National strike by miners, steelworkers reveals class tensions in Mexico

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Last week, more than a quarter-million miners and steelworkers walked off their jobs in one of the largest industrial strikes in Mexico in three decades. Between March 1 and March 3, hundreds of mines and mills across the country were affected by the national strike called by the 270,000-member National Mine and Metal Workers Union (STNMM).

The action began with wildcat strikes by miners on February 28 at a series of copper and zinc mines owned by Grupo Mexico, sparked in large measure by company's callous disregard for safety that resulted in the death of 65 miners in a February 19 explosion at the Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila, near the border with the US state of Texas.

The walkouts followed the decision of the government to end its rescue and recovery efforts at the mine. Fueling the anger of the miners was the callous indifference of President Vicente Fox's administration and the conviction that the government would do nothing to seriously investigate the causes of the mine disaster, let alone end the deadly and oppressive working conditions miners face.

In an effort to contain this explosion, the STNMM called for a national work stoppage on March 1. In addition to protesting the miners' deaths—which union president Napoleon Gomez Urrutia called "industrial homicide"—the STNMM leadership called the strike to oppose the Labor Ministry's decision on February 28 to remove Gomez and replace him with union dissident Elias Morales Hernandez.

Gomez is a fixture in the corrupt Mexican labor bureaucracy who inherited his position from his father and is a prominent figure in the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, which ruled the country for 70 years until Fox's 2000 election.

Although Gomez has long collaborated with the corporate bosses and suppressed rank-and-file workers, the Fox administration is concerned that he is losing his grip over his members, who have been involved in a series of recent struggles. Moreover, the SNTMM has opposed some of Fox's initiatives to reform the long-standing corporatist relations between the employers, the government and the unions that have been used to suppress the class struggle while providing the labor bureaucracy with lucrative careers.

The widespread response to the union's call for a national strike is not an indication of any support for Gomez—a millionaire and Harvard-trained economist with no serious connections to rank-and-file miners and steelworkers—but an indication of the explosive character of class tensions in Mexico.

This was the first national strike by miners since a strike over union recognition and wages in 1944 that was part of a broad labor offensive that included strikes by communication workers and oil workers.

Last week's protest strike shut down mines across Mexico that produce coal, copper, silver, zinc and other minerals. It also shut down the Altos Hornos and Mittal steel mills; the latter Dutch-owned company is Mexico's largest steel producer.

Virtually every union miner across Mexico participated in the walkout. News of the strike caused a rise in the world price of silver—Mexico produces 15 percent of the world's silver. The 70 mines paralyzed by the strike lost US$17 million on Thursday, and the steel mills lost US$10 million.

Thousands of workers stayed out on March 2, including the Sonoran copper miners at the sprawling Cananea and La Caridad mines near the border with the US state of Arizona.

The tragedy at the Pasta de Conchos mine revealed the level of exploitation that exists in the Mexican mining industry, where tens of thousands of coal miners risk their lives and health every day for near-starvation wages.

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Earning as little as US$7 a day, miners are working under unsafe and unsanitary conditions and using outdated equipment and monitoring devices that are in many cases deliberately sabotaged by management to prevent the interruption of coal production.

Pasta de Conchos also shed light on the corporatist arrangements between mine owners, government inspectors and union officials, which exist at the expense of miners. The union's collaboration became clear when the relatives of the trapped miners at Pasta de Conchos began to criticize STNMM President Gomez for letting a week go by without visiting the mine.

When he finally arrived, relatives called him a "rat" and chased him into the mining company's offices. Gomez would not explain why the union had not moved to close the mine two weeks before the blast, when an inspector's report detailed safety violations at the mine, including high levels of explosive methane gas.

The government's heavy-handed efforts to remove Gomez behind the backs of the union membership and replace him with rival bureaucrat Elias Morales only angered the miners further. The Labor Secretariat justified its undemocratic intervention by claiming that Morales had been the real winner in union elections in 2002, reversing the Ministry's previous decision that recognized Gomez as the leader.

While the miners' protests and last week's national strike were sparked by the industrial murder of the 65 Coajuila miners, the motive force behind the walkout is the fundamental transformation of industrial and social relations over the last two decades.

Driven by the debt crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, the bulk of Mexico's mineral wealth—which had been state-owned before 1982—has been privatized. Pressured by the US and the International Monetary Fund to balance its budget through the sale of state-owned assets, Mexico's mines, steel mills and other industries were sold of at very favorable terms to the buyers.

Hand in hand with the sale of state-owned firms, so-called labor reforms were instituted that facilitated an all-out assault on wages. Hammered by a dramatic increase in unemployment, real wages for unskilled workers have steadily fallen over the last two decades while wages for skilled workers have remained stagnant.

According to a study conducted by Mexico's "Universidad Obrera" (Labor University), construction industry wages lost 28 percent of their purchasing power between 1988 and 1994 and 33.31 percent between 1994 and 2000. In manufacturing, after increasing 40 percent between 1988 and 1994, real wages fell by 17 percent between 1994 and 2000.

While labor productivity grew by more than 43 percent between 1990 and 2000, the average wage only increased from US$1.45 to US$1.80. By the end of the 1990s, Mexican per-unit labor costs were among the lowest in the world.

Since the year 2000, this process has been aggravated by increasing levels of unemployment, as low-wage export-oriented factories—the so-called maquiladoras—have moved many of their operations to China, placing a further downward pressure on wages. Since 2000, only 1 million jobs have been created, while the labor force grew by 6 million workers.

Statistics for 2003 indicate that the decay of purchasing power continues. Nearly half of all Mexicans in that year lived below the poverty line, and 17 percent lived in extreme poverty. The situation would be worse if it weren't for the dollars sent by Mexican emigrants in the United States and Canada.

A 2004 joint study by Universidad Obrera and Mexico's prestigious Autonomous University determined that to live modestly, an average Mexican family needed to work more than 29 hours a day. This is up from 25 hours and 13 minutes in 1997 and 8 hours and 36 minutes in 1987. The study also indicates that in 2004, an average Mexican family would need to spend 94 percent of its take-home pay for food and rent, leaving 6 percent for everything else.

Falling real wages, growing unemployment and staggering levels of social inequality are what characterize Mexican society today. These are the conditions that lay behind the massive strike that shut down the country's mines and steel mills last week.

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