

Under US pressure, Mexican government vows to impose return to work and “herd immunity” policy

Andrea Lobo
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Hundreds of maquiladora sweatshop plants across Mexico have remained opened as the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to accelerate. This includes 68 percent of those factories in Tijuana, across the border from the US state of California, according to the local government.

The manufacturing plants concentrated along the US-Mexico border have become COVID-19 outbreak epicenters, with dozens of workers dying in overwhelmed hospitals. The closings that did occur were largely due to the wave of wildcat strikes that swept across the border cities Matamoros, Reynosa, Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana and Mexicali last month. However, these plants—which are critical for the reopening of the North American auto industry, along with US defense production—have been gradually reopening over the past two weeks or have sent notices to workers to prepare to return to work soon.

As in Mexicali last Friday, where the right-wing Workers’ Congress (CT) organized a protest outside the municipality building against the premature return to work, workers must be wary of maneuvers by the establishment and so-called “independent” trade unions and associated activists. Their aim is not to defend workers’ lives but to regain their confidence in order to soften the resistance and corral them back to the plants at the first available opportunity, regardless of the risks.

As of this writing, there are 23,471 cases in Mexico and 2,154 deaths, according to the World Health Organization’s tally. While refusing to close non-essential workplaces, provide protection to medical workers or implement mass testing and other emergency measures, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) spent February and March kissing supporters at rallies, claiming that Mexicans should go out, trust their stronger genes, and carry religious icons and a one-dollar bill in the wallet—a lucky amulet across Latin America—as “guardians.”

With the deadly virus spreading and a wave of strikes hitting the maquiladora plants, AMLO finally declared a “health emergency” on March 30, ordering the shutdown of nonessential production and the payment of full salaries.

Even though it did not have the slightest intention of enforcing these measures, the government sought to deflect popular anger by issuing statements about protecting workers’ lives. On April 16, Finance Minister Arturo Herrera wrote in a letter to the IMF, “Notwithstanding the current uncertainty, it is of utmost importance to send a strong message that there is no trade-off between health and the economy. The global economic crisis cannot be solved until the health emergency is effectively addressed.”

That same evening, however, the Trump administration published its plan “Opening Up America Again,” and the US president called AMLO shortly afterwards to pressure him to reopen plants in Mexico.

On April 23, AMLO declared in his daily press briefing: “We’ve committed, above all to our national business owners, to analyze the opening [in the US] to little-by-little start going back to normal productivity at the border. But this has not been decided yet because the coronavirus is unfortunately affecting them very much...” He later announced that the reopening would begin on May 17.

On April 27, Herrera switched his rhetoric about prioritizing health, and said to *El Pais* that the government would “find the mechanism” to open suppliers to US corporations even sooner. He explained, “What epidemiologists expect is that once we move to the next phase, we’ll start getting a herd immunity with such a high percentage of the population who got it, even though many don’t. What kills the pandemic is not avoiding infections but having had enough infections at such a high amount that there is no way to transmit it since others already got it.”

This is a homicidal policy that will result, if it is carried out, in hundreds of thousands of deaths.

On Monday, the *Detroit Free Press* published an article titled, “US auto industry preps for restart—and it all depends on Mexico.” It noted, “With about 40% of imported auto parts coming from south of the border, and parts made in the United States that are exported to Mexico for vehicle production there, the interdependency between the two countries cannot be overstated.”

The AMLO government and US- and other foreign-based corporations hope to use economic desperation to force workers back to work.

The UK anti-hunger organization Oxfam estimated that, without government aid, 3 million businesses could be affected, leaving 28 million workers—or nearly half of Mexico’s labor force—without a job or enough income to survive. Oxfam reports that providing informal workers a minimum income for a year would cost about \$24 billion, less than a quarter of the \$108 billion controlled by the six richest Mexican billionaires.

AMLO has refused to provide any aid to those losing their jobs and income in the informal sector. At the same time, he has claimed he would not give handouts to banks and corporations. However, while AMLO proclaims that his priority is not raising debt, Herrera has announced “the largest issuance of bonds in Mexico’s history,” approximately \$6 billion, and the government is pledging to the international markets that it will pay back the debt and interest in full.

At the same time, pressure is mounting to shut down the opposition of Mexican workers. Francisco Santini Ramos, the president of the Business Coordinating Council, the main employer organization, said corporations were being “stigmatized nationally and internationally by the protests of workers at nonessential plants and the deaths of co-workers, which could undermine the attraction of foreign investment.” Specifically referring to two Lear auto parts plants in Ciudad Juárez where at least 16 workers died of COVID-19, he said the company was not at fault and pointed to the health care system.

The daughter of a worker at the plant who recently succumbed to COVID-19 after a long fight against the disease, explained to the WWS that the Michigan-based corporation forced workers with COVID-19 symptoms to continue working throughout the second half of March. Her father, and many workers on social media noted that the plant would have kept operating if didn’t run out of space in its warehouses due to the shutdown of Lear factories in the US. “They didn’t close the plants even when Lear closed in the US. It’s irresponsible that they kept it open and exposed their employees,” Mónica Rosales told the WWS.

Regarding the underfunded health care system, the Mexican government has prioritized tax and property incentives for foreign capital, as well as a military buildup to prepare to defend their property and crack down on social opposition.

One of AMLO’s first policy initiatives was to create the largest free economic zone along the US-Mexico border by slashing taxes for corporations. This led to an estimated budget shortfall for the first year of US \$4.23 billion. AMLO also cut federal health care personnel by 30 percent and the budget of the Epidemiology Department by nearly 10 percent in his 2020 budget.

The supposed opposition by AMLO and his Morena party to the pro-business policies of the previous governments, especially after the 2012 Pact for Mexico that centered on the privatization of oil and social cuts, increased their popularity.

The Mexican ruling class and US imperialism prevented AMLO from coming to power through electoral fraud in 2006 and 2012 in order to smother rising social expectations. In 2018, however, he was allowed to win the presidency in order to contain simmering social opposition fueled by the killing of 43 teacher students in 2014 and the murderous repression of *Gasolinazo* protesters in 2017.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reported yesterday that AMLO raised the military budget 7.9 percent in his first year to \$6.5 billion. During the last decade, military spending has increased 47 percent, ostensibly to combat violent drug cartels, but homicides continue to reach higher levels. The US government has also continued to provide billions in military aid and training through the Mérida Initiative.

The main official drug enforcement official who coordinated with US agencies between 2001 and 2012 was Genaro García Luna, who has been indicted in New York for receiving millions of dollars from the Sinaloa Cartel starting as early as 2005.

On Saturday, the US ambassador at the time Roberta Jacobson, who worked closely with García Luna in the development of the Mérida Initiative, said that the former Mexican President Felipe Calderón and US governments knew of García Luna’s ties. Several of García Luna’s closest collaborators remain in top posts under the Morena federal and Mexico City governments.

The Morena government created a new National Guard, which is run by the same corrupt military command, and enshrined the military’s domestic deployment in the Constitution. After its first

assignments to crack down on Central American immigrants at the behest of the fascistic Trump administration, the National Guard has been sent to harass striking auto parts workers in Matamoros and to dismantle the blockade of a railway by teachers in Puebla. A National Guard internal memorandum on the COVID-19 crisis notes that it is preparing to move against “social unrest.”

With the pandemic crisis further eroding AMLO’s popularity, the ruling class is preparing for a new stage in the class struggle involving widespread state repression. AMLO’s approval rating, according to the polling firm Mitofsky, fell to the lowest point of his administration at 48.8 percent, compared to 67.1 percent in February 2019. The return-to-work campaign, as is the case internationally, is a particularly explosive issue—with the Ipsos MORI Global Advisor finding in a poll that 65 percent of Mexicans oppose a reopening until the pandemic is totally contained.

Despite the efforts by the trade unions and pseudo-left organizations in Mexico and internationally to boost illusions in AMLO, millions of workers, small-business owners and unemployed have seen past his phony “left” populism. Like the ruling class in the US and countries across the world, the entire political establishment in Mexico is demanding that workers risk their lives for the profits of the transnational corporations and Wall Street.

The only way to protect both the lives and livelihoods of workers is through a mass political mobilization of the working class, leading all oppressed layers behind it and independently of every pro-capitalist party and trade union. The private fortunes of the ruling elite need to be expropriated to end poverty and deprivation and the domestic and foreign-owned factories transformed into public utilities under the control of the working class, as part of the socialist transformation of the economy.

In opposition to the corrupt CTM unions, workers must build rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to unite with US and Canadian workers to demand the closure of all non-essential production and full income to all laid off workers. No production should be resumed until the pandemic is contained, universal testing and contact tracing put in place, and rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with public health experts committed to the interests of workers, not the corporations, can guarantee safe working environments.



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