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Commentary

‘To work more, produce more and defend the revolution’: Copper workers from socialism to neoliberalism

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Abstract

On 11 July 1971, Chile’s National Congress, in a historic vote, unanimously approved reforming the constitution, which opened the door to nationalise the large-scale copper industry. Traditional historical accounts of the nationalisation of copper had emphasised a history of negotiations between foreign capital and the Chilean government, documenting how economists and political leaders experimented with different approaches to obtain a share of the profits from the country’s most valuable commodity. By focusing exclusively on the political economy, however, scholars have overlooked the role of workers during and after the process of nationalisation and failed to account for why copper miners continued to fight to protect a state-owned company. Influenced by Peter Winn’s Weavers of Revolution and recent studies on people’s experience during the Popular Unity (UP) era, this article looks at the nationalisation of copper from below. It analyses how workers fought for, understood and experienced the nationalisation; how the UP transformed labour relations at the local level; and how the military, after 1973, redesigned the state company. By placing workers at the centre of the nationalisation, this article can help better understand its importance as a matter of both political economy and workers’ power and explain why the copper mines became the first site of labour resistance against the military regime.

Keywords: Chile; copper; labour history; unions; socialism; nationalism; dictatorship; neoliberalism; Cold War
We [workers] are the only and the authentic defenders of our independence, our sovereignty, and our dignity as human beings.

Héctor OlivaresSolis

On 11 July 1971, the National Congress, in a historic vote, unanimously approved reforming the constitution, which opened the door to the nationalisation of Chile’s large-scale copper industry. That day, President Salvador Allende travelled to Rancagua. He challenged US economic imperialism from the front door of El Teniente, the world’s largest underground copper mine and property of the Kennecott Copper Corporation. In the Plaza de Los Héroes, the site that commemorated Chile’s heroism during the war of independence against Spain, Allende celebrated the most emblematic and long-lasting reform of his government. He also reminded copper miners to ‘work more, produce more and defend the revolution’. Three days later, on 15 July, Allende signed the decree in La Moneda. Unlike the rally in Rancagua, the formal ceremony followed the country’s legal protocol. It was a semblance of the constitutional path that his government had promised to abide by. In Rancagua, he was welcomed by the men and women who had elected him. But in La Moneda, he sat next to Patricio Aylwin, a Christian Democrat and president of the Senate, and Ramiro Méndez Brañas, the president of the Supreme Court, who would both work hard to undermine his revolutionary government. As a matter of fact, the Christian Democratic Party formally complained against Allende’s speech in Rancagua for not acknowledging the contributions of the Christian Democracy to the fight for the nationalisation of copper.

These events tell two different narratives of the nationalisation of copper. The story of La Moneda is the story of the long political battle to increase state control of the copper industry. Traditional historical accounts of the nationalisation of copper had emphasised a history of negotiations between foreign capital and the Chilean government, documenting how economists and political leaders experimented with different approaches to obtain a share of the profits from the country’s most valuable commodity. A series of agreements with foreign capital reflected the political changes and the ups and downs of the Cold War and US foreign policy and economic interest in the region. Historians have also shown how economic nationalism influenced the political left and how leaders such as Salvador Allende crafted a nationalisation programme that differed from other political parties.

By focusing exclusively on the political economy, however, scholars have overlooked the role of workers during and after the process of nationalisation and failed to account for why copper miners continued to fight to protect a state-owned company. Influenced by Peter Winn’s Weavers of Revolution and recent studies on people’s experience during the Popular Unity (UP), this article looks at the nationalisation of copper from below. It analyses how workers fought for, understood and experienced the nationalisation; how the UP transformed labour relations at the local level; and how the military, after 1973, redesigned the state company. By placing workers at the centre of the nationalisation, this article can help better understand its importance as a matter of both political economy and workers’ power and explain why the copper mines became the first site of labour resistance against the military regime.

The long struggle for the nationalisation of copper, 1951–71

On 15 July, Héctor Olivares Solís, a socialist deputy and union leader, accompanied his friend and now compañero presidente, Salvador Allende, in La Moneda. It was an emotional day; he had dedicated his political and union career to fighting for workers’ rights and the nationalisation of copper. Born in Rancagua in 1924, Olivares Solís studied at the mining school in Copiapó and started working in El Teniente in the late 1940s. Like many leaders of the copper workers, he became involved in the Abraham Lincoln football club in Sewell and was then elected to the board of the miners’ union. In 1951, he contributed to the organisation of the Copper Workers’ Confederation (CTC) and became one of its most influential leaders, serving as president (1958–60, 1960–1, 1966–7 and 1969–71). As a national leader, he led the most important workers’ strikes against Ibanez’s, Alessandri’s and Frei’s copper projects and, as a result, was fired, harassed and arrested. In 1961, Olivares Solís travelled to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention in Geneva and denounced the Chilean government for failing to enforce labour rights. A member of the Socialist Party, he served in the House from 1965 until the military coup of 1973.
Copper union leaders like Olivares Solís understood the nationalisation as a road to recovering not only Chile’s most important natural resource but also labour rights. It was not an abstract political goal, but one that grew from daily interactions and conflicts with foreign managers. Since US copper companies arrived in the country in the early twentieth century, workers and their families had lived in isolated and segregated company towns. In 1926, for example, Chilean writer Ricardo Latcham published his testimonial book *Chuquicamata: Estado Yanquee/Chuquicamata: The Yankee State* to denounce the discriminatory attitudes of the Anaconda Copper Company. Like other foreign-owned camps worldwide, the copper camps came to symbolise US economic, political and cultural imperialism. If working and living conditions improved throughout the years, the gap between the American and the Chilean camps, the daily practice of abuses and discrimination and the racialisation of Chilean workers had erected an insurmountable barrier. Moreover, copper leaders incorporated the historical traditions of the Chilean left and the labour movement, including their economic nationalism and anti-imperialism.

The organisation of the CTC in 1951 transformed local demands and grievances into a national movement. When representatives from the three US-owned mines (Chuquicamata, Potrilllos and El Teniente) met in Machalí, a small town located between Rancagua and El Teniente, they agreed to bring together blue-collar and white-collar unions, support local struggles and represent workers at the national level. Leaders understood the problem of foreign capital as a matter of national economy and everyday experience. They criticised the foreign ownership of the industry, its double standards and poor enforcement of labour laws, arguing that the improvement of social and economic rights was inseparable from nationalisation. Although the CTC remained illegal until 1956, they exerted enormous pressures over foreign capital and the Chilean state and gained new political influence. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the CTC challenged every agreement between the government and copper companies and consistently demanded to sit at the negotiations and to bring labour rights and demands into the discussion.

The traditional political history of the nationalisation highlights the agreements between the state and foreign capital: Treaty of Washington (1951); Nuevo Trato (New Deal, 1955); and Chileanisation (1965). However, the other side of the coin was a series of national strikes. During each of the negotiations, the CTC called an industry-wide strike: a two-week strike in 1951, a three-week strike in 1955 and a 37-day strike in 1965. The strikes were complex, featuring a mix of economic and political demands, and the response from the political establishment unsurprisingly similar. From Gabriel González Videla to Eduardo Frei, they all despised the CTC and threatened its leaders, accusing strike workers of being ‘soviet servants’ and fighting for their economic privileges. In doing so, they continued to dismiss the unions’ demand to have a voice in defining the future of the industry. By the late 1960s, it was evident that politicians would be unable to transform the ownership of the industry without addressing workers’ economic and labour rights.

In 1969, Olivares Solís reaffirmed the CTC’s commitment to nationalising the copper industry. Only when Chile completely nationalised the copper industry, Olivares stated, ‘workers will truly have the human dignity that is now denied to them’. For many, it had become clear that the only path was a complete and radical nationalisation of the copper industry, one that could genuinely guarantee that they would have a voice on how to organise production. On the eve of Allende’s electoral victory, nationalisation remained at the centre of the political debate – as did workers’ rights. If all political sectors agreed on the need to nationalise, they had different views on the place of workers and the future of a state company. Indeed, the copper mines became the most significant labour, political, economic and international challenge to the UP.

**A socialist company, 1971–3**

Two months after the historic congressional vote, the government ruled that foreign companies would not receive compensation for their lost properties, a drastic break from previous agreements and the consensual road taken by the Christian Democracy. In October, Allende travelled to Chuquicamata, a place that he knew well from his many visits as deputy, senator and presidential candidate. In the former ‘Yankee State’, he declared that the copper industry would pass from being a ‘capitalist enterprise’ to a ‘socialist company’. He warned workers that socialism entailed new responsibilities towards the
company, the local community and the nation, especially in the ongoing battle to increase production. To make this happen, workers had to participate and lead the management and production process. As Jaime Estévez, head of the Corporación del Cobre, explained in November 1971, ‘if workers do not assume total control of the nationalized industries, socialization will not take place.’

Copper camps became the forefront of the government’s batalla de la producción, the national campaign to increase industrial, agricultural and mining production while fighting against sabotages and lockouts. Conceived as the sueldo de chile (the wage of Chile), the UP expected production from the copper mines to support the national economy and the revolutionary process. Nevertheless, technical difficulties, shortages of spare parts and the US campaign against Chilean copper undermined the industry, and overall production declined between 1971 and 1972.

The characteristics of a socialist nationalisation deeply influenced miners’ working, political and everyday experience. One of the most revolutionary changes was the new role of workers within the company. Workers’ participation was part of the larger plan of transforming the economy and labour relations, but it was also a long-term labour demand. The Central Única de Trabajadores (CUT) and the government had signed two agreements (December 1970 and February 1971) to guarantee and implement workers’ participation at the plant level. In the social sector of the economy, which included the large-scale copper industry, workers would participate in the following levels: the Board of Directors (Consejo de Administración), the General Workers’ Assembly (Asamblea de Trabajadores), Sectional Assemblies (Asambleas de las unidades productivas) and workers’ committees (Comités de producción). The UP attempted to control and define the limits of workers’ participation but working people kept pushing those limits and definitions. The experience and degree of success of the participation process varied from camp to camp. While in El Salvador and Potrerillos, where workers had strong ties to the Communist Party, the process was relatively successful, in Chuquicamata and El Teniente, political divisions jeopardised the work of the general assembly.

Despite political involvement, the UP introduced significant changes in miners’ day-to-day lives. From the departure of foreign managers and engineers to the renaming of streets and public buildings, the revolution and nationalisation transformed living and working conditions. Social, cultural and educational opportunities expanded, university students arrived and organised volunteer work and political leaders regularly visited the camps. Although, as Peter Winn suggests for the case of textile workers, people’s experiences ‘varied with many factors – among them class, gender, age, politics, residence, and work’. By the end of 1972, most mining camps suffered food and spare part shortages, especially after the boycott by the truck drivers that paralysed transportation of essential goods.

The revolution did not eliminate labour tensions, and both legal strikes and illegal work stoppages threatened production. If political leaders accused workers of prioritising their well-being at the expense of the rest of the nation, internal divisions, traditional work hierarchies and national politics quickly polarised local disputes. Most of the labour tensions involved supervisors, professionals and white-collar employees, sectors which believed that the nationalisation had undermined their traditional benefits. The case of supervisors and professionals is worth noting. Used to earning in dollars and receiving benefits similar to those of their foreign managers, they did not necessarily resist the nationalisation but the socialisation of the industry – particularly the freeze on automatic wage increases. They perceived that the new technicians, political appointments and the destruction of traditional work hierarchies threatened their careers and status. Organised at the national level in ANSCO (National Association of Copper Supervisors), they led several strikes and received widespread political support from the opposition. Other conflicts remained more specific and local, less political, and the continuation of a historical tradition of utilising work stoppages to resolve all kinds of disputes – from disagreements with foremen to the regulation of the level of smoke inside the mines.

The critical importance of copper to the government made it a hot political question, and the opposition rushed to manipulate conflict. In April 1973, a strike in El Teniente over the interpretation of how to calculate the wage increase quickly escalated to a major national crisis. For almost two months, miners, most of them white-collar employees, paralysed production. The opposition used a mediatic march to Santiago and photographs of violent confrontations between strikers and workers loyal to the
government to question Allende’s commitment to working people. The strike remains a little-studied event. However, the involvement of corrupt characters such as Guillermo Medina, a union leader who acquired new fame and privileges under Pinochet, suggests that the strike was less about a wage increase and more about the UP and its socialist company.

From dictatorship to democracy

On 11 September 1973, Chile’s ‘socialist experiment’ ended in a bloody coup d’état, backed by the US government and carried out by a junta composed of the commanders-in-chief of the four branches of the military. Within days of seizing power, the military leadership closed the legislature, banned opposition political parties and organisations and curtailed the freedom of the press. The dictatorship disappeared and killed over 3,000 people, torturing upwards of 100,000 more. Many of the victims were union leaders and workers, whom Pinochet treated as prime targets in his ‘internal war’.

Despite the fact that the large-scale copper industry remained in state ownership, the coup dealt an immediate and powerful blow to the miners’ long struggle for nationalisation. Unlike the CUT, the CTC was not disbanded after the coup; however, in the copper mines, as in other industries, collective bargaining was interrupted, and workers sympathetic to the military government assumed leadership of their debilitated labour organisations. Miners who were not dismissed after the coup were treated as ‘instruments in the rationalization of the Gran Minería del Cobre’ and subjected to the junta’s new programme of ‘labor discipline, tranquility, and order’. Like other governments before them, the junta claimed that workers’ derechos adquiridos threatened Chile’s competitiveness on the world market, and used this argument to attack the social and economic gains miners had earned through decades of struggle. The Ministry of Mining’s 1977 annual report acknowledged, ‘to achieve maximum productivity and greater efficiency at the state-owned [copper] companies, it has been necessary to impose strict control standards on production costs, which have necessarily had to influence the wages of personnel’. This was putting it mildly: in 1979, large-scale copper workers earned just over half (56 per cent) of their 1972 salaries. The state-run CODELCO cut its pre-tax expenses from 92 cents per pound in 1974 to 45 cents per pound in 1980. Much of this reduction was caused by falling wages.

In the first years after the coup, miners’ ability to resist these changes was limited by governmental repression as well as internal political divisions within the copper unions. The protests that miners organised in 1977 and 1978 represented the first wave of sustained labour activism against the government. First at El Teniente and then at Chuquicamata and El Salvador, copper workers held absentee strikes and boycotted company cafeterias to criticise their worsening economic conditions and protest against their officialist union leaders. A flyer circulated at El Teniente before the strike in November 1977 denounced the ‘yellow union leaders, traitor puppets who have sold out [to the junta]’, and called on miners to ‘defend our rights as men and return to the struggle’. Company administrators and military officials responded with massive dismissals and arrests. For example, after the strike at El Teniente, over 80 workers were dismissed and four union leaders were detained; two were sent into internal exile. At Chuquicamata in late 1978, the government declared a state of siege to quell the protests and forced 53 workers to resign.

The state’s violent response to the strikers was not new, but the leverage miners were able to exert through localised social mobilisation had severely diminished since the coup: the protests organised in the Gran Minería produced few material changes, evidencing the transformation of labour relations in the mines.

Although copper miners fared relatively better than workers in other industries, they too felt the effects of neoliberal ‘rationalization’. Corporación Nacional del Cobre (CODELCO), the state-owned copper company, cut its full-time workforce by 17 per cent in the late 1970s, transferring many support services and non-skilled jobs to contracted workers (contratistas). Between 1975 and 1984, CODELCO dismissed 6,000 full-time employees and hired 9,000 contratistas. Empresas contratistas sought out inexperienced, low-wage workers and refused to provide adequate medical care, social security payments or even timely salary disbursements. As the CTC observed, contracted workers ‘do the same job for much lower pay and … are not even treated as human beings’. Alongside the introduction of new technologies, CODELCO’s replacement of full-time workers with contratistas made employment in the mining sector more precarious, exacerbated the loss of professional training and changed the social
identity of mining. It also changed the nature of life and work in mining towns, which historically revolved around the corporatist welfare system of the mines’ old North American owners. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, hospitals in mining camps were privatised, schools shuttered and cultural centres and sports arenas closed. CTC president Rodolfo Seguel described CODELCO’s turn to contratistas as ‘a permanent threat to labor stability, a generator of innumerable conflicts, and a covert way of finalizing the privatization of CODELCO’.

While miners had long been isolated from the rest of the country’s workforce, the junta’s assault on copper workers’ derechos adquiridos unintentionally created new space for labour activism in the wake of the 1982 debt crisis. In April 1983, the CTC called for a day of national protest against the Pinochet dictatorship, emboldening tens of thousands of workers to take to the streets on 11 May demanding an end to the regime’s neoliberal policies and a return to democracy. The following month, miners halted production at the world’s largest underground copper mine for 24 hours in an illegal strike. The shutdown at El Teniente spurred wildcat stoppages at copper mines across the country as well as the arrest of the CTC’s leadership and the dismissal of several thousands of miners. After years of minimal labour activism, the CTC’s declaration in April 1983 at Punta de Tralca marked the re-emergence of the country’s labour movement and placed the CTC at the helm of the national opposition to Pinochet. As the union famously declared at Punta de Tralca, ‘our problem is not one more or one less law… but a complete economic, social, cultural, and political system that has us smothered and bound.’ Copper workers, the CTC said, had ‘lost their privilege’ as a result of the junta’s economic policies. They were ‘tired of seeing and feeling so much arbitrariness, [and] arrived at the conclusion that . . . the time had come to say, “enough!” and rise up to fight for systematic change’.

The CTC’s congress came on the heels of the 1983 Mining Code (D.L. 18.248), which allowed multinational corporations to explore and exploit copper reserves not owned by CODELCO. D.L. 18.248 was among the most liberal mining legislations in the world and granted foreign investors virtually unregulated access to el sueldo de Chile. As foreign capital flooded the copper sector, the CTC’s leadership framed their grievances not around internal class hierarchies but around the more inclusive concepts of national unity, sovereignty and anti-imperialism. Copper workers, who had long equated themselves with Chile’s national identity, were well positioned to make this symbolic appeal. Anti-imperialism was a widely engaging message, and the CTC’s declaration at Punta de Tralca galvanised workers, students and shanty town activists against the dictatorship and its neoliberal policies. From May 1983 to October 1984, the new social movements organised 11 successful mass protests in which tens of thousands of Chileans participated. Activists were violently repressed for their participation, and Pinochet threatened to carry out ‘another 11 September’ in 1985 if the unrest continued.

In hindsight, Peter Winn observes, the years between 1983 and 1985 were the heyday of the labour movement’s confrontation of the dictatorship. The jailing of union leaders, internecine political divisions and the impact of the economic crisis all contributed to the CTC’s decreasing leadership role in the national opposition. The CTC’s wariness of military retaliation – multiple times abandoning their call for a national strike at the 11th hour – left shanty-town activists overexposed and illustrated cracks within the new social movements. In late 1986, Seguel resigned as the head of the CTC due to strong pressure from the military regime. His detractors celebrated and pronounced, ‘as for the so-called social mobilizations, copper workers do not want anything to do with them. In 1983, we sacrificed, and it led to the dismissal of 22 union leaders and 540 miners. Other unions should assume this role now.’

As copper unions turned inwards in defence of their own, old political parties and hierarchies re-emerged to negotiate Pinochet’s exit. Sidelining the social movements that had created the conditions necessary for the political opening, the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia established its control over the transition and called for neoliberalism ‘with a human face’, as Patricio Aylwin famously pronounced. They embraced modernisation and disregarded its structural flaws. Scholars have posited that the Concertación’s fear of conflict is one of the great legacies of the dictatorship, evidencing how, in the words of Fernando Blanco, ‘the [neoliberal] model also created its own subjects’ who were willing to make concessions in order to never again return to military rule. The pain of dictatorship no doubt heightened elite anxieties, but the democratic transition also reflected the traditionally elitist nature of
Chilean politics. Just as Christian Democrats had embraced capitalism throughout the twentieth century, treating wealth inequality as a small price to pay for ‘modernization’, the concessions made by the Concertación at the end of the Cold War affected those at the bottom far more than those at the top.

In the late 1980s, Olivares Solís had returned to Chile. After the coup, he was arrested in Santiago’s military school and sent to Dawson Island, the concentration camp at the southern tip of Patagonia. He spent over 12 years in exile in Venezuela, where he followed the political debate of the exile community and the multiple divisions of the Socialist Party. He ran for congress in the first democratic election since March 1973, obtaining the first majority in his beloved district of Rancagua. The copper family had never forgotten him and, as in the 1960s, he continued to defend workers’ rights. In 1992, during a heated congressional debate about the project to build a statue to commemorate Salvador Allende, he reminded the political right that Allende ‘never had and did not leave this world with blood on his hands’. In contrast, Olivares continued, he was ‘consistent not only with a political ideal but with the workers, with the dispossessed of the country and, also, with the Chilean people’.

Aylwin’s election brought both change and continuity to Chile’s copper mines. After nearly two decades of state neglect, the Concertación sought to modernise CODELCO and make it internationally competitive; however, these efforts also produced new labour relations, downsizing and ‘flexible’ work schedules that constrained miners’ demands. As copper unions struggled to defend a state-owned company in an economy that prioritised the liberalisation of trade and investment, miners also continued to debate what nationalisation should look like in practice. Some believed that copper profits should be redistributed to benefit all Chileans, while others felt that the dangerous and physically taxing work of mining entitled its workers to a greater share of the pie. These were long-standing disputes, but they compromised the effectiveness of miners’ activism in the long transition to democracy.

**Abbreviations**

| Acronym | Description |
|---------|-------------|
| ANSCO  | Asociación Nacional de Supervisores del Cobre (National Association of Copper Supervisors) |
| CODELCO | Corporación Nacional del Cobre (National Copper Corporation) |
| CTC    | Confederación de Trabajadores del Cobre (Copper Workers’ Confederation) |
| CUT    | Central Única de Trabajadores; then from 1988, Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (Workers’ United Centre of Chile) |

**Declarations and conflict of interests**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work.

**Notes**

1 ‘La Confederación de los Trabajadores del Cobre en todos los frentes’, 8.
2 Salvador Allende, Plaza de los Héroes de Rancagua, 11 July 1971. In: *Textos de Salvador Allende (1971)*, 263.
3 See ‘Declaración de la Directiva luego del discurso de Allende en Rancagua’, in Partido Demócrata Cristiano, *La nacionalización del cobre*.
4 Fernandois, Busto and Schneuer, *Historia política del cobre en Chile*; Hurtado-Torres, *The Gathering Storm*; Moran, *Multinational Corporations*; Novoa Monreal, *La Batalla por el cobre*.
5 Winn, *Weavers of Revolution*; Schlotterbeck, *Beyond the Vanguard*; Frens-String, ‘Communists, Commissars, and Consumers’; Gaudichaud, *Poder popular y cordones industriales*.
6 Biblioteca del Congreso, ‘reseña parlamentaria’.
7 Latcham, *Chuquicamata Estado Yankee*.
8 O’Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission*.
9 Klubock, *Contested Communities*; Finn, *Tracing the Veins*; Vergara, *Copper Workers*.
10 Olivares Solís, ‘Cuarenta y nueve años haciendo patria’; Vergara, ‘Un Exitoso esfuerzo de unidad gremial’.
11 ‘La Confederación de los Trabajadores del Cobre en todos los frentes’.

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