

New trade union bureaucracies or rank-and-file workers' power?

Lessons of the Matamoros workers' rebellion: Part two

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First wave: Prieto isolates Matamoros workers and saves the Villafuerte union

Only two days later, on January 9 and 10, maquiladora workers in Matamoros at Polytech, Dura, Autoliv, Cedros and AFX Industries—all affiliated to the SJOIIM—began partial work stoppages over the non-payment of their usual bonuses. Workers began pressuring union delegates and inquiring about their contract, so management claimed AMLO's minimum wage increase meant that workers lost their bonus, while Juan Villafuerte, the SJOIIM leader, argued that workers had no right to the doubling of their salary.

On January 11, workers at Edemsa, APTIV, Parker, Autoliv and other plants also carried out partial walkouts, while a mass assembly was organized on social media for the following morning. An auto parts worker at Trico Componentes, Delfina Martínez, told reporters that the federal increase of the minimum wage “was a pretext for the factory not to pay us what we would normally receive each January.”

Some 2,000 workers met at the main plaza at 9 a.m. the following day. There and at meetings outside the plants, workers elected rank-and-file representatives at each plant to represent them in negotiations and to organize a strike, even where union delegates claimed to be “on the workers’ side.”

Online and at these initial meetings the sentiment was nearly unanimous to leave the union, with some arguing “we don’t need the union to negotiate.” Suddenly able to communicate democratically after the union had blocked this for decades, workers began raising their own demands, including a 100 percent wage increase, a return to the 40-hour week, the bonus of 32,000 pesos, the elimination of union dues consisting of 4 percent of salaries, “no firings,” as well as other issues. Workers continuously insisted that the raise and bonuses were “victories” that had to be defended.

Faced with an angry sea of workers that rushed into the union offices, Villafuerte agreed on Saturday, January 12, to negotiate a 20 percent raise and the full bonus, but ordered workers to postpone any strikes until Wednesday.

Defying this, workers, starting with the rank-and-file committee at Autoliv, pitched in to pay for their own red-and-black flags—the traditional symbol of a strike in Mexico—hanging them outside of the gates. Wildcat strikes spread across the 48 plants within hours, followed by an arduous fight to convince fellow workers from all shifts to join.

Workers then organized on social media a mass assembly at the plaza for the evening of Wednesday, January 16, to get rid of the union. Once Wednesday arrived, the SJOIIM didn’t strike, but only filed a “strike announcement” or “*emplazamiento*,” which legally requires six to 10 days before a strike can start.

Hundreds of auto parts workers at Tridonex, which is affiliated to a different union, joined the strike that day with a statement that said, “All workers disagree with the injustice sustained by the trade union and with the dues they take from us weekly. Today we can fight for a change, all of us together.”

Between January 11 and 15, over 3,000 maquiladora workers carried out wildcat strikes at Levolor in Agua Prieta and Stewart Connector Systems at Cananea—both border cities in the state of Sonora a few miles from Tucson, Arizona.

The Mexican and international corporate media responded with a virtually total blackout, fearing that the wildcat strikes would spread and merge.

On Wednesday evening, claiming that workers had invited her on social media, Susana Prieto arrived at Matamoros and took over the stage at the mass assembly. One of her first statements was to warn that “98 percent of what’s on social media is false.” By then, the *World Socialist Web Site* had published two articles on the strike, on January 15 and 16, that were being shared and accessed by thousands of striking workers through Facebook amid the media blackout. One of these articles warned: “Striking Mexican workers must not lose the initiative by placing their trust in any politician, the union or in those who falsely claim this corrupt organization can be ‘reformed.’”

The WSWS articles also included calls by Tridonex and Autoliv workers for an international struggle with US and Canadian Autoworkers, along with a message by American auto parts workers telling Mexican workers to “stand together as a united global force.”

In this crucial moment, Prieto denounced the SJOIIM and argued in favor of the wildcat strikes at the 48 SJOIIM plants, with radical-sounding statements such as “it’s time to make a decision” and “where there is a worker, there is a leader.”

She then claimed that AMLO “didn’t want to screw the unions himself but was hoping for you to do it.” However, she concluded: “This movement that you made already escapes the control of Villafuerte. You organized yourselves alone. But, this is why they have so much power because you can’t authorize a strike if it’s not through a union... You must pressure, to begin with, the union. You can’t free yourselves from Villafuerte for now.”

In other words, any alleged support for the technically illegal wildcat strikes, with Prieto even marching with workers the next days to call all shifts out, was a two-faced way to prevent them from organizing outside

of the union.

On January 17, thousands of maquiladora workers at Kemet and APTIV (formerly Delphi Automotive, the spun off parts division of General Motors) in the Tamaulipan city of Ciudad Victoria were inspired by the walkouts of their fellow workers 200 miles northeast in Matamoros and struck demanding a 30 percent raise. That day, a team of WSWS reporters went to the GM Detroit-Hamtramck plant and several auto parts suppliers in Michigan to discuss the Matamoros rebellion. Sally, a US worker, declared “We need to unite! Stay strong.” The WSWS also posted statements of support by auto parts workers in Ontario, Canada.

An Easy Way worker in Matamoros appealed through the WSWS to workers across North America, “Together we can defeat all of those exploiters that have enriched themselves thanks to that enslavement that we live.”

Prieto, on the other hand, thoroughly defended Villafuerte at a mass assembly on January 17 outside of the SJOIIM offices, claiming workers were “cretins” and “ignorant” for denouncing him after he filed the strike announcement.

On the 18th, hundreds of APTIV workers in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, only 55 miles west of Matamoros, were fired for demanding a 100 percent raise.

That morning, Prieto flew back to Ciudad Juárez through Mexico City, presumably to participate in the demonstration she had called for the 19th. Traveling thousands of miles and being in contact with workers across the border facing the same conspiracy by the companies and the Morena administration, Prieto made no serious effort to unite these struggles.

Instead Prieto was organizing delegations of workers to go to Mexico City and Monterrey to meet with union bureaucrats. There is no innocent explanation to this: as in 2016, she was working to isolate the struggles and keep them under the restraints of a union apparatus tied to the state and imperialism.

During the last two weeks of January, the WSWS posted 12 different articles with statements from workers across the US, Canada, Mexico and Europe expressing support for a joint struggle independent of the unions—an average of one article per day. On January 19, the WSWS warned about Prieto’s position: “Despite warnings that this is the only ‘legally sanctioned’ path, it will lead inevitably to a sell-out with the companies and the betrayal by the union to leave workers to fend for themselves once the company and state authorities counterattack against the most militant workers with a vengeance.”

Without Prieto in town, far from the movement “falling apart” as she claimed later, workers took steps toward developing their rank-and-file initiative and amplifying their class-based appeals. On January 18, the workers’ committee from Parker made a call from outside the SJOIIM offices: “send two representatives from each maquiladora to be present as a committee” to discuss future actions. Several plants sent a committee that night.

The next day, workers at maquiladoras with other unions, including Avances Científicos, Varel, Sliding, Fisher Dynamics and others, struck to demand the 20/32. Dozens were quickly fired, while the leader of the Union of Workers in Maquiladora and Assembly Plants (SITPME), Jesús Mendoza Reyes, defended the firings, calling the strikers “criminals” and sending police and thugs to threaten picket lines.

On January 19, the WSWS first published a report by a US worker at the Ford Assembly plant in Flat Rock, Michigan, indicating production was being shut down due to parts shortages caused by the strike in Mexico. Similar reports in the following days and weeks from workers across the US and Canada were later confirmed by other media outlets.

On Sunday, January 20, workers organized by themselves a mass demonstration across the city behind the banner “The union and company kill the working class.” Its purpose was to call workers across Mexico to join them in a “Day Without Workers” on Monday, January 21. The

appeal was then broadened internationally on Monday, when tens of thousands of workers from different unions and sectors, students and youth all marched in the largest demonstration so far in the rebellion to the international bridge with Brownsville, Texas. Carrying signs that included slogans such as “Today will go down in the history of the labor movement, everyone stand up,” workers shouted at American workers: “Gringos, wake up!”

Without Prieto to intervene that day, Mayor Mario López was compelled to address the crowd once it reached the plaza to defend the “right” of companies to protect their profits. After he was booed, a leader of the Miner’s Union at Tamaulipas, Javier Zúñiga García, intervened. “Let’s give our mayor our trust,” he said, “We have to keep trusting our institutions. If Villafuerte or Mendoza come, they will have the same rights as the mayor.”

At a time when union thugs, state and federal police, along with Navy soldiers, were harassing the picket lines, reports appeared that workers had formed their own defense committee to protect strikers.

Workers were also reporting to the WSWS that its articles had been “read by everyone” and even came up in negotiations with the companies. Seeing their power to shut down production across the continent and organize independently, as well as to appeal to workers internationally, workers were drawing revolutionary conclusions. The evening of January 21, a Dura Automotive worker said in an interview published three days later by the WSWS, “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.”

On January 22, the main employers’ organization in the country, the Business Coordinating Council (CCE), called for AMLO’s “intervention since this moment of instability that the labor and business sectors confront in Matamoros can bring irreversible consequences for the region’s economy.” Later that morning, Villafuerte “seconded” this call to AMLO.

As the strike movement threatened to grow further out of control, Prieto returned and monopolized the microphone again at another mass assembly that day. The full significance of her words and actions needs to be digested. “We need the federal government,” she claimed, echoing the calls of the business leaders, before inviting a local journalist, Mario Ramos, to speak. After calling on workers to distrust publications on social media, he launched a 15-minute diatribe against socialism. “This movement is not communist nor socialist. It doesn’t appear to me that you can have a peaceful movement if you are socialists or communists,” he said.

Then, Ramos admitted, “I’m a capitalist, I like money.” Prieto nodded and said, “me too.” Workers laughed and shouted for Ramos to get off the stage. When he asked if he could speak later, the crowd yelled in unison “No!”

In his morning press conference the next day, on January 23, AMLO responded to the call by the CCE and Prieto and addressed the Matamoros strike: “It seems workers have rebelled against their union leaders, and the matter has grown out of control. Although it is not a matter of our direct attention to put ourselves into the life of the unions, we must be respectful if we are looking for a fix and conciliation.”

In other words, matters had to be brought again under the control of the unions. According to a February 1 article of the Associated Press, business leaders reported that, far from a hands-off approach, the Morena administration “actively discouraged the Matamoros union from seeking the pay increase.”

Prieto, however, responded to AMLO’s address by attempting to confuse the workers, saying, “I don’t think the federal government disagrees with what we’re doing.” Then, when workers raised concerns about the AMLO administration and the unions, she again argued, “Don’t follow whatever garbage you read on social media,” and derisively

denounced workers for having “opinionitis.” This was interpreted by workers as a swipe at the WSWS.

On January 24, Polytech was the first to agree to the 20/32 demand. Distrusting the union, workers at most plants asked Prieto to give a green light regarding the legal validity of each new contract.

A few more plants agreed to 20/32 shortly before and after the SJOIIM’s strike announcement came into effect at 2 pm on Friday, January 25, which made the strike “legal” at those plants. At 1 p.m., however, the federal sub-secretary of labor, Alfredo Domínguez Marrufo, and federal representative for the state of Tamaulipas, José Ramón Gómez Leal, held a press conference as AMLO’s direct envoys to Matamoros and unsuccessfully called for a “postponement of ten days or more... to avoid a strike that could lead to unexpected consequences.”

That morning, Prieto visited several plants appealing to workers not to stop companies from taking away machinery and to be ready to comply with an order by the SJOIIM to postpone the strike. “This is not the time to fight with your union delegates... union delegates are nothing but workers like you with a license to represent,” she claimed. With the fate of the SJOIIM and his leadership still on the line, Villafuerte didn’t try to postpone the strike.

The saving of the SJOIIM, whose responsibility rests strictly with Prieto, allowed the international corporate media to begin reporting on the events in Matamoros, while leaving out the rank-and-file rebellion against the unions that the ruling class feared would spread. After a total silence for two weeks, the Associated Press published an article on January 26 that set the tone for other publications, citing prominently, “Union leader Juan Villafuerte thanked union members who had stood outside in the rain and cold, noting ‘we hope to soon conclude this labor action.’”

The widespread sentiment among workers was still in favor of organizing independently of the unions, both before and after the companies agreed to the 20/32. After the strike turned “legal,” an Autoliv worker told the WSWS: “I think that, indeed, the independent committees are much more useful than the union because we have been asking ourselves, ‘This is the proposal, what do we do?’—something that the union never did.” The WSWS warned that Prieto was “sidelining the work that rank-and-file committees have been doing in communicating democratically with their fellow workers and deciding on steps to take.”

Labor authorities announced that 13 auto parts plants were listed by NAFTA under federal authority, which meant that the strike announcement filed through the local board was invalid. On Saturday, January 26 and early Sunday morning, the AMLO administration had the Morena leader of the Senate, Ricardo Monreal Ávila, call Villafuerte and Prieto asking them to shut down the strike.

On January 27, Villafuerte said to workers at Autoliv that Monreal had given him orders from the federal government to communicate the threat that the state police would violently break up their picket lines. Prieto then arrived while talking to Monreal and warning him that he was on speakerphone. He proceeded anyway to say: “We are not going to let the economy of the state and municipality crash. The criminal lawsuit [against workers] is already in the General Prosecutor’s Office. I understand these are just starting, but I hope they are stopped and prosecuted.”

Realizing that Monreal had not only exposed the federal crackdown against Matamoros workers, but the anti-worker character of the Morena administration more broadly, Prieto began crying and frantically sought to cover her own tracks yelling, “I believed in López Obrador because I believed that he would end corruption, but I was naïve. There are too many interests involved!” As the video of the incident spread, Monreal released a statement claiming that it was not his voice.

The next day, Prieto told reporters that Monreal also said, “I am calling on behalf of our friend [president] Andrés Manuel... The maquilas must open on Monday. Since workers trust you, convince them to lift the strike.” She responded that workers would “lynch” her if she made such a

proposal.

Seeing such a confirmation that the AMLO administration did not support their struggle, workers appealed with greater determination to their brothers and sisters internationally to back their fight. “We call for your support, to be heard around the world, as a desperate cry since our economy everywhere is in the hands of a few that are threatening our integrity with state forces,” declared Rosalinda, a striking worker at Kearfott, which produces navigation systems for the US military and other clients.

On January 29, the WSWS called on workers not to let Prieto and the union “shovel them back to work,” adding, “With the backing of the union and the government, the companies will try to claw back any concessions given at the first available opportunity, just as they did when they scrapped their bonuses.” It also published a statement titled, “Defend the Matamoros workers! For a united fight by US, Canadian and Mexican workers to defend jobs and decent living standards!” by the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees, which is composed of workers across the US fighting to unite their struggles internationally and independently of the trade unions and the political establishment.

To be continued

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