

# Mexican government intervenes to end Coca-Cola strike in Matamoros

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On Wednesday, the Federal Arbitration Board declared the ongoing strike by 700 Coca-Cola workers in Matamoros “illegal,” opening the door for lawsuits and mass arrests if the workers continue to picket the city’s bottling facility. The federal government, led by the “leftist” Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), alleges that the Union of Laborers and Industrial Workers of the Maquiladora Industry (SJOIIM) never presented the appropriate documents to initiate strike proceedings at Coca-Cola.

The intervention by federal authorities signals a marked escalation in the attack against the working class. This action openly shows that the local, state, federal and court systems are jointly operating on behalf of the corporations and against the workers. Over 4,700 workers have now been fired, with the blessing of the union and the government, as a reprisal for the strike wave in Matamoros.

“This was a technical work stoppage, there was never a strike, we have notified all parties and the union leader. This stoppage did not exist, a strike was never launched,” said María Eugenia Navarrete, head of the Federal Board of Conciliation and Arbitration (JFCA).

After learning that the union had betrayed their strike, a group of Coca-Cola workers attempted to enter SJOIIM headquarters Wednesday evening and speak to union leader Juan Villafuerte. A physical confrontation ensued after union thugs forcefully denied the workers access to the building.

On Thursday, a temporary legal protection was granted by local courts against the federal ruling. Although the union claims to have filed the paperwork, it is entirely credible that the SJOIIM delayed filings in order to sabotage the strike and save its own skin in the eyes of the bosses.

In an immense show of militancy and courage, rank-

and-file workers held independent mass meetings on Wednesday and Thursday and voted to continue their strike action, despite their uncertain legal situation and the economic hardship of weeks without pay.

The Coca-Cola workers’ decision to launch wildcat actions on January 30 was a significant development in the strike wave that has since led to over 80 plants winning a 20 percent wage increase and a 32,000 peso (USD\$1,700) bonus, or what is popularly known as 20/32. The Coca-Cola plant is one of the few remaining facilities that has refused to grant the workers’ demands.

The strikers’ resolute stance has won the admiration of workers internationally. Residents of Matamoros have attended rank-and-file fundraising events, including at car washes and barbecues, to help the Coca-Cola workers pay their bills and support their families. The union, which has pocketed 4 percent of every worker’s pay for decades, has joined the company’s repressive efforts by refusing to mobilize dues funds for workers while they remain on strike.

The Matamoros workers are pitted against one of the wealthiest and most powerful corporations in the world. The claim that Coca-Cola, with a net worth of \$194 billion, is unable to give workers a wage increase of about \$2 each cannot be explained by the “greed” of any one company or executive. This corporate counteroffensive is above all a political response to the resurgence of the class struggle internationally, aimed at using the full force of the state against workers who dare question their exploitative working conditions and poverty-level wages.

Coca-Cola has threatened to file kidnapping charges against the workers if they continue preventing trucks from leaving the facility. Company representatives have also declared that the 700 strikers will not receive

back payment for the days they have missed and should already consider themselves dismissed from the facility.

Three other companies in Matamoros—steering wheel manufacturer Joyson Safety Systems and steel manufacturers Siderúrgica del Golfo and Flux Metals—have announced that they will leave the city as a result of the strike. The plant closures will wipe out another 1,500 jobs in the area.

Many laid-off workers report being blacklisted from other Matamoros maquiladoras, and potentially from plants across the US-Mexico border region. Given that over 4,700 workers have been laid off, the trickle effect of such reprisals will be in the tens of thousands as families suffer from an extended loss of income.

The example that the Matamoros workers have set by rebelling against their trade unions and launching wildcat actions is just one expression of a worldwide radicalization after decades of inequality, austerity and attacks on social services. About 80,000 teachers in Tamaulipas are demanding a salary increase of at least 7 percent this year, joining teachers that have launched struggles to defend public education in every continent. This week, teachers traveled to Mexico City to hold a sit-down strike in front of the lower chamber of Congress to demand the repeal of legislation that expanded standardized testing and school privatizations.

Last week, a national strike of 90,000 Walmart workers was betrayed by the Revolutionary Confederation of Laborers and Farmworkers union (CROC). Far from the workers' demands for a 20 percent wage increase, the union accepted a 5.5 percent wage and bonuses tied to the company's performance. They did not bring the contract to a vote by the rank and file or call workers out on strike for a single day. Such an action would have paralyzed the largest grocery chain in Mexico and rapidly brought the company to its knees. As the experience of the Matamoros strikes powerfully shows, workers must organize independently and against the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions in their fight for social equality.

Only the *World Socialist Web Site* has told workers the truth about the class character of the AMLO administration and the trade unions. The WSWS has fought to unite US, Canadian and Mexican workers in

defense of the Matamoros workers. Only an international counteroffensive by the working class, united by independent rank-and-file committees, is capable of standing up to the transnational corporations and reorganize society to meet human need, not private profit.



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