

Rebellion in Matamoros, Mexico

70,000 workers strike at US-Mexico border sweatshops

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At least 70,000 workers from 45 factories—including tens of thousands of auto parts and assembly workers at companies that supply GM, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler—have launched a wildcat strike in the US-Mexico border town of Matamoros.

The strike is a rebellion against both the “maquiladora” manufacturing corporations and the pro-company trade unions. Over 1 million workers endure low wages and sweatshop conditions at the 3,000 “maquiladora” factories that line the Mexican side of the border and account for 65 percent of Mexican exports.

The strike is a powerful sign of the growing mood of insurgency among workers across the world. It takes place alongside a strike of 30,000 public school teachers in Los Angeles, growing “yellow vest” demonstrations against inequality in France, and widespread anger among US and European autoworkers over massive planned job cuts by GM and Ford.

The workers decided to strike on Saturday at a mass general assembly meeting where the 2,000 in attendance repudiated the hated Union of Laborers and Industrial Workers of the Maquiladora Industry (SJOIIM) and agreed to elect representatives from their factories to direct their struggle free from the control of the union.

After the meeting, strikers visited each plant to call out their coworkers and hang red and black banners on closed plants—the traditional Mexican symbol of a factory occupation.

In defiance of orders by the union to stay on the job until Wednesday, groups of workers fanned out across the city to block the entrances to the shuttered plants and to stand guard both day and night. Workers have also set up common cafeterias and other amenities for strikers.

Workers are demanding a 20 percent wage increase, a bonus of 30,000 pesos (USD\$1,500) and a return to the 40-hour workweek. Workers initially demanded a 100 percent wage increase, but this was reduced by the union

when SJOIIM President Juan Villafuerte agreed to officially sanction the strike.

The SJOIIM’s decision to give official backing is a maneuver by the union to control and suffocate the strike. Workers are already posting screenshots online of text messages from union representatives threatening them with mass firings if they do not return to work immediately.

Breyssa, a striking Matamoros worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The union leaders are getting rich off the workers. Every day they take five pesos from our salary, and if you do overtime, they take a percentage of the hours you log in. In December, they take a portion of our holiday pay.”

One of workers’ chief demands is a reduction in union dues. Among the social media graphics workers are circulating is one that reads, “The workers of Matamoros will never go back to paying 4 percent union dues. You can’t have a rich union and poor workers.”

Another image states, “Urgent notice: We need a representative from each factory to report urgently. New leaders are urgently needed. General strike January 16.”

A third says, “All SJOIIM workers are being summoned to attend a special assembly. The order of the day will be the removal of the present union leader and his workgroup for failing to help.” The mass meeting is scheduled for Wednesday morning.

The companies on strike include Inteva, STC, Polytech, Kemet, Tyco, Parker, AFX and Autoliv. Pro-industry publications fear the strike wave may spread to other border towns, including Tijuana, Mexicali and Ciudad Juarez.

The strike takes place just across the border from Brownsville, Texas, where Donald Trump visited last week to denounce Mexicans and Central Americans as “criminals” and to demand the construction of a border wall amid the ongoing US government shutdown. Among the main goals of this wall is to physically divide the working class of Latin America from their natural class allies north of

the border.

The US and Canadian auto unions have echoed Trump's nationalist, anti-Mexican rants in an effort to direct workers' attention away from the real enemies: the corporations and their union collaborators.

In November, when General Motors announced it was slashing 15,000 jobs in the US and Canada, the United Auto Workers and Unifor blamed Mexican workers for "stealing jobs."

Ford has also announced thousands of job cuts in Europe and, with more cuts forthcoming amid an international restructuring of the auto industry, the unions and companies fear that workers will unite across national boundaries in a common fight. At a recent Unifor union rally in Windsor, Ontario, a woman stood near the speakers' platform dressed in a sombrero and poncho to insult Mexican workers. These are the racist views of the wealthy union leaders, not of US and Canadian workers who are looking for a way to stop the job, wage and benefit cuts.

Mexican maquiladora workers are not the enemies of US and Canadian workers. They are exploited by the same companies and are engaged in the same process of production. While the union bureaucrats in the US make upwards of \$200,000 per year, Matamoros workers make on average 176 pesos (USD\$9.20) per day.

Matamoros maquiladora workers also confront an enemy in the new government of Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), whose National Regeneration Movement (Morena) controls the national legislature. Matamoros maquiladora workers are angry that they will not receive a raise as part of AMLO's new free economic zone, aimed at facilitating the exploitation of Mexican workers by US manufacturers in the border region.

Though AMLO's plan includes a 100 percent hike to the minimum wage, Matamoros workers will be negatively affected because they already make slightly more than the minimum wage. The corporations are using the minimum wage hike as an excuse to slash bonuses and benefits for all workers.

Matamoros' new mayor, Mario Lopez, who is a member of Morena, said in a late 2018 interview on Central TV that because of the minimum wage increase, maquiladora workers' wage demands are "not financially viable for the maquiladoras." In the same interview, Lopez admitted that he was involved in a backroom "chat" with the unions and the bosses to eliminate workers' bonuses from the new contract. "I am intervening to make sure the parties reach a conciliatory plan," he said at the time.

Workers across the world experience the same conditions. Breyssa, the Matamoros striker, described life at her parts plant:

"In my plant there is always machine oil on the floor, and it is terribly loud. We are not given safe footwear or ear plugs for the noise. We had to bring our own safety equipment. Shifts are more than 10 hours per day, Monday through Saturday. We are on our feet without anywhere to sit, and sometimes we were forced to work overtime.

"We get there at 5:30 a.m. and leave at 6 or 7 at night. We are not allowed to go to the bathroom more than five times during our shift, and then we can only take five minutes. We are not able to drink much water, although it is often very hot in our work areas."

Breyssa spoke about the threat of reprisals by the auto parts companies after the strike was announced:

"Many companies are threatening workers with mass firings. In companies like Kemet, workers have been locked out. In another company called AFX, workers are being threatened with violence if they hang a banner indicating that they are on strike. At another plant called Autoliv, the police were called and were used to remove workers from the property. Workers want this information to get out, but they are afraid. There have been many years of injustices and poor treatment, and we are tired."

The WSWS contacted AFX corporate headquarters in Port Huron, Michigan and asked whether the company was threatening workers with violence. A representative said, "I have no comment on that."

The movement by workers internationally against job cuts, wage cuts and concessions is gaining momentum. On February 9, at 2 p.m. autoworkers will demonstrate at GM headquarters in Detroit, Michigan to show that they do not accept the job cuts and concessions announced by the auto and parts companies and are prepared to link up across all North America in a united fight for social equality.

The WSWS urges auto workers and other workers in Mexico to contact us with your story and information on the strike.



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