

Striking against death: Maquiladora workers walk out across northern Mexico

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Along the US-Mexico border, the growing wave of strikes and protests in sweatshop maquiladora factories marks a critical flashpoint in the struggle between the capitalist class and the working class over the global response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Giving voice to the interests of billions of workers worldwide, maquiladora employees who produce parts for transnational corporations in Tijuana, Matamoros, Mexicali, Reynosa and Ciudad Juárez are demanding a shutdown of non-essential production, full pay if plants close and the provision of adequate health care and safety precautions for the inhabitants of the country's industrial north.

Though the protests have been subjected to a media blackout in the US, videos are circulating of managers shouting at desperate and furious workers who finally throw their work smocks to the floor before marching off the job. As in early 2019, when 70,000 workers in Matamoros rebelled against the unions and launched the largest wildcat strike in North America in decades, workers are again acting on their own independent initiative, this time to save their lives.

The response of the corporations and their trade union partners has been to try to keep the plants running, no matter the human cost.

Doctors across the border region report that hospitals are overflowing with sick and dying maquiladora workers. At one major plant in Ciudad Juárez, owned by Michigan-based Lear Corporation, the company forced production to continue even as the virus spread throughout its facility. At least 13 workers at this facility alone have died.

Mónica, the daughter of a sick Lear worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “My father is in a very delicate state in a coma.” While still on the job in March, “he said Lear sent a sick person back to work. He and other people had contact with this person. It's irresponsible that plants remain open and expose their employees in such a way. Workers, from the experience I lived with my dad, don't expose yourselves. Take care of your lives and families first.”

According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, “By late

March it became clear that the [Lear] Juarez factory was the center of a major COVID-19 outbreak.” When many workers grew sick and went to the company infirmary, “nurses diagnosed them as having allergies or colds, gave them painkillers and told them to get back to work.”

Lear CEO Ray Scott earned \$9.9 million in the 2017-2018 fiscal year.

At another maquiladora owned by Georgia-based Cooper Lighting, owners forced workers to work through the pandemic and installed “chains on its doors to prevent its roughly 800 workers from leaving,” the *Times* reported. Company CEO Eric Rondolat reportedly earned \$2.8 million in the 2017-2018 fiscal year.

Such brazen criminality is the rule, not the exception. It embodies the response of the entire capitalist class and the major world governments to the pandemic. Trillions of dollars have been made available to the banks and corporations, enriching the financial aristocracy while billions of workers still go without the most basic protections.

As of April 15, 23 US autoworkers employed by Ford and Fiat Chrysler had died of the coronavirus. Twenty-seven US nurses and doctors have died of the virus, according to official Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data. As of April 12, 41 US grocery store workers had died of coronavirus. At least 12 meat processing workers have died in recent weeks, with hundreds more testing positive, and 81 active and retired New York City transit workers are dead. Due to limited testing, these numbers likely vastly undercount the death toll.

Those who have died were sacrificed at the altar of private profit. And for Wall Street and US imperialism, continued production across the Mexican maquiladoras is a geo-strategic necessity, no matter how many Mexican workers die in the process.

Over one million workers are employed at maquiladoras, which produce parts for most major US industries, including defense production. Maquiladora production is therefore essential to the efforts of the Trump administration and the

US media to “reopen the US.” Trump has proposed to ease restrictions on work and travel by May 1, despite warnings from medical experts that this will cause thousands of deaths.

At his daily press conference Sunday, Donald Trump announced: “I spoke with the president of Mexico yesterday... And we’re in very good coordination right now... We’re doing the supply chain. It’s not going to affect trade... And if it does, I will tell you: If a supply chain based in Mexico or Canada interrupts with our making a big product and an important product, or even a military product, we’re not going to be happy, let me tell you that.”

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s response to the virus has been dictated by his prostration before the Trump administration and the economic and geopolitical demands of US imperialism.

At the end of March, as the virus was spreading through the maquiladoras, López Obrador said in a video message, “If we grind to a halt, we don’t do any good. Let’s keep going about our lives as normal.”

López Obrador then made a number of high-profile public appearances in which he kissed supporters amid crowds of people, violating social distancing requirements. *Mother Jones* noted, “During one of the president’s daily press briefings, a reporter asked López Obrador how he would protect Mexico, and he responded by pulling religious amulets from his wallet and saying those were his protective shields.”

Also at the end of March, Luis Miguel Barbosa, the governor of Puebla and a member of López Obrador’s Movement for National Regeneration (MORENA) party, said the poor are “immune” to the disease, implying they should not be concerned about going to work. Puebla is a major center of foreign auto production.

The response of López Obrador exposes the bankruptcy of those in Mexico and the US, like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and *Jacobin* magazine, who promoted the president as a transformative “left-wing” or even “socialist” fighter for the working class. In June 2019, *Jacobin* praised López Obrador for advancing a “progressive agenda,” saying his administration “bucks international economic nostrums.”

On the contrary, López Obrador is now planning to use the country’s National Guard to crush workers’ protests and keep the profits flowing to Wall Street. A thirty-page internal National Guard document released recently says the force is preparing to deploy against “social unrest.”

The experiences of the last two months expose the total indifference of the ruling class to the deadly impact of the virus on the working class. Calls for an imminent “return to work” mean even larger numbers of workers are being

marched to their deaths to protect corporate profit and the wealth of the rich.

The growing action by Mexican workers in plants and warehouses located at the border speaks to the immense potential social power of an internationally unified working class response to the crisis.

The *Washington Post* reported Sunday, “Stirrings of unrest around the world could portend turmoil as economies collapse.” The article cited UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, who warned of “an increase in social unrest” on the immediate horizon.

The year 2019 ended with the largest wave of mass demonstrations in decades, but, absent revolutionary leadership, none of the issues over which workers protested were resolved.

Now, this growing social anger has entered a new, more urgent phase. Strikes, walkouts and protests are taking place in the US, Europe, across Latin America and the rest of the world as workers raise the same demands: indefinite time off with full pay, adequate protections for genuinely essential work, and the allocation of sufficient funds for health care and the production of protective equipment and ventilators.

The nature of the virus itself renders any purely national response obsolete. The nationalist trade unions are joining the ruling class of each country in conspiring to force workers to return to work as soon as possible.

To save their lives and the lives of their loved ones, workers must have control of health and safety measures in their workplaces. They alone must be allowed to democratically determine if, when and under what conditions workers are to return to work. This cannot be accomplished through the trade unions or in the absence of democratic workers’ control of production.

This means establishing new organizations—rank-and-file committees—to connect workers across industries and national boundaries and unite them in a global struggle against the capitalist system. Imbued with a revolutionary socialist perspective, this movement of the working class can ensure that production is organized not for profit, but to meet human need and save lives.



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