Metalworkers carry out wildcat strike in Matamoros, Mexico, for higher wages

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In Matamoros, Mexico, strikes are again breaking out to demand higher wages and safe working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The work stoppages are emerging two years after the historic wave of strikes in the city, when workers organized strike committees and mass assemblies in a rebellion against the corrupt company unions.

Growing discontent among workers has prompted the so-called Independent Union for Industry and Service Workers (SNITIS), formed by labor lawyer Susana Prieto to contain opposition after the 2019 strikes, to file a formal announcement of a strike on January 25 at all *maquiladoras* in Matamoros, hoping thereby to keep the struggle under their control and settled on terms acceptable to the companies as soon as possible.

However, on Wednesday, as soon as the shift began at 7:00 a.m., about 60 metalworkers at one of the two Concurrent *maquiladora* factories in Matamoros decided to walk out in opposition to a 7 percent wage increase offer by management, demanding instead a 15 percent increase and bonus of 10,157 pesos (US$ 514).

The strikers bravely refused to work for several hours and held heated debates outside the plant with management and delegates of the STIME union, which controls the contract at the factory and belongs to the corrupt Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM).

The wildcat strike was an attempt by the workers—lacking confidence in any of the unions, "independent" or otherwise—to take the struggle against the company into their own hands.

However, the STIME representatives were able to bring the work stoppage to an end in the immediate term, agreeing to a 10 percent increase and the 10,157 pesos bonus behind closed doors with management. At about 10:00 a.m., the union delegates announced their deal and ordered workers to end the strike. A striker explained in a live feed that the delegates opposed demanding 15 percent "because we earn more than the minimum wage, and well everyone walked back inside."

Concurrent Manufacturing is owned by the Texas-based multinational Cypress Industries, which produces circuit boards, wires, sheet metal and other metallic equipment. It employs about 300 workers in the Matamoros plants. The city sits just across the border from Brownsville, Texas.

The demands of 15 percent and 10,000 pesos, which workers have labeled the "15/10 movement," correspond to a clause included in a large share of the contracts in the city stipulating that any increase in the minimum wage needs to be matched for all salaries on top of the payment of a bonus consisting of the daily minimum wage increase (28 pesos for the border region) multiplied by 365 days.

The clause is widely seen as a conquest by workers in the city, initially won during historic militant strikes during the 1980s and partially applied to the more than 70,000 strikers in 2019.

On December 1, the administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) announced a nationwide minimum wage hike of 15 percent to 213 daily pesos (US$ 10.80) in the northern border region, where the cost of living is higher, and 141 pesos (US$ 7.14) in the rest of the country.

Not only are these still the lowest minimum wages in the hemisphere; they are also barely higher than the cost of the basic basket of goods for one individual, let alone for a family. The International Labor Organization wrote in a 2020-2021 report that real wages in Mexico fell 1.5 percent in 2019 and remain below the pre-2008 crisis level.

These abysmal conditions reveal the complete

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inadequacy of AMLO's increase of the minimum wage 100 percent across the northern border in 2019, which he attempted to use as a cover for the creation of the world's largest free trade zone—a 16-mile strip along the US-Mexico border in which corporations can enjoy lower tax rates than in the United States.

From January to April 2019, however, workers in Matamoros responded with wildcat strikes, which initially demanded the corresponding 100 percent wage increase and a bonus of 32,000 pesos, as well as a return to the 40-hour work week and the removal of the CTM unions. In appeals through the *World Socialist Web Site* and during a mass march to the border, workers called on American workers to join them in a struggle against the transnational corporations.

Prieto and her partners in the "independent" trade unions, however, intervened to keep the strikes chained to the union bureaucracy and channel all appeals behind the AMLO administration. Eventually, they were able to shut down the strike after companies agreed to a 20 percent wage increase and the 32,000 pesos.

This intervention by the "independent" unions, which worked to sideline the genuinely independent initiative of workers and their efforts to expand their struggle internationally, allowed the corporations and the CTM unions to fire more than 5,000 militant workers in mass reprisals.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, countless workers have been infected and died in outbreaks that the corporations, trade unions and government authorities have sought to cover up across Mexico. On Wednesday, the country reported its highest daily toll of 1,584 deaths, while the new and more transmissible strain first found in England has been detected in the state of Tamaulipas, where Matamoros is located.

Despite this dire situation, AMLO is adamant in his commitment to keep the factories open, declaring Wednesday that he shares the approach to the "pandemic and economic reactivation" of the incoming Joseph Biden White House, which is essentially no different to that under Donald Trump, namely, keeping workplaces open to ensure the flow of profits, regardless of the deaths which result.

While AMLO ordered a brief and limited shutdown of the maquiladoras in April that the corporations largely ignored, workers in Matamoros, Ciudad Juárez, Reynosa and other industrial cities on the border carried out a wave of wildcat strikes to shut down production, following similar actions by autoworkers in Europe, Canada and the United States.

Since the reopening in May, lawyer Susana Prieto has led the efforts to compel workers to obey AMLO's homicidal decrees, while refusing to call for any struggle against the thousands of layoffs carried out as reprisals for the April 2020 strikes.

By simply dismissing workers' demands to shut down nonessential activities and provide full compensation for lost wages, Prieto and similar forces in and around the unions have demonstrated that they are not "independent" or "democratic" at all, but simply tools of the capitalists like the CTM.

While North American workers have faced hundreds of thousands of deaths, mass layoffs, and attacks against their wages and benefits, US billionaires saw their total wealth increase by more than $1 trillion in the first nine months of 2020. Within Mexico, the billionaires Germán Larrea and Alberto Bailleres—with whom AMLO has a "good relationship"—saw their net worth increase 65 percent and 56 percent respectively in 2020.

The strikes this month in Matamoros are part of a growing resurgence of the class struggle, including a strike by Hunts Point warehouse workers in New York, the mass protests in Tunisia and the caravan of thousands of Honduran refugees and migrant workers.

The wildcat strike at the Concurrent factory highlights the urgent need for workers to form rank-and-file committees opposed to the trade unions in order to expand their struggle across Mexico and internationally against the profit system and the endless concentration of wealth at the expense of workers' lives and livelihoods.

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