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Labor, Safety Concerns Raised About Monterrey Subway System

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The subway system in Monterrey was featured in news reports in early December because of a brief strike by a group of more than 100 train operators and other employees who were demanding better working conditions, including the negotiation of a collective-bargaining contract and a commitment by management to address some safety and structural problems in the system. The strikers were also demanding the reinstatement of a colleague who had been reassigned after staging a hunger strike in September to bring attention to the labor and safety problems. The concerns raised by the workers about Metrorrey are a stark contrast to the international recognition that the Monterrey system has received in recent months for its environmental practices.

The strike, which took place during rush hour on Dec. 1, stranded an estimated 15,000 passengers on Line 2 of the system, many of whom were on their way to work. The workers ended the brief strike after securing a promise from Metrorrey director Javier Garza Vidal that the concerns would be addressed in a meeting during the week.

The labor problems faced by Metrorrey employees stem from a lack of a collective-bargaining contract. The workers say they are sometimes required to work seven days a week despite a federal labor law that limits the workweek to six days.

The workers have been raising concerns about structural safety problems and poor maintenance of equipment since September of this year. "We have a ticking time bomb," workers said in an interview with the daily Periódico ABC de Monterrey, suggesting that management has cut corners on maintenance of infrastructure, trains, and cars to save money.

The workers said a major problem exists on Line 2, where water has been filtering into the tunnels during heavy rains. "We are concerned about what could happen to the structure of the tunnel," said one operator.

Workers are also demanding the reinstatement of train operator Agapito Castro, who was reassigned to the warehouse in September for staging a hunger strike at one of the stations in an attempt to bring attention to the problems related to a lack of maintenance.

Garza Vidal had no immediate comment on the labor demands of the workers other than to announce that Metrorrey has developed contingency plans in case of another labor stoppage. "This is a situation that is affecting the users and not necessarily our subway system," indicated the Metrorrey director, who said emergency operators are on standby in case workers walk out again.

Garza Vidal dismissed the safety complaints, suggesting the problem was "related to aesthetics," which Metrorrey plans to fix over the next year. The Metrorrey president could be facing a credibility problem, however. Some members of the Nuevo León state legislature introduced a motion this week to oust Garza Vidal from his post, but the initiative was narrowly defeated.
Subway system operates on biogas

The negative publicity about the Metrorrey problems is a major contrast to recent reports about the subway system’s efforts to use clean energy to operate trains. Thanks to the construction of a biogas plant via the Monterrey Cinco program, launched in 2006, the Monterrey subway became the first light-rail system in the world to be powered primarily with energy produced from municipal garbage.

The system, constructed in 1991, was powered initially with conventional electricity obtained from the federal electrical utility, the Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE).

In 2006, municipal authorities launched the Monterrey Cinco program, an effort to convert municipal garbage into biogas to power the subway system. With the assistance of companies from Germany and Austria, the municipality constructed the biogas plant adjacent to the city landfill, which is managed by the Sistema Integral para el Manejo Ecológico y Procesamiento de Desechos (SIMEPRODE).

"Even though the initial investment surpassed US$6.5 million, the costs will be recovered in five years at most, since we won’t have to pay the CFE for electricity," SIMEPRODE director Jorge Padilla said during the early phases of the project.

The biogas plant, which has the capacity to produce 5.3 megawatts of energy with the use of five generators, currently provides 100% of the electricity needed by trains operating on two routes on the Metrorrey system. The two existing Metrorrey routes span 33 km, serving 32 stations. In November 2013, authorities in Nuevo León awarded a contract to a consortium comprising Alstom Mexicana, Constructora Garza Ponce, and Constructora Moyedan to construct a third route for the Monterrey metro system, spanning about 7.5 km.

The Monterrey Cinco plant produces more energy than what is needed to operate the subway system, and excess electricity is used to power municipal streetlights, the Paseo Santa Lucia museum, and several municipal and state government buildings.

In addition to supplying inexpensive energy for the operation of Metrorrey, the project has contributed to a significant reduction of CO2 emissions in Monterrey, Mexico’s third-largest city.

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