

Metal Workers & Miners Unions Consider Merger

June 28, 2010

Unions Representing Workers in Canada, Mexico and U.S. Explore Merger:
Would Create International Union of One Million Metal Workers and Miners

The United Steelworkers (USW), which represents 850,000 workers in Canada, the Caribbean and the United States, and the National Union of Miners and Metal Workers (SNTMMRM), known as the Mineros, which represents 180,000 workers in Mexico, have announced plans to explore uniting into one international union. The agreement to begin exploration of a merger was signed on June 21.

This first step in the creation of a global union—as opposed to a global federation of unions—represents a significant new development for labor in the Americas with implications for workers around the world. Building on the 2008 trans-Atlantic merger between Unite in the United Kingdom and the USW, now the USW and the Mineros are working to build a worldwide labor union with the power to confront the concentrated capital of the mining and metal working industries.

USW President Leo W. Gerard and Minero general secretary Napoleón Gómez Urrutia together asserted the two unions continued “common commitment to democracy, equality, and solidarity for working men and women throughout North America and throughout the world.”

The two unions have had a strategic alliance since 2005. Now a commission made up of five members from each of the unions will create a joint commission to propose “immediate measures to increase strategic cooperation between our organizations as well as the steps required to form a unified organization.”

Several Years of Close Cooperation

The attempt to create an international union by these two unions arises within the context of the 16-year old North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) countries. Since NAFTA took effect in on January 1, 1994, several Canadian, Mexican and U.S. unions have sought greater cooperation as they faced transnational corporations with new reach and power. This is, however, the first attempt to create a new international union in response to the greater mobility and power of international capital since NAFTA and what has been called the neoliberal era of privatization and free trade.

This new development also comes as a result of several years of intense and intimate collaboration between the Steelworkers and the Mineros at many different levels. The two unions have joined together in campaigns against common employers and in mutual support on issues facing them. Most notably, the USW has helped the Mineros as it came under a brutal attack by Grupo Mexico, that country’s largest mining company, and by the administration of Felipe Calderón, Mexico’s president. “

When the Mexican government brought trumped up charges against the Mineros’ general secretary, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, threatening to jail him, the USW played a central role in helping him find safety in Vancouver, B.C. For three years with the aid of the USW, he has been leading the Mineros through a series of difficult strikes and other confrontations from that city.

History of U.S.-Mexico International Solidarity

This is by no means the first time that unions in the three countries have attempted to build more powerful labor organizations through international solidarity. The path to solidarity has been fraught with problems and strewn with the wreckage of failures, while at the same time filled with inspiring examples and some significant successes. While today's situation poses altogether new challenges, the past history holds some lessons too.

With the development of modern industrial capitalism in all three nations in the late nineteenth century, there developed a complex exchange of organizational methods, union strategies and tactics, and social and political programs. At the center of the process was the construction of the railroad networks first in the United States and Canada and then in Mexico.

Mostly the influence spread from the more advanced and industrialized United States with a long history of trade unionism to Mexico. Those railroad lines, built by U.S. and British capital, employed British, Canadian and mostly U.S. railroad workers. The American railroad workers carried with them their 16 craft railroad craft unions and their practice of striking the employer over grievances, structures and strategies soon imitated by the Mexican workers.

Mexican workers who went to work in the mining industry in the United States joined the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions or more frequently the Western Federation of Miners or the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), adopting their militant strategies and revolutionary syndicalist politics. The influence was not all one way. The Mexican Liberal Party, actually a revolutionary anarchist group, came to organize workers in Mexico and sometimes in the Southwest of the United States.

After the discovery of oil in the Mexican states along the Gulf of Mexico around 1900, accompanied by the growth of oil storage and shipping facilities at the docks, the IWW became established there among the oil workers. At the same time, Spanish revolutionary syndicalists won a strong base among seamen, and their influence spread into the ports of Mexico, while Spanish anarchists came to organize department store clerks, restaurant workers, and factory workers in central Mexico. Their influence became pervasive. By the time of the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, the anarchist House of the World Worker with branches in many major Mexican cities had become the dominant labor movement.

The Mexican Revolution and Samuel Gompers

During the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the Constitutionalists—founders of what would eventually evolve into the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and rule Mexico for decades—reached an agreement with a faction of the House of the World Worker to provide troops for that wing of the revolution in exchange for support for the union's organizing efforts. So thousands of workers organized in Red Battalions rode off to fight Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, leaders of the plebeian and peasant leftwing of the revolution. Thus the Mexican state came to control the formerly anarchist labor movement.

In those years, as the new state was being established first under Venustiano Carranza and then under Álvaro Obregón, Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor moved into Mexico. The new Mexican government welcomed Gompers as an aid in helping to create the state-sponsored Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) which with the government was fighting to destroy the anarchist General Confederation of Workers (CGT). So between 1920 and 1925, anarchist unions with an internationalist perspective battled the business unions with a nationalist vision backed by the Mexican government, a war ultimately won by the government-

backed unions with the breaking of the Mexico City streetcar workers union in 1924.

Gompers principal aim, however, was to expand the reach of his Pan-American Federation of Labor (PAFL), an international union confederation that had already established branches in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico. As U.S. capital and the U.S. State Department spread their power and influence throughout Latin America, Gompers expected to see the PAFL spread the model of his so-called “pure-and-simple” trade unionism, sweeping aside the Red unions of anarchists and Communists. Gompers death in 1924 followed by the Crash in 1929, and the Great Depression for the next decade meant that his dream was never realized.

The 1930s Upsurge and the Post-War Right Turn

The worldwide economic crisis of the 1930s led to a working class upsurge in Canada, Mexico and the United States, initially under the leadership of a variety of political leaderships: Socialist and Communist, Catholic and conservative, but all independent of the employers and their respective governments. The brief period 1929 to 1939 saw powerful unions and new labor federations grow up in all three countries.

In the United States and Canada, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organized industrial workers, while in Mexico the new Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) organized a broad spectrum of workers in industries of all sorts. The CIO and the CTM and some of their industrial unions established strong fraternal relations during this period. The CIO-CTM alliance evolved and was transformed during the course of the U.S.-Mexico alliance against the Axis Powers during World War II. Both the CIO and the CTM emerged from the war having been drawn into closer relations of partnership with the corporations and with their respective governments.

With the outbreak of the Cold War in 1948, the governments of both the United States and Mexico, working closely with the employers forced a purge of leftists from the unions, while in the U.S. the Taft-Hartley Law hamstrung the unions. In Mexico the purge was particularly violent and brutal, as the Mexican government sent police and gangsters into the industrial unions to conduct a transfer of leadership at gun point. The independent elected union leaders were turned out in favor of men would were loyal to the government.

So by the 1950s, while ties still existed between the CIO and the CTM, they were now relations between U.S. labor officials who working closely with the U.S. State Department and American corporations and Mexican officials subservient to their government. Meanwhile, around the world labor unions divided between the Communist-led and pro-Soviet World Federation of Trade Unions and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions led by U.S. and European unions under the tutelage of the U.S. State Department. Within this context, real working class solidarity virtually disappeared, as the U.S. and Mexican unions’ tasks on the international scene became working to stop Communist, nationalist and other radical unions throughout the Americas.

For a hundred years attempts to build international worker solidarity have been disrupted by the imperial power of U.S. corporations and the U.S. State Department and by the Mexican nationalist government, as well as by conservative business unions loyal either to government or employers. Genuine international worker solidarity was greatest during periods of working class upsurge in the 1910s and 1930s within the context of worldwide labor mobilizations. The opening of the era of globalization raised new challenges.

NAFTA Changes the Game

Such was the state of labor solidarity in North America in the 1990s when the North American

Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was being negotiated. NAFTA, opened up the borders to capital (while keeping the movement of labor restricted), suddenly changed the rules. While the U.S. and Mexican union bureaucrats of the AFL-CIO and the CTM had been able to cooperate within the context of the Cold War, they suddenly found themselves at odds in the age of neoliberalism and free trade.

U.S. labor unions opposed NAFTA, fearing that it would lead to the importation of products produced with cheap labor, commodities which would undermine their employers' market share and therefore their jobs. Mexico's "official" or government controlled unions such as the CTM had no choice but to follow the government's directives and support the agreement. With U.S. unions opposed to NAFTA and Mexico's "official" unions support it, the pact between the AFL-CIO and the "official" CTM practically dissolved under the impact of NAFTA, forcing U.S. unions to look for other relationships. At the same time, independent unions in Mexico which were critical of NAFTA also looked for other relationships abroad.

The United Electrical Workers (UE) which represented workers in the United States, and which was not part of the AFL-CIO, discovered the independent Authentic Labor Front (FAT) in the early NAFTA period. Those two unions formed a model strategic alliance, and many other U.S. and Mexicans began to establish ties of various sorts in the 1990s and 2000s. The Communications Workers of America (CWA), for example,, established a relationship with the Mexican Telephone Workers Union (STRM). At times there were attempts to establish broader organizations around specific industries or problems, such as the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras.

Steelworkers and Mineros: Toward Unity

All of this then forms the long and complicated background to the events taking place today, at the center of which now, however, is fight against the mining companies. At the moment the USW is in the 11th month of a strike of 3,500 of its members against Vale Inco, a huge Brazilian mining company in Sudbury, Canada, while the Mineros, after three years on strike at Cananea, Sonora, face the military occupation of their town to break the strike. The USW and Mineros plan to build the power to stop such assaults on miners and metal workers in the Americas.

The Minero-Steelworker agreement to begin exploration of unity represents an exciting new development in international labor solidarity. With such unity, workers might have greater power in confronting the transnational mining and metal companies, and could respond to challenges more rapidly and with more flexibility than a federation of union usually can. Still, the challenges to this process will be enormous. No doubt both the employers and the governments will work to sabotage any arrangement which threatens to empower workers, and the unions themselves which have worked together so well for the last few years will face new challenges in developing a common leadership, organizational structure, philosophy, strategy and vision.

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