

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

Lessons of the Matamoros workers' rebellion: Part five

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This is the fifth and concluding part of a series of articles on the wave of strikes carried out by maquiladora workers in the Mexican border town of Matamoros.

The rebellion of the Matamoros workers in the early months of 2019 was a strategic experience from which critical lessons must be drawn not only for workers in Mexico, but for the entire international working class.

In the course of their courageous struggle, the maquiladora workers set up rank-and-file strike committees in opposition to the corporate-controlled unions, convened popular assemblies to vote on collective action across the city, and marched to the US border and issued statements to US workers to join their fight against the transnational corporations.

In the face of the repressive measures of the *charro* union thugs, the employers, and the state and federal police and military agencies, the Matamoros workers called for support from broader sectors of the working class in Mexico, as well as internationally, and formed workers' patrols to defend strikers. At Ballinger, where some workers were fired for demanding 20/32, workers spontaneously demanded administrative control over hiring and firing.

This inspired support among students, teachers, other service-sector workers and layers of the lower-middle class like small business owners, who joined the strikers' demonstrations and donated food and money. Amid initial struggles by teachers and hospital workers against President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's attacks on health care and public education, the Matamoros rebellion inspired a wave of strikes among university professors, metalworkers and other sections of the working class.

The emergence of new organizations of working class struggle has confirmed the prognosis of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, made as early as the beginning of the 1990s, that the resurgence of the class struggle would increasingly take the form of a direct clash with the old bureaucratized and corporatist trade unions and emerge as an internationally coordinated struggle.

The Matamoros workers rebelled against the gangster-ridden *charro* unions. But the "independent" unions promoted by the workers' false friend, labor lawyer Susana Prieto, are aligned with US and German trade unions, such as the United Auto Workers, United Steelworkers and IG Metall, which function as industrial police forces for giant corporations such as General Motors and Volkswagen. These corporatist unions, which have for decades suppressed workers' resistance to wage cuts, plant closings and layoffs, offer no alternative.

In the aftermath of the Matamoros strikes, the maquiladora owners association and the US- and other foreign-owned corporations are carrying out a punitive campaign of layoffs and the blacklisting of

militant strike leaders, while the AMLO government threatens to use state repression to stop workers from asserting their rights to a living wage and decent working conditions.

So, what is the way forward?

It is clear that the maquiladora workers would not have achieved a single thing without organizing themselves independently of the unions. That independent movement must be extended and consolidated through the formation of rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, in every factory and workplace.

These committees will not be new unions. As David North, the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, explained in 1998: "Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt a hostile attitude toward the class struggle. Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labor-power and determine the general conditions in which surplus value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obliged to guarantee that their members supply their labor power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contract. As Gramsci noted, 'The union represents legality, and must aim to make its members respect that legality.'"

In an earlier historical period, particularly during the post-World War II boom, workers were able to win certain improvements through the trade unions, despite these organizations' defense of capitalist property relations and their nationalist program. However, even then, whatever gains were made were the result of mass struggles from below to which the union bureaucracies felt obliged to respond.

The last four decades have seen the transformation of the trade unions from organizations that pressured the employers for concessions to the workers into organizations that pressure the workers for concessions—pay cuts, speedup, layoffs and other givebacks—to the employers. This transformation was bound up with objective socio-economic changes, above all, the globalization of capitalist production and the emergence of transnational corporations, which produce for the world market and scour the globe in search of the cheapest sources of labor.

The unions, which are based on a national framework whether they are nominally "socialist" or openly pro-capitalist, are incapable of responding to globalization in any progressive manner. Instead, they jettison any resistance to the corporations and voluntarily collaborate with their "own" employers and governments to cut labor costs to boost the competitiveness and profitability of the nation's industry against its international rivals.

The subordination of the interests of the working class to the capitalist economic, legal and political set-up today means the rejection of any assertion by the working class of its social rights. These rights, including the right to a secure and good-paying job, collide with the "rights" of the

capitalist owners to shut their factories, lay off workers, fire militants and move production anywhere in the world to get cheaper labor.

Rank-and-file committees

When two rights collide, Karl Marx said, then “force decides.”

Rank-and-file committees will not bow before “management rights” and what the corporate owners and their bribed politicians say is affordable. The committees must vigilantly counter-pose the will of the workers to the dictates of corporate management. They must use the methods of the class struggle—mass demonstrations, mass strikes and solidarity walkouts, plant occupations, etc.—which bring to bear the enormous strength of the working class, without whose collective labor society would grind to a halt.

Rank-and-file committees must demand the rehiring of all laid-off and victimized workers. In opposition to the shop floor dictatorship of the corporate bosses, enforced by the government and its capitalist laws, with the aid of the unions, workers must fight for industrial democracy and workers’ control of production, including over line speed and safety.

Striking maquiladora workers frequently brought up to WSWS reporters and on social media demands relating to poor access to health care, the mounting debts to the National Fund Institute of Housing for Workers (INFONAVIT), limited child care and other broader social issues around which tens of millions of workers and oppressed people who are shaking off their illusions in AMLO and awakening to the need to oppose his capitalist government can be mobilized.

Rank-and-file committees must link up workers in the factories and other workplaces with workers and young people in the neighborhoods to fight for the right to decent public education and other vital services, and against police and military repression.

To unite against the transnational corporations that super-exploit the maquiladora workers, workers must fight to unite with every section of workers throughout Mexico and establish lines of communication with autoworkers and other workers in the US and Canada, to prepare a coordinated struggle to stop the race to the bottom and guarantee secure and good-paying jobs for all workers.

The shutdown of production at auto assembly plants across North America as a result of the strikes in Matamoros palpably demonstrated the international character of the working class and the fact that workers all over the world face a common struggle. Through the WSWS, tens of thousands of workers internationally were able to closely follow the struggle of their class brothers and sisters in Matamoros, and these lines of communication and collaboration must be strengthened.

Reform or revolution

The working class cannot secure its social rights without fusing the growing resistance of workers with the international revolutionary perspective for which only the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, fights. The ICFI is confident that as the class struggle intensifies, the most advanced workers will turn to the scientific insights and revolutionary strategy of Marxism and study the lessons of history to prepare their battles.

The irreconcilable conflict between the social needs of the working class and the pursuit of personal wealth by the super-rich minority poses the need for the working class to abolish the capitalist system and take political power in its own hands. Only in this way can workers reorganize economic life on the basis of collective ownership and a democratically and scientifically developed plan for the world economy to meet human needs, not private profits.

In Mexico, the fight for this perspective means an irreconcilable struggle against the AMLO government and all of the petty-bourgeois and pseudo-left defenders of this capitalist regime. After stealing presidential elections from AMLO in 2006 and 2008, the Mexican and American

ruling classes gave the go-ahead for his election last year in an effort to diffuse the growing resistance by the working class and channel it behind the dead end of his pro-capitalist and nationalist program.

Last year, AMLO, who spent 18 years in the right-wing Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI), received a green light for assuming the presidential office after personally appealing to business leaders such as Larry Fink, whose financial firm BlackRock is the top owner of Mexican stocks and controls assets totaling \$6 trillion, more than the GDP of Latin America.

A few months after its inauguration, the AMLO administration is already facing mass opposition from the working class. While the president is working to trap opposition in the American- and European-backed “independent unions,” new methods of state repression are being fast-tracked through the Morena-led Congress in response to the Matamoros strike. The nearly unanimous approval on February 28 of a law setting up the National Guard and enshrining the domestic deployment of the military in the constitution shows that every faction of the ruling class counts on the armed forces to drown the growing social opposition in blood.

The threat of mass firings by the foreign-owned maquiladoras and their Mexican stooges must be answered with the nationalization of the factories under workers control, as part of a socialist reorganization of the economy. This includes expropriating the private fortunes of the super-rich, including Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim Helú, and utilizing the wealth created by the collective labor of workers to meet human needs.

The irrepressible conflict between the majority of the world’s population and a tiny minority of corporate and financial aristocrats is driving the growth of class conflict around the world. The Matamoros revolt takes place alongside a record number of strikes by US teachers, many of them initiated by rank-and-file educators on social media independently of the unions, months of “Yellow Vest” protests in France, and upheavals in Algeria, Morocco, Sudan and other countries. At the same time, 30 years after the restoration of capitalism in China and Eastern Europe, which was supposed to usher in a new epoch of prosperity and democracy, a wave of strikes has spread across Poland, Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic and in China.

Under the political leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the WSWS, the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees was founded in the US on December 9 to link up the struggle of autoworkers and other workers against General Motors plant closings and the attacks on the wages and living standards of all workers.

A central theme of the fight by the Steering Committee in the upcoming contract struggle by 150,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers is to reject the anti-Mexican chauvinism of the United Auto Workers union and fight for the unity of US, Mexican, Canadian workers.

The Matamoros rebellion confirms the Marxist perspective of the world Trotskyist movement outlined in its January 3 statement, “The Strategy of International Class Struggle and the Political Fight Against Capitalist Reaction in 2019”:

As the ICFI anticipated, the fight for social equality and world socialism will take the initial form of a global rebellion against these discredited, capitalist apparatuses... What can be predicted with certainty is that the upswing in militant struggles of the working class will continue in 2019. But the transformation of this intensifying social militancy into a conscious movement of the international working class for socialism depends upon the building of Marxist-Trotskyist parties in the working class—that is, national sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

That is the fundamental lesson that must be drawn from the Matamoros revolt.

Concluded

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