

“If we had not struck, the union would have done nothing”

Thousands walk out in Matamoros as Mexican government lets corporations continue production during pandemic

By Andrea Lobo
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One year since more than 70,000 *maquiladora* workers in Matamoros, Mexico, organized wildcat strikes and mass marches behind the banner “The companies and trade unions kill the working class,” another wave of wildcat strikes began last week in the border city to shut down the plants—largely involved in the production of auto parts and electronics—as the coronavirus pandemic spreads.

The latest Covid-19 count in Mexico is 94 deaths and 2,143 confirmed cases, with both numbers widely seen as underreported because of the lack of testing. *Milenio* found that 63 percent of fatal victims are younger than 60, with the World Health Organization (WHO) specifically warning that Mexico’s incidence (50 percent) of diabetes and obesity could drive up deaths.

In Matamoros, which is located across the border from Brownsville, Texas, the earliest confirmed case was on March 12, and the total of cases across the state of Tamaulipas has risen to 41, with two deaths. Despite the enormous industrial capacity of the state, there are only 277 ventilators for its 3.5 million residents. Without strict measures to shut down all nonessential production and provide incomes for families to remain home, hundreds of thousands of lives across Tamaulipas and Mexico are being placed in danger.

The new wave of wildcat strikes across Matamoros began last Tuesday, when workers at VDO and Novalink walked out. The next day, Autoliv workers downed their tools and those at Edemsa struck, refusing an order by management to attend “talks” with groups of 20 people at a time to convince them to return to the line.

On Thursday, workers at Tridonex and Parker also struck and were followed the next day by Tyco and Kwalu. Yesterday, strikes were reported at Kongsberg and Kwalu, where the company agreed to closing the plant and paying 80 percent of their salaries.

The government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), however, is doing everything possible to let companies continue extracting profits, endangering the lives of workers and their families. At the same time, the government is posturing as a defender of workers in order to prevent another social explosion.

On March 30, the government announced a “health emergency” ordering the closure of all nonessential activities until April 30. However, the measure is deliberately vague in its definition of “essential activities” and includes exceptions for activities “essential for the functioning of the economy” or “of public interest.” When pressed about when companies should close, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard made it clear the government would not interfere with the prerogatives of the corporate owners. “What we’ve found in the private sector has been solidarity and support,” he said, adding, “When it becomes indispensable to take such a measure of suspending nonessential activities, in that moment, we’ll have to close ranks.”

At the same time, while “ordering” closed companies to continue paying 100 percent of the salaries, the Secretary of Labor Maria Luisa Alcalde effectively confirmed that this will not be enforced. “The general obligation should be to pay the full salary, based on the understanding that there could be circumstances that force both parts to reach certain agreements.”

The agreements include deals reached by corporate-controlled unions to pay workers half of the salaries (200 pesos or \$8) per week at auto-parts company APTIV and other US- and European-owned component factories. Due to price gouging, a worker commented on social media that one can’t even buy two cartons of eggs with 200 pesos.

The deliberate vagueness of the decrees has helped the trade unions enforce the companies’ mandates. The head of the Metal-Mechanic Auto Industry Trade Union (SITIMM), Alejandro Rangel, said he wasn’t even discussing temporary closures since “there was no categorical declaration and clear suspension of work at companies in general by the health authorities.”

Management have cited the government’s decree to coerce workers to remain on the job. At Robertshaw, a supervisor was recorded saying “the majority of our clients sent us letters saying that ‘you are an essential company’” and told striking workers to “read the document well and then we’ll discuss.” However, workers continued to strike and compelled management to close the plant and pay the full wage. “We, the workers, achieved this because, if we had not struck, the union would have done

nothing,” commented a worker on Facebook.

At least 20 companies with 12,000 workers have been furloughed with an average of 50 to 60 percent of the salary, according to the local trade union leader Juan Villafuerte. Acknowledging that workers would shut down the plants if management did not, these companies hope to starve workers into submission to force them back to work.

A handful of *maquiladoras* were compelled to pay 100 percent, but several will undoubtedly use the threat of layoffs to compel workers to return to the line as soon as possible. As explained by the president of the Maquiladora umbrella organization Gerardo Vázquez Falcón, “We solidarize ourselves with workers, but that has a limit. Every company has a limit in how much it can keep paying wages. After that, the law establishes another mechanism—how to give severance payments.”

Dozens of plants, however, remain open. At Tridonex, a striking worker sent an audio to the WSWs of management arguing, “The decree says that there should be no firings, well for people not showing up to work, but not for those fighting in the line, not for those who don’t want to work... The virus has nothing to do with lack of discipline.”

At Schumex (Schumacher), a worker explained to the WSWs, “The manager tells us that we make essential products just like at all other plants in Matamoros and Reynosa, even though we make car battery chargers.” She added, “I suffer hypertension and, since I don’t have the medical file from the state insurance, they didn’t let me leave to protect myself, even though I had notified the medical department when I began working here. Many people with that record keep working under the risk due to COVID-19. The threats that they’ll fire us if we leave are everywhere.”

At the Easy Way plant, which produces blankets, the plant will remain open and switch immediately to producing facemasks since it has the equipment and material necessary. But even in this particular case, management is under pressure to cut costs, acknowledging that profits may fall and minimizing the importance of providing safe conditions for workers. “The health of workers is very important but keeping the source of our jobs is equally important,” a manager explained during the announcement.

The American ruling class sees continued manufacturing in Mexico and the flow of billions of profits as crucial to restart US production itself, especially as it fears a strengthening of China’s economic influence as a result of its faster containment of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Trump administration and Wall Street are pushing to force workers back to the plants, regardless of the human cost and, as noted by the Council on Foreign Relations last year, “Dozens of US companies, including General Motors Co., Honeywell International Inc., Nordam Group Inc., and Medtronic Plc, depend on the speedy delivery of Mexican-made components to keep their operations running in Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina and Oklahoma.”

The struggle of US, Mexican, Canadian workers and beyond against the efforts of the global corporations and capitalist governments to sacrifice lives of workers for the sake of profits, is one and the same.

In Matamoros, various political forces, including those tied to

AMLO’s Morena Party and the American AFL-CIO union federation, intervened last year to chain workers to the trade unions and prevent them from building independent rank-and-file factory committees to fight for a cross-border fight against the thousands of firings that followed the strike wave last year. Today, the unions and their apologists share the responsibility for the suffering, sickness and potential deaths, which will result from workers being coerced through layoffs and reduced wages to work in infected factories.

On January 16, when workers were appealing to their brothers and sisters internationally to expand the wildcat strikes, lawyer Susana Prieto, partnered with Morena, the “independent” unions, the AFL-CIO and pseudo-left outlets like *La Izquierda Diario*, showed up in Matamoros and declared, “You organized yourselves alone. But this is why they have so much power because you can’t authorize a strike if it’s not through a union... You must pressure, to begin with, the union. You can’t free yourselves from Villafuerte for now.”

Villafuerte is the General Secretary of the Union of Workers and Contractors of the Maquiladora Industry (SJOIIM), an affiliate of the gangster-controlled Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), which Matamoros workers rebelled against.

Even now, Prieto, her new “independent” trade union, and their partners are calling on workers not to show up to work while insisting that they must remain beholden to the trade unions and the capitalist system, which threatens the very lives of workers and their families.

A response to the COVID-19 crisis that prioritizes the needs of workers requires the building of authentic rank-and-file organizations, including factory, workplace and neighborhood committees. This is inseparable from the struggle for socialism, that is, the taking of political power by the working class to place all production under the democratically and scientifically developed plan to serve social needs and save lives, not corporate profits.

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