

Mexican labor lawyer released under punitive deal after arbitrary imprisonment

By Andrea Lobo
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After a three-week imprisonment in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, labor lawyer Susana Prieto Terrazas was released on probation on July 1.

Her arrest on June 8 was based on trumped up charges of instigating “an uprising or riot” and offenses against employees at a local labor court in Matamoros who claimed that auto parts workers assaulted them during a protest on March 10. The workers were demanding that the US-based Tridonex Cardone corporation stop paying automatic dues to a corrupt union belonging to the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM).

Prieto was not present at the demonstration, and no evidence was produced demonstrating any direct involvement. However, she was targeted since many of the workers demonstrating were hoping to switch to the Independent Union for Industry and Service Workers (SNITIS), founded and *de facto* led by Prieto.

The release followed an agreement reached between a judge and Prieto’s lawyers, which entails a \$3,000 compensation for the alleged “victims.” The court order requires Prieto, for a period of 30 months, to reside in her hometown of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, while refraining from coming near the Matamoros labor court or the “victims,” and traveling abroad, including El Paso, Texas, where her immediate family lives.

Soon after her return, Prieto made a statement claiming that there are two arrest warrants pending against her in Chihuahua.

Despite its profound political differences with Prieto, the *World Socialist Web Site* called on workers to “demand Prieto’s release and oppose this attack on the rights to freedom of speech, assembly and organization” by organizing independently of “every faction of the trade union bureaucracy and political

establishment.”

The illegal imprisonment and draconian conditions of her probation period are aimed at intimidating the working-class rebellion against corporate abuses, most immediately the growing wave of protests and strikes in Matamoros since April to oppose the forced return to plants that have turned into COVID-19 hotspots.

Tamaulipas Attorney General Irving Barrios Mojica led the prosecution, asking for a 4-year prison sentence. He portrayed the protest on March 10 as “the perpetration of crimes through aggression, threats and a danger to society.” Numerous videos, however, show that the 400 workers at the protest rallied peacefully while being harassed by the state police and National Guard troops, while the court refused for several hours to attend the workers’ lawyer.

During the three-week imprisonment, thousands of workers and youth joined marches and demonstrations in Matamoros, Ciudad Juárez and Mexico City demanding Prieto’s release.

The detention received a green light from Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). During a press conference on June 12, he noted that his government was immediately informed of the arrest but refused to call for Prieto’s release. Instead he claimed that “it has to do with the Tamaulipas state government, it’s not a federal issue.”

The case exposed that all factions of the ruling elite, from the ostensibly “left” López Obrador administration to the National Action Party (PAN) state governments in Tamaulipas and Chihuahua, are lurching toward authoritarian forms of rule to defend the profits of foreign and national corporations, including through arbitrary detentions.

While organizing several rallies calling for her release, Prieto’s colleagues in the so-called

“independent” trade unions channeled all appeals behind the federal government.

As confirmed by Prieto herself, her release was secured through back-channel negotiations, including with the Trump administration. “I thank Mr. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the Federal Government, the US embassy, the National Human Rights Commission, workers in Matamoros, Tamaulipas and national and international activists for my safe release,” she declared in a video when leaving the prison.

She also explained that, fearing for her safety, the American embassy secured an escort of Mexican federal police and National Guard units to accompany her out of the state of Tamaulipas.

At a US congressional hearing on June 17, the Trump administration’s trade representative, Robert Lighthizer, announced that the US government would request Prieto’s release. He said, “That is something we are working very closely with our embassy. We are aware of it. We are working on it. It’s something that we are going to monitor. We’ll take action if it’s appropriate... [The imprisonment] is a bad indicator.”

Then, on June 30, a group of 59 US Democratic representatives led by Bill Pascrell (New Jersey) wrote a letter to US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo to “request that your department aggressively work to help secure the immediate release of imprisoned Mexican labor lawyer Susana Prieto Terrazas.” The AFL-CIO also called for her “immediate and unconditional release.”

All of the statements by US officials said that they were concerned for the right of Mexican workers to belong to “independent” and “democratic” unions, claiming that this is crucial to raising their wages and “bringing jobs back to America.” They add that this is a central focus of the new US-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) trade deal, which went into effect the day of Prieto’s release. However, the deal actually seeks to intensify the exploitation of cheap labor in Mexico by US and Canadian corporations to underpin their profits while economically isolating China, their geopolitical rival.

The last thing the Trump administration, US imperialism and the AFL-CIO are concerned about are the conditions of the Mexican working class, which has long been used as a cheap labor source for US based transnationals.

Instead, the intervention by the American ruling class was spurred by fears that Prieto’s detention was quickly eroding workers’ illusions in AMLO and the “independent” unions, which have been critical in reopening indispensable Mexican suppliers for US industries amid the sprawling pandemic in both countries.

Above all, Washington fears that the rebellion against the corrupt CTM unions will take a genuinely anti-capitalist direction and increasingly strive to unify with the working class in the United States. Already Mexican workers in Matamoros and at the GM plant in Silao have established direct lines of communication, with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site*, with workers in the US.

The AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers (UAW) and other US unions have long sought to divide US workers from their class brothers and sisters below the Rio Grande. The criminal indifference of the ruling class on both sides of the border and their homicidal return to work policy, however, is provoking resistance of American and Mexican workers.

Fiat Chrysler workers in Michigan have formed rank-and-file safety committees to fight independently of the UAW and called on workers everywhere to join their struggle to protest workers’ lives during the pandemic. To fight the transnational corporations, workers in the US and Mexico need new organizations of struggle, independent of the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions, to unify their struggles across the border while they connect their day-to-day resistance with the fight for international socialism.

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