

Worker in Mexico fired, beaten, censored, and falsely charged for protesting corporate abuses

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The largest strike in two decades in North America continues among tens of thousands of “maquiladora” workers in Matamoros, Mexico. Workers bravely rebelled two weeks ago against the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions to carry out wildcat strikes for decent salaries, unpaid benefits and an end to the sweatshop standards at their plants.

Luis Daniel Prieto, a young worker from the city of Lagos de Moreno, in the central Mexican state of Jalisco, learned of the rebellion in Matamoros through the WSWs Twitter page. He was inspired by the courageous and independent stand taken by Matamoros workers and wanted to share his story.

After several low-wage jobs, including working at a Burger King, Luis Daniel, 34, worked for one year as a toll-booth collector. One afternoon, he learned from a radio commercial and from researching online that ICA, the company administrating the highway, was stealing thousands of pesos in owed benefits from each worker.

Once his paycheck arrived with 200 pesos (\$US10) for yearly benefits, he refused to sign the consent form and sought to convince other workers to protest. After a week of these efforts, he was summarily fired.

“The anger after years of being exploited by corporations, that is when I vomited out all the ‘labor hangover’ from my whole life,” he recounts.

Luis Daniel decided to sue ICA at the local Conciliation and Arbitration Board in León, Guanajuato, to expose their financial records “for my fellow workers to realize what was happening.” After eight months of fighting for his case and running out of money, he accepted a settlement of 23,000 pesos (\$US1,200) offered by the company.

“It was a defeat that would open a door to see other things,” he says. He used the money to buy equipment for a mobile churro stand which he now works at with a friend. “But that is when I thought, how many more people are in the same position when I demanded my benefits from ICA,

feeling sad and alone like I did? That’s not right.”

He decided in September 2016 to open a Facebook page called “La pocilga laboral de Lagos de Moreno” (Labor Pigpen of Lagos de Moreno) offering to accompany workers fighting against abuses by employers. “On the one hand, we carried out demonstrations. On the other hand, there were legal complaints,” Luis Daniel explains.

During this period, one major industrial park was inaugurated in Lagos de Moreno, with thousands of workers being employed by auto-parts companies owned by German and Japanese capital. This development has turned the small city into an increasingly important nodule in the North American auto industry, according to *El Economista*, “particularly because of its proximity to the states of Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosí and Querétaro, where Honda, Nissan, Mazda, General Motors, Toyota, BMW and Mercedes Benz all have assembly plants.”

Luis Daniel was contacted by workers from very diverse sectors—from agricultural fields, warehouses and housemaids to those at the newer manufacturing plants—all facing similar contract violations and other abuses by employers. He would encourage workers to denounce and publicize their complaints through the Facebook page, while they pursued lawsuits. This came increasingly at odds with the companies and their established institutions.

In the first place, he notes, “I met union leaders and officials, but no one wanted to support this to make a movement, which is what I wanted.” This led him to begin denouncing the trade-union bureaucracy in his page, stating “the company and the union are the divine instruments of the employers.”

Then, Luis Daniel began making public protests against the local subhead of the Labor Secretariat, Lilia Vianey Luna López, who was refusing to grant legal counsel and threatening workers. One afternoon, he says, “Lilia Vianey sent municipal police to arrest me at the Conciliation and Arbitration building. They pointed machine guns at me and

dragged me out of my chair.”

He said the president of the board intervened and prevented the arrest telling the police that they were not allowed in the building with weapons. “Be careful with this person, Lilia Vianey Luna López,” he said the local official then told him, “Business interests here are protecting her. They weren’t here to arrest you for what you are doing. That paper they showed me said that you tried to rape her.”

Luis Daniel said he waited until the police left and then went to denounce the allegations, which he said are false, at the office of the local human rights ombudsman, José Mavio Ramírez Trejo, who simply dismissed his complaint.

When WWSW reporters told Luis Daniel about the ongoing #MeToo campaign, he compared his situation to that of WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, who was also subjected to false rape allegations. “Just as easily as it was the Ecuadorian Embassy for Julian and the president of the board for me that day, it could’ve been death or a ‘disappearance’. That is what one is exposed to in these systems of impunity in which one gets charged with rape to facilitate hunting you.”

At the same time, he says he faced online censorship, noting that in late 2017, “I had another Facebook page of ‘La pocilga laboral’ and Facebook shut it down. We had about 5,000 followers and the new one has less than 300 and has had a lesser impact... This is something really rough that the powers that be apply.”

On January 31, 2018, he protested outside of the factories of Nestle and Dräxlmaier—a Germany-based auto-parts supplier—against the non-payment of wages for a security employee sub-contracted by the company Sevice. That evening, he said, two thugs went to his home to beat him with a metal pipe. His attackers only fled when a neighbor came out to his aid.

He filed a report at the local prosecutor’s office which he says was later dismissed again by the human rights ombudsman Ramírez Trejo, who claimed his office couldn’t file a report unless he had spent several days hospitalized.

“I kept accompanying the worker to his protests until, towards the end of May, I came out of my house and my car was on fire. I don’t know who did it, but for me those responsible are still Nestle, Sevice and Dräxlmaier because they began acting belligerently toward me when we would go and protest at their plants,” Luis Daniel added.

He said that to his surprise, when he went back to the prosecutor’s office there was no record of the previous attack and officials decided not to investigate his case. “Then the same thing happened with human rights,” Luis Daniel describes, “This Mavio Ramírez Trejo laughs at me and says, ‘What did you expect?’”

Because of the deadly threats and the enormous out-of-

pocket expenses to deal with his injuries and his car, he decided to end his activities with the “Pocilga.”

“My experience is proof that workers’ rights here are violated by companies, corrupt governments, corrupt human rights and corrupt conciliation and arbitration boards. They even refuse to comply with the corrupt contracts and deals they themselves imposed,” he remarked.

He then appealed to workers in Matamoros, “I saw this video by the lawyer Susana Prieto, who backs Morena. We know that all of these parties, whether it’s Morena [Movement for National Regeneration] or PRI, get money from businesses and criminal organizations. The Matamoros movement needs to watch out. Morena is in power now and one can’t believe what [president] Andrés Manuel [López Obrador] says about respecting workers’ rights and much less the dignity of workers. As simple as the imposition by the president of a Nestle factory in Veracruz.

“Her [the lawyer’s] ‘like-me’ rhetoric has always been used by politicians to dupe people... You can see in the video when this Mario says he is a capitalist and she nods. How are you going to fight for rights that contravene capitalism with representatives or ‘faces’ of a movement that identify as capitalists?”

He finally pointed to the decision of the López Obrador administration to form a new National Guard of up to 150,000 soldiers, warning that it will be aimed at repressing workers’ struggles. “What happens if a massacre is unleashed?” Luis Daniel concluded: “What is the purpose of waiting for change from such a president, a union leader or Susana Prieto?”



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