

Maquiladora worker speaks out about unsafe return to school in Matamoros, Mexico

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The new school year began in Mexico on Monday with in-person classes. All 35 million students and 2 million teachers from preschool to university, along with many more parents, are again being forced into close, daily contact, which will help fuel the ongoing waves of COVID-19 that are killing thousands and disabling countless more.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, celebrated Monday as “a very important day because girls and boys are returning to the schools.” He insisted that schools are safe, even though more than half lack potable water or a regularly functioning electric system and about a fifth lack classrooms where students can socially distance.

After refusing for two years to provide funds to compensate parents for staying at home and for the materials and internet needed for quality remote learning, he said “It’s not by force; it’s not mandatory. It’s necessary, just; it’s the mothers, the fathers, the young who must take the decision.”

The media and the education trade unions, which were at the forefront of the return to school campaign, also cheerfully celebrated the day. For working class parents, however, the reality could not be more different.

A worker producing electrical equipment for cars at the Schumex Schumacher maquiladora plant in the city of Matamoros and mother of three students described to the *World Socialist Web Site* the repeated COVID-19 outbreaks in schools and factories and a devastating increase in the prices of school materials and other basic needs.

She began: “This school year, I have two sons in junior high school and the oldest in high school, but the rules changed. Last year, they would go out in groups to avoid crowds during breaks and the start and the end

of classes, but this year all groups have the same times.”

At schools or factories, masks are still mandatory indoors, but workers must pay for these, she said, “and there are still infections.”

“At the junior high school where my children go,” she explained, “there is a mini-split AC in each classroom for the heat, but the maintenance and all expenses were covered by parents.”

Last year, her whole family caught COVID-19, and she was gravely ill and needed oxygen for two weeks. “Last week, I was reinfected. It could have been at my job or at the house of a relative. There are still people who get sick and don’t report it or get tested for COVID. I fared better this time because I had three Pfizer shots. I just had temperature, body aches, coughing, phlegm, and a bit of tachycardia [fast heart rate] at the beginning.” Fortunately, her sons and husband did not get sick this time.

She continues to be worried: “I’ve heard of people who contracted COVID, and their lungs stopped functioning properly or suffered after-effects like hair loss. What I have experienced is a lot of anxiety.”

“At Schumex here in Matamoros, there are many injustices happening; they treat us like anything but humans,” she stated. “The plant is an enclosed space with AC, and there are no open-air spaces. We’ll get reported if we are seen outside of the door. There is only the cafeteria for 500 workers. And I work 9.5 hours each day.”

Workers who develop symptoms can still get free COVID-19 tests with their health insurance and must isolate for a week when they test positive. However, she adds, “Even today, they will not hire vulnerable people. People like us are effectively banned from working for having a chronic illness, and no one does

anything to sanction these companies for discrimination.

“The companies will not accept any losses, and the government is complicit. During the first days of the pandemic, there was a lockdown and orders to send all vulnerable employees home, but the companies simply ignored it.”

As in many plants across North America and Europe, workers at Schumex carried out a wildcat strike on April 4, but management and the union conspired to reopen production almost immediately by offering a bonus and forced all workers to return within a month.

One of the gravest issues in the return to school has been the rampant inflation. “Prices are through the roof,” she said, “don’t even get me started about the school materials. Only three shirts for their uniforms were 1,000 pesos [\$50]. A carton with 30 eggs costs 85 pesos [\$4.20], a kilogram of meat is over 150 pesos [\$7.50]... the basic food basket is through the roof.”

As it created a special Free Zone for corporations along the US-Mexico border to cut corporate taxes below Trump’s corporate tax cuts, the AMLO administration raised the daily minimum wage with great fanfare to a mere 260 pesos (\$12.90). For the Schumex worker, this was reflected in a wage increase this year from 247 to 286 daily pesos—about 30 pesos or \$1.5 per hour.

Inflation has “swallowed up” the wage increase, she stressed. “I think workers everywhere are facing the same situation.”

In these conditions, she added, “Vacations and leaves are conditioned according to the needs of the company, not ours. The yearly bonus is paid incomplete. They took away a lot of our money supposedly for taxes. But I verified with an accountant, and it turns out that what they deducted is not reflected in the Tax Revenue Service. On top of this, our benefits are ridiculous.”

These conditions are being imposed by the corrupt trade unions or charros, despite AMLO’s labor reform, which promises to enforce “democratic” elections to ratify contracts. “The charros here are in charge of buying the votes in the elections to legitimize their contracts and put pressure on us to yield,” explains the worker.

In this context, she expressed her support for the campaign for UAW president in the United States being waged by Will Lehman, who is running to

abolish the union bureaucracy and establish an international network of rank-and-file committees for workers to fight for their independent interests, including ending the pandemic.

She said: “Let’s hope that he wins because the mafia of the unions is hard to beat. Ending the pandemic is almost impossible, but if these people leading the movement are strong and influential among the masses, it would be a great accomplishment for workers. For the government, the pandemic is a good deal. We have been waiting for two years for it to be over.”

A study published in the *Lancet* found that, during the first two years of the pandemic, Mexico had 798,000 excess deaths above the trend in recent years—the fourth highest in the world after India, the US and Russia. This included the deaths of several thousand teachers and over 1,000 children, without counting the surges this year.

The enormous wealth produced by workers, which could be used to finance the ending of the pandemic and poverty and confront all major social issues, continued to be funneled to Wall Street and the richest few. Billionaires got richer, and poverty increased.

Even as it rushed to reopen schools this year, the AMLO administration dedicated the lowest budget for education as a percentage of GDP since 2010 and is using more money to pay the public debt to banks than for health care.

AMLO, like the rest of the Mexican ruling class, does not care about the health and education of workers and their families and is only concerned about maintaining Mexico as a source of cheap labor and opening schools as day care for parents to be able to go generate profits for the rich.



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