

Mine explosion in Mexico: Unsafe conditions and government corruption

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9 May 2011

On May 3, an explosion ripped through a coalmine in San Juan de Sabina, Coahuila State, in northern Mexico. The mine was one of many precarious and unregulated mines in Mexico. The body of 38-year-old Alberto Sifuentes, the last of the fourteen men who died in the explosion, was recovered on Sunday morning.

In addition to Sifuentes, the other victims were Jesús A. Sifuentes, Julio Sifuentes, Hermilo Pérez, Eleazar López, Julio Cesar Resendiz Domínguez, Santos Vallejo Ríos, Rogelio Robledo, Reyes Francisco Cruz, Hugo Santos, Mario Alberto Anguiano Montes Isaías Valero Pérez, Juan César Chávez, and Eduardo Sánchez. The mine had been operating for only 25 days, and it had 25 workers.

Jesús Fernando Lara Ruiz is the sole survivor. Lara was expelled to the surface by the force of the explosion. One of his arms was torn off. The other had to be partially amputated. Neither the mine owners nor Mexican officials have given any explanation why Lara, a 15-year old youth, was employed at the mine.

The explosion took place at 8:00 AM as the miners were connecting two vertical shafts 60 meters below the surface.

At a press conference on Sunday morning at the site, Mexican Labor Secretary Javier Lozano declared, “We want coal that is free from blood,” and indicated that joint inspections would take place by the Departments of Labor and Economics. At the same press conference Coahuila Governor Jorge Torres bemoaned the lack of safety. If corporations do not want to make the necessary investments in coal exploitation, he said that they should move aside and hand over their mines to “other capitalists.”

In fact, exploitation of coal resources in Coahuila, which takes place under conditions of little or no

government oversight, is both bloody and profitable for the coal companies.

The recent explosion took place not more than 5 years after the 2006 Pasta de Conchos mine explosion, which killed 65 miners, 63 of whom remain buried at the site. Pasta de Conchos is in the same region as the Sabinas mine. Forty-six miners have been killed since the 2006 explosion in this area of Coahuila. There is no doubt that both Lozano and Torres are concerned that the widespread anger that followed the 2006 disaster will erupt once more.

In 2006, Lozano openly covered up for Grupo México, the corporate owner of the Pasta de Conchos mine. Family members accused him of stopping the rescue effort at the mine lest it be found out that some of the 63 miners had survived the explosion.

On May 5, the Coahuila daily, *El Diario de Coahuila*, charged Lozano and other officials of the Labor and Economics department with embezzling funds for infrastructure and mine safety projects and with influence peddling among the local coal producers. According to the Diario article, Binsa, the operator of the Sabina mine, was allowed to operate without any supervision and with no safety equipment whatsoever.

In this region, coal veins are close the surface and are often exploited in small mines, known as *pocitos*. Miners work under brutal conditions in what are little more than holes in the ground, with coal extracted with buckets attached to truck engines. Government inspectors often overlook these small operations entirely.

Less than a year ago, in August 2010, Labor Department officials made assurances that mine safety regulations would be enforced in the wake of a coalmine explosion in La Florida, also in Coahuila state. No action was taken.

Even when inspections do take place, as in Pasta de Conchos, they have little practical effect. A representative of Center of Reflection and Labor Action (CEREAL) observed last week that the Labor Department knew of and ignored reports of violations in 17 out of the 32 inspections carried out in the last three years at Coahuila *pocitos*. The Pasta de Conchos Family Members organization (FPC) also made the same accusation.

Many of the people that worked to recover those killed at Sabina were fellow miners and family members. These unpaid volunteers worked tirelessly for the five days of the rescue operation. Lozano promised that in the future volunteers would be compensated.

Adolfo Gonzalez told the press, “I’ll bring up my son’s body in pieces if I have to,” This sentiment was echoed by other family members participating in the rescue effort.

Mexico produced 11.13 million tons of coal in 2009, sixty percent of which is used domestically to generate electricity and in the production of coke, used in steel production.



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