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Federal, State Police Recover Cananea Mine From Strikers

by LADB Staff

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Tensions between organized labor and President Felipe Calderón's administration escalated after the federal government moved to evict dozens of miners who had held control of Grupo México's Cananea mining operation in Sonora state since January 2008. The Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) said no casualties were reported during the operation by federal troops and Sonora state police, although there were some reports that union members were beaten. Even with the mine back in company hands, operations will probably not resume for a long time, since the cost of restoring the operation is estimated at US\$114 million. The Cananea mine has been out of operation since members of Section 65 of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana (SNTMMSRM) went on strike in July 2007.

The union workers charged Grupo México with violating the collective-bargaining contract with the SNTMMSRM. The government declared the strike illegal in January 2008, which prompted the union workers to take over the mine (SourceMex, January 06, 2008). The SNTMMSRM kept up its legal appeals but saw its options exhausted when a labor court denied an injunction challenging the right of Grupo México to terminate the contracts of the striking workers (SourceMex, February 04, 2010). On the afternoon of June 6, 2010, around 2,000 federal troops and Sonora state police officers descended on the mine, seizing the property from the workers. SEGOB described the intervention as "peaceful." Human rights advocates, opposition parties condemn operation Human rights advocates immediately condemned the government's operation, criticizing the Calderón administration for putting the interests of corporations ahead of the miners.

In addition to the action at Cananea, critics cited SEGOB's decision to disperse protestors in the community of Sabinas in Coahuila state, who were angry about the government's negligence connected to the explosion in the Pasta de Conchos mine, which killed 65 miners in 2006 (SourceMex, March 01, 2006 and October 24, 2007). Among the protestors were relatives of the victims, most of whom remain buried in the mine. The protestors, who have kept a constant presence at Pasta de Conchos since the accident, took over the entrance to the facility, which prompted Coahuila state police to intervene. "The evictions at Cananea and Pasta de Conchos demonstrate that this government's first option is force," said Edgar Cortés, a spokesperson for the Instituto Mexicano de Derechos Humanos y Democracia (IMDHD). "The government's so-called support for the rule of law is hollow because in reality it follows authoritarian practices."

The independent Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) has launched its own investigation into the Cananea evictions. CNDH official Luis García Guerrero said the commission is especially looking into complaints that police beat some of the miners during the operation. The CNDH is working with its state counterpart, the Comisión Estatal de Derechos Humanos (CEDH) in Sonora state, on this investigation. Opposition legislators in the Mexican Congress also criticized the operation. Deputy Ernesto Pompa, chair of the special committee in charge of following the Cananea case, called a meeting of committee members to discuss the aggression against the miners.

Pompa is a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Deputy Ramón Jiménez of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) suggested that Grupo México be punished for its anti-labor stance. He suggested that the government cancel the mining concession to Grupo México and transfer it to another mining company. PRD Sen. Arturo Núñez criticized Interior Secretary Fernando Gómez Mont and Labor Secretary Javier Lozano Alarcón for going back on their promise that there would not be a violent eviction of the miners. But Sen. Javier Castelo of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) defended the police actions, saying that the government was acting according to the law. "All the courts had ruled that this was no longer a strike," said Castelo. "The government was only recovering a business in order to generate more jobs." Union expands complaint with IACHR The SNTMMSRM is not planning to roll over.

The union has announced plans to organize actions at various mining sites and ports around the country to protest the government's actions. The first protest occurred on June 6, when union members disrupted some operations at the port of Lázaro Cárdenas in Michoacán state. The ultimate goal, said SNTMMSRM spokespersons, is to force Grupo México to turn back the Cananea mine to the workers. The union is also planning to expand its complaint against the Mexican government and Grupo México with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in Washington. "It is clear that this eviction is a direct affront to the miners' right to strike," said Marco Del Toro, one of the attorneys for Section 65 of the SNTMMSRM. The Calderón government's relationship with labor has not been exactly cordial, with several labor organizations using the May Day celebration this year to renew their criticisms of what they perceive as the administration's anti-labor practices (SourceMex, May 05, 2010).

The conflict at the Cananea mine and the clash with the Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME) regarding the Calderón government's decision to shut down the Compañía de Luz y Fuerza del Centro (CLC) have been the administration's most bitter conflicts with labor in the past year. The Calderón government shut down the CLC in October 2009, citing the inefficient manner in which the power company serving Mexico City and surrounding areas was being run (SourceMex, October 21, 2009 and December 09, 2009). The president has also had other minor clashes with unions, including a difference of opinion with the labor organization representing sugarcane growers about the administration's policies on sugar imports (SourceMex, April 21, 2010). SNTMMSRM national leader Napoleón Gómez Urrutia has urged Section 65 members to reject any settlement offers from Grupo México because the union still has legal resources available. Gómez Urrutia, who is accused of corruption, went into exile in Canada (SourceMex, March 01, 2006). In 2006, the Mexican government asked the Canadian government to extradite the union leader, but this could prove difficult because of a treaty between Canada and Mexico prohibiting the detention or extradition of an individual accused of political crimes (SourceMex, August 16, 2006). Even from Canada, Gómez Urrutia remains the undisputed leader of the SNTMMSRM. Some observers suggest the labor situations at the Cananea mine and Pasta de Conchos were battlegrounds for a highly personalized conflict between Gómez Urrutia and German Larrea, chief executive of Grupo México.

The union called only one strike against Grupo México in the 1990s, but that number increased to 32 after Gómez Urrutia assumed the SNTMMSRM leadership in 2001. Grupo México officials say the company is planning to eventually restart operations at the Cananea mine, but this is not imminent because of the high costs associated with resuming activities. Cananea director Isaac López Arzola said it could be as long as a year before the plant is fully operational, although some activities will

resume gradually. He estimated the cost of rehabilitating equipment at about US\$114 million. Some of the equipment was vandalized by strikers and some fell into disrepair because of disuse. Gustavo Ortega, technical director for Grupo México, said the company estimates losses from the lack of output during the 34-month closure of the mine at about US\$3.5 billion. But some financial experts predicted that the company's sales would increase by more than 70% this year because of the resumption of some operations at Cananea.

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