

Maquiladora workers demand release of labor lawyer arrested in Matamoros, Mexico

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In the Mexican city of Matamoros, across the border from Brownsville, Texas, thousands of workers at the maquiladora sweatshop plants have demonstrated to demand the release of Susana Prieto Terrazas, a labor lawyer who works with so-called “independent” unions.

The Tamaulipas state police arrested Prieto last Monday, June 8, as the lawyer, her daughter and husband left a restaurant in Matamoros. She is being held on trumped up charges of instigating an “uprising and riot” at a local labor court on March 10.

Despite our sharp political differences with Prieto, which we have presented in detail, the *World Socialist Web Site* unequivocally opposes her arrest and demands her immediate release. Her frame-up and detention is aimed at terrorizing the heroic workers of Matamoros and other sections of the working class, who have rebelled against the gangster-ridden Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) union and the homicidal back to work policy demanded by the giant transnational corporations and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO).

Within minutes of her arrest, which she livestreamed on Facebook, dozens of workers and supporters of Prieto took to the streets, organizing through social media, and protested peacefully outside of the police headquarters and municipal government building and then blocked the road to the airport.

An auto parts worker from Tridonex Cardone who was at the protest told the WSWs, “Some claim she is being taken to the airport. We are here at the Ministerial [Police]. It seems like she is here since human rights officials walked in. It looks like they are moving her around to confuse people.”

That evening, dozens blocked the federal interstate highway for several hours after Prieto was taken by police to the state’s capital Ciudad Victoria, 200 miles south. Tridonex workers explained they were confronted by

National Guard troops.

In the context of the brutal killings carried out recently by the police in Mexico and internationally and the forced disappearances and death threats against demonstrators by police in Guadalajara, the Tridonex workers described the arrest and secret transfer of Prieto as a “kidnapping.” More protests were being planned over the weekend.

AMLO has given his tacit support for the arrest of Prieto even though she is a political supporter of the president and his Morena Party. AMLO said last Friday he knew about the arrest “since the first day and gave instructions to check into the case.” Far from demanding her release, however, the president claimed Prieto’s arrest was a local issue, providing the same green light he did after state police in Jalisco kidnapped dozens of youth in Guadalajara protesting against the police killings of George Floyd in the United States and Giovanni López in Jalisco. “It has to do with the Tamaulipas state government; it’s not a federal issue, just to clarify,” AMLO declared.

In a press conference last Wednesday Tamaulipas general prosecutor, Irving Barrios Mojica, claimed the arrest was based on a lawsuit from the Number 6 Labor Conciliation Board in Matamoros. Barrios alleged that, on March 10, “about 400 people, under the pretext of manifesting their right of assembly and protest, riotously disturbed the public order through the use of violence and threats to damage the facilities and employees and personnel inside the building, hoping to intimidate and force them to carry out functions without the corresponding and legal qualifications or requirements.”

Prieto is being charged as the “instigator” of “(1) threats, (2) uprising or riot, (3) coercion of individuals, and (4) offenses against public employees,” citing specifically their “physical and moral” integrity.

Barrios said Prieto was moved to Ciudad Victoria on Monday because people were protesting “in an

intimidating and threatening way” outside of the attorney general’s office in Matamoros, where the lawsuit was filed.

After a 20-hour hearing on Tuesday and Wednesday, which was held remotely, a supervisory judge ruled that Prieto would be prosecuted. He added that Prieto would be held in detention at the Ciudad Victoria prison because the March 10 “events were perpetrated with violence” and she was allegedly a flight risk because she had residence outside the state and country. The authorities dismissed concerns regarding Prieto’s high-blood pressure, which makes her particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus that has already killed 11 prisoners in Mexico.

The protest on March 10 involved workers at Tridonex who were accompanied by supporters from other plants. It marked the peak of 14 months of protests and legal procedures to break from the corporate-controlled SITPME trade union, which belongs to the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). During this period workers have faced threats and physical attacks by the Tamaulipas police, federal troops and union thugs.

While a share of workers supported leaving the SITPME to join the Independent Union for Industry and Service Workers (SINTIS) founded and led largely by Prieto, she was not present at the March 10 event and no evidence has been made public of her direct involvement in the protest.

Tridonex workers told the WSWS their protest was driven by opposition to “14 years that [SITPME leader Jesús] Mendoza has been stealing our dues.” The SITPME operates as a police arm of management to enforce poverty level wages—which average \$75 (1,675 pesos) per week for Tridonex workers. The bribed union officials suppress any opposition to mass layoffs and sweatshop working conditions while the labor courts rubberstamp the diktats of the corporations.

In January 2019, workers at Tridonex joined tens of thousands from almost every maquiladora across Matamoros in a wave of wildcat strikes, demanding that the companies stop recognizing and giving automatic dues to the CTM unions. On January 16, 2019, strikers voted on a statement carrying this demand. The Tamaulipas police and the CTM thugs attacked and threatened workers who were demonstrating peacefully while the company fired hundreds in reprisal. The struggle continued and reached a high point last March after the labor court refused to meet with the workers’ lawyer (not Prieto). On March 9, Tridonex workers carried out a

wildcat strike to pressure the company and labor court to accept their demand to separate from the CTM-backed union.

A worker at the March 10 protest told the web site *Rossy Conexión JM* that workers were requesting that the court “stop payments to Mendoza and accept our separation from the union,” but the court refused, saying, “We were supposedly violating their rights.” He added, “The only thing we wanted was for them to take the legal paperwork since they previously refused to do so three or four times.” Instead, he said, the workers were threatened with “elements of the military and State Police.” Finally, shortly after 2 p.m. the court announced it would accept the papers.

The timing of the arrest is bound up with the AMLO government’s efforts to satisfy the demands of Wall Street and the Trump administration to keep the Mexican supply chain flowing to the US auto, electronics and aviation and defense industries. There are more than 143,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Mexico and at least 16,872 deaths, and these numbers are widely considered gross underestimations. Hundreds of maquiladora workers in Baja California, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas and other border states have died from the contagion. As in other countries the criminal indifference of the ruling class has also sparked a wave of strikes and protests by health care, manufacturing and other workers.

By arresting Prieto the Mexican authorities and trade union functionaries hope to stamp out this wave of opposition. Workers in Mexico and around the world must demand Prieto’s release and oppose this attack on the rights to freedom of speech, assembly and organization. To carry out this fight workers need new forms of working-class organization struggle, rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, which are independent of CTM, the AFL-CIO-backed “independent” unions and every faction of the trade union bureaucracy and political establishment. These committees must spearhead the fight for a powerful industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class across North America to defend health and safety and guarantee living wages for all workers and their families.



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