

AFL-CIO, Mexican government seek to chain renewed struggles across Matamoros to “independent” trade unions

By Andrea Lobo
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Recent wildcat strikes and “legal” strike announcements have signaled a renewed upsurge of workers’ struggle at the auto-parts, electronics and other *maquiladora* factories in the Mexican border city of Matamoros.

The largest trade union in the city, the Union of Laborers and Industrial Workers of the Maquiladora Industry (SJOIIM), which is currently renegotiating the contracts at 46 plants, filed a strike announcement for January 1, demanding a 30 percent wage increase, the reduction of the work week from 48 to 40 hours and a bonus corresponding to any federal increase in the minimum wage for 2020.

On November 28, workers at two *maquiladoras* that produce industrial machinery, Ballinger Manufactures and Mexican Ensamby, carried out wildcat strikes against the automatic union dues to the Industrial Union of Workers at Maquiladora and Assembly Plants (SITPME), which sent thugs to harass strikers. At Mexican Ensamby, where management has threatened to close down the plant, workers have carried out partial wildcat strikes in recent months against arbitrary firings.

Amid nervous warnings, the Mexican and US governments are scrambling to chain workers to either the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), which the SJOIIM and SITPME belong to, or so-called “independent” unions after Matamoros workers rebelled against the trade unions earlier this year and waged the largest strike in North America in three decades.

Between January and April, about 70,000 Matamoros workers independently organized a wave of wildcat strikes in opposition to 80 transnational corporations. Triggered by news that the SJOIIM, the companies and the government were conspiring to eliminate their existing bonuses and overlook an extra bonus and a 100 percent wage increase stipulated in their contract as a result of a minimum wage increase, the strikes won a 20 percent wage increase and a \$1,700 bonus.

The tenuous character of the effort to use the strike announcement to regain credibility and impose a sellout agreement was expressed by the SJOIIM leader Juan Villafuerte to *Expreso*, who pleaded, “My appeal is that [workers] only get information through executives, human resource officials, or their trade union delegates at each company about the negotiations, the progress and details of the contracts.”

The local president of the Mexican Employers Confederation

(Coparmex) declared after talks with the SJOIIM that “we can’t ever allow again what we lived through at the beginning of this year since Matamoros would not endure something like that, and we trust that the authorities will fulfill their duties.”

If the SJOIIM and SITPME are in a position to attempt sellouts and harass strikers it is because the rank-and-file committees were sidelined by the intervention of the Mexican unions, the US AFL-CIO and the Mexican ruling party, the Movement for National Regeneration (Morena) of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).

A leading role in this intervention was played by the politically connected labor lawyer Susana Prieto, who directly attacked the *World Socialist Web Site* and socialism in her interventions during the strikes. Insisting that workers had to subordinate their struggles to AMLO, she promoted illusions in the federal Morena government. More recently, she formed the National Independent Union for Industry and Service Workers (SNITIS) in collaboration with the Mexican Electrician’s Union (SME)—long partnered with Morena and the AFL-CIO—to compete with the CTM in Matamoros.

A fight against the 6,500 firings, blacklisting and other reprisals against the most militant workers after the Matamoros strikes was thus blocked. Moreover, last week, Prieto claimed that SNITIS officials were attacked by CTM goons, but when workers called to “form an armed civil group,” she insisted opportunistically that “What is needed is getting rid of the boss,” referring to the SITPME leader.

Beyond the hundreds of millions of dollars in profits lost during the strike, the ruling class was particularly shaken by the creation of elementary rank-and-file committees, the appeals to US workers to “wake up” and join the strike and the shutdowns at auto assembly plants in the US and Canada from parts shortages. The revolt also triggered a wave of strikes across Mexico and intersected with a resurgence of the class struggle internationally marked by the “yellow vest” protests in France and wildcat teachers strikes in the US.

While breaking the corporate media blackout on the strikes, the calls by the WSWs to consolidate the rank-and-file committees and extend the appeals to US and international workers received a wide hearing.

In a recent interview with *Automotive News*, Ricardo Castro,

Mexico labor chief at the law firm Baker McKenzie, concluded from the Matamoros strike that “the risk of not having trade unions with the necessary structure and maturity to represent workers is that it opens the door for other ‘hostile’ organizations with the initiative to create their own association.”

The efforts to undermine the independent class initiative of workers and the influence of internationalist and socialist perspectives give the lie to the claim advanced by US and Mexican officials that the promotion of so-called “independent unions” is aimed at improving the wages and conditions of workers in Mexico and elsewhere.

During the trade negotiations for the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), US officials pressured the Mexican authorities to promote “independent unions.” As US imperialism intensifies its trade war measures against China and re-organizes production in North America, it hopes to rely on trade unions that are not as discredited as the CTM to prevent strikes and keep “competitive” wages. The lobbying efforts in Mexico have been led by the AFL-CIO and its local partners, including the SME.

In fact, speaking to the US Congress on June 25, Gladys Cisneros, the Mexico Program Director for the Solidarity Center, the AFL-CIO’s international subversion program, referred to the fact that Mexican workers have lost 80 percent of their purchasing power in 30 years. “The recent example of Matamoros,” she added, “is illustrative of what can happen when workers begin to develop higher expectations for their treatment, their incomes and the behavior of their unions. The wave of worker strikes resulted in concrete gains for workers, who received their bonuses and wage increases, and spurred a movement that has inspired the country.”

The promotion of these unions is integral to the vow made this month by Mike Pompeo who leads the US State Department—the main sponsor of the Solidarity Center—in response to mass protests across Latin America “to work with legitimate governments to prevent protests from morphing into riots and violence that don’t reflect the democratic will of the people.”

As explained in a March 10, 2010 Congressional testimony by USAID Acting Assistant Administrator, Susan G. Reichle, the agency was providing \$7.25 million annually to Solidarity Center programs in 20 countries, including Brazil, Bolivia, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua to develop “free and independent unions.”

“Mexican workers have been slow to trust labor rights actors as they push for greater democracy in the workplace,” Reichle complained, so “some partners have begun public pressure campaigns” to win support for US-aligned “independent, worker-based unions.” These programs seek to “build the culture of compromise,” “predictable rights-and-rules based systems” and “democracy-building,” adding that, “at the same time that the need for international competitiveness has a downward push on compensation, there is a greater likelihood that workers will contribute to broader manifestations of political unrest as citizens are challenged to take care of their basic needs.”

Far from promoting genuine democracy at the workplace or state level, the Solidarity Center’s predecessor, the AIFLD, cultivated the trade unions that backed the 1973 Chilean coup that installed the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, as well as the trade unions that

backed the failed Venezuelan coup in 2002.

More recently, as exposed in an April 2009 cable published by WikiLeaks from the US embassy in Syria to the CIA, National Security Council, French and UK governments, one of the “eight major Syria-specific initiatives” with a budget of \$12 million aimed at “fostering ‘regime change’” and “to politically isolate” the elected Syrian Government was a grant to the Solidarity Center called “Building trade union capacity.”

Another 2009 cable published by WikiLeaks points out that the Solidarity Center’s Gladys Cisneros had facilitated negotiations that November between a trade union in the Honduran General Workers Central (CGT), which had backed the US-backed coup five months prior, and the Fruit of the Loom textile corporation to re-open a closed factory. “She requested [US] Embassy assistance for the expeditious registration of the labor union under the new factory name. Poloff [political officer] explained the Embassy’s no-contact policy due to the coup d’état but said that we would be willing to help as much as possible within those guidelines,” the cable indicates.

During the US-backed overthrow of Bolivian president Evo Morales last month, the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), which had been a key ally and suppressed the class struggle during Morales’s 14 years in power, demanded the same day as the military that Morales resign, refused to call any industrial actions against the coup, and led calls for new elections to legitimize the far-right coup regime.

Whether this was plotted directly with US agencies or was a response derived from the COB’s own nationalist and pro-capitalist orientation that characterizes all trade unions is not clear yet. However, the American financial oligarchy and its imperialist state is consciously promoting trade unions in Mexico and internationally to suffocate the resistance in the working class to its drive for greater exploitation, authoritarian rule and neocolonialism.

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