

“I want the working class, the class that drives society, to fight for a better life”

Matamoros, Mexico maquiladora worker speaks out

Alex González, Andrea Lobo
24 January 2019

A worker at the Dura Automotive auto parts “maquiladora” in Matamoros, Mexico, who wished to be called “Miguel,” spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about his working conditions, life in Matamoros, and what he thinks of a united struggle by all workers to fight for a better life. He called for workers around the world to follow the “Matamoran model” by rebelling against their unions and organizing an independent struggle through social media.

Miguel works at one of the 3,000 “maquiladora” sweatshops that employ more than one million workers along the Mexican side of the US-Mexico border. Although the maquiladora workers generate billions of dollars in profits for some of the world’s largest corporations, they teeter on the edge of poverty and are brutally exploited by both the unions and management.

For 12 days, more than 70,000 workers in Matamoros have courageously been on strike in defiance of their trade unions and the corporations, who have intimidated and physically assaulted them in an effort to beat them back into submission. But the workers of Matamoros have had enough. They are demanding a 20 percent wage increase, as well as a \$1,700 bonus, a reduction in union dues and a shorter work week to have more time to spend with their families.

Miguel works 12-hour days, 6 days a week to provide for himself and his wife, who also works at the maquiladora plants. He earns USD \$9 dollars a day—or just 75 cents an hour. Miguel wakes up at 4 a.m. each morning and commutes for over an hour to get to his plant.

He reports that there have been serious accidents at

the plants due to precarious working conditions. “Many are missing limbs, there have been injured fingers and hands, and even workers’ scalps. There are some plants where female workers’ hair gets tangled in the machines. When workers are injured, they are no longer hired due to having bad health or serious accidents.”

Miguel reports that their long hours at the plants have taken an immense physical and emotional toll. “Our nutrition and health are very poor,” he said. “They exploit us tremendously. Many workers suffer from nutrition problems, they have stomach issues and are not allowed to go to the bathroom.”

Just like their counterparts at multi-billion-dollar corporations like Amazon or UPS, workers who suffer injuries on the job are told by management or the unions to seek other services rather than go to the doctor on the company’s dime. “Companies send us to government hospitals because they don’t want to pay themselves. They send workers to private clinics and avoid their responsibilities towards the workers.”

He described the average morning:

“Union workers arrive at 6:30 a.m. for the first shift,” he said. “The first breaks of the day are at 8:15 a.m. We have just 15 minutes from the time our break starts to the time we have to get back to the production line.”

But this does not include the time it takes to get to the cafeteria and back, let alone get food and also use the restroom. “In reality our break is much shorter,” he said. “We take two minutes to get to the cafeteria and two minutes to get back. That means only have a 10 minute break. Management writes down the time we leave and the time we return to the line. But we’re not

robots, we can't eat in five minutes and be satisfied!"

These sweatshops are set up, with the government's blessing, as duty- and tariff-free enterprises. This means that the companies are exempt from most local and national taxes. While starving entire states of revenue sources, the companies leave workers reliant on government subsidized medical care and housing.

"Social services are deplorable. If you are sick and go to a government hospital, you can wait one or two months to see a doctor," said Miguel. "These are serious conditions and many workers have had major problems because they have not had access to medical services on time. We see this in every section of the working class here in Matamoros."

When asked about the quality of schools, Miguel said: "Education should not be based on whether or not you are a business man. They educate us only to work at maquiladoras or some other workplace. These are giant corporations, like you say, with huge tax breaks that are very profitable for them."

On top of dangers at the factories, workers face daily risks on the streets getting off work in the early hours of the morning. "In Matamoros, there is rampant violence due to organized crime. Police extort us, transit workers extort us. And then there is the issue of female workers. Women are more vulnerable in these situations. My wife has to walk home at two or three in the morning."

The conditions in Matamoros are not unique to the city. "These are situations that are not spoken about, but that happen in our town and around the world. Matamoros is not the only place that suffers from these issues. Here in this city it is about making money for the companies, making money for the companies, making money for the companies. You leave your job and the next day it's back to the same routine."

WSWS reporters told Miguel about the interest that the Matamoros strike is generating among the international working class.

When reporters asked what he would like to tell workers around the world, he said: "I would like the international working class to rise up against the companies that keep them repressed, tired, that keep them poor to keep having cheap labor at their disposal ... At some point in history people will understand the power that they have to fight for their rights. I am very excited to see our people awakening. There are a lot of

jobs that are at risk in this city due to our actions, but I think it will be worth it. Something good has to come out of this. This is the rising up of the working class. I invite workers everywhere to fight for what they deserve."

Miguel's story powerfully demonstrates the commonalities between workers all over the world who face the same conditions in their workplaces. Contrary to the nationalist poison peddled by the trade unions, Mexican workers are not the enemies of workers in the US, Canada, China, or any other country, but another link in a global chain of exploitation by the same companies.

While the trade unions will keep them divided by industry and country, workers everywhere are eager to form links with one another internationally. Actions such as the "Day Without Workers" protest in Matamoros that made appeals to their US allies must be broadened and made more conscious and concrete. Workers must understand that their demands—a good paying job, safe working conditions, fully-funded social services, leisure time for culture and entertainment—can only be achieved through an international struggle to expropriate the wealth of the capitalists that control all of society's resources.

In a global economy, the international unity of the working class is a strategic necessity. Workers who wish to form a common international strategy should contact us by email at autoworkers@wsws.org or via our Facebook page in order to take up these crucial steps. For more information on the February 9 rally in Detroit, visit wsws.org/auto .



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact