

New trade union bureaucracies or rank-and-file workers' power?

Lessons of the Matamoros workers' rebellion: Part three

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Second wave: "Independent" unions step in

At this time, only about 14 companies had agreed to the 20/32 and were already carrying out firings, even though the strike was costing companies a whopping \$50 million per day, according to Index.

On January 30, the strike began to spread to maquiladoras affiliated to the smallest of the three main unions in the city, the Workers Union of the Maquiladora and Assembly Industry (STIME), led by Rubén Longoria Uribe. (The SJOIIM, the Industrial Union of Maquiladoras Workers or SITPME and the Union of Maquiladora and Assembly Industry Workers or STIME are all part of the Confederation of Mexican Workers or CTM.) Some 1,500 maquiladora workers put down their tools at Spellman to demand the bonus of 32,000 pesos. The electronics company quickly agreed.

Hundreds of workers at a Coca-Cola bottling plant affiliated to the SJOIIM began partial stoppages to demand the 20/32. The Mexican financial daily *El Financiero* proclaimed the next day "the end of labor peace" in Mexico.

In the next few days, workers at Toyoda Gosei Rubber and other STIME plants joined the second wave of wildcat strikes in defiance of the union. After a four-hour strike at Ballinger on February 4, the company agreed to the 20/32, which led other workers at SITPME to organize a mass assembly that afternoon to call for a "general strike" demanding the 20/32, regardless of whether it was pegged or not to their contract. They also raised as a major demand getting rid of the union.

Thousands at 25 maquiladoras from SITPME and STIME were suddenly on strike, and workers at the supermarket chains Chedraui, Smart and Soriana, the milk processing plant of Vakita, and trash collectors joined them.

On February 2, inspired by the Matamoros rebellion, workers at the five campuses of the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM) in Greater Mexico City struck to demand a 20 percent wage hike. At the time, teachers in the western state of Michoacán were carrying out strikes and intermittent blockades of railways connected to the crucial Port of Lázaro Cárdenas. On February 7, about 680 workers at General Mills in the central Mexican city of Irapuato, Guanajuato, launched a

four-day wildcat strike against unjustified firings and for significant improvements in benefits and conditions. Moreover, auto parts workers in Ciudad Victoria continued to threaten to strike for a 30 percent raise.

Within a week after this second wave started, all the maquiladoras affiliated to the SJOIIM agreed to the 20/32. Nonetheless, the companies started firing hundreds of the most militant workers while Index, the association of maquiladora owners, threatened 25,000 layoffs.

While creating the illusion that she was guaranteeing workers' demands simply by reviewing each contract, Prieto displayed as much eagerness as the companies to shut down the strikes. For instance, on February 5, when Swedish-based Autoliv agreed to the 20/32, she told workers "we have to go back to work now." When workers expressed concerns about reprisals like firings to avoid paying the bonus offered in four installments, she defended the corrupt companies that were stealing from the workers. "This isn't the fault of the companies," Prieto declared, "the companies have their interests. We are not professional agitators. We wanted something legal. The company will not decapitalize only because you want your bonus of 32,000 pesos..."

When concerns about the AMLO administration were raised, she told Autoliv workers, "He is my president and your president. All of his detractors seek only to channel water to their own mill."

That weekend, on February 9, the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees held a demonstration outside the headquarters of General Motors in Detroit to oppose the plant closures announced by GM in the US and Canada. Demonstrators rejected the anti-Mexican agitation by the United Auto Workers and Unifor and called for workers to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, in order to unite with workers in Mexico and around the world against the assault on jobs and living standards by the transnational corporations.

In addition to greetings from the framed up Maruti Suzuki workers in India, several workers in Matamoros sent statements

of support of the demonstration. Bernardo, an Inteva worker already back at work, declared, “If you unite the strikes in the US with those in other parts of the world, the workers movement would strengthen because we would be closing down the road of the corporate elite.” On February 12, the WSWWS received a video from striking auto parts workers at Fisher Dynamics in Matamoros who stated: “Brothers in Detroit, Michigan, in your struggle against mass layoffs, stand firm and we will continue to stand together!”

The political establishment, including the union bureaucracy, moved to contain the second wave of strikes and prevent these internationalist sentiments from finding an organized and more politically conscious expression.

In Ciudad Victoria, the CTM union led by María Dolores Zúñiga cancelled the strike announcement that weekend demanding a 30 percent raise and imposed a sellout agreement of 16 percent. Then, a February 11 report by *Proceso* described how the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC) prevented wildcat strikes by Walmart workers in Monterrey convincing them to affiliate.

On February 13, Morena Senator and leader of Mexico’s Miners Union, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, announced the co-founding with the Electrician’s Union (SME) of the “International Labor Confederation” (CIT), openly framing the decision as a response to the wave of strikes initiated in Matamoros. The development received the support of the American AFL-CIO labor federation and positive coverage by the *Wall Street Journal* and other corporate outlets. The next day, Index called for the “immediate intervention” of AMLO and the new CIT in Matamoros.

The employers then escalated the firings and layoffs, including the closing of the Joyson Safety Systems plant with 700 workers on February 15, as well as the repression by the police and union thugs. The president of the Business Coordinating Center or CCE, Juan Pablo Castañón, doubled the previous threat made by Index to 50,000 layoffs in Matamoros.

In the first week of February, Susana Prieto moved to corral workers in Matamoros behind the “independent” unions. She began visiting picket lines with Luis Carlos Haro, an activist from the pseudo-left Political Organization of the People and Workers (OPT), which was founded by the Electrician’s Union (SME). On February 3, Prieto said to a picket line at Joyson that he was “helping for a few days.” Haro then gave “special greetings from the Alliance of National, State and Municipal Organizations of the Movement of San Quintín Workers and the Independent, National and Democratic Union of Workers of San Quintín [SINDJA].”

Prieto’s relation to Haro goes back at least to the December 2017 “Binational Conference” co-sponsored by the AFL-CIO and SME, in which Haro was a coordinator and Prieto a keynote speaker. As mentioned above, Prieto continued to organize frequently with the “Alliance” co-founded by the AFL-CIO in San Quintín.

On February 12, the WSWWS warned workers about the purpose of bringing Haro along: “These forces seek to provide a new façade to the same trade union bureaucracy to subordinate workers’ independent initiative to the dictates of the corrupt union structures, the government, and ultimately, the ruling class and imperialism.” In apparent response, Prieto insisted that day to workers, “you never saw me with a union,” only to tell a picket line at Kasco wanting to leave SITPME, “I believe that you need to form independent unions here. Trade unions are good; we [the workers] are the corrupt ones, along with the people who administrate them.”

Third wave: Trade unions suppress strikes across the country

On February 25, a third wave of strikes began when 400 metalworkers at Sigosa, Seyco Joits and Sistemas Estructurales y de Construcción, which are affiliated to the Miners Union led locally by Javier Zúñiga and nationally by Senator Gómez Urrutia, struck in Matamoros demanding the 20 percent raise and a bonus of 48,000 pesos (US\$2,513). In Ciudad Victoria, about 500 workers at Spring Window Fashion struck demanding to leave the union. At this time, 15 maquiladoras from the second wave were still on strike, but a week later all but three—and the Coca-Cola bottling plant—had agreed to the 20/32. The fear that the strikes would merge and spread was largely behind the decision by the companies to accept the 20/32.

During the following two days, 2,900 metalworkers at two yards owned by Dragados Offshore, which produces drilling platforms, in Altamira, Tamaulipas and Pueblo Viejo, Veracruz carried out wildcat strikes demanding raises as high as 100 percent. On February 28, a strike announcement was postponed at the Autonomous University of Mexico (UACM), where workers demand a 12 percent raise. That week, the CROC was compelled to file a strike announcement involving 90,000 Walmart workers from across the country to demand a 20 percent raise.

All of these struggles remained within the grip of the unions and were quickly sold out. The Miners Union has opposed any struggle against the threatened closures of the three metallurgic plants in Matamoros. Workers at Spring Window Fashion were convinced to simply switch to a different union within the CTM, the one led by María Dolores Zúñiga. The union at UACM postponed the strike indefinitely after workers rejected a sellout agreement of a 5.47 percent raise. Finally, CROC cancelled the strike at Walmart agreeing to a 5.5 percent raise.

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