

3-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Fatal Explosion at Coahuila Mine Highlights Poor Safety Conditions for Workers." (2006).
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Fatal Explosion at Coahuila Mine Highlights Poor Safety Conditions for Workers

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2006-03-01

A fatal explosion at a coal mine in Coahuila state has drawn attention to the poor safety conditions for workers in the Mexican mining industry, particularly in coal extraction. The incident, which occurred on Feb. 19 at the Unidad Pasta de Conchos mine near the community of San Juan de Sabinas, killed 65 miners who were trapped underground.

The explosion sent temperatures above 600 degrees Celsius (1,100 Fahrenheit), enveloping the mine with lethal amounts of methane and carbon dioxide. Rescue workers were still unable to retrieve the bodies of the workers almost two weeks after the explosion because conditions inside the mine remained very treacherous.

The mine is owned and operated by Industrial Minera Mexico (IMM), a subsidiary of the Mexican-based multinational company Grupo Mexico. The parent company's primary mining activity is copper extraction, with operations in Mexico, the US, and Peru.

Critics said IMM did little to ensure the safety of workers at Unidad Pasta de Conchos, failing to take obvious steps to prevent this type of accident. Relatives of the victims said almost all the mine employees had complained of gas buildups and outdated equipment. A handful of miners who were not working at the time of the incident told reporters that they were often sent into dangerously unstable shafts without training or proper equipment. "We heard that our trapped colleagues had devices that contained an oxygen chamber, but most of these were not working," one miner told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy.

The miner said Grupo Mexico and General de Hulla, its partner in the mine project, were aware of problems, including some minor explosions in the mine, but took no action. "Here you have to make your own safety arrangements," said the miner, who asked to remain anonymous. "All these companies care about are that the coal is extracted and that they make money."

Grupo Mexico responded to the criticisms by noting that the Unidad Pasta de Conchos mine passed several recent inspections, including one on Feb. 7. A preliminary report by the Secretaria del Trabajo y Prevision Social (STPS) after the inspection said the company did not get a clean bill of health, with 34 areas of concern noted. The company had corrected 28 of those deficiencies but had failed to take action on six possibly serious violations related to electrification of the mine, said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada, which obtained a copy of the report.

"Relatives of the victims and workers at the mine have said that the explosion may have been caused by a failure in the internal electrical system," said the newspaper.

Miners call strike against mine owner Grupo Mexico

The accident at Unidad Pasta de Conchos prompted 4,000 unionized employees at other Grupo Mexico operations to walk off their jobs to demand that the company take steps to make operations safer at its IMM facilities. Among those striking were workers at IMM mines in San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, and Sonora states, including employees of the company's giant copper-extraction operations at La Caridad and Cananea. The striking workers are members of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalurgicos y Similares de la Republica Mexicana (SNTMMSRM).

Union officials said less than half of the miners who died at Unidad Pasta de Conchos were members of the union. Leaders said the union has organized 12 strikes against IMM over the past four years to protest poor working conditions. "If we had to walk off the job every time we found a safety-related problem at an IMM facility, we would be perpetually on strike," said SNTMMSRM secretary-general Napoleon Gomez Urrutia. "None of its mines are safe. The company has offered to pay 750,000 pesos (US\$71,600) to the immediate family of each of the victims, but union officials say the amount is not enough. "They should ask for at least twice that amount," said Gomez Urrutia.

On average, the miners earned about 5,000 pesos (US\$477) per month, including benefits and a productivity bonus. Some union leaders blame the problems on federal inspectors, who they say are in collusion with the company. "There are inspections that are done very superficially or ones in which they don't give much importance to risks," said Gomez Urrutia.

IMM president Xavier Garcia said the union has no cause to complain because the SNTMMSRM and the company signed a document on Feb. 7 certifying that the mine was safe. Arturo Vilchis, Coahuila's director of civil protection, also insisted that the inspection had uncovered nothing serious. "Everything passed the standards," he said.

Vilchis was contradicted by his boss, Gov. Humberto Moreira Valdez, who joined in the criticism against federal inspectors employed by the STPS. "No one says it out loud, but we know that inspectors can be bought with a little money. They are given drinks, women, and money. This is corruption," said Moreira, who pointed out that the federal government has assigned only two inspectors to cover 129 mines in northern Mexico.

Moreira also criticized President Vicente Fox and members of his Cabinet for misleading the relatives of the miners and letting them think that their relatives might have survived the blast. "The authorities treated the people in an inhuman way and told them they had to hope for a miracle when technically it was clear there was no possibility of life," Moreira told reporters. Grupo Mexico officials said, however, that the federal government and the company wanted to have all the information possible before telling relatives that the miners had died. "The company's responsibility to the families was to tell them what we knew, not what we didn't know or what we believed," said Juan Rebolledo, Grupo Mexico's vice president of international relations.

Fox government urged to take stronger actions

Some legislators also called for stronger actions from the Fox administration. Sen. Luis Rico Samaniego, a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), said it was evident that

many companies were not in compliance with regulations that require that safety procedures at all mines be updated. "The government has to cancel any concessions for those mining companies that are not in compliance with official norms," said Rico Samaniego, who represents Coahuila in the Senate.

The Chamber of Deputies has also formed a special commission to look into the tragedy. The commission will include members of the labor and social security committees, said Deputy Pablo Gomez, the floor leader of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). Additionally, the lower house plans to summon Labor Secretary Francisco Salazar as well as Fernando Flores Perez, director of the social security institute (Insituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, IMSS), to testify about the safety conditions at the mine.

Some critics also claim that the Fox administration failed to comply with its commitments to the International Labor Organization (ILO) to ensure that miners are not exploited. "The government has violated the ILO statutes by allowing corruption, failing to exercise sufficient controls of the industry, conducting inadequate inspections, and engaging in systematic violations of the federal labor law (Ley Federal del Trabajo)," said the Asociacion Nacional de Abogados Democraticos (ANAD). These violations, said ANAD, give relatives of the victims sufficient grounds to bring action against the company and the government before the ILO.

Still, mining industry executives insisted that the Unidad Pasta de Conchos tragedy was an isolated incident. "Unfortunately these types of accidents, which are really one-time events, make mining seem like it is still backwards," said Sergio Almazan, director of the Camara Minera de Mexico (CAMIMEX). "But it's not true." The industry's response to the incident opens the door for future tragedies, some critics said.

Toby Smith, a specialist in mine safety at the US-based National Safety Council, said inadequate ventilation at many mines around the world, including in Mexico, leaves miners vulnerable to explosions caused by an accumulation of methane. "You have to review all the practices and procedures for the workers, the conditions of the equipment, the ventilation, the supports," Smith said in an interview with the Mexico City newspaper Reforma. "You have to prevent any future accidents."

Syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento said the federal government has contributed to the problem by failing to employ a practice used in the industry, where methane gas is collected and used on site to create electricity. "In Mexico, this practice is prohibited because electricity production is a state function," said Sarmiento.

Sarmiento said several proposals have been introduced in the Mexican Congress since 2003 to allow the private mine owners to generate their own electricity through the use of methane gas. "These proposals have been frozen by 'nationalist' legislators who claim that any effort to allow private companies to generate electricity would be a blow to Mexican sovereignty," said the columnist.

Coal production thrives in Coahuila

Unidad Pasta de Conchos is one of four major underground coal-extraction operations in Coahuila, along with the San Patricio, Micare, and Mimosa mines. San Patricio is also operated by Grupo Mexico, while Micare and Mimosa are owned by Grupo Acerero del Norte (GAN). Another 32 small and medium-sized mines operate in Mexico, primarily in Coahuila, Sonora, and Oaxaca states, said the Camara Minera de Mexico (CAMIMEX).

Grupo Mexico opened the Unidad Pasta de Conchos coal mine in 1984 to supply coal for the rapidly growing steel industry in northern Mexico. Some estimates indicate that Coahuila produces more than 13 million tons of coal a year, some of which provides about 14% of the electricity produced by coal-powered plants in Mexico. The coal extracted in Coahuila is also exported to the US. "The Coahuila coal fields are located just over the US-Mexico border, offering good access to the well developed gas infrastructure in Texas," said a report from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The Unidad Pasta de Conchos mine, which was in the process of expansion before the recent accident, earns Grupo Mexico about US\$10 million a year, a fraction of the company's total earnings of more than US\$1.7 billion in 2005. Grupo Mexico is a vast conglomerate whose holdings include several railroads in northwestern Mexico. The company was one of several private entities that benefited from the privatization of the previously state-run railroad Ferrocarriles Nacionales (FERRONALES) in the 1990s (see SourceMex, 1996-10-09 and 1999-09-15).

The company owns vast copper reserves in three countries, including holdings previously owned by Asarco in Arizona and the Southern Peru Copper Corporation in Peru. Grupo Mexico also extracts aluminum, molybdenum, gold, silver, and zinc from its mines in Mexico. Sarmiento said Grupo Mexico has decided to suspend operations at Unidad Pasta de Conchos, at least for the near future. "This represents a new tragedy for the residents of San Juan de Sabinas, where jobs are scarce," he said. "The jobs that the mine created, which paid more than any other in region, were highly valued."

Coahuila state legislator Jorge Guajardo said a large section of Coahuila depends directly or indirectly on mining, especially coal mining. Northcentral Coahuila, where the mines are, is estimated to have reserves that could last 100 years or more. "Coal is the destiny of the area's 300,000 inhabitants," said Guajardo. "Either you work in the coal industry or take the risk of crossing into the US and perhaps getting killed in the process," said local resident Arturo Rios, whose cousin was shot to death in Texas.

The pay does not compensate for the risks, but many residents accept jobs in the mining industry nevertheless. "Here you cannot find any jobs, not even washing cars," said Juan Carlos Pena, a resident of San Juan de Sabinas. "But the mining companies beg you to work for them, and they don't even ask your name." Power struggle at miners' union worsens situation In the midst of the Unidad Pasta de Conchos tragedy, a power struggle has worsened within the SNTMMSRM, fueled in part by the Fox administration.

A document presented to the STPS by two SNTMMSRM leaders accused Gomez Urrutia of misappropriating union funds. The two leaders, Juan Patino Rocha and Juan Luis Zuniga Velazquez, said the charges were serious enough to merit Gomez Urrutia's removal. The STPS, which under Mexican labor statutes has the power to certify union leaders, agreed with the request to remove him. The STPS also accepted the request by Patino Rocha and Zuniga Velazquez that retired union member Elias Morales Hernandez be named as the new secretary-general.

Union leaders said the move to replace Gomez Urrutia was presented in mid-February, but the decision was postponed because of the tragedy at Unidad Pasta de Conchos. Gomez Urrutia did not make any immediate comments on the situation. The decision to name Morales has set in motion the possibility of a nationwide strike for the entire mining sector and some related industries. Gomez Urrutia is very popular with the rank and file, and many union members see the appointment of Morales as an imposition by the Fox government.

Mining and industrial workers in eight states walked off the job on March 1, including 12,000 employees of the giant steel manufacturer AHMSA. The stoppage affects production of 10,000 tons of steel and 30,000 tons of coal daily, said AHMSA spokesperson Francisco Orduna. A nationwide strike would have even greater repercussions for the mining industry in general, which earns about US\$3.8 billion a year and accounts for about 1.6% of Mexico's GDP, said CAMIMEX. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 1, reported at 10.47 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: US Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.gov; The New York Times, 02/20/06; The Dallas Morning News, 02/22/06; Los Angeles Times, 02/23-25/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/21/06, 02/22/06, 02/27/06, 02/28/06; Notimex, 02/22/06, 02/23/06, 02/27/06, 02/28/06; Reforma, 02/22/06, 02/24/06, 02/26-28/06; La Crisis, 02/22-24/06, 02/27/06, 02/28/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 02/23/06, 02/24/06, 02/28/06; Associated Press, 02/27/06, 02/28/06; El Economista, 02/22-24/06, 02/27/06, 03/01/06; Reuters, 02/22-24/06, 02/26/06, 02/28/06 03/01/06; El Universal, La Cronica de Hoy, 02/22-24/06, 02/27/06, 02/28/06, 03/01/06; La Jornada, 02/22-24/06, 02/26-28/06, 03/01/06, 03/02/06)

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