

Mexican Government declares it will take months to retrieve bodies of Coahuila coal miners

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The collapse of the Pinabete coal mine in Coahuila, Mexico on August 3 left 10 miners trapped and with their escape route flooded. They are now presumed dead. Four miners were able to escape and are now hospitalized. On August 15, the 13th day of rescue efforts, following a second flooding of the mine galleries, the nature of the search shifted. It is now about retrieving the cadavers of the 10 men. *

Those in charge of the rescue estimate that it will take at least between six and 11 months to recover the bodies. “We were doing well until an opening widened from the adjoining abandoned mine, that stores more water,” declared Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

The “adjoining mine,” Las Conchas, which shut down in 1996 is very close to the Salinas River, the source of the flood waters. The company, (El Pinabete Mining Company) had been granted an operating permit by the Economics Ministry, and supposedly inspected by the Ministry of Labor (in charge of all mine inspections).

The permits are handed out even though another branch of the government, the Mexican Geologic Service (Servicio Geológico Mexicano—SGM) some time ago established that the entire region was unsafe to mine.

In 2013, the Mexico City news magazine, *Proceso* obtained from the SGM maps of the coal region in which many areas within the region are hatch-marked with red lines indicating where not to mine.

The Pinabete mine operated under contract with the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) to provide fuel to public electricity plants located in Coahuila in line with current energy policy. Since taking over the presidency in 2019, Lopez Obrador, known as AMLO, has pursued a more nationalist energy policy, favoring the use of fossil fuels extracted in México.

Pinabete consisted of three narrow interconnected vertical shafts leading to galleries 60 to 80 meters deep, which flooded. By every measure the mine was unsafe; its miners lacked any safety equipment, there were no emergency or risk-mitigating equipment, and no means of signaling the surface. The miners worked hunched in the mine gallery.

When the pit flooded, the 10 victims simply had no time to escape. However, relatives and local miners suggested that they could have survived initially by finding higher ground, and consequently they strongly condemned the sluggish and ineffective response by officials.

According to a report by *La Jornada* correspondent Leopoldo Ramos, the lack of safety conditions brought back the tragedy of February 19, 2006, when a methane explosion killed 65 miners, 63 of whose bodies are still below ground. Directly responsible for those

deaths was mining giant IMMSA (Industria Minera México Sociedad Anónima) a division of Grupo Mexico, a powerful, wealthy and well-connected conglomerate with tentacles in oil, copper, transportation, and coal mining.

As with the long list of mine disasters and deaths in this region, no company, no government agency, no trade union, has been ever held accountable (less than a month after the Pasta de Conchos explosion, in Mexico City the federal house of deputies approved constitutional reforms that rewarded the coal barons, including IMMSA, with new operating permits that guaranteed more than \$500 million in profits).

According to official sources, in consultation with the relatives, the plan now is it to dig a hole next to the mine to recover the 10 bodies. Following that, a monument will be placed in honor of the fallen men.

In 2012, under the Enrique Peña Nieto administration, a “Pact for Mexico” was signed by major political parties (PAN, PRI, PRD, Greens), that, among other things, abolished underground coal mining, absent guarantees of miners’ safety. A decade has passed with no changes. State and Federal regulators continue to treat coal barons with kid gloves at the cost of human lives.

During the last 25 years at least 153 coal miners have perished in preventable mine accidents (80 since 2006). A government mining safety and inspection system exists in name only, starved for funds.

AMLO has declared that his administration will investigate how the Pinabete mine was being run and if it had been given permission by federal authorities. “A complete investigation will take place,” said López Obrador. When questioned, the president assured that one of his campaign promises had been not to provide more operating permits in this region.

Following the Pasta de Conchos 2006 disaster, family members of the 65 victims, some of whom had been violently repressed by police and company thugs for trying to organize their recovery, formed a non-governmental group, the Pasta de Conchos Family Organization (Organización Familia Pasta de Conchos—OFPC). Throughout the intervening 16 years it has fought for recovery of the remains and that the true causes of the accident be made public. The group has also organized rescue squads to aid victims of other mine disasters. In 2020, the AMLO administration initiated the attempt to recover the 2006 victims; the project so far has been riddled with delays.

According to OFPC studies and testimonials, collected in a book, *El Carbon Rojo de Coahuila—aquí acaba el silencio* (“Coahuila’s Blood Coal—here ends the silence”) published in 2018, under the auspices of the Heinrich Böhl Foundation, over 3,000 miners have been killed between when coal mining opened up in the region in 1883 and 2017.

The text narrates in detail the total lack of safety measures by the firms and the indifference of government authorities to conditions in the mines.

Chapter three is an exposé of the corporate role of the miners union (Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos, Siderúrgicos y Simiáres de la República Mexicana) which “represents” many of the miners in the region. The chapter presents evidence of sweetheart deals between the wealthy union bureaucracy and the coal barons. The exposé describes how the union would threaten to strike over safety, only to cancel at the last minute, a common practice for trade unions across the world.

Since the Pasta de Concho events, four presidents from different parties have ruled Mexico: Vicente Fox (of the centrist Revolutionary Institutional Party, PRI), Felipe Calderón (of the center-right National Action Party, PAN), Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (center-left Morena Party).

Each of these administrations has had close links with the corporatist and corrupt miners’ union. In 2006, following the Pasta de Conchos explosion, the head of that union, Napoleon Gómez Urrutia, was forced to seek refuge in Canada, after being exposed for his corrupt acts. Due to his connections with the AFL-CIO, he managed to obtain Canadian citizenship.

Currently he is a congressman for the ruling Morena Party, after being welcomed back by AMLO himself.

That the union has not changed is evidenced by one of the most cynical reactions to the death of the 10 miners from union bureaucrat Javier Martínez Valadez of the mine union’s National Executive Committee. He acknowledged that the Labor and Social Safety Secretariat had only two or three inspectors in the region and claimed that, if there were more inspectors, mines like Pinabete would not exist. He went on to declare that, despite the mines being death traps, whenever governments suggest that they be eliminated, the inhabitants of the region object, since it is their only source of employment.

Blaming the miners for their own deaths, Martínez added: “In addition these workers choose to earn more money instead of safety, or retirement benefits. They are not used to work in an orderly manner, and do not want to pay [union] dues or be punished for absenteeism. If in four or five days they earn well, that is enough for them to live on.”

Miners will continue dying, declared Martínez.

The Coahuila mines are part of a geological region that extends north across the Rio Grande separating Mexico from the US, and Coahuila from the US state of Texas. On both sides of the border coal is blood red. The profits of coal monopolies are extracted at the expense of miners’ lives. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, in Texas and Coahuila, massive miners’ strikes confronted state repression on behalf of private capital.

In 1903 in Thurber, Texas a powerful coal miners’ strike pitted workers against the Texas Rangers and helped establish the United Mine Workers. The strike included a march by miners and their supporters out of the city that virtually emptied this important coal mining town.

In Coahuila, a miners’ strike in 1950 at the Nueva Rosita, Palauand Clorete mines turned into a virtual civil war, as the government sent troops, repressed the miners and tried to starve them into submission. Following this strike, Coahuila miners marched on Mexico City, a 1,500-kilometer trek (900 US miles), with the intention of appealing to President Miguel Alemán. The mass protest known as the March of Hunger, never achieved its objective; the president, member of the

Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI), imprisoned the marchers in a sports stadium and forced them to surrender. The defeat of this strike paved the way for the government establishing a “charro” sell-out corporate leadership for this union.

Just as the 2016 Pasta de Concha explosion was followed by spontaneous protest strikes by copper and other sectors of the mining industry, the AMLO administration, together with coal barons and multinational corporations are keenly aware that this new disaster may provoke labor struggles across the country.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International campaign for the formation of rank-and-file committees to lead these struggles, rejecting *charro* unionism and the false assurances from the AMLO administration, the unions and corporations. These committees must lead the fight to end coal mining permits in geologically unstable regions of Coahuila; for miners to take control of safety inspections and measures; and work to run mines and industries under workers control. The rank-and-file committees must go beyond Mexico’s borders and establish alliances with miners across the world.

Essential to that struggle is the revival of Trotskyism in Mexico, the nation that welcomed Leon Trotsky in 1937, through the establishment of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

* The buried miners are:

1. José Luis Miguélez, 46
2. Jaime Montelongo Pérez, 61
3. Mario Alberto Cabriales Uresti, 45
4. Hugo Tijerina Amaya, 29
5. Sergio Gabriel Cruz Gaitán, 29
6. Jorge Luis Martínez Valdez, 34
7. Margarito Rodríguez Palomares, 54
8. José Rogelio Moreno Leija, 42
9. José Rogelio Moreno Morales, 22
10. Ramiro Torres Rodríguez, 24



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