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# **CONTESTED COMMUNITIES**

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Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's

El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904–1951

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## **PREFACE**

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On a cold winter night in 1991, immersed in research for this book, I accompanied close to two hundred copper miners as they marched through the streets of Rancagua, the city below the El Teniente mine, to protest the recently elected democratic government's plans to expand foreign investment in new copper enterprises and thus initiate the incremental privatization of an industry nationalized in 1971 by the socialist government of Salvador Allende. The mood that night was subdued and markedly different from that of miners in strikes and protests during the four decades preceding the military coup of 1973, when thousands of workers and their family members would routinely take to the streets in community-wide mobilizations. The march was noticeable for the small number of protesters and the absence of women from workers' families, and it reflected profound changes in the Chilean economy, society, and politics that had undermined miners' militant traditions of labor activism and strong community ties since the 1973 military coup of Augusto Pinochet. The unified working-class community and cohesive mining workforce that had been created during one stage of the internationalization of capital following the First World War was now being rent asunder by transformations in Chile's insertion into the global economy.

In this book I chart the construction of a permanent working-class community in Chile's export mining sector in response to North American capital's requirements for a trained and stable labor force. I examine changes in both men's and women's lives provoked by this new stage in capitalist economic development. As many writers have observed, "globalization" is both shaped by ideologies of gender and structures gender relations through the international division of labor, the organization of labor markets, and the ordering of household production. In Chile, North American capital employed gendered social welfare and labor policies

in order to reorganize relations between men and women and everyday forms of sociability to conform to the model of the male-headed nuclear family, redefining working-class masculinity and femininity in terms of the ideology of female domesticity. The logic of economic development and capital accumulation was articulated with an autonomous, but related, logic of power based on gendered social hierarchy. Thus, the community and class identities forged during this process of capitalist development in the mining export sector were informed by new arrangements of gender.

Globalization is not an inevitable or inexorable process. The ways in which local societies are integrated into the international capitalist system are shaped as much by internal social, political, and cultural configurations of forces as by international structures of trade and circulation. This study shows that capital's strategies are played out on terrain molded by forms of social life shaped by gender, as well as internal patterns of class relations and state formation. In Chile, both men and women struggled against the reorganization of their economic and social lives according to the dictates of foreign capital in the export sector. They asserted control over both their labor and their social-sexual lives. But, even as they resisted radical changes in their patterns of everyday life, men and women came to identify with new gendered concepts of work and family and built a stable community of male-headed households in response to the initiatives of North American capital.

The formation of a permanent working-class community in the export sector was articulated with the process of state formation in Chile following the First World War. The development of an activist state and corporatist labor relations system after 1930 buttressed the North American company's corporate welfare policies; male workers were provided new guarantees, such as the right to unionize and a "family wage," while women had the right to male workers' wages and benefits. At the same time, the state's regulation of labor relations, the legitimization of a new set of rights in both corporate and state social welfare programs, and the development of nationalist languages of citizenship offered workers new resources in their conflicts with foreign capital. Men and women drew on the strength of their community and a sense of gendered rights to a family wage, backed by the state, to confront the power of the North American mining company in El Teniente. Thus, the process of capital accumulation in Chile's foreign-controlled export sector and the power of the North

American mining company was limited, modified, and challenged by the formation of an activist and interventionist state and forms of working-class mobilization, rooted in new structures of community and shaped by new definitions of gender, citizenship, and class.

The 1973 military coup in Chile transformed Chile's social and political landscape. The regime dismantled the corporatist system of labor relations established during the 1930s and unleashed a campaign of terror against organized labor and the Left. In addition, the military government embarked on a radical policy of economic restructuring according to the tenets of neoliberal, free-market ideology. Chile's insertion into the world economy was redrawn as the military dictatorship opened the economy to trade and investment. Whereas the copper-driven export economy had created the conditions for a stable working-class community organized around male-headed nuclear families, in the new free market, labor was (under)valued for its flexibility and mobility. The state-run copper company began to employ private subcontractors who could provide cheap, nonunion, temporary labor. In addition, liberalization created new export economies, mostly in the fruit, forestry, and fishing industries, that required a part-time and inexpensive labor force. Today, Chile's fruit exporters employ female workers at low wages, provide few benefits, and actively prevent the unionization of the workforce. Neoliberal economic restructuring in Chile, as in many Latin American countries, has eroded the structure of the working-class, male-headed nuclear family by increasing low-paying "feminized" jobs and eliminating jobs that provided male workers a family wage. The dismantling of state social programs and protections and the repression of organized labor under the dictatorship only accelerated and exacerbated this process. In El Teniente, working-class men and women no longer enjoy the forms of community solidarity or closely knit family ties that had been the basis for the development of a powerful labor movement until 1973.

By tracing the emergence of a dynamic labor movement in the copper industry during the first half of the century, I do not seek to romanticize working-class resistance but to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of past challenges fashioned by working people to the march of capitalism. Thus, I explore the dialectical process in which transformations in the process of capital accumulation and the structure of the global market destroyed old arrangements of class and gender, while forging a unified

community that provided the basis for a militant working-class politics committed to socialist change and to the nationalization of the foreign-owned copper industry. In addition, I analyze the tensions, fractures, and contradictions in working-class culture and politics before 1973. The resilient community identity and robust labor politics of the mining enclave masked fundamental inequalities between men and women; indeed, the strength of workers' challenge to the authority of North American capital was predicated on the subordination of women within the nuclear family. As was clear during that rainy night in 1991, to confront Chile's new role in the global market and a hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism, advocated by the stewards of the transition to democracy as avidly as by the ideologues of the military regime, the men and women of the El Teniente mining community will have to imagine and build new forms of community based on shifting definitions of work, class, and gender.