



Strikes 1983. Miners march through the streets of Santiago (top).

Workers from the Andina Division: soupkitchen in the union building (right).

Miners starting the days work (below).



Copper workers: militant and politicized?

By Oscar Mac-Clure and Iván Valenzuela

Copper miners in Chile have traditionally been considered militant and highly politicized. In this article two researchers from Chile analyze how the nationalization of the mines and the advent of the military regime have influenced the miners and their organizations.

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The National Copper Corporation of Chile (CODELCO) presently employs 24 456 persons in four mining centers: Chuquicamata, Salvador, Andina, and El Teniente. The *Copper Workers Confederation* (CTC) is probably the country's most important labor organization.

Traditionally, copper miners have been considered militant and highly politicized in comparison with other sectors of the Chilean labor movement. We want to examine whether the nationalization of the mines and the advent of an authoritarian regime have reinforced or modified these characteristics of the miners' behavior.

There have been a number of studies of the historical development of unionism in the copper sector. From these studies we have identified for examination three central hypotheses:

- the hypothesis, originally of Kerr and Siegel,¹ that the miners constitute an isolated mass and that this factor generates among them a greater propensity to strike in comparison with the rest of the unionized workforce;
- the hypothesis that the central role of the copper mines in the nation's economy enabled copper workers to constitute themselves as a "workers aristocracy"; and
- the hypothesis that the copper workers only appear to be politically radical while in fact their political position is merely "instrumental".

While these hypotheses imply a degree of autonomy of the movement and certain orientations stemming from its class make-up, Angell² provides a different focus. He argues that due to the weakness of the Chilean working class and the consequent strength of the state, workers' conduct was strictly dependent on the influence exercised by the political parties, outside of which unionism was non-existent.

We will argue the following:

- a) that the behavior of the miners' union cannot be defined as simple defensive

conduct in an isolated medium, but rather reflects its key political role and the miners' preponderance in the working class; that its posture in defense of national interests is uncharacteristic of the narrow self-interest of a supposed "workers aristocracy"; and that the movement's political conduct cannot be reduced to mere opportunism or pragmatism;

b) that the analysis referred to above must be placed in the context of the changes in social relations that Chilean society underwent in the fifty years prior to the coup, characterized, among other aspects, by a particular type of social organization;

c) that nationalization coincided with a series of other changes which have affected significantly the development of unionism in the mines.

Data are from many diverse sources, ranging from economic statistics to union documents collected over years of work with union organizations.

Pre-nationalization period

The period 1930—73 was characterized by a frequently intense struggle by copper workers to achieve their incorporation into the socio-political system and to satisfy their basic aspirations. From the time of the establishment of US companies and the start of production in El Teniente (1912), Chuquicamata (1915), and Potrerillos (1927), the workforce grew rapidly, reaching some 15 000 workers in 1927, located in classic miners' camps. The first union was formed by the workers of Sewell in 1925, inaugurating a period of constant union activity that continued through the 1930s. The first important legal strikes occurred at the time of the Popular Front, such as that at El Teniente in 1938, and there were attempts at mediation by the *Chilean Workers Confederation* (CTCH) on the one hand and at arbitration by the state on the other.

The copper workers played a more important role nationally in 1950 when

the Chuquicamata strike contributed to the fall of the inflexible "cabinet of national concentration". The following year the *Copper Workers Confederation* (CTC) was formed. Along with the "New Deal" policy of the US companies, the government promulgated a special law, the Copper Workers Statute, which mandated greater state intervention in labor conflicts and recognized the Confederation as legal interlocutor.

Between 1957 and 1973, strikes in copper were frequent, but until 1968 particular problems in each company were the predominant causes. The copper unions played a role in the national political scene in 1965—66 when, faced with the arrangements negotiated by the Frei government to form joint ventures between the state and the transnationals, workers demanded nationalization of the mines and a reform in the Copper Workers Statute.

In comparison with the early period when the unions were struggling to establish themselves and be recognized by the state, towards the 1970s the level of militance and the politicization of the copper unions grew significantly.

Despite the common image of a predominantly factory character to the labor conflicts of the period 1954—73, in fact more mine workers participated in strikes than manufacturing workers in each of these years. In the mining sector, copper accounted for more than half the days lost due to strikes.

As can be seen in the accompanying graphs, the evolution of labor conflicts both in mining and nationally is markedly similar in respect to the constant rise in the number of strikes. Another common characteristic is the tendency towards stabilization, as measured by a diminishing number of work-days lost to strikes, at the same time as the total number of strikes was rising. The shortening of the conflicts reflects a "symbolic" dimension in which the pressure for satisfaction of demands became gradually more political than economic. In the 1960s the number of

Table 1
Strikes in the mining sector, 1954—1983

Year	Number of strikes	Number of workers participating	Number of days lost
1954	59	32 774	528 514
1955	57	55 029	504 298
1956	49	60 828	802 953
1957	33	18 569	134 894
1958	46	31 719	145 279
1959	71	52 097	752 029
1960			
1961	85	60 529	613 000
1962			
1963	112	45 827	282 000
1964	85	33 353	290 000
1965	116	60 998	768 000
1966	46	27 093	168 000
1967	166	73 038	365 000
1968	104	52 827	366 000
1969	126	71 951	153 655
1970	149	95 158	658 516
1971	125	20 544	95 253
1972	272	41 046	197 752
1973	189	45 673	180 640
1974-1979	na	na	na
1980	7	10 600	103 400
1981	—	14 800	538 800
1982	—	100	—
1983	—	—	— (0)

Note:

No data available for 1960 and 1962, and for number of strikes 1981—82.

Sources:

OIT, *Anuarios*, 1957—1984; Pizarro, Cuadros No 28 and 23, p 61—68.

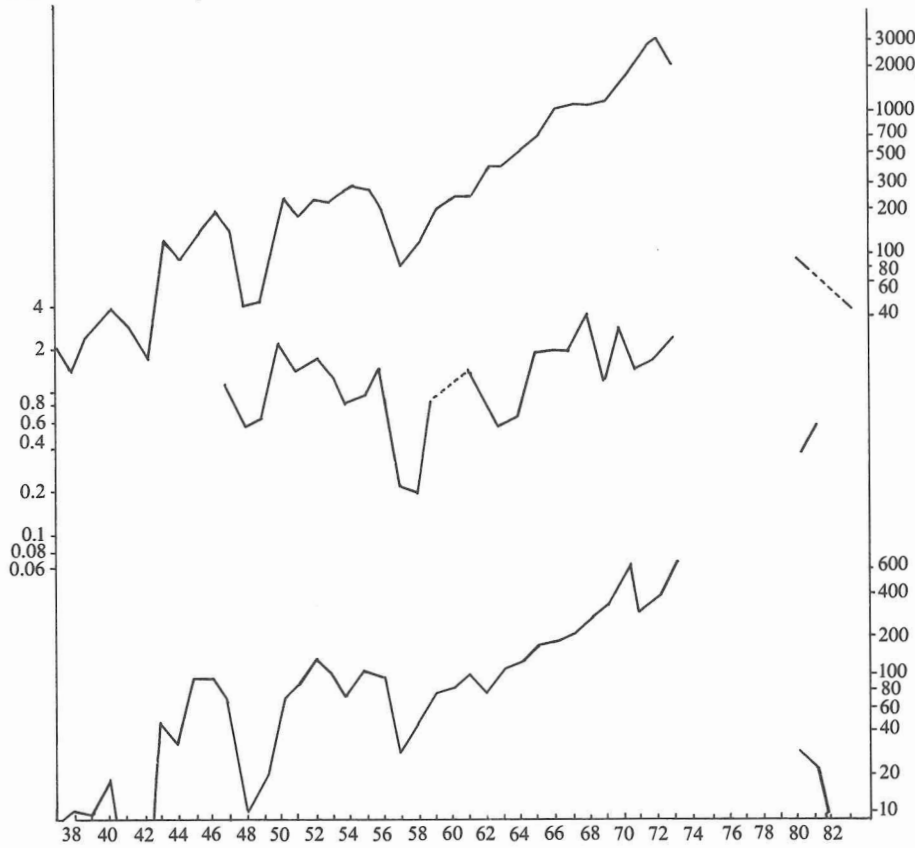
strikes increased, both in the mines and in the country as a whole.

These tendencies demonstrate that the propensity to strike on the part of the copper workers cannot be explained solely by their isolation nor by factors intrinsic to mining or to the copper companies, but only by adding the context of the social contract and related processes. The distribution of benefits was achievable only by those groups which could bring pressure to bear most strongly, as was the case of the copper

miners. Their key role in the economy enabled them to exercise this pressure; nonetheless, the high level and increasing rhythm of the conflict in copper mining cannot be explained entirely by this logic. The strike, to the extent that it threatens the basic political consensus or puts in jeopardy social order, plays a key role in the arrangements which promise state² characterized by permanent crisis.

In order to act politically, the labor organizations of workers from other

Figure 1
Strikes in Chile, 1937—1983



Frente Popular | González | Ibáñez | Alessandri | Frei | Allende | Pinochet

Note:

a/ No data available Numbers of days lost 1937—46 to 1960.

Sources:

OIT, *Anuario*, 1947—49 to 1984; Pizarro, 1978; Angell, 1972.

economic sectors established with the political parties a more-or-less direct relationship crystallized in the *United Workers Center (CUT)*. But in the case of the copper workers, political action developed through the Copper Workers Confederation. They did not need the relatively external organization as did the workers from the import-substitution industries. The copper workers had a sufficiently powerful and homogeneous economic base on their own. The joint action of workers in three mines

was easier, as well as more dangerous for the system's stability, than actions in dozens of small- and medium-sized factories.

Post-nationalization developments

The nationalization of the US companies in 1971, as well as the earlier "Chileanization" and the change in administration of the copper companies which culminated in nationalization, were crucial elements in the develop-

ment of the copper union movement. We can roughly distinguish three stages which had different effects on the movement's actions:

1. The Allende government

The labor problems and the political struggle in the mines increased and eventually contributed to the destabilization of the government. The rise in militancy translated into 180 sectional work stoppages, four mine-wide strikes, one supervisors' strike, and another by white-collar workers in Chuquicamata alone. In El Teniente, a work stoppage caused by the 1973 wage adjustments had a clear pre-coup role. In contrast with past practice, the tone of many of the conflicts changed from its previous leftwing posture to the opposite in support of political groups opposed to Allende.

Events in this period clashed with the predominant views of the time as to what could be expected from the copper workers in the process which began in 1970. Although not all the miners could be characterized as "conscious", there was nonetheless a marked presence of members of leftist parties in addition to a long experience of resistance to imperialist domination of the mines which could have germinated an anti-capitalist consciousness.

The hypothesis that copper miners were a mere "instrument" of the political parties permits us to clarify that, as opposed to the accepted wisdom of the time, the copper workers did not have a purely class, non-economist consciousness neither at that time nor before, nor did they have a definitive, ideological commitment to the left parties, as shown by Zapata³ with respect to the workers of Chuquicamata.

But a series of social changes occurred in the mines during the Allende government:

- changes resulting from the establishment of a new administration and a new owner;
- the culmination of the process of in-

corporation of additional workers into the mines: between 1966 and 1972 the number of copper workers rose 53 per cent, principally due to the expansion of production;

- the launching of participatory mechanisms which incorporated workers; and
- the attempt to modify the pay system.

These changes were perhaps more significant than any others in the history of copper unionism. The only comparable change might be the establishment of the Copper Workers Statute in 1955. But the inevitable consequences of these changes manifested themselves at a time in which only two types of action were possible: those which supported the government and those which supported its opponents.

2. Early post-coup years

Despite the repression of leftist leaders, the Copper Workers Confederation resurfaced during the years immediately following the coup with a new leadership and managed to maintain links with the government to try to preserve the rights of the copper workers. Nonetheless, the Copper Workers Statute was abolished, and in 1979 miners began to negotiate with the company under the same conditions established by the new labor legislation (the Labor Plan) for other unionized sectors. Labor conflicts were of a lesser magnitude than before, with the exception of certain tense political moments, such as the "Victuals Movement" of 1977 and 1978 and the El Teniente strike of 1981.

Unlike other unionized sectors, the copper unions enjoyed uninterrupted integration in the institutional system throughout this stage. By contrast with the manufacturing unions and despite the end of the previous intense party presence in the unions, the copper workers maintained their politicized character and continued to influence the country's political life, even under dictatorial rule.

3. The period of social opposition to the military regime

In May, 1983, the Copper Workers Confederation convoked the first "national protest", which put the miners in the center of a wave of discontent in the country and opened the way to massive opposition to the regime, including the poor and professional groups. The CTC's call, however, did have a basis in immediate demands: due to the economic crisis, the government took legal steps to reduce real wages and modified the system of indemnities, forcing the miners — through "early negotiations" — to accept a reduction in the indexing of their salaries.

The arrest of copper union leaders and the firings of workers who joined the second protest resulted in a general strike of the copper mines on July 16—17, 1983. Only Chuquicamata's production workers registered high attendance. The government took reprisals, firing and disqualifying as union officials those leaders who had led the first "national protest" and the general strike in the mines and had formed the *National Workers Command* (CNT), a broad-based labor body with the Confederation as its axis.

Post-nationalization processes

Although the Allende government and afterwards the military regime have affected markedly the union behaviour of copper workers, we believe that a series of other processes also have exercised a significant impact:

State property

The situation of copper workers was particularly affected by the change in ownership of the deposits. When the minerals were in the hands of the transnationals, the demands of the copper workers were seen as justified almost automatically as they appeared as a direct anti-imperialist demand in defense of the national interest. This united the miners with the rest of the

working class. With nationalization, workers were confronting in defense of their acquired rights a company in which were combined both employer and the state.

This crisis situation has been resolved in the recent period, although we could qualify the solution as more apparent than real. The democratic banner has awarded the copper unionists a new legitimacy for their demands and a basis of solidarity with other social forces. But the basic problem persists: in the pre-nationalization period, syndical action in the mines opposed societal objectives against the goals of the US companies. Union pressures now, on the other hand, place societal objectives before an authoritarian regimen, but also tend to conflict with the societal function of the company.

Diminishing isolation

With nationalization the foreign enclave disappeared, along with its cultural symbols. The state, no longer remote, established itself in the mines through the authority of its delegated functionaries and administrators. Above all, with respect to the hypothesis of Kerr and Siegel in their classic formulation, nationalization is accompanied by a tendency to diminish the geographic isolation of the copper workers, and this has occurred, as we have seen, despite the variations in their militancy. In El Teniente, workers abandon the camps, such as Sewell, and take up residence in Rancagua. In Chuquicamata there is a growing integration with the city of Calama. Other factors tend to link the life of the copper workers with that of the country, particularly the popularization of television and of education — the latter away from the place of residence, in some cases — and the commercial activity that these workers generate due to their superior purchasing power.

The process was accentuated by the dismantling of the totalitarian structure of the mining camp in which the com-

pany dominated all aspects of the worker's life, including those outside the workplace. CODELCO made efforts to free itself from problems which had nothing to do with productive labor directly. In the post-1973 period, the company gradually detached itself from its previous responsibilities for health, housing, education, retirement, and the supply of merchandise.

This process began to reduce the influence of the union. City life brings multiple changes to the worker and places him in an interdependence of forces unlike the oligopolistic union-company model which was particularly intense in the mining camp.

Considering the case of El Teniente, we may hypothesize that to the degree that workers are close to an important urban center of form a part of it, the greater is their ability to exchange experiences with other unionized sectors and political groups, to be influenced by union tendencies and the state of political parties nationally, to have at hand more ample means to carry on their struggles, and to influence the political situation through their actions.

The evolution of socio-economic conditions

In the past decade, economic conditions of the copper workers have undergone a series of changes, both in terms of remuneration and conditions of work. Earnings have been affected by state administration of the company, both in levels and wage structures. At the same time, workers have been affected by the shift of certain tasks to outside contractors and by a reduction in the CODELCO workforce since 1979.

The pace of wage gains has decreased in the post-Chileanization period and the post-nationalization period, as well as under the military regime. From the mid-1950s until 1972, real wages tended to rise substantially, at an average annual rate of 6 per cent. During the next period, dating from late 1973 to May, 1983, real income fell (as measured by

the evolution of the base wage). During this period real income dropped 32.6 per cent, or about 3.2 per cent per year, although most of the drop occurred in the first three years.

Modernization of the mines

Since nationalization, the central economic strategy of CODELCO — which we will not debate here — has been to obtain a rapid increase in production. This has been associated with intense technological changes. Copper production in 1982 was double that of 1962 while the workforce grew only by 44 per cent. Gross investment by the US companies during the thirty years they operated the mines was substantially inferior to that undertaken by the military regime alone. (Despite this increase, the government has recognized that investment was still insufficient to take full advantage of the country's mineral potential.)

The mechanization process consisted of four components: increases in the size of equipment (e g trucks, flotation cells), innovations such as the use of trolleys for trucks, the introduction of new equipment (e g jumbos, self-loading diesels), and mechanization of control of operations (e g computerized routing of trucks). The introduction of these innovations resulted in not only increased instability of employment, but also profoundly altered the social identity of the mine worker. Work tasks were separated, and the worker ceased to be linked to an identifiable quantity of production. A worker's output no longer depended upon his skill and experience, his knowledge of the mine, his stamina, or his knack for "making-do".

With the more complex equipment such as that introduced into the mines in recent years, the individual worker knows less of its internal functioning, output depends less and less on his skills, and his role in maintenance and repair is practically nil. The results of the production process no longer depend as heavily on the effort of an

individual or a team of workers, but on the skilled coordination of people and machines, the condition of the equipment, and the proper organization of the work. The central role no longer is played by the unit boss, much less the operator, but by the maintenance technician and the administrator who controls the equipment and its use. Formal education has become a requirement for operators. Partly due to this last development, contracted mine workers have begun to show a noticeable rise in education and technical capacity.

Our hypothesis

Clearly, our focus throughout this paper emphasizes the social roots of union activity, in contrast to those works which reduce the analysis to the politico-institutional dimension. To understand adequately this dimension, we propose to incorporate multiple variables linked to the social behavior of the miners which cannot be limited to those contained in the "isolated mass" hypothesis of Kerr and Siegel nor to the "workers aristocracy", whose analytical insufficiency we have argued above. The instrumentalist hypothesis, similar to the Angell thesis of the preponderant role of the parties in the unions, is difficult to verify because of the complexity of the interactions to which he alludes. But we maintain that it is essential to understand the political behavior of the union movement by examining its social context.

The pre-nationalization period, the Popular Unity government, and the military regime all register a higher level of combativeness among the copper workers than among other sectors of Chilean workers, as measured by the realization of strikes and other forms of pressure. The conflicts were attempts to defend the economic interests of the copper workers in the medium and long term, and their frequency and intensity depended upon the degree of openness or repression exercised by the state and

by the political and social situation in general.

We believe the union movement among copper workers in fact has been politicized, but not *radicalized*: the distance maintained by the copper union with respect to the CUT, its inconsistent conduct during the Popular Unity period, and the changes in the makeup of its leadership during the military regime in comparison to the pre-nationalization phase reveal that its supposed radicalism had a more rhetorical than real character.

In any case, participation by the copper unions in politics has been constant, and its form has depended upon the particular conditions of each period. Using their immediate demands as a point of departure, the copper workers have sought incorporation into the political system and the recognition of the legitimacy of their struggles by other social actors. In the past they experienced their union conflicts as a class struggle against imperialist domination; in the present period, it takes the shape of a demand for the democratization of the country. Unlike traditional manufacturing industry workers, the underpinning of the copper workers' strength is their capacity to put pressure on the economy; nonetheless, both groups must express themselves politically to obtain favorable results from the government. Because of their economic weight, the copper workers interact with the political system directly through the Copper Workers Confederation while the industrial workers in the past had to resort to an intermediate group, the CUT. Copper syndicalism has been indeed very politicized, but this process has not depended upon party action nor upon the nature of mining enclaves: the nature of its politization has been influenced by these factors, but also by the rules of the game of the society in which they operate.

These conclusions are particularly valid for the post-1973 period upon which we focus in the present work.

Unionism in the copper sector, as in the rest of the trade union movement, nearly collapsed in 1973. But, owing to its economic centrality and the fact that its internal organization was not wiped out, it returned to increasingly sharp action starting in 1977. Since then, union activity in the copper sector cannot be explained by the Kerr and Siegel hypothesis, nor can it be argued that these workers constitute an aristocracy within the working class whose behavior is purely economic. Nor is the union relationship with political parties that of mediation or instrumentation. On the contrary, a number of other elements play a role in its behavior which would be worthy of further prospective hypotheses. In this respect, elements can be identified to sustain two quite divergent hypotheses, corresponding respectively to a period of confrontation with the military regime and to a future scene of mutual adjustment.

The first hypothesis would consist of a reaffirmation, using different bases, of the traditional tendencies toward conflict and political action in copper syndicalism. Pertinent elements would be the fall in real wages and the problem of unemployment that places copper workers in a similar situation to that of the rest of Chilean workers. Their reaction is strong, partly because they see themselves affected more directly than in the past by government policies, given that under state ownership of the mines such policies touch all aspects of workers' lives. This occurs even more sharply in a situation of authoritarian control, especially as the decrease in their geographic isolation allows them to participate more broadly in the country's political life.

The second hypothesis would recognize a turnabout in the present nature of labor conflict with respect to the pre-nationalization period: political and economic struggles no longer carry anti-imperialist overtones. The great difference brought about by the change in proprietorship is that the political

posture of the copper unions no longer can be that of class and national opposition to external domination, but must confront the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the state's economic management. The situation is no longer so clearly that of class domination, especially with the lessening of the geographic isolation of mining centers now integrated with urban zones where distances between groups are less marked than in the camps and where middle-class sectors not only are present but dominate the social culture.

Seen from the point of view of the entire syndical movement, copper unionism has constituted one of its principal axes. An expression of its importance was the decisive role it played in the constitution of the National Workers Command. It is debatable whether this reflects a more general tendency to displace those sectors which traditionally predominated in the Chilean working class. In any case, it should be noted that in its confrontations with the company and in the particularities of its class situation, the copper union movement has developed a practice, combining ideas and force, which has served as a point of reference for other segments of the union movement — as was the case in their defense of the national interest in the past. Some of these ideas which inspired worker struggles sprang entirely or predominantly from the copper workers.

Notes:

¹ Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, "The Inter-industry Propensity To Strike, An International Comparison in Industrial conflict", in Arthur Kornhauser, et al (eds), *Industrial Conflict*, MacGraw-Hill, New York, 1954.

² Alan Angell, *Politics and Labour Movement in Chile*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1972.

³ Francisco Zapata, *Los mineros de Chuquicamata: productores o proletarios?* Centro de Estudios Sociológicos, El Colegio de México, 1975. ■