

After deadly blast, Mexican miners launch strikes to demand safe conditions

Rafael Azul
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In the wake of the death of 65 coal miners at Grupo México's Pasta de Conchos mine, located in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila, more than 5,000 miners struck several operations owned by the giant mining company February 28 to protest unsafe working conditions and demand decent wages.

Four thousand miners at two of the world's largest open-pit copper mines, Cananea and La Caridad, met Tuesday and walked off their jobs to protest "poor maintenance and lack of safety equipment" at the mines. The strike shut down mining and processing operations in Zonora, near the Arizona border. Copper miners also walked off the job at mines in Nacozari and Agua Prieta. Another 1,500 workers laid down their tools at a zinc mine in Zacatecas and at a smelter in San Luis Potosi, both in central Mexico, after negotiations for a new contract failed.

Workers are demanding that Grupo México, the world's fourth-largest copper producer, spend more on spare parts and machinery to prevent another disaster such as the deadly gas explosion February 19 at the company's coal mine in Coahuila, near the US border, according to the National Union of Mine and Metal Workers (SNTMM).

Union president Napoleon Gomez described the explosion at the mine as "industrial homicide." Gomez called for a one-day strike March 1, by his union's 260,000 members, although the national walkout was initially called to oppose moves by the Labor Ministry to remove Gomez—a longtime SNTMM leader and fixture in the former ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI—and replace him with a union rival. (Initial reports Thursday indicated that thousands of miners and metal workers were participating in the national walkout).

Taking into account the union's role before and

during the Pasta de Conchos tragedy, Gomez's words and the protest strike were designed to cover up the union's own complicity in allowing Grupo México to maintain unsafe conditions. By calling for a national strike, union leaders are attempting to place themselves at the head of the spontaneous movement of zinc, coal and copper miners for the purposes of controlling and suppressing it.

The explosion that resulted in the death and probable entombment of 65 miners at Pasta de Conchos exposed the unsafe working conditions at the mine as well as the general circumstances that miners and their families confront while producing vast profits for Grupo México's stockholders.

Grupo México is one of the most profitable companies in the country. Last year, it reported sales of US\$5.2 billion, an increase of 23.5 percent over 2004. Its earnings reached US\$1.7 billion in 2005, a 37 percent increase over the previous year. Last summer, 1,500 US copper miners were involved in a four-month strike against the company's ASARCO division, which is using the bankruptcy courts to tear up contracts and pensions. During that struggle, thousands of Mexican miners and metal workers conducted a one-day sympathy strike.

Last Saturday, mine managers and government officials announced the suspension of rescue efforts at the Pasta de Conchos mine, declaring that the level of methane made a continued search extremely hazardous and, in any case, rendered it impossible that any of the miners might still be alive. They also said it was most probable that all 65 trapped miners had died from the force of the initial explosion and may be buried under tons of rock.

Officials suspended the search for the bodies until such time as the gas could be vented by drilling holes

deep into the mine—a process that could take months. Relatives of the victims suspect the mine may be sealed and closed without the bodies of their loved ones ever having been recovered.

SNTMM President Gomez denounced the company and the government, claiming that they both conspired to prolong the agony of the families when they knew that the 65 miners were already dead. The union official also tried to deflect critical reports in the press that the SNTMM had distanced itself from the victims' families during their ordeal until the end of the week, when it proposed to negotiate compensation for the victims.

In fact, the explosion and its aftermath revealed decades of collaboration between the SNTMM, Grupo México and the Mexican government, during which time the union ignored health and safety violations and permitted the use of poorly paid, untrained temporary workers in the mines. The miners' union allowed the mine to stay in operation despite an inspector's report—issued 12 days before the explosion—detailing serious safety violations, including dangerously high levels of methane gas.

The Mexican daily *La Cronica* reported Wednesday that Labor Ministry interviews conducted with miners Tuesday revealed that the mine had not been inspected for 18 months prior to February's inspection. The Labor Ministry would grant waivers authorizing the mine to continue operations, in return for “cash, alcohol and women,” miners declared.

The newspaper also reported on dangerous conditions, including sparks flying from frayed wires—poorly patched up with electrical tape—too thin to cope with electrical current surges. Most miners believe that the explosion was sparked by an electrical malfunction, possibly when a conveyor belt was turned on.

The miners also told reporters that the transportation system into the mine, an aging locomotive, leaked fuel and was prone to overheating. These conditions were well known to management, as well as to the union. The miners denounced Pedro Camarillo, the union official at the mine, for allowing these conditions to exist and called for his removal. On Tuesday, the Labor Ministry removed Camarillo.

Grupo México and the government have offered each of the victims' families US\$72,000 and other benefits.

On Tuesday, SNTMM leaders advised the families not to accept the offer, assuring them the union would negotiate more generous settlements.

In comparison with compensation for other mine tragedies (in 1969, for example, workers' families each received 6 million pesos or US\$500), management's offer of the equivalent of 10 years' wages, plus retirement benefits and scholarships, is a recognition of the explosive social tensions in the mining community. Management also announced that salaries would continue to be paid to the miners put out of work by the disaster until further notice.

The explosive reaction to this tragedy by these militant sections of miners, including those in Cananea and La Caridad—areas with a rich history of working class struggle that dates back to the 1910 Mexican Revolution—is a reflection of the class tensions that predominate throughout Mexico.



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