

“Our life is not a game”

Workers strike across Ciudad Juárez, Mexico as COVID-19 death toll rises in factories

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Strikes have spread across the Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez, which borders El Paso, Texas, involving hundreds of *maquiladora* workers demanding the closure of non-essential factories, which have been kept open despite the growing death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic, including 13 employees at the US-owned Lear car seat plant.

The strikes, which follow similar actions by workers at the border cities of Matamoros, Mexicali, Reynosa and Tijuana, are part of a growing international resistance involving workers across Europe and the US as the pandemic continues to spread out of control.

Transnational firms and the Mexican financial aristocracy are determined to keep the flow of parts coming from the cheap-labor industrial belt across the US-Mexico border and northern Mexico as the global automakers prepare to reopen assembly plants across the US, Europe and Canada. On Sunday, US president Donald Trump said he spoke with his Mexican counterpart Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) Saturday to coordinate the reopening of supply chains.

With warnings of the deepest economic crisis in Mexico's history and a massive under-reporting of infections and deaths and with no plan to contain the escalating outbreak in the country, the AMLO administration has allowed vast swathes of industry to remain open and announced a “reactivation” as early as June 1.

The strikes at Ciudad Juárez began last Wednesday as workers at a Therm-O-Disc Emerson plant protested the nonessential production of thermostats without protective equipment. On Thursday, workers at the smoke-alarm maker Honeywell struck after a co-worker reportedly died of COVID-19. Honeywell, which has insisted that its production is “essential,” threatened workers with reprisals and offered a \$17 bonus per week to shut down opposition.

“Our life is not a game, it’s not a tossup. We want a quarantine... with 100 percent of our wages,” a worker told the video news site *Ruptly*. Workers at electric-motor producer Regal Beloit struck Friday after two workers died of COVID-19. Since then, workers have also struck at Amphenol CTI (Canadian wire harness business), TPI Composites (US wind turbine blade manufacturer), Norma Group (German welding and joining technology company), Argentina-based Electrocomponentes, Syncron (US-based warehouse and export packaging firm) and Critikon (US-based

medical supplier).

Workers took matters into their own hands after government authorities, management and the trade unions took no action to shut down plants when news broke of the deaths at Lear and other *maquiladoras*.

The first coronavirus case in Ciudad Juarez was confirmed on March 17, and the Chihuahua state authorities “recommended” the shutdown of nonessential operations on March 23. The *Los Angeles Times* interviewed two workers at the Lear plant who spoke anonymously and described a wave of cough and fever by mid-March. At the time, AMLO was insisting that “pandemics... won’t do anything to us.” Lear workers lacked hand sanitizer and those with symptoms were not given sick leave.

It was not until March 30 that the Mexican government declared a “health emergency” ordering nonessential activities to stop and urging companies to provide 100 percent pay during the shutdowns. The government decree, however, was deliberately vague regarding when the plants had to close, what constitutes “essential activities” and whether pay cuts agreed by the corrupt trade unions were legal. At the same time, the AMLO government and state authorities have taken no actions against companies that defied their orders.

While Lear closed its plants in Mexico on April 1, Chihuahua officials said last Saturday that, out of the 160 factories in Ciudad Juárez, 28 “nonessential” plants, 33 “considered essential” and 35 “with some essential activities” remained open, while 64 were closed. About 120,000 of the 300,000 *maquiladora* workers remain at work.

The city had 108 confirmed cases and 20 deaths from COVID-19 on Sunday; however, lawyers representing the medical staff at Hospital 66 in Ciudad Juarez shared images with piled body bags. “The personnel at IMSS 66 reports more than 80 dead by Friday only in that clinic, imagine how many are infected—many in the *maquiladoras*,” lawyer Mario Espinoza Simental commented. Doctors denounce the lack of PPE in the hospitals and demands that they send workers back to the factories with little more than acetaminophen because of the lack of testing.

The Health Ministry director for the Northern Zone, Dr. Arturo Valenzuela, declared Saturday that “there were deaths earlier this year” that were reported as pneumonia and other ailments “but were probably COVID-19,” including of “factory workers.”

Nationwide, the official count of COVID-19 cases stood at 8,261, but top health officials have estimated that there are more than 56,000 infections.

The outbreak is effectively out of control, while no economic support is being given to laid off workers, most of whom are forced to depend on the informal sector without unemployment benefits or health insurance. The International Labor Organization estimates that Mexico could lose 1.7 million to 7 million jobs as a result to the pandemic crisis. By comparison during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, one-tenth the total or 772,000 jobs were lost, pushing 10 million people below the official poverty rate. Now some 50 million Mexicans—out of the population of 130 million—are considered poor and 50 million more are at risk of falling below the poverty threshold.

The only federal “assistance” provided involves loans at 6.5 percent interest or higher for small and medium companies that will begin on May 4. Not only are companies carrying out mass layoffs, but the AMLO administration has ordered a 50 percent budget cut in most federal institutions outside of health care, the Army, Navy and National Guard. This will lead to mass layoffs in education, culture, public services and other sectors.

Amid the lack of testing, PPE and other medical equipment, AMLO has vowed “to do the impossible” to avoid increasing the public debt. While the 2020 federal health care budget was only \$5.2 billion, the six richest billionaires in Mexico control \$108 billion, and the last decade saw an increase of dollar millionaires from 78,000 to 173,000.

At the same time, Mexico has spent over \$120 billion in law enforcement and the military—known for its rampant violence and corruption—on the so-called “war on drugs” since 2006, and AMLO created a National Guard to perpetuate this. After 13 years of war, March 2020 was the deadliest month with 2,585 homicides, with Ciudad Juárez as one of the epicenters with 159 killings.

Reuters reported Sunday that “some [Mexican business executives] are threatening to not pay taxes until the economy recovers from the coronavirus, particularly in northern border states such as Chihuahua and Tamaulipas,” where Matamoros is located. Several companies have also called on the police to force striking workers back into the plants.

The Mexican ruling class and its US and European patrons are terrified that their response to their efforts to lay the burden of the crisis on the working class will lead to a social explosion that AMLO will be unable to contain. There was already a simmering rank-and-file rebellion against the corrupt trade unions and the transnational corporations expressed by waves of wildcat strikes in Ciudad Juárez in 2015-16 and Matamoros last year.

Last weekend, David Ibarra, a former finance minister and current board member at several Mexican multinationals called for “an agreement between the government, the business sector and organized labor over a new social consensus.” The call for a new consensus is being widely made by capitalist commentators internationally and has proven to a thinly veiled call to “reopen” capitalist economies and to use more authoritarian measures to crush the resistance of workers who refuse to die for corporate profit.

In an April 13 column for the *Times*, journalist Patricio Fernández warns of a larger “second wave of discontent” over the response to the pandemic that would be far greater than the mass upheavals in Chile that occurred over the last year. “And we are not talking of a theoretical and unknown fury. We just saw its teeth,” he writes. After denouncing protesters as “marginal lumpen mobs,” he calls for a greater “presence of the state” and “a law-and-order bet” as “the best strategy to avoid a breakdown of dimensions that will be hard to fix.”

A coalition of forces including the US trade union confederation AFL-CIO, the so-called “independent” trade unions tied to AMLO’s Morena party and their pseudo-left apologists intervened during the previous rebellions of workers in Ciudad Juárez and Matamoros to chain workers within the gangster-ridden unions, which are now partnering with the corporations to force workers to remain at the unsafe *maquiladoras*.

There is indeed a second wave of struggles among workers in Mexico and this time it is a matter of life and death. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on workers to form rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, independent of the unions, to shut down all non-essential production and guarantee full wages and medical benefits to all laid off workers. At the same time, these committees must demand universal testing, immediate and fully paid medical care for affected workers, and no return to work until all workers have proper protective gear and a safe working environment, overseen by factory committees working in conjunction with health care professionals.

Rank-and-file committees in Mexico must unite with workers in the US and Canada to wage an internationally coordinated struggle to shut down all non-essential production and demand the immediate conversion of the factories to produce testing equipment, ventilators and protective gear for medical and other essential workers, while protecting the workers who manufacture these vitally necessary products.



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