

Workers at GM plant in Silao, Mexico: US-sponsored union “destroyed our independence”

Andrea Lobo

15 September 2022

The so-called Solidarity Center, an AFL-CIO body almost entirely financed by the US government, used cash payments to destroy a rank-and-file group at the General Motors factory in Silao, Mexico, and impose a supposedly independent union that has acted no differently from the corrupt *charro* unions, according to six former members of the group interviewed separately by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The election of the new Independent Union of Auto Industry Workers (SINTTIA) at the top automaker in Mexico was hailed by the governments, trade unions and the corporate press in Mexico, the United States, Canada and across the Americas and Europe as proof that workplace democracy is being restored in Mexico.

It “was seen as an important test case for whether new North American trade rules can improve working conditions and stamp out corruption,” as the *New York Times* wrote. The US Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, who is now working to stop a strike of rail workers, said, “This historic election shows us that we can make progress toward the right of all workers to associate freely when we work together.”

The ruling class indeed conspired together, but for exactly the opposite goal. The new union and its Casa Obrera confederation structure created to form similar unions in the region are mere “puppets” who “broke us apart as an independent group,” according to one of the group’s former leaders.

Within the plant, “workers even want to return to the CTM,” as indicated by two interviewees, referring to the gangster-ridden Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) that imposed employer-dictated contracts since the plant opened in 1995. This is the most condemning evidence possible of the anti-democratic character of SINTTIA.

Workers overwhelmingly ratified a sellout contract with SINTTIA in late May that included an 8.5 percent wage increase and 2.5 percent increase in benefits—well below the 14.6 percent yearly increase in the cost of basic living expenses. Clearly, workers hoped that, unlike the CTM, the new union would offer a democratic space to work toward improvements.

However, a year has passed since SINTTIA was founded, and it has not celebrated a single mass assembly. Repeated assemblies to elect a leadership, develop demands and a plan to fight for them, including immediate recall, are basic democratic fundamentals for any working class organization.

Wages remain at near-poverty levels, grievances at the plant are still ignored by the union and the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage through the plant.

One only needs to read the comments on the SINTTIA’s social media pages to confirm this. “We trusted you and we are NOT seeing an improvement,” “We achieved a change but things remain the same,” “We

heard more of you during the campaign, but you have totally gone missing” are some of the comments. Such comments are no different from those made about the CTM’s infamous “phantom unions.”

An active worker, Eduardo, responded to the new contract on Facebook: “Which raise? Oh, I believe I got an increase of 100 pesos a week and the union takes away 60 weekly pesos, so the raise is 40 pesos. Yes, I think I got the raise of 40 weekly pesos, but with inflation, this raise gets used up to buy two kilos of tortillas.”

Recently, workers have not even been getting their full salary due to technical work stoppages. One interviewee said that workers are particularly upset that while SINTTIA “promised to pay technical stoppages at 75 percent, they are still getting 55 percent.”

After meeting with the US ambassador Ken Salazar to get his approval for the deal, SINTTIA declared that the contract was a “historic triumph” which “favors both parts.” Like with the CTM, this could only mean the bureaucracy and the company.

A few weeks after the ratification of this deal, GM renewed its quarterly dividend and share buybacks for the first time since the pandemic began. Just this first buyback of \$5 billion as a “reward” to investors amounts to almost 16 million pesos (\$790,000) for each GM Silao worker, who currently make on average 70,188 pesos or \$3,490 a year.

From Generating Movement to SINTTIA

Generating Movement was formed in early 2019 through regular meetings where active workers discussed how to expel the CTM union from the Silao plant.

The group’s brave organizing efforts came to a head in the runup to the expiration of the contract of American workers at GM on September 15, which marked the beginning of a 40-day national strike. After holding frequent online calls organized by the WSWs with US autoworkers, Generating Movement democratically met in an assembly and voted to oppose forced overtime and speedups in support of the US strike, according to the reports given by the group members to the WSWs at the time.

During these weeks and months “about twenty workers were fired little by little when it became known that they were cooperating with the movement,” said one of the leading members, who was not fired but was forced to flee the country with her family due to violent threats.

The workers, who were going months without an income, notified the WSWs in the period surrounding the US strike that the chief of the Solidarity Center in Mexico, Gladys Cisneros, and her predecessor

Benjamin Davis, along with their Mexican partners, were offering economic and legal aid.

Eventually, the lawyer Héctor de la Cueva, general coordinator of the Labor Investigation and Union Advisory Center (CILAS) and founding member of the New Workers Central, which is controlled by the Electrician's Union (SME) and a close partner of the AFL-CIO, established contact with the workers.

One explained: "CILAS was linked to the Solidarity Center, which in turn belongs to the AFL-CIO. They are the ones who lead these movements, and the Solidarity Center oversees distributing the cash." CILAS also has ties to the IndustriAll union backed by the German government, and to the Canadian Unifor union. It ties the union bureaucracies and governments of the most powerful imperialist countries with their counterparts in Mexico.

According to a leading member of Generating Movement at the time, on October 10, 2019, Héctor de la Cueva held his first meeting with the Silao group at the house of a worker. This was only a week after GM was compelled to shut down its Silao factory entirely given Generating Movement's efforts to mobilize support for the ongoing strike in the United States.

Then, money started flowing from the Solidarity Center to corrupt the organization and undermine its internal democracy. One worker explained that their co-worker Israel Cervantes, who was the first one fired by GM, "was in charge of receiving the cash and distributing it to us. He gave us 6,000 weekly pesos (\$300) while my daily pay at GM was 350 daily pesos. He made us sign a document from the Solidarity Center so that he could show them. This continued until the labor contract [with the CTM] was defeated."

Gradually a "certain hierarchy" was formed whereby CILAS would hand down the orders, the interview explained. "There was no democracy. Israel would always say, 'Wait for whatever Héctor says.'" Workers indicate that CILAS promised them "jobs as advisors" in the union and one was offered a whole union for himself in case this one failed.

As summarized by another worker: "I was one of the initiators of Generating Movement, and we were a special group and were truly looking for a genuine change, but CILAS undertook disappearing Generating Movement."

CILAS handled the entire process of "hand-picking" active workers as staff to register the new union legally, selecting "those seen as the most easily manipulated," according to one leading member of the group at the time. "They were not democratically elected," stressed another.

The registration process facilitated dividing the group between those already fired and the active ones being incorporated into the new union. One worker explained: "Our bond and independence were destroyed in that moment because things were being done under the orders of outsiders... It became clear that we were only puppets or the cover of a struggle that, frankly, we had undertaken. Heads rolled, and they only used them as a trampoline to take power."

Immediately after the No vote against the CTM won, the CILAS informed them that their group Generating Movement "was over" and that SINTTIA would not require their services any longer. "That day, they kicked us in the pants," one expressed. "They threw us into the trash," another said.

Several of these workers have still not received any severance pay and remain blacklisted by companies across the region. One explained: "I'm still unemployed and blacklisted today. I can't get a new job because I get stuck in the last filter when I apply. The fired workers still meet sometimes, and they are also still unemployed." Several said that the new union "used us" and "forgot about us."

The Solidarity Center also sponsored the creation of a Casa Obrera led by CILAS and Cervantes "as a hook to orchestrate the same that they achieved at GM" at other plants across the region, as explained by one

interviewee.

Indeed, this operation is being hailed as a model ahead of the May 1, 2023, deadline for the renewal of all 500,000 contracts in Mexico under the new labor reform, which was dictated under the new North American trade agreement.

Moreover, SINTTIA illustrates the class dynamics behind the waving of a fist full of cash by US Vice President Kamala Harris during her visit to Mexico last year. She promised \$130 million to support the formation of so-called "democratic unions"—a major increase from the \$858,000 disbursed by the National Endowment for Democracy to the Solidarity Center in 2020 for the same purpose.

The AFL-CIO in Mexico

The US-sponsored unions like SINTTIA are being called upon by US imperialism to suppress the class struggle under a far more advanced stage of the crisis of capitalism than that ever faced by the CTM, which will inevitably involve an even greater and more violent cooperation between the unions and the repressive state apparatus.

To claim that such unions are democratic, independent or even workers' organizations is to blind the working class to the reality it confronts. Workers must be able to distinguish between their basic interests and those of its deadliest enemies, and it does not get any deadlier than US imperialism.

Historically and today, the role of the American union bureaucracy in Mexico has been to help crush every major effort of workers to form independent organizations by sponsoring nationalist leaderships that became fully integrated into the Mexican capitalist state and subordinated to US imperialism.

From the super-profits its monopolies have pocketed from exploiting workers all over the world, imperialist powers have used the crumbs to "economically bribe the upper strata of 'its' workers," as Vladimir Lenin wrote in 1916 describing the creation of a "labor aristocracy." He added: "How this little sop is divided among labor ministers ... labor officials, workers belonging to the narrow craft unions, office employees, etc., etc., is a secondary question."

As soon as the first craft unions were formed in Mexico under the heat of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917), the top "labor aristocrat" in the US and leader of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Samuel Gompers, intervened and used some of that American "sop" to gain control of the Mexican unions. The AFL established close ties and provided training to Luis Morones, a leader of the Casa del Obrero Mundial (COM), which was the hotbed for the emerging Mexican unions.

The COM and Morones were instrumental in channeling thousands of workers into the bourgeois Constitutionalist army to help crush the radical peasant armies of Zapata and Villa in 1915 and then to subordinate a massive wave of strikes in 1916–17 behind one or another faction of the liberal bourgeoisie or into apolitical passivity.

Morones founded the first national labor confederation CROM in 1918 under the auspices of the government of Venustiano Carranza. A year later, Morones founded the Mexican Labor Party, which provided a ruling vehicle for the succeeding bourgeois administrations of Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, and became Labor Secretary in 1922.

A second turning point took place when hundreds of strikes broke out in 1934–36 amid the Great Depression. The unions led by CROM dissident Vicente Lombardo Toledano formed the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) to channel the upheaval behind President Lázaro Cárdenas, who was compelled to carry out major nationalizations. In 1938, the CTM formally joined the ruling party of Cárdenas, the

predecessor of Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI).

Not surprisingly, Lombardo Toledano, Morones and the AFL's William Green were all vicious opponents of Leon Trotsky, who was exiled in Mexico and founded the only organization which fought for the genuine independent political mobilization of the working class for world socialist revolution, the Fourth International.

Given Lombardo Toledano's ties to Moscow and the Stalinist Communist Party, which had a key role in subordinating workers to Cárdenas, the AFL continued to back Morones and his CROM. However, since the CTM had eclipsed the CROM in size and power, the AFL worked behind the scenes to back the faction of the CTM led by Fidel Velázquez, who succeeded in displacing Lombardo Toledano in 1941 and led the organization until his death in 1997.

A 1998 study by Ralph Armbruster from the University of California, Riverside indicates that during the 1940s and 1950s, "The PRI and the CTM also purged leftists and communist labor leaders and installed new pro-government labor leaders, or *charros*, in these unions. The AFL, the CIO, and AIFLD'S predecessor, the Inter-American Federation of Labor (ORIT), supported these policies and worked closely with the CTM during this period."

The CTM proudly hosted in Mexico City the founding ceremonies of both the ORIT in 1951 and the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) in 1962, both of which worked as fronts for CIA operations across Latin America. The ORIT also maintained its headquarters in the CTM building until 1989.

Philip Agee, a former CIA agent who worked closely across Latin America with the AFL-CIO, described the latter's goal "to train cadres to organize trade unions or to take over existing ones, in such a way that the unions would be controlled ... by the CIA." These unions actively supported US-orchestrated coups such as in Chile in 1973 and handed hit lists of militant workers and peasants to the fascist military dictatorship in El Salvador, among numerous other crimes against workers.

The early purge of left-wing elements from the CTM meant that the AFL-CIO intervened less heavily in the CTM than other unions in the region, however, it maintained a significant level of control, like dictating appointments of the CTM to international bodies and training Mexican unionists in Washington and at a training facility in Cuernavaca.

During the subsequent decades, as new technologies allowed capital to globalize and find cheaper labor sources, the industrial labor force in Mexico grew from 2.2 to almost 8.7 million workers from 1960 to 1995, and to 9.3 million today—with nearly 1 million in the auto sector. This brought an enormous amount of business to the CTM, which got a cut from imposing pro-corporate contracts behind the backs of workers.

"Attracting investors means controlling worker activism, and the most direct way the CTM and other official unions can do that is to organize workers under their own banners", write researchers Harry Browne and Beth Simms.

Meanwhile, real wages in Mexico fell dramatically. Today, the real minimum wage is less than half what it was in 1970, despite recent increases. In 1979, a Mexican auto worker earned \$3.90 per hour, compared to just over \$2 today. The role of the unions as enforcers of capitalist contracts have meant that their material interests are diametrically opposed to those of the workers.

Similarly, workers in the United States have also seen a fall in real wages along with the destruction of hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs. But, as they lost hundreds of thousands of members, the American unions and their executives became richer through investments in the stock market, administrating corporate training centers, pension funds and outright corruption schemes.

Precisely when its integration into the state and corporate management reached new heights, the AFL-CIO dissolved the AIFLD and founded the Solidarity Center in 1997, claiming that it was "breaking from Cold War

policies" and promoting "independent labor movements" that "challenge corporatism."

At the time, the AFL-CIO responded to the growing rebellion against the CTM by shifting its support to so-called "independent" unions that had broken with the CTM. "The AFL-CIO would later realize that it needed allies more representative of Mexican labor," as an official of one of these unions told researcher Thomas Collombat.

The claim that the Solidarity Center opposes "corporatism"—the alliance of the trade unions, the corporations and the state—is entirely belied by the fact that its "independent" partners in Mexico have fully integrated themselves into the new ruling party Morena of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The CILAS lawyer who was in charge of registering the new union at Silao, Claudia Patricia Juan Pineda, is listed as an adviser of the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT) which was the first "independent" trade union organization to establish ties to the AFL-CIO in the 1990s.

The FAT was founded by Arturo Alcalde Justiniani and formerly led by Bertha Luján Uranga, who is the national president of Morena. Alcalde and Luján are among the closest allies of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and they are the parents of the labor secretary, Luisa María Alcalde Luján.

As demonstrated by the experience in Silao, the Solidarity Center seeks to repeat what its predecessors accomplished through Morones and the CTM. Facing a new wave of the class struggle fed by the ongoing pandemic, the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and rampant inflation, US imperialism is increasing its funding to make sure that the rebellion against the *charros* does not disrupt production in Mexico, which houses nodal points in the supply chains of almost every major US industry, including the American war machine.

Workers must conclude from this history that true independence means the political and physical independence from every agency of US imperialism, including the CTM, the new unions trained and funded by the Solidarity Center, their pseudo-left apologists, the Mexican state and every pro-capitalist political party. All these forces and anyone seeking to subordinate workers to them must be purged from the emerging political movement of the working class in Mexico and internationally.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact