

SAN JOSE MINE INCIDENT Don't Mourn, Organize

[The San Jose Mine incident in Chile has again brought forward old questions related to labor and capital. In the backdrop of the San Jose Mine incident, the 33 miners' struggle to win life, Michael D Yates, Associate Editor of *Monthly Review*, was interviewed by Farooque Chowdhury. Michael D Yates was for many years professor of economics at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, USA. He is the author of *In and Out of the Working Class* (2009), (with Fred Magdoff) *The ABCs of the Economic Crisis* (2009), *Cheap Motels and a Hotplate* (2007), *Naming the System* (2004), *Why Unions Matter* (1998), *Longer Hours, Fewer Jobs* (1994), all published by Monthly Review Press. Following are Michael Yates' responses to the questions :]

Q : From your writings it stands that miners' life is well known to you. What's your reaction to the episode that the world witnessed in the San Jose Mine in Chile?

A : There is a special solidarity in mining communities, because of the danger of working underground, where at any time you could die. People live in constant fear of this. My reaction was to assume that the owners were lax in terms of safety, and this appears to be the case. Hopefully this episode will fuel more militancy among the miners and their communities. On a purely human level, I cannot imagine what it must have been like to be trapped like that. But now the men will be expected to work as always, and the fame they have now will soon enough fade. They will be affected in many negative ways, psychologically not the least. However, the media won't be around to report on that, and the concern the world has now will disappear.

Q. On the basis of statistics it can be deduced that mining is one of the deadliest occupations. Then, why people enter into mine? What is the hard fact?

A. People work in mines because they need work. Their mobility is not great, and if their communities have always sent men into the mines (I don't know if women work in the mines there or not), then it is a natural thing for young men to follow suit. There may even be notions that mining is a way to win your manhood. Then unions too are usually strong in mining, so the pay, etc, are usually above average. Working class life is hard and full of dangers in any event. It is not as if the average worker has unlimited opportunities. Quite the contrary.

Q. As one searches the pages of mining history one will find that a lot of changes have entered into mining, and into miners' life. On the contrary, a lot of "things" have not changed. What are those, on both sides, changes and unaltered?

A. Mining technology has changed considerably, with a good deal of mechanization replacing hand labor. Much more of this should occur, so as few people as possible have to be miners. This won't happen under capitalism, however. What has remained the same in most of the world is the constant danger, the callousness of the owners, and the collusion between the owners and the government. Where the unions of miners are strong, conditions are always better, but this is a constant struggle that waxes and wanes over time.

Q. What are the reasons behind?

A. Always the profit motive, the goal of accumulating capital is behind nearly everything that matters in working class life. You see what happens when capital is in charge in a country like China, where mining disasters are not at all uncommon, all the more so as the nation becomes increasingly capitalist.

Q. Is there no way out from the life miners are entrapped into?

A. Strong unions are the best hope inside capitalism. Only the abolition of capitalism can liberate miners and all other workers.

Q. What are the hindrances in improving the working and living conditions of miners?

A. They are the same as for all workers: the power of capital, the power of the state, divisions of all sorts among the workers. As miners overcome their divisions and come to see more clearly the root causes of their oppression, they begin to take actions to get out of the trap.

Q. Is improving working and living conditions for miners costlier than the “cost” for lives? How it affects productivity and, essentially returns?

A. Of course, a life is always worth more than profits. The owners don't see it this way, and that is why the miners must organize and force the owners to accept a different calculus. Then the owners will try to keep profits up in the face of higher wages and better conditions, including safety. The owners always have the upper hand at the workplace since they own the capital. So miners have to organize politically as well. In purely technical terms, union miners are probably more productive as they will be better trained, etc. But they may not be more profitable. Hence, there is constant class struggle.

In Capital, Marx refers to a note by Liebig that tells the mine owners compelled the miners to consume bread and bean though the miners disliked beans which was liked by horses. But the owners' choice was dictated by the interest of return as beans provided the power the miners needed to bring up metal load from deep down. Now, it seems, labor is less important than material, the support systems in mines, and the life they have been pushed into, meager wages, ramshackle congested homes without water, sewage system, and proper ventilation system, diseases, etc., constant fear of unemployment, the abject poverty. In many lands, these are not different from the condition of the working class in England Engels described, rather miserable than that. These are now a bit documented. Even the mainstream media sometimes mention this fact. Is it that miners' living condition is now not a factor for capital regeneration as there is a huge reserve army of labor?

This may be true in many parts of the world. We have to expect owners to calculate costs with no concern for the workers, as they think of the workers as implements of production, no different that the materials and machines used. Whatever lowers costs and raises profits will be done, absent strong class organization.

Q. And, has that intensified the rate of appropriation of surplus labor?

A. Yes, it always does.

We know legendary John Henry, the “steel-driving man”, who swung a 4.4-kg sledge hammer with each hand for 12 hours a day, pounding steel chisels as deep as 14ft/4.2m into solid rock. He is a hero of labor, and a symbol of humanity's determination. How the San Jose miners shall be remembered by the present period that finds deep in the Moon and the Mars being explored, and by posterity?

Unless the miners force the issue by radically strengthening their organization, they will be just another footnote in history.

And, how humanity shall remember this crude, callous capital that called in this cruelty in the San Jose mine?

The answer is the same as for the previous question. As Mother Jones, the legendary miners' angel and organizer, said, ‘Don't mourn, organize’. □