

Police kill strikers

Mexico: Armed siege of steel mill reveals escalating class war

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The killing of two young metalworkers in a military siege against strikers at a steel mill in Mexico signals a sharp escalation in the class struggle in Mexico.

Two young workers were shot to death, and more than 30 others were injured on Thursday, April 20, following an armed assault by Mexican security forces seeking to put an end to a strike at the Sicartsa steel mill in the city of Lazaro Cardenas, in the southwestern Mexican state of Michoacan.

Workers who spoke to the Mexican Daily *La Jornada* described the attack as a wanton assault in which state and federal security forces — one thousand strong — fired indiscriminately on picketing miners, who resisted fiercely.

Eyewitnesses reported that after killing the first worker, 19-year-old Mario Alberto Castillo, a cop put his boot on Mario's bleeding head and dared the strikers to rescue him. A second worker, Hector Alvarez, 36, was killed shortly thereafter. The *New York Times* and a Mexican daily, *La Crisis*, reported that a third person may have been run over and killed by a police vehicle.

Two of the injured miners — Cirilio Quiñones and Luis Alberto Vargas — are listed in very serious condition and were transported to a Mexico City trauma center.

The military-style assault began at 7 a.m. and lasted until 1 p.m. It was initiated by Michoacan State police with the support of the Federal Preventive Police. Initial reports also suggested that a heavily armed elite squad — the *Grupo Aereo de Reaccion Inmediata* (The Immediate Reaction Airborne Group, GARI) — fired at the pickets from helicopters. This operation was well prepared; while most of the police units appear to have been armed only with tear gas canisters and truncheons, a disciplined squad, armed with AR-15s, AK-47s (two kinds of assault rifles) and 9 mm pistols, was assigned the task of shooting at the workers. GARI is an elite commando unit normally used to combat terrorist and drug-gang activity. Following the confrontation, the strikers discovered scores of spent rifle shells littering the floor of the plant. The entire operation brings to mind the attacks on students and workers during Mexico's dirty war in the 1970s

Though Sicartsa management denied complicity with the

military assault on the strikers, Michoacan's government secretary Enrique Bautista said that the company had demanded the workers' eviction after a government arbitration panel declared the strike illegal. The Michoacan government, controlled by the left-nationalist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), did not hesitate in joining the repression.

Two Michoacan officials, Public Security Secretary Gabriel Jimenez and police chief Jaime Liera Alvarez, resigned in the wake of the incident. Liera admitted that some of the Michoacan cops were armed with assault rifles, allegedly to fire at the workers' feet, if it became necessary. Michoacan Governor Lazaro Cardenas Batel insists that he had ordered that his police not be armed and has called for an investigation. President Vicente Fox did not clarify his role in the operation, but declared that he was "distressed."

Unrepentant over the killing of the two young workers, company lawyer Alejandro Gonzalez declared that Sicartsa would pursue criminal charges against the strikers for committing "terrorist acts."

Though the security forces were not able to dislodge the miners from the occupied mill, 400 members of the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) are occupying strategic positions in this port city.

The strikers are demanding that the "intellectual authors" of this operation be brought to justice. Many blame President Fox for the attack; at the funerals for the slain strikers, many denounced Fox as an assassin. Union officials indicated that no negotiations will take place until all the security forces are withdrawn.

Workers at the plant, represented by the Miners and Metallurgical Workers Union (SNTMM), have been on strike since April 2. Ostensibly, the strike was called to demand the reinstatement of union chief Napoleón Gómez Urrutia. Gómez was dismissed by the Labor Ministry in the wake of the February 19 mine explosion that killed 65 in the Pasta de Conchos coal mine in Coahuila State.

The workers' grievances, however, go much deeper than the defense of Gomez, a multimillionaire economist who has no serious connections to the rank and file in his union and who,

for the most part, stays out of sight from the membership. On Saturday, Sicartsa workers denounced him for not showing up at the funerals of the slain strikers; in February, family members of the 65 Coahuila miners chased him into the company offices when he did show up, calling him a “rat.”

The roots of the Sicartsa struggle stem from the privatization of Mexico’s coal and copper mines in the 1980s and the steel industry in the 1990s. Sicartsa, Altos Hornos, and other enterprises constituted a network of profitable state-owned steel companies employing 50,000 workers. In 1991, they were carved up and offered to private investors in deals that many denounced at the time as fraudulent and corruption-ridden.

Tens of thousands lost their jobs. Employment at the Sicartsa plant in Lazaro Cardenas plummeted from 8,000 to fewer than 4,000 today. In many cases, the new owners proceeded to strip these enterprises of their assets and replaced their employees with non-union contract labor at lower wages.

The SNTMM bureaucracy collaborated with privatization throughout this period. “We believe we shouldn’t confront the changes head on but seek the best possible arrangement for labor,” declared an SNTMM executive board member at Sicartsa in 1991. “What really weakens the union is if it’s not capable of proposing productive alternatives. We are starting to think of the competitiveness of the company but with the organization and participation of the workers” (“From the Many to the Few, Privatization In Mexico,” Laura Carlsen, *Multinational Monitor*, May 1991).

For most workers, working conditions, job security and wages have never recovered from the privatization of these enterprises. Many workers laid off from Sicartsa have been forced to take jobs with outside contractors for less pay. These conditions drove Sicartsa workers to strike for 45 days in August and September 2005. The workers defied a return-to-work order from the Labor Ministry on the ninth day of the strike.

The poverty and unsafe working conditions endured by miners and metalworkers were dramatically exposed by the explosion in Coahuila and the revelations that the accident was the result in part of a conspiracy between mining, government, and union officials to hide evidence of high methane levels at the mine. Driven by the years of deteriorating living standards and working conditions, hundreds of thousands of miners and metalworkers walked off their jobs when the fate of the trapped miners became clear. At issue was the fight to reverse the deterioration of safety, job security and real wages.

Following the mine explosion, the government of Vicente Fox — openly defending the mine owners — suddenly discovered that Gomez, the man with whom the regime had collaborated for five years, was no longer fit to run the miners’ union, supposedly because he had inherited his union post and enriched himself in office. In a move of questionable legality, it summarily replaced the union leader with Elías Morales. Gomez is being investigated for possible embezzlement of

union funds.

While there is no principled difference between Gomez and Morales — both represent Mexico’s corporatist union bureaucracy — the Fox government gambled on the latter’s dependability. Unquestionably, no matter how they felt about Gomez, the government intervention into their union further enraged the workers.

Whatever the government’s political calculations, last week’s murderous assault on the Sicartsa strikers represents a political blow to Fox. Less than 24 hours after the confrontation at Sicartsa, Ruben Aguilar, a government spokesman, attempted to shift attention away from the government and blamed the deaths of Castillo and Alvarez on the strikers themselves, charging them with having ignored the arbitrator’s ruling declaring the strike illegal. He also indicated that the government would not give in to the workers’ “blackmail” and reinstate Gomez to the union leadership.

President Fox and his National Action Party (PAN) came to power nearly six years ago, replacing the 70-year rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), promising an end to corruption and the creation of jobs and prosperity. Behind last week’s repression at Sicartsa stands the stark reality of declining living standards, increasing unemployment and further misery for the vast majority of Mexicans.

Elections for president are scheduled for July 2. The attack on the metalworkers is bound to affect the outcome. Union officials called for a rejection of PAN candidate Felipe Calderon. Leading in the public opinion polls is PRD candidate Manuel Lopez Obrador, yet, as the actions of the PRD in Michoacan demonstrated last week, a victory by either party, or by the PRI’s Roberto Madrazo, will result in a regime determined to defend the profit interests of big business.

The killing of the Sicartsa strikers has served to mobilize miners and metalworkers across the country.

At La Caridad, a giant open pit mine in Sonora State, striking miners marched through the streets of the city of Nacozari in honor of the slain Sicartsa workers and indicated that they are in a state of high alert against a possible assault on their strike. The La Caridad copper workers walked out on March 24.

In Hidalgo State, 100 miners threatened to shut down the Real de Pachuca mine and send a detachment to Michoacan to assist the Sicartsa strikers.

The crisis in Mexico is not without historical antecedent: nearly 100 years ago, on June 1, 1906, the Cananea copper miners walked off their jobs and initiated the struggle that erupted in the Mexican Revolution.



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