**Appendix 1-Tyee Article**  **Lesson: Vancouver Island War**

*Embattled Striking Miners in Mexico Are Led from BC*

As troops attempt to crush strikers in Sonora, their exiled union president ponders next steps from Burnaby.

Mike Bruce, "Embattled Striking Miners in Mexico are Led from BC," *Tyee*, June 10, 2010, accessed April 2015.<http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2010/06/10/MexicanMiningStrike/>

The lip of an enormous copper mine pit looms behind the dusty streets of Cananea in Sonora, Mexico. Walk those streets, and you encounter outsized memorials and tributes to the mine and its workers, the kinds of markers you might find in the British Columbian communities of Kimberley, Logan's Lake, Trail, or any other mining towns that dot the rural landscape across North America.

Cananea is the largest mine in Mexico, at one time responsible for some 40 per cent of the country's copper output. At a high point on the main road leading to the mine stands what used to be a movie house. Now it is the union office and hall of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalurgicos y Similares de la Republica Mexicana (Los Mineros) mineworkers union.

The union-owned funeral home for members sits across the street.

In Cananea, where miners work in crumbling, dangerous facilities owned by transnational corporations focused on bleeding profit out of the earth, walkouts, strikes and company lockouts have become a regular part of the life.

The workers at the Cananea Copper Mine have been on strike for almost three years in a fight over health and safety conditions. In those three years, the mine has been shut down and Grupo Mexico, the mine's owner, has claimed to have lost some $1.5 billion U.S. in revenue.

The company and the government have placed intense pressure on the union, driving its leader beyond Mexico's borders and forcing him to lead the fight from an office thousands of kilometres away. Napoleon Gomez Urrutia remains in charge from his base in Burnaby, B.C., even as the conflict enters a new and violent level of intensity.

'Industrial homicide'

On Sunday, June 6, some 400 Federales, the paramilitary Mexican federal police force, stormed Cananea, backed up by what estimates have placed at between 2,000 to 4,000 "Federal Preventative Police" sent to the town to secure the mine and evict the strikers.

Late that night, tear gas was fired into the union offices near the mine entrance, and arrest warrants were issued for the leadership of Section 65 of the Los Mineros union. There are unconfirmed reports of two union members killed in the police action.

At 2:15 a.m. Monday morning, state police stormed Grupo Mexico's Pasta de Conchos mine in the state of Coahuila, site of a 2006 explosion that killed 65 miners. The police used this action to expel family members of those killed who have been working to recover the bodies of their loved ones who have remained buried for four years. According to a Grupo Mexico official quoted in the June 8 New York Times, the timing of these two police actions was coincidental.

The 2006 disaster at Pasta de Conchos is where the relationship between the mineworkers union, the government, and Grupo Mexico took the hostile turn that led all the parties to this point. The explosion was dubbed "industrial homicide" by Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, the erudite, soft spoken secretary general of the 280,000-member Los Mineros.

Safety standards had been in freefall at Grupo Mexico's mines and facilities for years, the result of aggressive privatization of state resources administered by the conservative administration of president Vicente Fox, succeeded by the current government of President Felipe Calderon. Grupo Mexico is a mining and resource behemoth that has close ties deep within the Mexican government, a relationship often likened to that between Halliburton and the George W. Bush administration.

The government stood firmly behind their patron when Gomez forcefully criticized Grupo Mexico after the deaths of 65 of his members. Following Gomez' furious, emotional remarks in the wake of the Pasta de Conchos explosion, the government leveled several charges of corruption against him, claiming that he had embezzled millions of dollars from the union's coffers.

Facing these charges alongside a steady stream of death threats against him and members of his family, Gomez fled to the United States and later to Canada, fearing the risk that the Bush government would extradite him.

Firmly in charge

Gomez is now living in Vancouver with the assistance and support of the United Steelworkers, the 1.2 million-member international union. Working out of the USW District 3 offices in Burnaby, Gomez has not only continued to run the union and negotiate agreements on behalf of his members, he has also expanded his base of support. As a regular speaker at union conventions, delegate meetings, and community group gatherings, Gomez retells the stories of government violence and repression alongside the horrific working conditions often faced in Grupo Mexico facilities such as the Pasta de Conchos mine.

Despite the charges and his isolation, Napoleon Gomez remains firmly in charge of Los Mineros' 280,000 members. He has been re-elected unanimously six times since his first election in 2001, and the overwhelming majority of the membership remain steadfastly loyal to him. Banners and murals pledging unanimous support dot union halls across Mexico.

An independent audit conducted by Swiss accounting firm Horwath Berney Audit SA examined all of the union's books and has completely exonerated Gomez of any wrongdoing. At the same time, several lower court rulings in Mexico have thrown out the federal government's charges against Gomez.

None of this has budged the Calderon government, which continues to seek the extradition of Gomez, and senior Mexican ministers have pressed their Canadian counterparts for action. The Canadian government has yet to reply to these requests.

Yet the Mexican Government and Grupo Mexico continue their assault, and the actions at Cananea -- both the strike by the miners and the assault by Federales -- are part of the larger conflict surrounding Gomez, union independence, and an ongoing government crackdown, often by use of force, on independent unions not recognized, or thus controlled, by the government.

Government's gambits

In the wake of the Calderon's government's charges against Gomez, the authorities have moved to seize Los Mineros' assets and set up a parallel, government-controlled union, the National Front for the Miner's Renovation.

One of Gomez' former deputies, Carlos Pavon, is working for this puppet group, and is rumoured to have accepted a large cash payment in reward.

Pavon had remained loyal to Gomez in his exile, traveling with other senior members of the Los Mineros Executive to Vancouver in 2008 to attend the B.C. Federation of Labour convention where Gomez and Los Mineros were being honoured.

Upon his return to Mexico, Pavon and another senior deputy, Juan Linares, were arrested at the Mexico City airport and incarcerated at the Reclusio Norte Prison. Shortly thereafter, Pavon was released after issuing a public renunciation of Gomez and Los Mineros.

Linares, however, remains behind bars. During a recent visit by an international delegation of labour activists, including Canadian Labour Congress president Ken Georgetti, USW Canada chair Ken Neumann, and Vancouver-based union leaders Steve Hunt from the USW and Andy Ross from COPE 378, Linares said that he has received many overtures from Grupo Mexico, including offers of vast amounts of cash alongside immediate release in exchange for a public renunciation of Gomez.

Still a target

Like Linares, the vast majority of Los Mineros members remain loyal to Gomez and the independence of the union.

Few signs are more indicative of this than the fact that, with the exception of Grupo Mexico, employers across Mexico whose workers are represented by Los Mineros still go directly to Gomez for negotiations and collective bargaining. Members simply won't recognize the authority of anyone else. Such is Gomez' authority that representatives from many employers in Mexico frequently travel to Vancouver to negotiate directly with Gomez at the United Steelworkers District 3 offices in Burnaby.

Yet despite this authority and this success, or perhaps because of it, Gomez remains a designated adversary, and target, of the Mexican government.

Gomez has been a thorn in the side of the government, and Grupo Mexico in particular, since he was first elected in 2001. Traditionally, Mexico's government-recognized unions have had a close, non-adversarial relationship that more closely reflects collusion than confrontation.

All this changed with Gomez' election, which occurred shortly after the election of the right-wing administration of Vicente Fox, a former executive with Coca Cola.

Following the staid labour atmosphere of the 1990s, where Los Mineros engaged in only one strike against Grupo Mexico, the union has engaged in 32 strikes at Grupo Mexico operations since Gomez' election.

The situation that now exists between Los Mineros and the government/Grupo Mexico is intensely personal and Gomez is clearly the target.

Cross-border strategies

Which brings all of this back to Cananea and Pasta de Conchos and the launch of a government assault on workers in both locations.

While the Cananea strike is ostensibly over health and safety issues, it is just as much, if not more, in solidarity with members' exiled leader.

When the international delegation of labour leaders visited Cananea in early May, union members were anticipating the hammer to fall at any time. With Calderon's planned state visits to Washington and Ottawa, the Los Mineros executive was predicting that the government would take action shortly after Calderon returned to Mexico on May 28. Calderon wouldn't risk provoking a rebuke direct from U.S. President Obama, said union leaders, a result which would be likely considering the relationship between the White House and United Steelworkers, who have a strategic alliance with Los Mineros.

The predictions proved true. As soon as Calderon was safely back in Mexico and away from the potential of a dressing down from Obama on human and workers' rights concerns, the Federales were sent into action. Just over a week after the end of Calderon's tour, the troops were sent in.

Follow the dollars

At the end of the day, the government and company actions are about money; the Cananea mine is worth a tremendous amount of money to Grupo Mexico, and the government is prepared to secure the company's access to this wealth with brute force.

Ultimately it is Napoleon Gomez who remains the biggest single barrier to Grupo Mexico's unfettered access to this wealth, and the government of Mexico has made clear that it is prepared to use government resources, including bullets and tear gas, to secure and operate the mine on behalf of the country's mining behemoth.

So today the streets of the small, dusty, desert town of Cananea are occupied with some 2,000 to 4,000 Federales and "Prevention Police."

The union executive is in hiding, and the damage, injury, and possibly death tolls are still being assessed.

Representatives from the United Steelworkers are on the ground, trying to mediate and preserve the safety of the workers and their families.

The government and Grupo Mexico are no doubt trying to sort out the process of escorting and protecting the 1,200 replacement workers needed to operate the giant mine, with the likely result that the police and paramilitaries are digging in.

At the same time, in union offices in Burnaby, in Pittsburgh, in Ottawa, and in Washington, labour leaders and activists are also gathering, digging in, and sorting out their next steps.

There might be a lot about Cananea that looks and feels like a Canadian or American mining town, but with armed troops on the streets and tear gas drifting through the air, the differences with our close ally and NAFTA trading partner could not be more acute.  [Tyee] 

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