USW, Los Mineros Strengthen Alliance

By Jim McKay
USW Communications

Convention delegates leapt to their feet in a standing ovation Tuesday as International President Leo W. Gerard signed an enhanced alliance agreement with Los Mineros, Mexico’s oppressed national union of mine and metal workers.

The agreement reaffirms a strategic alliance signed in 2005. It brings the USW “one step closer” to building a unified North American union that can confront multinational corporations in the United States, Canada and Mexico, the three countries party to the devastating North American Free Trade Agreement.

The signing before 3,000 delegates and guests came after an emotional address by Oralia Gomez de Casso, the wife of exiled Los Mineros leader Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, who is living in Canada and was prevented from traveling to Las Vegas by new bogus charges in Mexico.

Los Mineros leader Juan Linares, who had hoped to sign the agreement, was pulled off an airplane as he attempted to leave Mexico for the convention. The pact was instead signed by Los Mineros officer Sergio Beltran Reyes.

The agreement followed a 2010 pact between the two unions to create a cross-border commission to explore unification and increase strategic cooperation.

Gomez, who has been re-elected five times as general secretary of the union since being forced to flee Mexico five years ago, spoke by telephone to the convention.

He thanked the USW and other international unions for their support and solidarity, and pledged to continue his fight for justice in Mexico.

“The struggle is not over,” he said. “We will continue until we reach a final victory, not only for Los Mineros but for trade unionists all over the world.”

The two unions have for years fought side by side to resist attacks by corporations, aided and abetted by the government of Mexico, on the rights of Mexican workers and the existence of Los Mineros. They have supported each other in struggles on both sides of the border.

The agreement calls for the USW and Los Mineros to strengthen joint efforts to fight for workers in the three countries and affirms an earlier commitment to create a single North American organization.

The agreement calls for the USW and Los Mineros to remain separate labor organizations with separate constitutions. Neither will be liable for the legal obligations or debts of the other.

Councils will be created from USW and Minero local unions that will meet regularly to exchange information and facilitate strategic cooperation, support and organizing. A mechanism will be created to support cross-national organizing.

Each union will be entitled to observers with the right to speak but not vote on issues that come before their executive boards or committees. An exchange program of USW and Minero personnel, staff and membership will be developed. Language instruction will be explored.

The joint commission established in 2010 to advance joint initiatives will be expanded to include the USW’s general counsel and director of international affairs. Los Mineros will get two additional representatives.
Delegates Reject Dues Reduction

By Bob Gallagher
CNO Communications

Convention delegates on Tuesday overwhelmingly rejected five resolutions to reduce dues, which would have threatened the USW’s ability to serve members and meet the union’s many challenges.

The delegates also concurrently approved 272 resolutions submitted by local unions that called for keeping the union’s dues structure unchanged.

International President Leo W. Gerard urged the nearly 3,000 delegates for a strong showing that would convince corporate America of the USW’s resolve to remain a fighting union. They gave it to him.

“The reality is, brothers and sisters, we came here to stand up and fight back,” Gerard said. “We didn’t come here to lean back and walk out with our tails between our legs.”

Delegates lined up at floor microphones to defend the union’s dues structure and outline struggles where members have resisted corporate attacks.

Rodney Nelson, president of Local 207 at a Cooper Tire plant in Findlay, Ohio, pointed to a tire trade case that the USW won against China that led to increased investment in his plant and new jobs.

“The International Executive Board took on China and won, and created jobs back here in the United States,” Nelson said. “Why would we want to tie their hands to their sides to limit the fight for us? Keep the union dues the same and keep fighting.”

Mike Rodriguez, president of Local 2102 in Pueblo, Colo., said his local in 2004 won a seven-year unfair labor practice strike against Rocky Mountain Steel, formerly CF&I Steel Corp., and $68 million in back pay because of USW solidarity and the Strike and Defense Fund, which dispensed $60 million during the struggle.

District 1 Director David McCall, secretary of the Constitutional Committee, said the rejected proposals would have saved members just pennies per day while depleting the Strike and Defense Fund and crippling other essential union activities.

Approximately $121 million was spent on 104 strikes since the last Convention three years ago including $95 million on direct strike relief, Secretary-Treasurer Stan Johnson noted.

“I don’t pay enough dues,” Johnson said. “You don’t pay enough dues. We can never pay enough dues to fight the fight that we have to fight.”

Lynn Williams Inspires Convention

By Jim McKay
USW Communications

John Lee, financial secretary for Local 7706, told the delegates he caught hell from his members when his former PACE local went to the new USW dues structure, so he told them, “You do get what you pay for.”

Lynn Williams, USW President Emeritus, explained the history and importance of Steelworkers standing up and fighting back. And to thunderous applause, Lynn reminded the Convention that “trade unionists are special people who have the courage to take up the fight for each other.”

Lynn, a founder of Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR), received a special tribute in a motion that also expressed appreciation to members, officers and the board of SOAR, and pledged to continue to consider the interests of USW retirees in all bargaining, social, legislative and political activities.

Known as a great storyteller, he has finally put to paper his inspirational stories of a life as a committed activist, fearless leader of the Steelworkers and as one of the most respected heroes in the history of the labor movement.

Lynn’s memoirs, One Day Longer, unveiled at the Convention, vividly recount his life in labor with all its triumphs, challenges, hopes and dreams. He traces the rise and transformation of the labor movement from World War II to today.

One Day Longer is a profound reflection of Lynn’s impressive career.

To an emotional standing ovation, Lynn concluded his convention address with the uplifting words of Tommy Douglas: “Courage my friends, ‘tis not too late to build a better world,” adding, “That is what our kids deserve; that is what our grandchildren deserve, and that is what we will leave them.”
Brazilian Labor Leader: Corporations Must Respect Workers

By Barbara White Stack
USW Communications

Artur Henrique dos Santos, president of the Unified Workers Central (CUT), which is Brazil’s largest labor federation with 7.5 million members, brought Steelworker delegates to their feet when he told the convention in Las Vegas that multinational corporations must respect workers and the societies in which they live.

“Any company from any country that goes to any other country must respect the traditions, the culture and the history of the lives of the workers there,” dos Santos told the crowd, which is highly sensitive to this issue because of the contempt that the Brazilian-based mining corporation Vale displayed toward USW members in Canada.

In introducing dos Santos to the group, International President Leo W. Gerard noted that the CUT helped overthrow Brazil’s dictator and elect two successive Brazilian presidents who have created 20 million jobs and lifted 26 million people out of poverty. The CUT, Gerard said, has proven to be among the Steelworkers’ strongest and most steadfast allies.

Dos Santos said he was glad for the opportunity to go to Sudbury and stand with Gerard and the Steelworkers in the Vale strike. “I learned lessons with you Steelworkers that I will carry the rest of my life.”

In addition to Vale, dos Santos said, “There are many Brazilian companies operating around the world; this is another reason we need international solidarity.”

And he promised, “We are together as one fighting for our rights, our dignity. Long live international solidarity!”

IMF Leader: Global Worker Solidarity Crucial

By Barbara White Stack
USW Communications

Wearing a blue and gold USW T-shirt with “Solidarity” written across the chest, Jyrki Raina, general secretary of the International Metalworkers’ Federation, told the delegates and guests that international worker solidarity is crucial in a global economy.

In this new globalized world, where corporations operate without national borders, workers cannot fight for a better life if they do not develop allies, Raina said.

He said most of his knowledge about corporate campaigns came from actions he engaged in with the Steelworkers. His first partnership with the USW, he said, was taking on Mark Rich, the wealthy international commodities trader who owned the aluminum smelter Ravenswood and locked out Steelworkers for nearly two years. In that campaign, European allies helped track down Rich, who was living and working abroad and assisted with demonstrations at his office.

Rania noted that the Steelworkers are coordinating networks of workers at international corporations for joint action. “A new era of global solidarity has begun,” he said.

His own organization, the IMF, which represents 25 million industrial workers in 100 countries, with the USW its largest North American affiliate, will merge in 2012 with the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) to form an organization representing 50 million workers in 130 countries.
Steelworker’s Son Rocks Delegates

Grammy-winner roots rocker, Dave Alvin, a son of a Steelworker, entertained delegates and guests Monday evening at the USW cook-out. Joined by his band, “The Guilty Ones,” his set included “Gary, Indiana, 1959,” an ode to the national steel strike that year and the slow, steady decline that followed.

“I was just channeling my dad,” he told President Leo W. Gerard after the show. Cas Alvin, his father, was a Steelworker Organizer in the U.S. southwest and an editor of the Steelabor magazine.

Alvin sang:

“The factories are in ruins / decent jobs hard to find / you can’t get ahead / no matter how hard you try / ‘cause the big boys make the rules / tough luck for everyone else / out on the streets / it’s every man for himself.”

“Dad was a dedicated union man,” said Alvin. “In fact, I’m named after Steelworker President David McDonald.”

Solidarity Promoted

Steelworkers from across North America stood at the USW 2011 Convention to support a resolution promoting international solidarity, then passed it unanimously, along with another one calling for investment of worker capital to promote worker security.

The international solidarity resolution aims to balance corporate-driven globalization by creating a global workers’ movement. The resolution on workers’ capital, industrial democracy and worker ownership calls on the USW to ensure its investments are used to create jobs and community growth as well as financial returns.

Delegates took to the microphones on the Convention floor to tell how international solidarity aided their local unions and fellow workers.

Rick Bertrand, president of Local 6500 in Sudbury, Canada, which struck multinational mining company Vale for over a year, told the audience, “We saw firsthand how tough it is to fight a multinational. Without international solidarity, it would have been a lot tougher.”

Larry Burchfield Jr., vice president of Local 13-1 in Texas City, Texas, said that global solidarity has meant help from Unite, the largest union in Britain and Ireland, in confronting his employer, BP, a multinational based in Great Britain. “With Unite brothers and sisters, we fought them on their own turf at stockholder meetings when they wanted to take away retiree benefits for new hires,” Burchfield said.

Tom Hargrove, president of Local 1010 at the ArcelorMittal mill in East Chicago, Ind., said international solidarity improved workplace safety. “As a member of the ArcelorMittal global safety committee, I had the honor and privilege of visiting and trying to make it a safer workplace around the world.” This effort is unions and union federations collaborating internationally to secure safer conditions, he said.

Workers’ Shared Values Will Prevail

Len McCluskey, a former Liverpool dock worker and now general secretary of Unite, Britain and Ireland’s largest union with 1.5 million members, told delegates Tuesday that workers’ shared vision and values will defeat the corporate elite.

“The ideals that you represent of decency, fairness and equality are what stands us apart from the corporate elite and the bosses. They don’t understand these values. They fail to realize that the spirit of solidarity and community courses through our very veins. And that’s why despite their wealth and power, they will never, never defeat us,” McCluskey said.

McCluskey talked about how Unite and the USW, through their three-year-old alliance called Workers Uniting, have collaborated to confront global capital. “We have brought our members together in metals, in the forestry sector, in the can and containers industry, in education, in oil and most of all in the pulp and paper industry. In businesses where we have both Unite and USW members, like Alcoa, Pilkington and the National Grid, we have started to work out joint strategies.”

USW International President Leo W. Gerard noted as he introduced McCluskey that Unite donated $100,000 to help Canadian USW members during their strike against multinational Vale. And McCluskey thanked the USW for its support during Unite’s strike against British Airways.

“Our politicians and media barons try to debilitate us, to grind us down!” said McCluskey. “I reject that defeatism... Believe in your values! Believe in your strength! Believe in your union! Because another world is possible.”

By Barbara White Stack
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Len McCluskey

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Dave Alvin