

Mexican Labor Union Under Siege

By David Macaray

Any questions as to which American president Felipe Calderon most admires were answered last October when he fired 44,000 members of the independent Mexican Electrical Workers Union. First, he refused to negotiate with them, then he fired them. By all indications, the Harvard-educated president of Mexico is an unabashed disciple of Ronald Reagan.

Further evidence is seen in Calderon's brutal treatment of Los Mineros, the independent mine workers union that has been on strike at the Cananea copper mine in the northern state of Sonora, since July of 2007. With two miners already dead and many more injured in battles with the military, Calderon has threatened to have federal armed forces seize control of the mine.

These Los Mineros workers aren't on strike because they're radicals, or dissidents, or the greedy bastards that the corporate-dominated American media typically portray American strikers. This strike isn't all about money. Rather, the Los Mineros strike was precipitated largely by health and safety concerns at the Cananea mine, a facility owned by the powerful Grupo Mexico consortium.

Earlier this year a federal court allowed Grupo Mexico to fire the striking Los Mineros workers, and the Mexican government seized the union's assets and forcibly removed from office its president, Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, after refusing to recognize the results of the union's election. Urrutia, along with other Los Mineros leaders, is now in exile, out of the country.

While Mexico has a significant labor union presence, many of its labor laws are more restrictive and idiosyncratic than those of the U.S. For example, workers who wish to form an independent or breakaway union are required to obtain a "license" to do so, and can, in fact, be turned down by the government if the group's politics seem too radical, or if the government already has a sweetheart deal with the parent union.

Indeed, some of Mexico's unions are accused of being so cozy with the government, they resemble China's ACFTU (All-China Federation of Trade Unions). With 134 million members, the ACFTU has long billed itself as the world's largest trade union. That would be quite an accomplishment....if the Federation bore any resemblance to a real union.

Yet, in other ways, Mexico's labor unions, with their long and rich history, are tougher and more truculent than those in the U.S. For instance, Mexican strikers typically occupy the facility they're striking (e.g., the Cananea mine)—a far cry from the comparatively orderly and gentele strikes in the U.S.

On Thursday, May 20, approximately 150 members of the United Steelworkers union (USW), along with various staff and union supporters in the Washington D.C. area, marched in protest of Calderon's visit to the U.S. The USW and AFL-CIO have both publicly condemned the Calderon regime's treatment of Mexican workers.

Leo Gerard, president of the USW, issued a boilerplate statement saying, "We call on the Mexican government to withdraw its threat to use military force to dislodge the strikers, and to begin negotiations with the Los Mineros to peacefully resolve this conflict."

And in an unmistakable reference to NAFTA, Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, said, "It is absolutely critical to the economic and social advancement of the region [North America] that Mexican workers have the opportunity to work in good jobs....so that they can provide for their families and contribute to real and sustainable development in Mexico."

While the USW and AFL-CIO's show of solidarity is gratifying, what Los Mineros needs more than anything is a splashy show of support from the U.S. government. A positive word from Obama or, at the very least, a strongly worded condemnation by Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis would send a clear signal. But that's unlikely to happen. Obama's support of American labor is, at best, tepid; why would he become a cheerleader for a Mexican union?

The city of Cananea has historic importance. Going back to the landmark miners' strike of 1906, during President Diaz's regime, Cananea is considered the birthplace of the Mexican labor movement. Even though the workers failed to get the concession they demanded, the strike was regarded as a moral victory and a contributing factor to the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

What's occurring in Cananea today can be seen as a continuation—an extension—of that early show of defiance 104 years ago. Same struggle, same basic issues, same basic players. The only difference is that Profirio Diaz didn't go to Harvard.

DAVID MACARAY, a Los Angeles playwright, is the author of “ [It's Never Been Easy: Essays on Modern Labor](#)” (available at Amazon, Borders, Barnes & Noble, etc.) He can be reached at dmacaray@earthlink.net

WORDS THAT STICK