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The Chilean miners: fake solidarity in the land of “every man for himself”

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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Like millions of others, I was absolutely delighted to see the trapped miners in the San José mine in Chile getting out alive from their stressful, claustrophobic confinement which they’d been in for almost 70 days as a result of negligence on the part of the mining companies. I could only be thrilled to see this terrible story of grief and suffering come to a happy ending and see tears exchanged for bursts of laughter. But at the same time, mixed with my joy at seeing these 33 condemned men return to life, I still had a feeling that was a mixture of revulsion and anger at the show put on by the very people who had dug what could have been these men’s graves. I have no wish to be a killjoy, but when the natural euphoria that has engulfed the country calms down, a great many questions will need to be asked.

The first is that although the government is blatantly attempting to reap political credit for this miracle of the rescue of 33 men who were buried alive under tons of rock, 700 metres below the

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surface, the reality is that they never should have been buried in the first place! The mine had been closed for safety reasons and was reopened precisely because of the government policy that sacrifices workers' safety, workers' lives for the benefit of the entrepreneurial class. Moreover, at a time when both the government and the bosses were taking these men for dead, it was the tenacity of the miners themselves and their workmates who provided information and the benefit of their experience, that were responsible for keeping the search alive until they were found. The miners are alive not thanks to the Piñera government, but to the perseverance of the workers who pressured them into making the rescue a reality, and thanks to the expertise of the miners themselves who knew how deal with their situation underground. If it had been down to the government and the bosses, these miners would have been forgotten and abandoned like hundreds of other workers who every year are forgotten and abandoned when they die in accidents, the vast majority of which are preventable.

But once the cameras arrived, the indifference was immediately forgotten, replaced by an almost feverish concern; the country and its ruling classes were struck by “Telethon syndrome”, all smiles for the cameras and hugs for the victims. But this is the sort of solidarity that tricks us, because it makes us forget that we live in a country where there is very, very little solidarity, a country where the “every man for himself” mentality was imposed on the inhabitants through the blood and fire of nearly four decades of rampant neoliberalism. It is fake solidarity because it is used to their own advantage – to increase their popularity ratings, for the sake of propaganda and marketing, to make political capital. Apple will give them I-pods, Farkas gives them 5 million pesos each¹, some

¹ Leonardo Farkas, a billionaire businessman and mine owner known for his appearances on TV Telethons and handing out money on the street. 5 million Chilean pesos equals approximately US\$10,000.

have offered holidays in the Greek islands, others the chance to see Real Madrid or Manchester United play, a third-class politician (who, incidentally, is the president) poses for pictures with them... everyone using them quite blatantly as propaganda for their product, sports club, country or government. I can't stop feeling a bad taste in my mouth when I see how they are exploiting them in such a way.

This is the extent to which the manipulation reaches, with Piñera calling on the world to remember Chile as the country that rescues and forget about the Pinochet dictatorship — which made him a billionaire, with wealth far beyond what the vast majority of people can even imagine. Think how the world would react if German Chancellor Angela Merkel asked the world to forget about Hitler. I cannot help feeling deep disgust at the vile opportunism of it all. But I'm not surprised. For better or for worse, it is part of the plans by the ruling block to wipe out the “original sin” of our exemplary democracy, to forget the authoritarian-dictatorial “slip up” that drowned the hopes of three generations of Chileans in blood, part of the imposed collective amnesia by this country's propertied class. All this was was another opportunity to flog what they have been flogging us for the past twenty years.

This is a country which lives on fiction, where the rescue becomes a form of reality show, with of course no shortage of spicy stories about lovers and other scandals to divert the hoi polloi. A reality show where the reasons for this tragedy are conveniently forgotten, where the reason these men were entombed goes unmentioned — an economic model which seeks the maximum profit for the least possible cost. It is an economic model which puts subcontractors, workers in conditions of terrible danger, in the mines and other places, making them carry out risky work which in many cases costs them their lives, while their employers amass enormous fortunes.

This is only a fictitious solidarity, solidarity which exists in front of the cameras, for show, but which disappears in the anonymous

day-to-day interaction of our grey cities. This fake solidarity is handed out like aspirin to feed the inflated image we have of ourselves. But above all it is fictitious solidarity because this solidarity between buried and buriers disappears amid a sea of inequality in a country where neither the society as a whole nor the economy holds solidarity as its guiding principle. A quick example: while the miners are being offered millions in contracts by all and sundry, the company is refusing to pay them for the time they spent underground. Now with the miners themselves rolling in money, they are probably not too concerned about receiving their miserable wages, but there are thousands of other, less fortunate workers who are languishing in one of the country's Workers' Hospitals, to the indifference of their companies, without any wages as long as they remain unable to work due to injuries they got on the job. That's capitalism...

But let's not forget that 439 workers died in workplace accidents in this country in 2009, and where was the solidarity for them? Where were all the efforts to save them from their mines or from all the various workplaces they died in? For them there was only the indifferent gaze of the authorities or the criminal entrepreneurial class. 439 human beings with the same abilities, the same right to live, laugh and enjoy the good things of life as the 33 miners brought back from the dead.

So that's why I have all these conflicting feelings about the rescue and the coverage of it. Because beyond the happiness we all feel for the good fortune these workers have had, escaping with their lives, beyond the plastic, showbusiness smiles, beyond all the presidential visits and hugs, beyond all the "generosity" being paraded before the cameras by certain companies (or more accurately, by their marketing departments), I still think of the thousands of unfortunates who are sacrificed year after year on the altar of profit, whose fate is only met with indifference. I cannot help thinking that if those same workers had organised themselves to fight against the dangerous conditions they were (and still are)

forced to work in, if they had resisted allowing themselves to be buried, they would have been treated like criminals. I cannot help thinking that in a country which boasts of its solidarity, at that very moment there were also 32 Mapuche political prisoners, some under the age of 18, who were considered "terrorists" and who were left to waste away on a hunger strike which was hidden from the eyes of the national and international press, and who are being treated in a disgracefully paternalistic way by the government. I cannot help thinking of all this, despite my immense joy at seeing the miners returning to us.

What a shitty, hypocritical country.