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Mexico

# Mexican miners and steelworkers on strike

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**ON APRIL 20 EIGHT** hundred state and federal police launched an assault on 500 striking workers who had been occupying a steel mill in Lázaro Cárdenas. Two were killed, five seriously injured and 40 wounded. A video released to the press shows Michoacán police taking aim at the strikers.

Union members and townspeople retook the plant while representatives from unions and human rights organizations converged on the scene. Meanwhile, Villacero Corporation, which owns the plant, accused the strikers of being "terrorists." This is the latest incident in a months-long struggle.

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At the beginning of April, after a brief national wildcat, miners and steel workers launched a series of strikes for union autonomy. If successful, these would transform both Mexico's labor movement and its political system.

At first the mining and steel companies, the employers association, and the Mexican government stood together against the strikers, whose backers include the independent National Union of Workers (UNT), a Catholic Bishop, and other mining and metal workers unions around the world.

Then, on April 10, Altos Hornos de Mexico SA, the nation's largest steelmaker, broke ranks with Grupo Mexico, stating in a full-page ad in a local daily, that Labor Secretary Francisco Salazar is causing "chaos."

Mexican courts declared the strikes illegal, but the strikes continued with labor leaders calling for a nationwide one-hour strike on April 28. At stake in this contest is a system of state and employer control of unions that has lasted over 80 years. If Mexican workers should ever achieve genuinely independent unions, not only would they have more economic strength, but they could become a social force and a political power.

### **Background to the Battle**

The battle began with a big bang. More than a quarter of a million miners and steelworkers walked off the job between March 1-3 in wildcat strikes at 70 companies in at least eight states from central to northern Mexico, virtually paralyzing the mining industry.

The strike resulted from an attempt by the government to remove the Mexican Miners Union's top officer, General Secretary Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, and replace him with Elías Morales Hernández, a union dissident who is reportedly backed by the Grupo Mexico mining company.

The coup in their union led miners to strike insisting that the government recognize Gómez Urrutia. In many mining towns and cities the miners also marched and rallied demanding not only the restitution of their leader but also safer conditions.

The strike by members of the National Union of Mining and Metallurgical Workers of Mexico (SNTMMRM) resulted from both labor union and political causes. The explosion and cave in at the Pasta de Conchos mine in San Juan de Las Sabinas, Coahuila in northern Mexico on February 19 killed 65 miners. The Miners Union leader Gómez Urrutia blamed the employer, Grupo Mexico, calling the deaths "industrial homicide." The Pasta de Conchos cave-in set off a storm. Throughout Mexico politicians, academics, intellectuals, and ordinary people criticized the mining company.

Grupo Mexico stock fell. Copper and other commodity prices rose. The Mexican Catholic Bishops Conference criticized the employer's negligence and called for an international investigation, expressing their lack of confidence in the government.

### **The Ousting of Gómez Urrutia**

While miners throughout the country mourned the death of their brothers and complained of health and safety conditions in their own mines, there was no official or wildcat strike in the immediate aftermath of the accident.

Then, on February 28 the Mexican Secretary of Labor announced that Gómez Urrutia was not actually the head of the union, but that the real general secretary was Elías Morales Hernández. The government's action was based on part of Mexican labor law known as "taking note" (toma de nota), under which the government recognizes the legally elected officers of labor unions.

Six years earlier Morales Hernández had appealed to the Secretary of Labor, arguing that he had actually been elected and should be the new head of the union. The government had rejected the appeal by Morales Hernández, and in 2002 then Secretary of Labor Carlos Abascal Carranza recognized Gómez Urrutia as the general secretary.

Why had the Mexican government suddenly opted to overturn its own earlier decision, recognize the dissident, and bring him out of retirement to assume leadership of the Miners Union? The answer has partly to do with the Miners Union and the recent accident, but just as much to do with the Congress of Labor (CT), the umbrella organization that brings together most of the largest Mexican labor federations and industrial unions.

### **Official Labor Movement in Crisis**

In mid-February 2006, Miners Union leader Gómez Urrutia joined together with Isaías González, head of the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC), to challenge the election of Víctor Flores Morales, head of the Mexican Railroad Workers Union (STFRM), for control of the Congress of Labor (CT).

Gómez Urrutia was trying to position himself to become the top leader of the numerically most important Mexican labor organization. His ambitions troubled many.

The CT, which brings together most of the "official" unions of Mexico, historically formed part of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the ruling party of Mexico. The CT had historically backed the PRI's candidates, supported the PRI's policies, and served in the Mexican Congress as PRI senators and congressmen.

More recently the CT had worked out a modus vivendi with Mexican president Vicente Fox, collaborating with his National Action Party (PAN). Napoleón Gómez Urrutia's attempt to take over the CT not only challenged Railroad Workers Union leader Víctor Flores, it also worried the PRI and PAN.

### **Rival Leaders**

Víctor Flores had been the ideal labor union leader under both PRI and PAN governments. He had worked closely with the government to carry out the privatization of the Mexican railroads, leading to their sale to the Union Pacific and the Kansas City railroads.

When rank-and-file railroad workers protested, Víctor Flores cooperated with the government to have them fired - easy enough with some 100,000 railroad workers losing their jobs in the privatization - and if that did not work he had sent his thugs to beat them and threaten them with murder.

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While somewhat volatile - as a PRI Congressman Victor Flores had once tried to strangle another representative - he was loyal to the government's program of neoliberalism.

Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, on the other hand, seemed, from the government's point of view, to be becoming a loose cannon.

Gómez Urrutia had inherited the leadership of the mine from his father Napoleón Gómez Sada. Both had been typical charros, that is, union bureaucrats absolutely loyal to the PRI. They had turned out the vote for the party, collaborated with the employers, and expelled union activists or leaders who opposed them or supported other political parties.

Doing all of those things, they enjoyed the wealth, power and privilege to which their loyalty entitled them. Lately, however Gómez Urrutia had begun to challenge both the employers and the Congress of Labor/ PRI leadership.

### **The Miners' Union in Struggle**

In June 2005, Mexican miners joined their compañeros in Peru and the United States as more than 10,000 miners carried out a simultaneous protest against Grupo Mexico to demand that the company stop violating workers' rights. The three unions accused Grupo Mexico of having a policy of repression, exploitation and unwanted involvement in union affairs.

The protest was organized by the United Steel Workers of America (USW) in the United States, the Federation of Metal Workers of Peru (FETIMAP), and the National union of Miners and Metal Workers (SNTMM) of Mexico. The international solidarity against the Mexican mining company was backed by the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF).

Then in September 2005, Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union won a 46-day strike against two steel companies in Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacan, in one of the most important strikes in Mexico in a decade. The local union and its 2,400 members succeeded in winning an 8% wage gain, 34% in new benefits, and a 7,250 peso one-time only bonus.

The union had broken the government-employer-imposed wage ceiling. The Mexican Miners Union also had an impact on domestic politics, playing a critical role in the union bloc that opposed the Fox administration's labor law reform package.

All these actions, economic and political, threatened to upset the Mexican system of labor control by which the governmental labor authorities, the employers, and the "official" unions of the CT collude to channel and suppress workers.

Then in February, Gómez Urrutia made his bid to take over the CT, raising the prospect that he would lead labor struggles at a national level. Clearly at that point the Fox government must have already been looking for a way to get rid of him. Then his remarks on Grupo Mexico's "industrial homicide" made him persona non grata with the PRI and with the employers.

### **Government Repression**

President Vicente Fox's administration took swift action to defend itself and support Grupo Mexico. First, as already mentioned the government brought Elías Morales Hernández out of retirement and declared him to be the legitimate

head of the union.

Second, the government indicted Gómez Urrutia for allegedly embezzling \$55 million given to the union during the privatization of the Cananea copper mine under the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Third, labor boards and courts declared the strikes illegal for various reasons, but often because they were inter-union conflicts.

While these might seem like particularly original and creative moves on the part of the government, they are in fact all rather standard measures.

Gómez Urrutia refused to accept Morales Hernández's usurpation of the union leadership, and local unions throughout the country - infuriated by the attempt to appoint a man backed by Grupo Mexico - voted to back Gómez Urrutia. He also categorically denied the charges of embezzlement, saying the money had been paid out to union members. His supporters filed a charge of industrial homicide against Secretary of Labor Francisco Salazar and two mine inspectors.

Meanwhile miners keep walking out on strike at mines throughout the country. The work stoppage is costing Group Mexico about \$2.5 million a day in lost production at La Caridad, the country's second-largest copper mine.

### The Larger Context

The struggle over the Congress of Labor and now over the Miners Union takes place at a crucial time: Mexico is in the midst of a national election campaign, in which the conservative National Action Party's candidate Felipe Calderón and the Institutional Revolutionary Party's candidate Roberto Madrazo are being challenged by Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution.

López Obrador is running on a populist platform calling for putting "the poor first." He is leading in the polls, and while international bankers and Mexican industrialists have said they can live with him, some fear the poor make take his slogan seriously.

At the same time, Subcomandante Marcos, leader of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), has left the Lacandon Forest in Chiapas to organize the "other campaign." This is not an attempt to win election, but rather an effort to organize the anti-capitalist forces of Mexico into a social movement with the power to overturn the government, call a constituent assembly, and write a new constitution for an egalitarian (and, though he hardly ever uses the word, socialist) Mexico.

Marcos has recently gone out of his way to speak to Mexican workers and union members, blue-collar laborers in private industry and white-collar workers in government agencies, suggesting that they have to turn against their union leaders, the bosses, and the politicians. Most of the people Marcos speaks to - the poor, Indian communities, the unemployed - don't have much economic leverage. Now the miners' strike has shown what real economic power and potential political power could be.

The Miners Union's nationwide wildcat strike showed Mexican industrial workers' taking center stage for the first time in decades. Twice in the past there have been such strikes against the Mexican government: first in 1959 when the Mexican Railroad Workers union called a nationwide strike, and again in 1976 when Electrical Workers and their allies in the Democratic Tendency carried out a national strike.

Both those strikes were crushed by the Mexican government - the PRI's one-party-state - using the army, police and massive firings. The Mexican government of that era, the era of the PRI, had the political and social power to carry out such military and police actions to put down a national labor walkout.

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The Fox government, as demonstrated by six years of political failure, economic doldrums and social disintegration, does not have the force to face down the labor movement. A number of movements with different political leaderships and goals - López Obrador and the Party of the Democratic Revolution, Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas, and Gómez Urrutia and the Miners Union - appear to be aligning in ways that could turn Mexico upside down.

Whether that happens depends on three things: 1) whether the government continues to make mistakes that inadvertently advantage and encourage its enemies; 2) whether the leaders of these movements prove willing to and capable of setting broader forces in motion; 3) whether workers, feeling and seeing their strength, move to build their own independent force.

[<http://internationalviewpoint.org/local/cache-vignettes/L80xH87/danLaBotz-smaller-e2381.jpg>]