

As strike expands in the maquiladoras

Mexican auto parts workers explain how they formed strike committees

By Andrea Lobo
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After two weeks of wildcat strikes, tens of thousands of “maquiladora” workers in the Mexican city of Matamoros, next to the border with the United States, continue to expand their struggle.

At 2 p.m. on Friday, the official, legally-sanctioned strike began after the main trade union was compelled to file a legal strike announcement last week when workers refused to abide by the union’s back-to-work orders. As soon as the 2 p.m. deadline struck, workers across the city placed red-and-black flags traditionally used to declare a strike on the main gates, cheering and recording social media videos as their fellow workers still inside walked out enthusiastically.

In the last moment Thursday and Friday, four *maquiladoras* (Polytech, CTS, Core and AFX) agreed to the \$1,700 raise and the 20 percent bonus that workers have demanded.

However, the overwhelming majority of companies have refused, fearing that any concessions will encourage workers across Mexico and internationally to rebel against their bought-and-paid-for unions and unleash a mass working class movement for social equality. Instead, they’ve sought to bait workers with pitiful bonuses, the removal of machinery and threats of plant closures, mass layoffs and criminal charges against militant workers.

Workers are sharing new details on how they began building independent committees to conduct their strike. An auto parts worker at Autoliv, which was the first plant to go on the wildcat strike in Matamoros, told the WSWS that on January 12, as soon as workers realized that the union and management were conspiring to rob them of mandated bonuses and a raise, they elected five workers as a committee independent of the trade union to organize a strike and “fight for our rights and what belongs to us.”

He continued: “The function of these independent committees was that deals could not be made under the table anymore between the union and the companies, since there were workers there telling us what was being said and agreed to. I think that, indeed, the independent committees are much more useful than the union because we asked ourselves, ‘This is the proposal, what do we do?’—something that the union

never did.”

Another auto parts worker who is employed at Fisher Dynamics described how her maquiladora joined the strike on January 15: “My co-workers began talking, ‘Our situation is backbreaking, there are too many hours, too much pressure from the union, the union delegates are always on the side of the company and never in favor of workers and were also opposing the \$1,700 bonus and 20 percent raise... Then, two of them said, ‘Well, we are tired of this, right? Look at what the other plants are doing, I think we can win. Let’s do something about it!’”

Fearful of the growing strength of these committees, the companies and the trade union requested a “federal intervention” in the days prior. At 1 PM on Friday, the sub-secretary of labor, Alfredo Domínguez Marrufo, and the federal representative for the state of Tamaulipas, José Ramón Gómez Leal, who was sent personally by President Andres Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) of the National Regeneration Movement (Morena), held a press conference to request that workers accept a “postponement of ten days or more” for further negotiations “to avoid a strike that could lead to unexpected consequences.”

Given that heavily-armed soldiers of the Navy and police have already been harassing workers at the picket lines, this warning needs to be taken as a serious and lethal threat by the AMLO government against workers. Workers have reportedly begun organizing self-defense networks to protect themselves as the strike enters its third week.

On Thursday, one plant announced that it would close down and leave 1,700 workers and their families without their sustenance. Then, management and union leaders at about a dozen plants locked workers inside the plants on Friday, refusing to recognize the beginning of the “official” strike. Some presented workers illegal documents provided by the Matamoros labor conciliation council to keep them inside. Union officials claimed to have “their hands tied” and defended the action.

At the same time, autoworkers in the United States and Canada have confirmed to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*

that the strike is causing auto parts shortages across the industry.

On Friday, the Commerce Chamber (Canaco) in Matamoros warned government authorities that the strike would cost slightly over \$6 million in monthly losses to the entire economy of the city. After the first week of the strike, however, the Maquiladoras Association of Matamoros reported that the companies had lost more than \$100 million. Commentators have pointed out that the payment of the bonus and wage increase would be less than \$200 million for the entire year.

Such figures reflect the enormous extraction of profits by the transnational corporations. Hundreds of millions are channeled into the pockets of their executives and to financial investors with the rubber stamp of the government in the form of enormous tax handouts and land, backed by police state repression.

Bernardo, a worker on strike, told the WSWS, “The companies are losing more than we are asking. That tells me they can pay and just want to keep all workers in misery.” He warned his fellow workers, “It’s almost certain that the federal government is betraying us, and if they use federal force against us, things are going to get ugly and a federal intervention against us will be a problem meriting a revolution.” He expressed support for fighting for a general strike across North America to face corporate and government threats, saying, “it would be a major blow against the corporations.”

In the United States, amid a virtual blackout of the Matamoros strike in the international media, the Trump administration continues to cultivate its fascist and dictatorial base through its anti-Mexican and racist demagoguery. Using the same scapegoating tactics, Canadian and US trade unions are working overtime to undermine the growing solidarity between workers across North America.

At a Friday morning press conference, the leader of the Canadian autoworkers union Unifor, Jerry Dias, announced a boycott of General Motors cars made in Mexico. This is an outright attack on Mexican autoworkers. It would produce job losses in Mexico and across North America as well, with GM indicating that there are “more than 60 Ontario-based auto parts companies supporting Mexico production.”

Contrary to the nationalism of the unions, workers in the US and Canada are calling for advancing their own international solution to the crisis of the capitalist system. An autoworker in Oshawa, Canada denounced Dias to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* for “spreading Mexican hate and opposition.”

“It’s so obvious the dividing orders have been given so we don’t support their cause,” he said. “The corporations, unions and media are all revealing themselves for what they are. The more this Mexico thing spreads, the more it exposes their corrupt intentions.”

On January 16, the Mexican political establishment sent labor lawyer and Morena-tied activist Susana Prieto to intervene. She

won the initial confidence of workers by expressing support for the strike and feigning sympathy for their hatred of the abusive trade unions and management. However, she has worked to suffocate and confuse the independent initiative of workers, from telling workers they can’t free themselves from the union to creating illusions that a “federal intervention” will benefit workers and sidelining the work that rank-and-file committees have been doing in communicating democratically with their fellow workers and deciding on steps to take.

On Friday morning, she insisted that workers not prevent companies from taking machinery away before the “official” strike and that they be ready to comply with a postponement of the strike if the union demanded one. Prieto desperately exhorted, “This is not the time to fight with your union delegates,” lying to skeptical workers that “union delegates are nothing but workers like you with a license to represent.”

Workers must oppose the road being proposed by Prieto and reject the straitjacket of appealing to the corrupt trade union bureaucracy and the capitalist AMLO government, whose only response to any challenge to the capitalist interests it serves will be to violently suppress the strike.

On the contrary, the Matamoros workers must continue developing their independent strength through the incipient strike committees. Workers have the initiative. They are shaking up the entire North American auto industry. They can build their strength by forming a citywide strike committee with rank-and-file representatives from each plant to take full control of the struggle and appeal to their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Canada and beyond.

*Workers who wish to form a common international strategy should contact us by email at autoworkers@wsws.org or via our **Facebook page** in order to take up these crucial steps. For more information on the February 9 rally in Detroit, visit wsws.org/auto.*

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>