

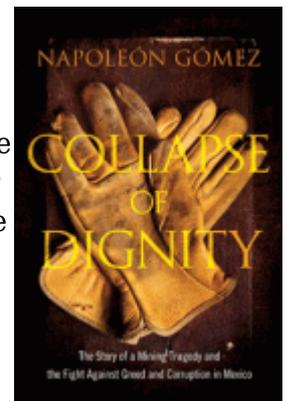
The Persecution of the Mexican Miners

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Napoleon Gómez. *The Collapse of Dignity: The Story of a Mining Tragedy and the Fight Against Greed and Corruption in Mexico*. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, Inc., 2013. 344 pages. Photos. Index. \$26.95 U.S. / \$36.00 CAN / Kindle \$11.99.

Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, the general secretary of the Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union, has written this memoir to tell the story of his career as head of the union, particularly his persecution and the persecution of the union and its members by the Mexican government and the mining companies. Like most autobiographies perhaps, this one is self-serving, it obscures as much as it reveals and creates a kind of fictional public persona, though it also tells us a good deal about the contemporary Mexican labor movement. The book recounts convincingly and in great detail the Mexican government's use of trumped up legal charges, kangaroo courts, and slanderous media campaigns in an attempt to destroy the reputation of Gómez Urrutia, as well as efforts of Grupo Mexico, the country's largest mining corporation, to crush the union and eliminate the contracts that protect miners' wages, working conditions, and health and safety.

The story, which has been pretty well told before piecemeal in Canadian newspapers and in Mexico's left publications the *La Jornada* newspaper and *Proceso* magazine, has not received much attention in the U.S. press except in the left and labor press. For seven years in *Mexican Labor News and Analysis* we have covered this story of the suppression of labor union and workers' rights for our subscribers and readers who are mostly labor and human rights activist. The story is a fascinating example of the utter corruption of the Mexican government, the avarice and viciousness of the mining companies, of the tenacity and ambition of Gómez Urrutia, and of the courage of his union's members.



In brief, the story is this. In the early 2000s, I began to notice that something new was happening with the Mexican Miners Union (also known as Los Mineros); they were rather suddenly taking on a new more militant attitude. After Gómez Urrutia took over leadership from his father (Napoleón Gómez Sada) in May of 2002, the union began to engage in more strikes and in solidarity strikes with unions and workers in Latin America and in the United States. Then in February of 2006 Gómez Urrutia made a move to take over control of the Congress of Labor, the umbrella organization to which most of Mexico's labor federations and unions then belonged. At about the same time, on February 19, 2006 there was a deadly explosion in the Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila State taking the lives of 65 miners, a disaster that Gómez Urrutia called "industrial homicide." Gómez Urrutia's attempted coup in the Congress of Labor and his denunciation of the companies for their role in the Pasta de Conchos disaster made him persona non grata with all the powers-that-be.

Those events led the Mexican federal government as well as several Mexican state governments to attempt to remove Gómez Urrutia from the scene by accusing him of having defrauded his union and its members of \$55 million. They brought charges that would have kept him in jail indefinitely while awaiting trial and which could have eventually sent him to prison for years if not decades. He wisely fled to the United States and then to Canada. At the same time Grupo Mexico attacked the union at the large Cananea copper mine and other mines, eventually succeeding in breaking the union at Cananea though not at the other sites. Miners were fired, their families evicted, their local unions besieged, their lives made miserable.

With the support in particular of the United Steel Workers, as well as the International Metalworkers Federation, Gómez Urrutia and his attorney succeeded in proving repeatedly in a variety of Mexican state and federal courts that there was no basis for any of the charges against him. Yet he has not returned from exile in Vancouver for fear that new charges would be brought or that he might be killed by agents of the government or the companies, fears which seem quite reasonable. Meanwhile, being repeatedly reelected general secretary by his members, he has continued to lead the union from Canada as it engaged in strikes and negotiations that won its members outstanding contracts. Today he continues the fight from Vancouver and the union's members keep the faith in Mexico's mines, constantly under pressure from the employers.

Not a Convincing Memoir, However

While Gómez Urrutia, who is not much of a writer, tells the story of his union and its struggle well enough (though there will be too many events, names, and agency initials for many readers), his own biography is not convincing and we are therefore left in doubt about his character and his real motives. We are pretty sure by the end that there is no real person who corresponds to the hero of his book.

He wants to convince us that he is a son of the working class, but this is a fiction. When Gómez Urrutia was a boy, his father, Gómez Sada, was a miner and then a local mine union leader who by 1960 had become head of the Miners Union. That was at the height of the power of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that controlled the unions and more or less appointed their leaders, leaders who did the party's political bidding and did not create problems for the employers and especially not for the foreign mining companies. Gómez Sada was a typical *charro* of the era, that is, a union bureaucrat who owed his position to the government's violent purge of more leftist, radical or militant union leaders and to his own acquiescence. My wife and I met him once at his office and he was gracious and generous as only an aristocrat can be, having some of his underlings take us around to visit mines and steel plants. He prided himself on the fact that his union had always been "institutional," that is, "official," supporting the government, even when the conservative and corporate Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN) was elected president. The PRI rewarded Gómez Sada by making him a Congressman and a Senator. He became the Mexican equivalent of a kind of a Count or Duke of labor.

Gómez Urrutia then was the son of a kind of party-union aristocrat, a privileged position that made it possible for him to study economics at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and then to go to graduate school at Oxford University in England. He mentions that, "The late sixties was a time of social upheaval. At the universities in the United States, France, England, Germany, Italy, Mexico, and many other parts of the world, student movements were erupting against colonial wars, inequality, repression, and racial discrimination throughout the world." Yet somehow Gómez Urrutia fails to mention that in Mexico the social upheaval took the form of a movement for democracy, a movement against the PRI, the party of his father and later his own party. He fails to mention that the PRI President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz sent the army and the police to suppress the movement killing an estimated 300 young people in Tlatelolco, the Plaza of the Three Cultures. The student democratic movement was followed—as some radicalized students went into the mines—by the "labor insurgency" of the late 1960s, as it is called, a rank-and-file movement from below in the auto part plants and in the steel mills and even in some mines. There was also the mid-1970s movement of the Electrical Workers (STERM) and their Democratic Tendency, suppressed by the army. Gómez Urrutia never mentions these movements; perhaps he knows nothing about them, though one suspects that he knows them quite well but prefers to avoid mentioning the real labor movements of his youth because his father and he opposed them as did all

the official unions and PRI politicians.

Gómez Urrutia returned from his studies abroad taking positions first as an economist at the Banco de México, then as a professor at the UNAM. In the mid-1970s President José López Portillo appointed him to be an Assistant Director for Planning in the Department of Planning and the Budget, and finally he worked for ten years at Moneda de Mexico, the Mexican mint. That is, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia was ascending the staircase of the Mexican *nomenklatura* until, motivated by excessive ambition, he made a political misstep in the early 1990s by running for governor of Nuevo Leon as a candidate aligned with Donaldo Colosio, an opponent of president Carlos Salinas. Only after he failed in the party primary process in the PRI, more or less ruining his political career, did he then turn his attention to the union.

While Gomez Urrutia tries to convince us that he became general secretary because the miners had all known him since he was a child, because of his volunteer work for his father, and because of his own experience as a mine employee in the accounting department of a mine and therefore a union member, none of this is convincing. Not at all. It is quite clear that when his father died, he inherited the position of general secretary, head of Los Mineros. And since his story of how the miners loved and trusted him is so phony and corny—"They knew I would never betray the union or the workers. I was already their colleague, their brother, their friend."—it would have been better to have simply and honestly written, "I inherited the union's top post from my father but had other ideas and began to take a more militant approach."

While this book poses no interesting questions, there are important questions to be asked. They are, I think: Why did Gómez Urrutia take a more militant approach? Why was that possible given the long history of state-party control of the unions? What does this mean for the Mexican labor movement? What are the possibilities for the future? As his earlier flirtation with politics suggest, Gómez Urrutia was interested in power; to become head of his father's union and then head of the Congress of Labor would make him a real power, perhaps even a king-maker in the PRI or possibly even in the PAN. The Miners Union was for him a path to political redemption. (Certainly that was the lesson also drawn by Elba Esther Gordillo, head of the Mexican Teachers Union who also tried to become leader of the Congress of Labor in the same period, also unsuccessfully.) Gómez Urrutia's espousal of militant unionism and international union solidarity proved an almost successful strategy for enhancing his own political position.

What made it possible of Gómez Urrutia to take a more militant line was the expansion of the mining industry that was taking place, the privatization of that industry, and its technological transformation. The Mexican Miners Union was large enough, strong enough, and well situated enough to be able to take on the mining companies one by one and win better contracts. Those contracts gave Gómez Urrutia the loyalty of the members and allowed him to make his power play for the Congress of Labor. His demonstrations of international solidarity also strengthened his hand, giving him that American connection desired by all Mexican politicians. At the same time, the combination of the transformation of the Institutional Revolutionary Party as it was taken over by the technocrats and ultimately by Carlos Salinas, and the experience of neoliberal globalization as Salinas dismantled the nationalized industries, opened the markets, and invited in foreign investors, meant that the unions were also under enormous political pressure, suffering structural dislocations, and seeing rank-and-file resistance.

The conditions created the opportunity for Gómez Urrutia to make his move at the Congress of Labor. But, just as he had done earlier when he ran for governor of Nuevo Leon, he had chosen the wrong side. The state and the official unions were still too strong, and he lost. Nevertheless, through the assistance of the United Steel Workers and the IMF, he has been able to hang on to his base in the Miners Union. At the same time, Grupo Mexico saw that by working closely with the state, it had

a chance of breaking the union, at least at the Cananea mine.

Still, under Gómez Urrutia's leadership the Mexican Miners became an independent union that found itself fighting the state and the companies. The union's besieged position forced it to seek even greater international solidarity in Canada, the United States, and in the world labor movement. The attack by Felipe Calderón's government on the Electrical Workers Union (SME) and on the teachers union brought the Miners allies in Mexico. These are all unions waging a rearguard action as they try to carry out a retreat always in fear of being routed.

While Gómez Urrutia has proven to be a remarkable son of the old PRI-union aristocracy, a curious kind of Knight of the old order, that is not the way the Mexican labor movement will be revived. Rank-and-file workers in the unions will have to create and push forward their own leaders who fight for a different sort of unionism, a different sort of politics, and a different society.