

Families of trapped Mexican coal miners denounce president AMLO's photo-op visit

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On Sunday, four days after ten miners were trapped in a flooded coal pit in Sabinas, Coahuila, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, was met with angry shouts and jeering from the miners' relatives and co-workers as he walked over for a few minutes for a blatant photo-op and to callously tell them to place their faith in the "technicians" and that he will "never forget them."

Relatives have been counting every minute since Wednesday, when their loved ones were trapped 200 feet (60 meters) underground as water rose 100 feet above their tunnel. As of this writing, not enough water had been pumped out to let divers enter the pit, which is located just over an hour's drive from the Texas border.

The families peppered the president with demands for swifter actions in the rescue and a solution to the unsafe conditions in coal pits more generally, but before they could even finish their sentences, he quickly waved goodbye and left.

"Why did you even come?" some relatives shouted as they were pushed back by a massive contingent of hundreds of Army and National Guard soldiers.

"He just came to take his picture and leave," said the wife of a miner to *El País*. The sister of miner José Rogelio complained to *Jornada* that AMLO only met with them "for like five minutes." She stated, "That is not enough. We were expecting him to bring large machinery to dig another tunnel for the water to drain... there are some large pumps lying around and we don't know why they are not being used."

Lucía, the mother of the trapped miner Ramiro Torres, said with stinging sarcasm, "Mr. President, I appreciate that you came to take your picture with my pain, that of my family and each one of us here. I hope your photos serve you for politics." She scoffed,

"Thank you for your long visit."

In response to the backlash, AMLO argued on Monday that his administration is powerless. He has not given any new mining permits, he said, and the government and the trade unions "are not able to monitor so many mines." Such statements amount to washing his hands over the fate of the miners and families.

His visit and comments reflect the indifference of the entire Mexican ruling class to the safety and welfare of workers. The AMLO administration, which has been promoted by the pseudo-left as a champion of the working class, and his partners in the so-called "independent" trade unions oversee unsafe conditions that serve the profit interests of corporations as the rule, not the exception.

During the first two years of the pandemic, Mexico's excess deaths surpassed 632,000, more than twice the official COVID-19 death toll, as a result of his administration's policy of reopening factories, mines and workplaces while letting the virus run rampant. Just last year, 110,000 working age adults between 35 and 64 years old died from COVID-19 in Mexico, according to the national statistics agency INEGI.

While feigning concern over workers' safety, AMLO and his security detail remained maskless on Sunday, despite the ongoing global surge of the pandemic driven by the deadly Omicron BA.5 subvariant of COVID-19.

The incident recalls how the relatives of the 65 workers who died in an explosion at the Pasta de los Conchos coal mine in 2006 chased out Mineros union leader Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, a Senator for AMLO's Morena party and a close associate of the AFL-CIO, when he showed up at the rescue site a week later. His union had published a report two weeks

before the disaster concluding that the mine was safe. AMLO himself has postponed for two years his promised effort to recover the bodies at the mine.

Ninety-nine percent of the coal bought by the state-owned electricity company CFE comes from such pits in Coahuila, and production has ramped up under AMLO's energy reform. A CFE document from 2020 explicitly states the "presidential instructions" to buy coal from 60 producers in Sabinas.

Behind populist claims of saving the CFE, his government has actually subordinated the state agency to major oil, gas, and mining corporations. In April, the president "reassured US businesspeople that the CFE would buy up all the energy they invest in generating, which would make them secured investments," as reported by Mining Mexico.

The mining output in Mexico jumped 5 percent in 2021, surpassing pre-pandemic levels, including a 28 percent yearly increase in coal for heating, which is almost exclusively produced in Coahuila.

As Manuel Fuentes Muñiz, a professor of the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM), explained to El Financiero, whether workers are hired through contracts or informally, their conditions are sanctioned by the authorities. He explained, "The Labor Ministry acknowledged that this mine had been operating since January ... and it has a team of inspectors that should check the area periodically." However, he added, for two years the ministry "has refused receiving the collaboration [for inspections] from locals."

In the 21st century and on the border of the most advanced economy in the world, workers are taken hundreds of feet underground to spend their entire shifts squatting in tunnels that are about 2 ft (60cm) wide or less. There are no exits or possible emergency measures, which make these pits incompatible with workers' safety. In fact, in 2011, the National Commission on Human Rights concluded that none of the mining pits in the region were safe. Child labor is also rife. The trapped miners are between 22 and 61 years old.

The miners in Sabinas work without health insurance or benefits and receive between 2,000 and 5,000 pesos (\$100-250) each week, depending on production levels. This system and the growing demand for coal has pushed miners to work exhausting hours under such

unsafe conditions.

In a moving series of interviews with relatives by N+Media, Josué Rodríguez, son of miner Margarito Rodríguez and a miner himself, explains that he hopes that they have found a higher area underground away from the water. "The pits are like... going down not knowing if we will ever come out alive."

Like AMLO, other "left nationalist" governments partnered with the trade union bureaucracy across Latin America, like those led by Pedro Castillo in Perú, Luis Arce in Bolivia, and Gabriel Boric in Chile, also impose unsafe and miserable conditions on miners and other workers while relying on the police and military to suppress their strikes and protests.

At the same time, globalization has turned northern Mexico into a major industrial center, alongside its more traditional extraction of natural resources, and has interlinked workers in all sectors into complex and global supply chains. Far from improving living standards and working conditions, the capitalist "resource curse" was expanded into the maquila factories whereby foreign investors use the local elites, including the trade unions, to oversee the super-exploitation of workers with no regard to their health, living standards, or the environment.

Miners and their families can defend their lives and living conditions only by organizing independently of all pro-capitalist parties and unions and joining their struggles with workers across industries and beyond borders. That is the purpose of the call made by the World Socialist Web Site to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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