

After Matamoros strikes, Mexican government enacts bill for “democratic unions”

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On May 1, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) signed labor legislation supposedly aimed at creating “democratic” and “independent” unions. The bill purportedly would allow workers to use a secret ballot to select union leaders and approve collective contracts. It will also create a federal arbitration board for the resolution of labor-management disputes. The Mexican Senate and Chamber of Deputies overwhelmingly passed the bill in April.

The purpose of the labor reform is two-fold. First, the Mexican ruling class seeks to sow illusions in new trade union organizations, such as the newly-founded International Labor Confederation (CIT), that are in reality no different than the corrupt, pro-company unions that already exist in other countries to smother and betray workers’ struggles, regardless of the manner in which trade union leaders are selected.

Four months ago, a wave of strikes hit the *maquiladora* industry in the border city of Matamoros. To the mortal fear of the ruling class, these struggles erupted in direct opposition to unions affiliated with the largest trade union confederation in Mexico, the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). Thousands of workers took the decisive step of creating independent factory committees, democratically led and elected by workers, to coordinate and lead a struggle against transnational corporations that brutally exploit them in modern-day sweatshops.

The open corruption and criminality of Mexico’s trade unions is an undisputed fact. The CTM and its affiliates are notorious for signing agreements known as “protection contracts” that are negotiated behind the backs of workers without their vote, and sometimes

even without their knowledge. The CTM has historically been tied to the right-wing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and for decades functioned as a pillar of government rule.

However, workers must be urgently warned that AMLO’s legislation will not improve their living and working conditions. Their exploitation will continue unabated, regardless of what illusion of “choice” is now presented.

Mexican workers need only study the experience of their international counterparts, who won the right to form and elect unions during the first half of the 20th century, but face the same wage cuts, speed-ups, and plant closures under their own nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions.

In fact, when workers in the US and Canada learned of the independent rank-and-file initiative of the Matamoros workers, many responded that they wished to rebel against their own nominally “democratic” unions!

No “labor reform” will democratize the factories and secure workers their rights, because the source of their exploitation is not fundamentally legal, but economic. An elected trade union official, no matter how sincere he or she might be, immediately confronts capitalist economic and political relations that are considered sacrosanct, including the “right” of corporations to maximize their profits and remain “competitive” by extracting as much value from the workers as possible. The “choice” of a trade union official is worthless when the options facing workers are only over which individual will enforce the diktats of management.

In its five-part series “Lessons of the Matamoros workers’ rebellion,” the WSWWS carried out an

extensive historical and political analysis of these “independent” unions in Mexico and Latin America. Outfits like the CIT and the National Workers Union (UNT) are funded and supported by US and German governments to channel social opposition into the capitalist system, weed out left-wing and socialist-minded workers and politically subordinate them to the interests of imperialism.

A second factor behind the enactment of the labor legislation was passage of the new US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). Mexican labor reforms were a key demand of the Trump administration, Congressional Democrats, and the US trade union apparatus for agreement on the USMCA, which would replace NAFTA.

US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer hailed the new laws by stating, “These reforms will greatly improve Mexico’s system of labor justice and are exactly what labor leaders in the United States and Mexico have sought for decades.”

The US government does not have an ounce of concern for the rights of Mexican workers. Latin American workers and youth, who have been the victims of dozens of US-backed dictatorships and are ruthlessly greeted by the modern-day immigration Gestapo at the US-Mexico border, know the true attitude of the US ruling class to their democratic rights.

The Trump administration has sought to repackage NAFTA as a more explicit US-led protectionist trade bloc. The labor reforms are seen as nationalist measures to make Mexico a less lucrative investment platform for transnational corporations and increase the “competitiveness” of US firms.

Leading members of the Democratic Party have tried to outflank Trump from the right on trade, claiming that USMCA will only be ratified once there is evidence that the reforms are being implemented.

This includes the nationalist “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders, who lined up behind efforts to pit Mexican and US workers against each other and line them up behind their own ruling classes. “The NAFTA treaty that Trump re-negotiated with Mexico will still allow companies like General Motors to send our jobs to Mexico,” said Sanders on April 13. “For once in your life, keep your campaign promises ... go back to the drawing board.”

An assimilation of the lessons of the Matamoros workers’ rebellion is urgently needed to understand the way forward. Workers must fight not for new unions, but for rank-and-file workers power that takes as its starting point the objective needs and the social strength of the working class. This will not be granted by AMLO or any other capitalist politician, but must be fought for by the international working class, united under a socialist program and perspective.



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