Workers strike across Ciudad Juárez, Mexico amid increase in COVID-19 deaths in factories

By Andrea Lobo
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Strikes have spread across the Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez, which borders El Paso, Texas, involving hundreds of maquiladora workers protesting that nonessential production continues despite the growing toll from the COVID-19 pandemic in the city, most starkly the death of 13 employees at a Lear car seat plant.

The strikes, which follow similar actions by workers at the border city of Matamoros, are part of a growing international resistance involving workers across Europe and the US against nonessential work as the pandemic continues to spread out of control.

This movement also coincides with growing demands by transnational firms and the Mexican financial aristocracy to keep the cheap labor industrial belt across the US-Mexico border and northern Mexico supplying crucial parts for assembly lines across the US, Europe and Canada. On Sunday, US president Donald Trump said he spoke with his Mexican counterpart Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) Saturday to coordinate the reopening of supply chains.

With warnings of the deepest economic crisis in Mexico’s history and a massive underreporting of COVID-19 infections and deaths and no plan in place to contain the still incipient outbreak in the country, the AMLO administration has allowed vast swathes of industry to remain open and announced a “reactivation” as early as June 1.

The strikes at Ciudad Juárez began last Wednesday as workers at a Therm-O-Disc Emerson plant protested the nonessential production of thermostats without protective equipment. On Thursday, workers at the smoke alarm maker Honeywell struck after a co-worker reportedly died of COVID-19. Honeywell has insisted that its activities are essential, threatened workers with reprisals and offered a $17 bonus per week to shut down opposition. “Our life is not a game, it’s not a tossup. We want a quarantine… with 100 percent of our wages,” denounced a worker to Ruptly. Workers at electric-motor producer Regal Beloit struck Friday after two workers died of COVID-19. Since, workers have also struck at Amphenol CTI, TPI Composites, Norma Group, Electrocomponentes, Suncreon, Critikon.

Workers took matters into their own hands after government authorities, management and the trade unions took no action to shut down plants when news broke of the deaths at Lear and other maquiladoras.

The first coronavirus case in Ciudad Juarez was confirmed on March 17, and the Chihuahua state authorities “recommended” to shut down nonessential operations on March 23. The Los Angeles Times interviewed two workers at the stricken Lear plant anonymously who described a wave of cough and fever by mid-March. At the time, AMLO was insisting that “pandemics… won’t do anything to us.” Lear workers lacked hand sanitizer and those with symptoms were not given sick leave.

It wasn’t until March 30 that the Mexican government declare a “health emergency” ordering nonessential activities to stop and demanding 100 percent pay during the shutdowns. These two key clauses, however, were deliberately presented in vague language regarding when the plants had to close, what constitutes “essential activities” and whether pay cuts agreed by the corrupt trade unions were legal. Despite the urgency of the situation, no legal retaliation has been pursued against companies who infringe the orders.

While Lear closed its plants in Mexico on April 1, Chihuahua officials said last Saturday that, out of the 160 factories in Ciudad Juárez, 28 “nonessential” plants, 33 “considered essential” and 35 “with some essential activities” remained open, while 64 were closed. About 120,000 of the 300,000 maquiladora workers remain at work.

The city had 108 confirmed cases and 20 deaths from COVID-19 on Sunday; however, lawyers representing the medical staff at Hospital 66 in Ciudad Juarez shared images with piled body bags. “The personnel at IMSS 66 reports...
more than 80 dead by Friday only in that clinic, imagine how many are infected—many in the maquiladoras,” commented lawyer Mario Espinoza Simental. Doctors there denounce the lack of PPE and being compelled to send workers back home and to the factories with acetaminophen due to the lack of testing.

The Health Ministry director for the Northern Zone, Dr. Arturo Valenzuela, declared Saturday that “there were deaths earlier this year” that were filed as pneumonia and other ailments “but were probably COVID-19,” including of “factory workers.” Nationwide, the official count of COVID-19 cases stood at 8,261, but top health officials have estimated that there are more than 56,000 infections.

The outbreak is effectively out of control, while no economic support is being given to workers, most of whom depend on the informal sector without health insurance or unemployment benefits. The International Labor Organization estimates that Mexico could lose 1.7 million to 7 million jobs as a result to the pandemic crisis. For reference, the 2008-2009 crisis led to 772,000 formal jobs lost and 10 million people falling below official poverty. Currently, out of the population of 130 million, 50 million Mexicans are considered poor and 50 million more are at risk of falling below poverty.

The only federal “assistance” provided involves loans at 6.5 percent interest or higher for small and medium companies that will begin on May 4. Not only are companies carrying out mass layoffs, but the AMLO administration ordered a 50 percent budget cut in most federal institutions outside of health care, the Army, Navy and National Guard, which will lead to massive layoffs in education, culture, public services and other sectors.

Meanwhile, amid the lack of testing, PPE and other medical equipment, AMLO has vowed “to do the impossible” to avoid increasing the public debt. While the 2020 federal health care budget was only $5.2 billion, the six richest billionaires in Mexico control $108 billion, and the last decade saw an increase of dollar millionaires from 78,000 to 173,000.

Mexico has also spent over $120 billion in law enforcement and the military—known for their rampant corruption—on the so-called “war on drugs” since 2006, and AMLO created a National Guard to perpetuate this. After 13 years of war, March 2020 was the deadliest month with 2,585 homicides, with Ciudad Juárez as one of the epicenters with 159 killings.

Reuters reported Sunday that “some [Mexican business executives] are threatening to not pay taxes until the economy recovers from the coronavirus, particularly in northern border states such as Chihuahua and Tamaulipas,” where Matamoros is located. Several companies have also called on the police to force striking workers back into the plants.

The Mexican ruling class and its US and European patrons are terrified that their response to their efforts to lay the burden of the crisis on the working class will lead to a social explosion that AMLO will be unable to contain. There was already a simmering rank-and-file rebellion against the corrupt trade unions and the transnational corporations expressed by waves of wildcat strikes in Ciudad Juárez in 2015-16 and Matamoros last year.

Last weekend, David Ibarra, a former finance minister and current board member at several Mexican multinationals called for “an agreement between the government, the business sector and organized labor over a new social consensus.” The call for a new consensus is being widely made by capitalist commentators internationally and has proven to a thinly veiled call to accelerate the move toward authoritarian forms of rule in response to the crisis.

For instance, an April 13 column for the New York Times, Patricio Fernández Chadwick delves into this call for using the crisis for a “new social pact.” He warns of a larger “second wave of discontent,” referring to the mass upheavals in Chile during the past year. “And we are not talking of a theoretical and unknown fury. We just saw its teeth,” he writes. After denouncing protesters as “marginal lumpen mobs,” he calls for a greater “presence of the state” and “a law-and-order bet” as “the best strategy to avoid a breakdown of dimensions that will be hard to fix.”

A coalition of forces including the US trade union confederation AFL-CIO, the so-called “independent” trade unions tied to AMLO’s Morena party and their pseudo-left apologists intervened at Ciudad Juárez and Matamoros to chain workers back behind the trade unions now partnering with the corporations to force workers to remain at the unsafe maquiladoras.

The World Socialist Web Site calls on workers to form rank-and-file committees to organize an internationally-coordinated struggle to shut down all nonessential production and provide the necessary equipment to all medical and other essential workers.

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