

Mexican Mine and Metal Workers: An independent union for Ciudad Acuña workers

By Leslie Cunningham



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In 1906, four years before the official start of the Mexican Revolution, workers at the huge copper mine of Cananea (in Sonora just south of Arizona) engaged in an epic struggle against the bosses of the Rockefeller-owned mine over wages and working conditions. At that time, workers moved freely back and forth across the border to work in mines in both Arizona and Mexico. So did the bosses' agents--including the Arizona Rangers, who were called out to shoot down striking Mexican workers.

The first image that comes to mind about the Mexican Revolution may be of *campesinos* and the iconic figures of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. But the Mexican working class was a powerful force, also; many consider Cananea to have been the first shot of the Revolution. The revolutionary Constitution of 1917 enshrined the right to strike and other workers' rights that were the basis of the Federal Labor Law which the Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (CFO) uses to educate workers.

Today's Cananea miners are the mainstay of the National Union of Mine and Metal Workers of the Mexican Republic (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana or SNTMMSRM). Known as *Los Mineros*, this is the union that workers in the former Alcoa *maquiladoras* of Ciudad Acuña have chosen to affiliate with.

The largest labor federation in Mexico is the Confederación de Trabajadores de México--the CTM. Over the years it has come under the control of the government and the companies, and its member unions are known as "*charro*" unions (corrupt unions with leaders who follow government policy and use violence against their opponents). Workers involved with the CFO in Ciudad Acuña say that the CTM union is worse than useless and has given unionism a bad name! So they have looked to a respected and militant independent union and have formed *Sección 307* of the SNTMMSRM. (A "*Sección*" of a Mexican union is equivalent to a "local" of a U.S. union.) The CFO has educated and trained the former Alcoa (now AEES) workers and guided them through the organizing process (read more in the CFO's Annual Report: www.cfomaquiladoras.org)

This is taking place during a period when independent unionism is under attack from the Mexican government, which last fall sent in police and troops to occupy electrical utility workplaces in Mexico City, firing 44,000 members of the electrical workers union (SME). Mexico's ruling party, the PAN, is also seeking to "reform" the Federal Labor Law by eroding workers' rights and allowing employers to use more "contract" workers who have no rights.

SNTMMSRM has suffered a setback in Cananea where a 3-year strike has been declared illegal by a Mexican court. The 1,300 Cananea miners went on strike in 2007 over health and safety issues. *Los Mineros* held out until February 11, 2010 when a court issued a decision saying that the strike constituted a violation of management rights and declared the strike over and the miners terminated. Unionists in both Mexico and the U.S. see this court decision as "effectively exterminating the right to strike in Mexico." (Those are the words of the U.S. AFL-CIO.) The national Mine and Metal Workers Union and the Cananea miners vow to continue to hold the plant and demand the right to their jobs, their union, and the right to strike. But will this battle drain resources from *Los Mineros* and affect its ability to support the efforts of the Ciudad Acuña workers?

You will learn a lot more about where the Ciudad Acuña workers are in this process, what they're doing in organizing their union and in getting other workers to join, and what the CFO's role is in this effort.

A good source in English: Mexican Labor News & Analysis, from an independent U.S. union, the United Electrical Workers: http://www.ueinternational.org/Mexico_info/mlna_articles.php?id=168#1104

Further reading: *Mexican Workers and the State*, by Norman Caulfield
The Children of NAFTA--Labor Wars on the U.S./Mexico Border, by David Bacon