

The International Socialist Organization covers up for the unions, AMLO in Matamoros, Mexico maquiladora strike

By Alex González
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After nearly a month of silence, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) has presented a dishonest account of the ongoing strikes by up to 70,000 “maquiladora” workers in Matamoros, Mexico. The ISO’s one and only article on the Matamoros strikes was published on February 11 under the title “The Rising of the Maquiladora Workers.”

The article frames the wildcat actions as a fight that succeeded in pressuring the corrupt union leaders working on behalf of the companies (known as “charros”) to defend workers’ interests. The article also credits Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (popularly known as “AMLO”) with both the start and the success of the strikes. The ISO is compelled to present an alternate version of events because the truth of what happened in Matamoros is that workers launched a rebellion against the trade unions and the bourgeois Movement for National Regeneration (Morena) party which the ISO supports.

The ISO critiques local trade union leaders Juan Villafuerte and Jesús Mendoza for “ensur[ing] profits and growth for the companies and big payoffs for themselves at the expense of the workers” but then claims that the workers successfully pressured these leaders, who were “put into the unprecedented position of having to represent workers” and were “compelled to give daily reports on negotiations and directly relay workers’ responses to proceedings.”

This presentation of events is false. The unions are hated by the workers and they have not been pressured to fight on the workers’ behalf. They are stifling the strike movement, threatening workers with mass firings and reportedly assaulting workers on the picket line.

The strike wave broke out because workers built

their own independent factory committees to organize *against* the unions. They took matters into their own hands and broke the isolation imposed upon them for decades by the pro-company unions. The *charros* have responded by feigning verbal support for the strike, which every worker knows is a lie.

The ISO does not refer to the independent character of the committees, instead calling them “delegated committee structures” that were part of a “network” by “tireless organizer and advocate” Susana Prieto. Prieto, a labor lawyer that operates as a Morena activist in her hometown, has said that she “likes capitalism and money” and denounced workers for forming their own political opinions, which she calls “opinionitis.” In reality, the committees were initiated by the workers themselves and Prieto is now going from plant to plant trying to convince workers their only option is to transform their committees into unions.

The ongoing efforts by Prieto, with the backing of key sections of the ruling class, to create “democratic” unions, are aimed at replacing the discredited old union leaderships and creating new union leaderships which will more effectively control workers’ opposition and prevent future rebellions.

Last Wednesday, miner’s union leader Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, who is also a Morena senator, announced the creation of a new “International Labor Confederation” that will supposedly serve as an alternative to the *charro* unions. The initiative received widespread favorable coverage in the international press, including the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and has reportedly received the backing of the AFL-CIO.

In one passage, the ISO notes that *charro* leader

Villafuerte “had worked closely with the maquiladora owners and municipal and state politicians to make Matamoros an ideal place for foreign investment by keeping wages and benefits constrained. Each year, the union ‘renegotiates’ the pay and benefits for workers, without their input, and typically carries over contracts with little change. *Charros* are rewarded for their service of maintaining wages and benefits low, while more notorious union bosses go even further in robbing pay and benefits from their workers in a systematic way.”

But this description perfectly fits the trade unions in the US, in which the ISO itself occupies leading positions! Many of the ISO’s upper-middle class membership derives its income from the union dues that the Matamoros workers were fighting to eliminate or sharply reduce.

The term *charro* union equally applies to organizations like the Chicago Teachers Union, led by ISO leader Jesse Sharkey, who makes at least \$180,000 a year. Sharkey played a key role in the betrayal of the 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike which led to the shutting down of dozens of schools.

ISO leader Sherry Wolf is a leading bureaucrat for the American Federation of Teachers at Rutgers University in New Jersey. ISO writer Aaron Amaral is Assistant General Counsel for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) who, according to public records, made nearly \$100,000 in 2015.

In other words, the ISO is an organization led by *charros*. It would take a Matamoros worker nine days working 12 hours per day to make what Sharkey makes in one hour for sitting behind his desk. A Matamoros worker would have to work for 108 years to make what Sharkey makes in a year.

The ISO also praises AMLO, who the article credits with helping the strike wave through the increase of the minimum wage along the US-Mexico border. The article claims that AMLO has “rais[ed] the confidence and combativeness of Mexican workers” and implemented policies that have had a “tangible impact on the standard of living for poor and working people.” The ISO even praises AMLO for not using the army to brutally repress the strike.

This is another lie. From the beginning, the minimum wage increase was meant to provide a “left” gloss for

the creation of a new free economic zone that would slash taxes for corporations and set up new state-sponsored centers of exploitation, including more maquiladoras. AMLO has denounced striking teachers as “conservative,” saying teachers’ protests for higher wages and more public education spending have “nothing to do with the left.”

While the ISO attempts to disassociate AMLO from other members of his administration, the truth is that Morena officials—from the mayor of Matamoros up to the head of the Mexican Senate—have been scrambling to shut down the walkouts and have supported the use of police and military force to break up the strike. Now, there are reports police have begun to attack pickets while the armed forces have been patrolling strikes and intimidating workers.

If workers want to know the true attitude of AMLO towards the working class, they need only look at the conditions that immigrants face in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, just 500 kilometers from Matamoros. Thousands of Central American migrants that chanted “We are international workers!” are now trapped in what amount to concentration camps, with armed guards preventing them from leaving.

The significance of the Matamoros rebellion is that it shows the fight for social equality necessarily pits the workers against the entire capitalist economic and political system in which the unions are based.

The ISO seeks to prevent the growth of the class struggle from developing in a revolutionary direction. Their dishonest appraisal of the Matamoros strike aims to provide a “left” cover for the institutions that have over decades been discredited in the eyes of the masses to keep workers and youth from drawing political conclusions about their objective tasks in the coming period: the fight for international socialism.

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