

Autoworkers in Mexico unmask AMLO's promise of "union democracy"

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9 December 2020

During an online forum last Thursday, autoworkers in Mexico victimized by General Motors and Audi bravely exposed the oppressive working conditions enforced by the trade unions and the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).

The online event, called "Trade union democracy in the auto industry in the context of USMCA [US, Mexico, and Canada trade deal]," was organized by the "Binational Summit against USMCA," a front used by the Mexican Electricians Union (SME) and the US union confederation AFL-CIO to keep workers on both sides of the border chained to the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions and prevent a genuine unification of workers across the North American continent and internationally.

The organizers hoped to foster illusions in AMLO's promises of creating "union democracy" and to bring back to the fold workers who increasingly see the futility of voting to replace the leaders of the gangster-ridden CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers) unions or joining new "independent" unions, which also subordinate the interests of workers to the Mexican capitalist class and the giant transnational corporations.

In their testimonies, however, workers explained that the promised protections in AMLO's new labor reforms and the USMCA have turned out to be nothing but "dead letters." This realization is an important step forward, but workers must now work through the implications and more fundamental questions.

Why have the trade unions in every country and supposedly "left" and "nationalist" politicians like AMLO become little more than subsidiary managers for transnational corporations and banks? What are the organizational but, most importantly, the political tasks that workers confront? The organizers of the meeting made sure that these fundamental issues facing the working class were not discussed.

The two participants from the Audi assembly plant in Puebla are part of a group of more than 25 workers fired since 2017 for opposing the union SITAUDI, which belongs to the National Union of Workers (UNT). The union claims to be "democratic" and different from the corporate-controlled, or *charro*, trade unions in the CTM. The UNT has long received funds and training from the AFL-CIO, the US government and their counterparts in Germany.

Eduardo Badillo explained that when the plant opened in 2016, "the union was formed by Audi workers, but little by little they were replaced by the committee that came from the Volkswagen [union, SITIAVW], which employed threats." Within five months, he added, "those people took over all the posts in the union and it became a *charro* union." The SITIAVW is another so-called "independent" union in the UNT.

In response, workers formed the "Peaceful Committee for Removal" to reclaim control of the local union. "The voice of the 6,800 workers was ignored, and this is still the case even though there is a new leader," Badillo added. "The union officials would tell us, 'It's your fault, and the company is correct... You don't pay me to do that job.'"

The most militant workers were soon fired. Jaime González described his own victimization. In early 2017, he presented a document in the name

of the committee requesting the financial statements of SITAUDI, whose offices are located in the same area as the company's human resources department. Union officials rejected the workers' request even though under the terms of the union's own constitution, members have the right to view the union's assets, revenue and expenditures. Management fired González the following day, claiming that they had "mistakenly" hired 600 surplus workers. "But the company never fired those 600 workers," he declared.

Speaking next was Israel Cervantes, a worker at the GM assembly complex in Silao, Guanajuato, which also employs nearly 7,000 workers. After ten years under the thumb of a *charro* union aligned with the CTM, Israel and others began organizing to oust it. GM then fired him on the basis of a fraudulent "anti-doping test." He explained, "My layoff was because we were organizing a group for union democracy as stipulated in the new labor reform, but they are empty words, and we don't see anything the USMCA will do either."

Cervantes continued, "During the [GM] strike in the United States, we also supported them, refusing to accept forced extra hours, and the people in the US supported our struggle here in Mexico." GM and other autoworkers in the US were informed about the courageous stand of the Silao workers by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, which broke the silence of the corporate-controlled news media and the United Auto Workers union and hosted several online meetings where the victimized Silao workers spoke to their US counterparts in 2019.

GM and the CTM have continued their vendetta, firing another 17 Silao workers who backed the militant group, known as the Generating Movement.

The US corporation and the CTM have also organized several fraudulent contract and union recognition votes to "comply" with the new legislation, while all appeals by Generating Movement to AMLO and his Labor Ministry have been ignored. Instead, the government sent auditors to meet with workers who were intimidated or corrupted by union delegates to rubberstamp this pseudo-democratic process.

"We work 12 hours shifts, four days a week, but there are areas where the union is pushing workers to work six days. The new contract also includes extra hours," Cervantes said. "They keep abusing, taking advantage of the power that the Labor Ministry itself is giving them."

GM worker Sergio Contreras then described how he was victimized after contracting coronavirus and quarantining, after 26 years on the job. "There have been nine dead at the plant [from COVID-19] and the funeral support is 750 pesos [US\$38]—a mockery for the families who have lost a loved one. The *charro* union does nothing," Contreras added.

A false "unity" with a faction of the union bureaucracy?

The meeting moderators asked workers if they have gotten improved treatment under AMLO. "The labor reforms are dead letters," González from Audi responded. "There has been no response from the former officials of the [Labor] Ministry or the current ones. Their only role is to take pictures at events. In terms of helping the working class, it's a dead

letter.” Federal lawsuits demanding their rehiring remain neglected.

The moderators also asked workers if they had reached out to labor lawyer Susana Prieto and her new union SNITIS.

Prieto, who collaborates with the AFL-CIO, gained recognition during the historic wave of wildcat strikes in early 2019, which involved 70,000 auto-parts and electronics workers at *maquiladoras* in Matamoros, just across the border from Brownsville, Texas. The workers rebelled against the CTM, established rank-and-file strike committees and mass assemblies to spread the strike, which led to a shortage of parts and shutdowns at US and Canadian auto plants. When Prieto arrived, she denounced workers and said they were ignorant for trying to organize without the legal sanction of the CTM. At the same time, she covered up the role of the AMLO administration, which attempted to violently crush the strike. Because of this, Prieto was given widespread media coverage as she worked to shore up the authority of the *charros* unions and end the strike.

While the companies agreed to a 20 percent wage increase and a bonus of US\$1,700, the *maquiladora* bosses, with the complicity of the unions, fired over 5,000 workers in reprisal while imposing speedups and other abuses on the remaining workers. Prieto then founded an “independent” union, SNITIS, with the support of the Electricians Union SME in an effort to preempt further rebellions against the CTM.

In accordance with AMLO’s reopening at the behest of the Trump administration and Wall Street, Prieto has helped herd workers back into the *maquiladoras*, which have become COVID-19 hotspots.

Regarding an alliance with Prieto, Cervantes at GM said, “Actually, no, our group is moving toward an independent union, we have an organizational scheme. The people in the group believe that it’s better to create an independent union instead of joining another one.”

In a worried tone, the main guest panelist Professor Enrique de la Garza Toledo, a researcher on the exporting *maquiladora* plants at the Mexican Autonomous University (UAM), rambled for twelve minutes making excuses for the AMLO administration and the unions. “It’s still to be seen, whether what is written can be fulfilled or not,” he said. “If there is no workers’ force that pressures for laws to be respected, then there is no use to have positive laws on paper,” he claimed, as if AMLO, a tool of Mexican and international capital, could be pressured to defend the interests of the working class.

After saying that the SME answers directly to AMLO, de la Garza called on workers to seek unity with this rotten organization. “Especially when one is weak, with few people, sometimes one grasps at straws due to the weakness. I think this should not lead to becoming sectarians—to say, ‘not with these people because we are already with the others.’”

The meeting ended with the reading of a statement addressed to the “Labor Ministry and Federal Government” and the announcement of support from trade unions in Germany and the United States, which have a decades-long record of betraying the interests of workers and fomenting national chauvinism, including against Mexican workers.

The road forward

The testimonies from those victimized by GM and Audi make clear that workers increasingly sense the futility of pressuring the CTM or aligning with “independent” unions and capitalist politicians beholden to the transnational corporations and financial oligarchy. These experiences, such as the firings for opposing the treachery of the unions, are shared by workers in the United States, Germany and internationally, where the AFL-CIO, IndustriALL and other union bodies act no differently than the CTM in Mexico.

The period in which the unions could still improve the wages and conditions of workers even as they upheld the capitalist system is long gone. By the 1980s and 1990s, the globalization of capitalist production profoundly transformed the character of the nationally based unions. From organizations that once pressured the employers for concessions, they became organizations that relentlessly pressured workers to accept

concessions in order to create the most profitable conditions for foreign capital in the name of defending “national industry.”

In a parallel process, all the bourgeois nationalist and social democratic parties abandoned any social reforms and imposed relentless austerity measures, while working with the unions to suppress the class struggle and secure cheap labor for the transnational corporations. From India to South Africa and all the countries of Latin America, these bourgeois national parties have become nothing more than police-state enforcers for the continued impoverishment of the masses.

In this context, every attempt to tie the working class to the fate of the “national economy” by AMLO, the pseudo-left and the trade unions is reactionary. This is the role of the SME, its New Workers’ Central (NCT) and similar outfits, who capitulate to AMLO, who in turn capitulates to Wall Street and imperialism.

What these forces fear above all is the growing influence of the WSWs and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which represent the only realistic road forward for the struggles of the working class in the era of globalization: the program of socialist internationalism. As the ICFI wrote in 1993, “The workers movement will be revived as a revolutionary, socialist and international movement, or it will not be revived at all.”

The murderous continuation of nonessential production during the pandemic, enforced by all unions and governments, poses this question with a burning urgency. Autoworkers, teachers and other workers in the United States, Europe and Australia are forming, under the guidance of the ICFI, rank-and-file safety committees to end the sacrifice of workers’ lives for the sake of profits during the pandemic.

The formation of new organizations of struggle poses the question of which class should run the factories, reorganize the world economy and control state power: the financial oligarchies—whose only policy is to amass greater wealth through mass death, dictatorship and war— or the international working class on the basis of meeting human needs.

The struggles for the reinstatement of victimized workers, higher wages, job security, the shutdown of nonessential production and a scientific response to the pandemic require above all a conscious political leadership and program based on the political independence and international unification of the working class.

This program can only be provided by a world party that is armed with a revolutionary Marxist perspective and the historic lessons of the class struggle. This party is the ICFI. We call on workers and youth to take up the fight to build sections of the ICFI in Mexico and every country.



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