



Free the Arrested Strikers! Cops and Troops Out of Cananea!

Hundreds of Mexican Police Attack Miners Strike, 40 Injured

JANUARY 11 – An emergency picket has been called for Saturday, January 12 at 3 p.m. outside the Mexican consulate in New York City to protest a police attack on striking miners in Cananea, Mexico.

Shortly before noon today, the Mexican Mediation and Arbitration Board (JFCyA) declared “non-existent” the six-month-old strike of copper miners in Cananea, in the state of Sonora. Hours earlier, an occupation army of more than 800 federal and state police arrived in the mining town in some 80 vehicles. Within minutes of the arbitration board announcement, the repressive forces swarmed through the streets of Cananea heading for the mine, which has been occupied by strikers for more than six months. News reports list more than 40 people injured, nine miners arrested and several strikers unaccounted for.

The mine workers are protesting the notoriously dangerous safety conditions at the mine (the largest open pit copper mine in the world) and smelter. The facilities have greatly deteriorated since the mine was privatized in 1990. Delegations of trade unionists from the U.S., particularly Steel Workers from Arizona, have visited the mine, as they have during previous strikes. The arbitration board ruling also affects striking miners in the state of Zacatecas, and in the silver mining town of Taxco.

The federal government has repeatedly used Mexico’s corporatist labor laws, modeled on the labor code of Mussolini’s fascist Italy, to outlaw the miners’ strike. Although courts have issued injunctions against the JFCyA rulings, the state



An army of at least 800 federal and state police and Mexican army troops that assaulted the six-month-old strike by copper miners at Cananea, in the northern state of Sonora, January 11. (Photo: Miriam Villavicencia, Canal 12)

and federal governments have proceeded with their heavy-handed repression.

Safety conditions at the Cananea plant are so notorious that an international team of doctors and health professionals which visited the struck plant in October stated that they found a “clear picture of a work-place being ‘deliberately run into the ground’.” The mine is part of the Grupo México, owned by the billionaire Germán Larrea, who also owns the coal mine at Pasta de Conchos, where 65 miners were buried alive in February 2006.

The picket in New York is being called by the Internationalist Group, which in 2006 initiated a number of demonstrations in support of striking teachers in Oaxaca, in southern Mexico.

Strike in Cananea, Sombrerete, and Taxco in Fifth Month



Striking miners in Cananea during December visit of SITUAM union delegation. (Photo: El Internacionalista)

- **Bring Grupo México to its Knees With a Nationwide Miners' strike!**
 - **For a National Strike Against Calderón's Starvation Programs!**
 - **Down with the PRI, PAN and PRD, Parties of the Bourgeoisie!**
 - **Forge a Revolutionary Workers Party!**

The following article is translated from a supplement to El Internacionalista published by our comrades of the Grupo Internacionalista in Mexico and distributed to miners in Cananea along with the accompanying article, "A Century of Internationalist Labor Struggle in Cananea."

DECEMBER 15 – The strike of copper miners in Cananea, in the northern Mexican state of Sonora, at a zinc plant in Sombrerete, in the state of Zacatecas, and at silver mines in Taxco, Guerrero, is now halfway into its fifth month. The walkout, which began on July 30 demanding compliance with the contract and with the most elementary job safety standards, has met with a concerted hard-line response from the bosses (Industrial Minera México, belonging to billionaire Germán Larrea's infamous Grupo México¹) and the bourgeois government of Felipe Calderón, whose labor sec-

retary is blatantly at the beck and call of Grupo México. One week into the strike, the Federal Mediation and Arbitration Board², declared it "nonexistent," only to reluctantly permit it when a federal judge granted an injunction to the mine workers organization.

In September, the same labor tribunal granted legal recognition to a new company union, the "Single Union of Mine Workers" headed by Francisco Hernández Gámez, and ordered a new vote to decide who would have the contract at Grupo México's plants. At the beginning of December, Germán Larrea threatened to shut the mines if the miners didn't return to work. This is not the first time he has used this ploy: during the Cananea mine workers' strikes of January 2003 and October 2004, he brandished the same threat. But this blackmail by the copper baron is all smoke and mirrors, particularly when you consider that Cananea

alone represents 64 percent of Grupo México's potential earnings, and its copper deposits are estimated to last for anywhere from 30 to 82 years of production at current rates (*La Jornada*, 4 December 2007). In other words, any "closing" would simply be a legal maneuver.

The truth is that the miners have Larrea by the throat. Now what has to be done is squeeze, by launching a nationwide mining strike against all the affiliates of Grupo México, and if necessary, to extend the strike to the conglomerate's other sectors, like FerroMex (rail freight), and to other companies like the steel mill complex in Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán. But in order to do this, *it will be necessary to confront the whole corporatist control apparatus that the capitalist state imposes on Mexican labor relations.* This is the heart of the problem.

In the course of their attack against the mine strike, the bosses and their government have maintained that all issues pertaining to safety have been resolved. It's all lies. We all know what Grupo México means by "workplace safety standards": dead workers. This is the company that is responsible for the *murder* of 65 miners at Pasta de Conchos, in the state of Coahuila, in February 2006. One of the Cananea miners' demands that the company deems "unacceptable" is for the recovery of the remains of the dead miners at Pasta de Conchos. It has been amply demonstrated that management's actions sent the miners to the slaughter, with the complicity of the state and federal governments. But the bureaucracy of the corporatist mineworkers' "union," the SNTMMSRM³, shares the blame for this "industrial homicide."

As it was a century ago, mining is the most dangerous branch of industry, even though the technology exists today to make it substantially safer. This isn't just true of the mines of Grupo México, either: capitalist mining in this country is built upon the systematic murder of mine workers. Putting an end to this macabre spiral of death should not only fall on the shoulders of the militant local 65 of the SNTMMSRM in Cananea, which has gone on strike nearly every year over the last decade, despite suffering defeat each time. The heroic miners of Cananea must not stand alone. The miners' strike in Cananea, Sombrerete and Taxco should be a spark that ignites a proletarian counteroffensive across the country to defeat the bosses' attack. What's needed is a *national strike against the repressive starvation policies of the Felipe Calderón government.*

This, in turn, requires a struggle for complete independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie, its parties, its strong men, and its state. It's not enough to just struggle



Workers hang banner of solidarity greetings from Union of Workers of the Metropolitan Autonomous University (SITUAM) to striking Cananea miners, December 2007.

(Photo: El Internacionalista)

against the federal government in the hands of the PAN (Calderón's National Action Party). The workers must also tear off the corporatist straightjacket that binds them to the capitalist state and its former state party, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), and break as well from the popular front around the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. With this revolutionary perspective the miners' present struggle, like the historic strike in Cananea one hundred years ago⁴, could presage the beginning of a revolutionary struggle. The next Mexican revolution must be a *workers socialist* revolution, and it requires above all else a struggle to forge a revolutionary leadership.

Workplace Safety and Workers' Blood

Not long after the current strike began, a miner from Taxco commented that for the mine bosses, the death of one worker costs less than purchasing the necessary safety equipment: "If one of us gets killed on the job, the insurance policy pays. On the other hand, if a machine is damaged, the company is liable" (*La Jornada Guerrero*, 10 August 2007). In Taxco, red and black flags (the traditional sign in Mexico denoting a struck enterprise) have been placed at three silver mines. Miners say that the prevailing conditions there are the same as they were in Pasta de Conchos in the fateful pre-dawn hours of 19 February 2006. The electrical system is deficient, with cables tangled around the water lines, fuse boxes without insulating covers, machinery without emergency brakes, and rock slides. Forced to make do with obsolete, run-down equipment, the miners have suffered an escalating rate of accidents in recent years.

The situation is no different at the zinc plant at Sombrerete. A report published last June stated that three miners had been killed there. Besides the terrible condition of the electrical system, the buildup of silica dust and the lack of air-filtering systems is a constant threat to the health of the miners. The same goes for the Cananea mine, where dust is caked on every surface. The extraction of copper from this open-pit mine requires the successive crushing of the mountain's rock into ever-finer particles. The accumulated dust produces a whole range of respiratory disorders, including silicosis, the miner's scourge, and can cause lung cancer.

Today, the technology exists that could allow the mines operate at high standards of safety. All it would require is investing in the physical plant and its maintenance. Furthermore, the miners could be given personal safety gear, such as artificial respirators, and plastic barriers to isolate poisonous gases, etc. Many mines in the United States and Europe rely on powerful suction fans with filters to remove the deadly silica dust. However, implementing such basic safety precautions is contrary to the thirst for profits that drives production under capitalism. For the mining firms, whether state-owned or private, it is more profitable to keep the unhealthy conditions that ensure death to the workers.

It does not have to be this way: the workers should force the implementation of the necessary measures to save their lives. *Union safety committees* must be formed, *empowered to stop production when health or lives are at risk*. It is essential that such committees be made up only of workers, because the decisions to protect the miners' lives must not be influenced by financial considerations. The ubiquitous "tripartite" worker/management/government commissions only exist to prevent the workers from acting. Workers safety committees must have the physical means (master switches and circuit breakers) and coverage, with delegates in every work area and department, so that decisions can be carried out on the spot. In fact, in Cananea, a North American labor journalist reported:

"We know what's safe and what's not,' one miner commented, 'but they never want us to spend time fixing problems – just get the production out. If we tried to stop the line for safety problems, we would lose our jobs.' Many safety lines running alongside the conveyers, which should stop the speeding belt in case of an accident, have been cut so they can't be pulled, or are simply absent."

–David Bacon, "The Killing Dust," *Truthout*, 11 October

Bacon points out that in various areas of the facility, air filters haven't been turned back on since the 1999 strike; water tanks, essential for dust abatement, have huge holes rusted out:

"So for the past eight years, dust that should have been sucked up by the collectors has ended up instead in the miners' lungs.... But there are other dangers. Many machines have no guards, making it easy to lose fingers or worse. Electrical panels have no covers. Holes are open in the floor with no guardrails. Catwalks many stories



Report by international commission organized by Maquiladora Health & Safety Support Network documented how dust collectors have been disconnected by the company (top), leading to huge accumulations of deadly silica dust as well as dangerous holes in the floor. (Photo: MHSS)

above the floor are slippery with dust and often grease, and are crisscrossed by cables and hoses. Not long ago, one worker tripped and fell five stories to his death onto a water pump below."

It is truly an infernal image. A commission of eight doctors and specialists in industrial safety who inspected the facility at Cananea at the beginning of October produced a detailed report in which they enumerate the broad variety of violations to the most basic safety rules. The findings are enough to make your hair stand on end:

"The conditions observed inside the mine and processing plants, and the work practices reported by the interviewed workers, paint a clear picture of a workplace *being 'deliberately run into the ground.'* A serious lack of preventive maintenance, failure to repair equipment and correct visible safety hazards, and a conspicuous lack of basic housekeeping has created a work site [where] workers have been exposed to high levels of toxic dusts and acid mists, operate malfunctioning and

poorly maintained equipment, and work in simply dangerous surroundings.

“The deliberate dismantling of dust collectors in the Concentrator area processing plants by Grupo Mexico approximately two years ago means that workers in these areas have been subjected to high concentrations of dust containing 23% quartz silica, with 51% of sampled dust in the respirable particle size range, protected only by completely inadequate personal respirators. Occupational exposures to silica can lead to debilitating, fatal respiratory diseases including silicosis and lung cancer.” [emphasis in original]

—*Workplace Health and Safety Survey And Medical Screening of Miners At Grupo Mexico’s Copper Mine Cananea, Sonora, Mexico*, dated 12

November, available online at <http://mhssn.igc.org/CananeaOHSReport.pdf>.

The report is chock full of details of the terrible conditions that prevail in the mines and the surrounding factories. The workers not only face the constant risk of inhaling poison dust, but also chemical vapors, electric shocks, falls from great heights, etc.

Break the Shackles of Corporatism! Forge a Revolutionary Workers Party!

Clearly, the miners’ strike needs no further justification. Even so, it has been attacked on many fronts. The powerful Grupo México, a conglomerate that benefited from the privatizations undertaken by Mexican presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), and subsequently has been protected by the PAN governments of Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón, has used the labor boards to its advantage, besides resorting to open gangsterism (which left one miner dead in Cananea last June) and the formation of a company union. But at bottom the current unsafe conditions in Mexico’s mines are the result, at least quantitatively, of the privatization of the mining industry that was carried out at the end of the ’80s *with the connivance of the miners’ “union,”* a corporatist formation (known in Mexico as *charro* unions⁵) integrated into the state apparatus through its incorporation into the PRI.

The former head of the SNTMMSRM, Napoleón Gómez Sada, father of the current president, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, always functioned as a government man, the rightful heir to the founder of the corporatized mining union, Jesús Carrasco, in the 1940s. Thus, for example, one of the principle demands of the current miners’ strike in Cananea is for the reopening of the workers’ clinic, closed by the bosses after the defeat of the 1999 strike, when the national miners’ “union” not only failed to support the



Workers clinic shuttered by Grupo Mexico bosses after defeat of 1999 miners strike. (Photo: El Internacionalista)

Cananea strikers, but openly took the side of the government and the bosses (see “Cananea: A Century of Internationalist Class Struggle”).

The corporatist “unions,” fully integrated into the capitalist state, have chained the workers to their exploiters. These organizations’ primary function has been to suppress the workers’ expressions of discontent and to impede the formation of genuine workers’ organizations. The “*charro*” union leaders and their thugs constantly break strikes, assaulting and even murdering hundreds of dissident workers. As we highlighted in our article “Capitalist Murder in Pasta de Conchos” (*El Internacionalista*/Edición México no. 2, August 2006), the SNTMMSRM under Gómez Sada played a central role in knifing workers’ struggles against privatization and massive layoffs, or if he could not prevent these struggles from breaking out, in isolating them. Today his son has fallen out of favor of the PAN governments, despite having been a favorite of the fascistic Carlos Abascal, Fox’s first labor secretary.

What is happening is that the corporatist system that characterized the one-party regime, the PRI-government, that ruled Mexico for seven decades is decaying, but has not yet disappeared. When the mines were state-owned and the PRI controlled the governmental apparatus at every level, there was a circulation of government functionaries such that today’s “union” chief could be a government official or PRI parliamentary deputy or senator tomorrow, and later the head of the company. Since the privatization of the state enterprises that began in the ’80s, and accelerated with the PRI’s defeat in the 2000 presidential elections, cracks have begun to appear in what was once a monolithic edifice of capitalist state control. However, the corporatist regime came into existence for reasons that have not themselves disappeared: the weak Mexican bourgeoisie confronts, on one hand, a proletariat with enormous potential power, while on the other, it is subject to the powerful influences of

Yankee imperialism.

Thus, the corporatist “union” apparatus, though weakened, has persisted in functioning as the bourgeoisie’s labor police. Those elements of the PAN government closest to the leading capitalists would like to do away with these legacies of the PRI regime that they now consider unnecessary, while other capitalist sectors see the need to maintain a “union” security buffer. Thus while Secretary of Labor Francisco Xavier Salazar Sáenz took aim at Gómez Urrutia in 2006, the head of Mexico’s powerful interior ministry (Gobernación) Carlos Abascal continued to recognize him as head of the union. And in April of 2007, in accordance with a federal court ruling that discovered irregularities and falsifications in his dismissal as president of the SNTMMSRM, the Labor

Department reinstated Gómez Urrutia and withdrew its endorsement of his replacement, Elías Moralez Hernández. Nevertheless, there are still a series of court cases pending against the miners’ leader, and he has had to take refuge in Canada. We demand that all the charges against leaders of ostensible labor organizations be dropped, since they serve as an attack by the capitalist state against the mine workers.

We of the Grupo Internacionalista have opposed all capitalist government intervention in the affairs of the workers movement. We supported the mine workers’ strike in March of 2006, which was called off after the legal deadline of 72 hours in compliance with the judicial ruling declaring it non-existent, and we called for its extension to the whole working class in a nationwide strike against government repression. We came out for freeing all the imprisoned workers, and for all charges against them to be dropped, at the same time as we continue to fight for the independence of the unions from state control. Thus, we wrote:

“What is needed at this moment is to overcome the state framework and launch a ***national strike against the murderous government***, to fight for *victory to the teachers strike* in Oaxaca and to the miners’ strikes; for *total independence of the unions* from the bourgeoisie, breaking the shackles of corporatist pseudo-unionism and rejecting the government’s attack on the miners and metal workers; for freedom and dropping of all charges against all the workers, peasants and teachers arrested as victims of the ruling class’ repressive onslaught.”

—*El Internacionalista*/Edición México No. 2, August 2006

The fact that we oppose bourgeois repression does not change the bourgeois character of the corporatist apparatus one bit, nor does it postpone the struggle to replace the corporatist unions with genuine workers’ organizations. To make a truce with the *charro* bureaucracy condemns the struggle against anti-working class persecution to failure, because in the final analysis these cogs of the capitalist state machinery take their orders from their bourgeois masters.



March in solidarity with miners, Mexico City, 6 March 2006. Today a national strike is urgently needed to support striking miners.
(Photo: AP)

It is precisely in the struggle against anti-union repression that workers’ committees can be formed that break with the corporatist structure and champion complete independence from the bourgeoisie. In this struggle, historically militant sectors which the corporatist *charro* “unions” have not been able to completely regiment, can play a key role, provided that they escape the corporatist manacles. We have documented how sections 65 (Cananea), 271 (Lázaro Cárdenas), 288 (Monclova), 201 (Sombrerete) and 17 (Taxco) of the SNTMMSRM have repeatedly been forced to fight against their own “union” which has supported the company against its own members. The same goes for Section 22 of the teachers of Oaxaca and other sections affiliated with the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (CNTE) vis-à-vis the corporatist National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), whose gunmen have murdered over 150 of their members. From the so-called democratic insurgency in the electrical workers organizations in the ‘70s, the refusal to break out of the shell of the corporatist “unions” has condemned their struggles to defeat.

We insist that *the workers must clean their own house*. If the capitalist state persecutes a Napoleón Gómez Urrutia for corruption or some other accusation, whether the charges are true or not, it is because the ruling class wants to exploit the workers even more harshly. Today, in the epoch of “globalization” following the destruction of the Soviet Union, along with its bureaucratic Stalinist leadership, even the *charro* corporatist apparatuses that provided a few crumbs for the workers, as well as programs like Social Security, represent an unprofitable expense for the bosses eager to extract the maximum surplus value from “their” wage slaves.

To win this struggle – which is nothing less than the miners’ fight for their very lives – requires carrying out a sharp class struggle. The miners will not gain a victory in the labor tribunals or arbitration boards. They need to mobilize their social power. This is what they are doing now, and

they have halted production in three important mines, resulting in a 60 percent reduction in copper production. Their struggle must not remain isolated: it must be part of a powerful proletarian answer to the capitalist assault that has raised the price of tortillas 80 percent in the last year alongside drastic increases in the prices of almost all staple goods culminating in the *gasolinazo*, the “gasoline shock” scheduled for January. This goes along with the elimination of tariffs on grain imports, which will result in the destruction of what remains of Mexican agriculture. To impose this anti-worker, anti-peasant program, the rapacious national bourgeoisie is militarizing the country to suffocate outbreaks of social unrest.

In this panorama, the semi-corporatist leaders of the National Union of Workers (UNT) and the “independent” unionists of the Mexican Labor Front (FSM) headed by the powerful electrical workers’ union (SME) have been notable for their lack of solidarity with the embattled miners. We call on the “independent” unions in particular to call a national workers mobilization in defense of the strikers of Cananea, Sombrerete and Taxco and to provide them with the necessary economic support to keep up their movement. The bosses have various ways of controlling working-class discontent. Be it through the corporatist regimentation of labor, or through the subordination of workers’ struggles to the agenda of a popular front headed by a bourgeois party like Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s PRD, or through the formation of company unions that sell sweetheart contracts in the style of the PAN, the bourgeoisie tries to keep all eruptions of working-class anger under their control.

The key to victory in this struggle is for the workers to refuse to play by the rules of the game dictated by the bosses, and to *politically* break with the bourgeoisie. Despite the PRD’s populist rhetoric, it was the prosecutor from the PRD government of the Federal District (Mexico City) who ordered the arrest of Gómez Urrutia’s subordinate, Gregorio Pérez Romo, in 2006. The PAN, PRI and PRD, the three main bosses’ parties, unite their forces to better crush the struggles of the workers (like they did in Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán, Atenco and Oaxaca last year, and as

they are doing today against the teachers college students of Ayotzinapa in Guerrero state). For this reason, the working class needs its own political vehicle, its own party, to wage a genuinely revolutionary struggle, which is essential to winning the current strikes and social struggles. Raising up once more the banner of the Bolsheviks Lenin and Trotsky, the Grupo Internacionalista, section of the League for the Fourth International, fights to forge the indispensable party of the workers’ vanguard. ■

¹ Grupo México is the owner of the Pasta de Conchos coal mine responsible for the murder of 65 miners who were buried alive due to criminally negligent safety conditions in early 2006 (see below).

² Mexico's Junta Federal de Conciliación y Arbitraje (JFCyA) is derived from the 1931 Federal Labor Law (LFT), modeled on Mussolini's corporatist institutions in fascist Italy.

³ Sindicato de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana.

⁴ See the accompanying article, “Cananea: A Century of Internationalist Class Struggle.”

⁵ *Charro* = cowboy. At the beginning of the Cold War, in 1946-48, the Mexican government completed the state takeover of the unions, expelling the “reds” from union leadership positions (jailing many for years), seizing union offices at gunpoint and firing hundreds of union militants. Henceforth, union leaders were directly appointed by the government. The emblematic figure for this corporatist takeover was Jesús de León, who was installed at the head of the railroad workers union and who liked to dress up in Mexican cowboy (*charro*) outfits with big sombreros and silver decorations. Thereafter corporatist labor organizations were known as “charro” unions.

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