cross that of Sebastian Pinera under anything other than the extraordinary circumstances they have over the past 24 hours. Now, with the billionaire president presumably safely ensconced in his private jet on the way back to the presidential palace in Santiago, the thirty-three rescued men contemplate what might have been and what the future now holds in store for them and their families.

Today tens of thousands of men in Chile and across the world will risk their lives in mines deep underground. For the companies which employ them, and for the rich who invest in those companies, their lives and health are of little consequence when compared to the drive for profit.

However, for a heroic 69 days of a rescue operation which culminated in the rescue of 33 of their number, that priority was reversed. In that time we have been privileged to witness man's humanity to man in action, in the process providing us with a glimpse of another world.

It is a world worth fighting for.

20 Comments »

1. Many of these miners appear to be Catholics and some have even had the audacity to attribute their rescue to divine intervention. Now they are on the surface they will doubtless resume their relentless programme of persecuting gays and murdering millions of Africans, which are after all the main activities Catholics pursue. I think there will be many here who will find nothing to celebrate in this rescue.

Comment by lone nut — 14 October, 2010 @ [10:13 am](#)

2. Its just weeks since we commemorated the 60th anniversary of the knockshinnoch disaster, a story of rescue and survival where 13 lost their lives but 118 were saved <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUDvaY17S8w>

great piece John

Comment by Jim Monaghan — 14 October, 2010 @ [10:17 am](#)

3. 1# there is a difference between secularism and shite.

Comment by jim mclean — 14 October, 2010 @ [10:38 am](#)

4. Lets hope that those rescued their families and gran children, will not have to down any hole in the future,as their union negotiated recompense should reflect.

Mind you that first cat down the hole was he not a S.A.S dude. Was he there to ensure that no panic ensued for who was getting in the gage first,or to stun the reluctant panicked.Or was he there to ensure the the dude,who had his misses, and