

Leading in exile

Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, general secretary of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana, and IMF Executive Committee member, is fighting the most aggressive attack on union autonomy and workers' rights ever seen in Mexico.

MEXICO Napoleón Gómez runs one of the most powerful and active unions in Mexico from a cell phone at an undisclosed location. Important messages, strategy and union business is transmitted daily to his staff based at a discrete office on the outskirts of Mexico City.

Regarded by some fellow labour leaders as a “natural enemy of the government”, Gómez and his union, known as Los Mineros, have paid a heavy price for standing up to the Mexican government and powerful business interests while asserting their union independence.

“They have killed us, they have jailed us, they have beaten us and threatened us. They have threatened our families,” Gómez said in a phone interview.

Gómez is referring to the recent government sanctioned violence against Los Mineros members and himself including: opening fire on and killing striking steelworkers at a Sicartas plant; covering up health and safety hazards that led to a tragic mine explosion which left 65 miners dead; jailing 21 strikers from a Nacozari copper mine; forcefully removing Gómez as union general secretary who has also received death threats aimed at himself and his family members.

The government claims Gómez was removed as leader because he stole US\$55 million from the union, a charge Gómez calls “a campaign to divert attention from the real problems in the country.”

“This is just a way to discredit me, they



NAPOLEÓN GÓMEZ URRUTIA

Country: Mexico

City: Monterrey

Position: General Secretary, SNTMMSRM

don't have any proof. They know where the money is because they have frozen all of our bank accounts.”

At 60 years old, having graduated from the National Autonomous University of Mexico and with a doctorate in economics from Oxford University, Gómez is neither your typical political refugee, nor union miner. His experience in Mexico's mines came at an early age watching his father, Napoleón Gómez Sada, who ran the miners' union for 40 years.

“As a boy I attended assemblies and union meetings. Often I accompanied my father to the mines. I was lowered into my first mine at the age of 16-900 meters in the San Francisco Gold mine in Chihuahua.”

Thirty-three years later Gómez officially joined the union heading a mining project in the state of Durango and later was appointed special delegate to the national committee for political and social programs.

After serving as assistant general secretary in 2000 he was unanimously elected general secretary of the Los Mineros in 2002, four days after the death

of his predecessor and father. He would again win the unanimous support of his membership in 2006 in the wake of gross government interference in union affairs, and strong opposition from some unions within the Mexican labour movement itself.

“The Labour Congress has had a strong tradition of institutionalised unions. We're promoting change during this difficult time in Mexico, they see me as a threat to their way of business. They prefer labour leaders who just take instructions from the government or companies, and we are different.”

Gómez and other labour leaders for change have founded the National Front for Defense of Unity and Autonomy of Unions, which represents 6 million workers.

When asked what is it like to be regarded as a Mexican revolutionary by some and an international fugitive by others, Gómez says he looks to his membership for resolve.

“It has been a very difficult time. But even today, after six months of the most aggressive attacks seen against a union, the miners still support me. This is what gives me strength: their friendship, their loyalty, their courage.”

Gómez, who has been overwhelmed by international solidarity, is quick to point out that what is happening in Mexico is a problem for all unions. “I call on all union leaders to actively protect union autonomy. If we allow the extreme right to do this in Mexico, allow companies to gain more political power, then it can happen anywhere.”

When asked if he is optimistic about the future of the Mexican labour movement, Gómez is quite matter of fact, “we will either get stronger after this crisis, or we will disappear.”

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For more information see p.7 and www.imfmetal.org/mexico