

Mexican workers, COVID-19 and the fight against the back-to-work campaign

By Andrea Lobo
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The following speech was delivered by Andrea Lobo, a supporter of the International Committee of the Fourth International who lives in Costa Rica and has written extensively on the struggles of the working class in Latin America, to the 2020 International May Day Online Rally, held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 2.

The return-to-work campaign has taken on a particularly urgent character for US imperialism in Mexican manufacturing plants, which are indispensable for restarting US production. Mexico is still reporting record numbers of confirmed COVID-19 deaths and infections almost every day.

A Honduran doctor interviewed recently by the WSWs noted that news on the pandemic recalls Gabriel García Márquez's crime novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. One opportunity after another is wasted, by almost everyone in the story, to warn the victim of a known murder plot, until it's too late. Governments today are responding through neglect and lies amid generalized warnings about the pandemic. It would be a mistake, however, to see the ruling class and their political representatives as neutral spectators, who simply prefer "not to say anything." They are the protagonists with distinct interests in the execution and cover-up.

In the case of the pandemic, the victims, facing mass casualties and economic deprivation, can see the crime unfolding in front of their eyes and can decipher the rest of the plot. This protagonist, the social force with the strength to face the oligarchies and their states and stop this ongoing crime, is the working class.

After similar actions across Europe and the United States, thousands of workers at manufacturing plants across Mexico, called *maquiladoras*, struck to force the

closing of nonessential plants and to demand protective equipment at essential plants. The strikes in Mexico began in Matamoros, across the border from Brownsville, Texas. Workers there began to walk out one day after the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) ordered the closing of nonessential production. But plants refused to close, with companies citing the deliberate vagueness of the official decree.

At Matamoros, workers carried out the largest strike wave in decades in North America last year, to protest \$8 wages for 12-hour shifts, and the efforts by the companies to steal their bonuses. From this experience, many concluded that the local and federal authorities and the trade unions had backed the corporations unconditionally, and that workers could rely only on their own initiative.

As COVID-19 outbreaks and deaths spread, this also became clear for workers in cities like Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana, Mexicali and Reynosa, who joined the strike wave.

The international strike waves have only begun to show the vast revolutionary potential of the working class, and the need to unite its vast power across ethnic, gender and national lines—because all workers share the same interests.

The father of Russian Marxism, Georgi Plekhanov, wrote that, "It is not enough for the doctor to sympathize with the condition of his patient: he has to reckon with the *physical reality* of the organism, to start from it in fighting it. If the doctor were to think of confining himself to moral indignation against the disease, he would deserve the most malicious ridicule."

Workers need to understand the physical reality of the situation they face. In just three decades, Mexico has undergone a massive transformation in its class

composition. According to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, agricultural, mineral and low-tech products accounted for 70 percent of exports in 1986. Since then, exports have grown 10.4 percent annually, and now high-and-medium-technology goods account for 75 percent of exports. Most go to the United States and Canada.

The maquiladora workforce has grown to about 3 million workers, who operate in crucial and highly profitable links, up and down global supply chains and across industries with existential importance to the American ruling elite. The North American industrial platform was built up and further interconnected in an effort by US imperialism to respond to its declining economic position by competing against Europe and Japan, initially, and now China.

In the more immediate term, as financial markets are rescued with trillions from the Federal Reserve, the oligarchy is desperate to extract real value through exploitation, and Mexico's maquiladoras are essential. On the other hand, the profitability of Mexico's low wages is a major incentive for war-related manufacturing to be pulled away from potential American rivals.

Workers at an Amphenol plant in Ciudad Juarez, which produces wires and connectors for the auto and defense industries, struck on April 17, after several workers became sick. The company was compelled to close the plant, but reopened only one week later, knowing that it had the *de facto* permission of the Mexican government, and the backing of US imperialism, to endanger the workers. Amphenol stocks surged nearly 15 percent that week and 19 percent for the month. CEO Richard Norwitt received \$10 million in 2018, mostly from stock options.

Ray Scott, the CEO of automotive seating and electrical systems manufacturer Lear Corp., where at least 14 workers in Ciudad Juarez died of COVID-19 due to a late closure, also received nearly \$10 million—more than 3,500 times the listed annual salary for an operator there.

A few days after Donald Trump published his plan for "Opening up America again," he personally called Mexican President López Obrador to push him to reopen suppliers for US companies. The Pentagon, the US ambassador to Mexico, a bipartisan group of

senators and several business groups joined in the pressure campaign.

AMLO has now announced a reopening, starting on May 16, and minister of Economy Arturo Herrera said to *El Pais* that the government was looking for "some mechanism for companies on the Mexican side tied to US supply chains to open sooner." The government seeks to reach "herd immunity," he explained, since "what kills the pandemic is not avoiding infections." Assuming that there is a significant protection against second infections, which has no scientific basis for COVID-19, "herd immunity" would require that more than half of the 135 million Mexicans become infected. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, would die.

It would be naïve to think that a government willing to sacrifice so many to serve US imperialism will not make use of the troops and special forces, trained and armed with the support of the United States, to enforce the return to work. A recent internal memorandum of the National Guard, which was created by AMLO himself, indicates that it is preparing to deploy against "social unrest."

The corrupt and nationalist trade unions and their apologists in each country are lining up behind the return-to-work campaign of their governments. Workers must build new organizations, rank-and-file committees, to democratically decide when and under what conditions they should return to work, independently of the trade unions, and to coordinate their struggles across sectors and borders.

Eighty years ago, shortly before his assassination by a Stalinist agent near Mexico City, Leon Trotsky wrote: "Only under its own revolutionary direction is the proletariat of the colonies and the semi-colonies capable of achieving invincible collaboration with the proletariat of the metropolitan centers and with the world working class as a whole. Only this collaboration can lead the oppressed peoples to complete and final emancipation, through the overthrow of imperialism the world over."

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