

“With 568 pesos you don’t eat three meals a day”

General Motors worker in Mexico speaks out in support of US-Canada auto strike

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On the eve of a strike deadline at auto plants across the US and Canada, the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter spoke to Luis, a General Motors assembly worker at the Silao Complex in central Mexico.

He described his living conditions and several cases of corporate abuse overseen by the “independent” union installed last year at the plant with the support of both the governments and union bureaucracies in the US, Canada and Mexico.

Q. AMLO (Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador) said at the recent event that the auto industry “treats its workers well, paying them the fair wages and benefits” they “deserve.” How would you respond to him?

A. For him earning little is a fair wage. For me it is not a fair wage. We don’t make enough.

My salary is 568 pesos [\$33] a day. With 568 pesos you don’t eat three meals a day as you should. For the house, I have a loan with Infonavit and they take 785 pesos a week from me. I have spoken to other coworkers, who pay 1,150 pesos a week. Most of the people I have talked to have other jobs. In my case, I do carpentry work in my free time. When I get a job, I do it. Other colleagues are mechanics, bricklayers, etc. I have asked others, “Is what you earn here enough for you?” And they answer, “No. My wife works. I work in my spare time. And now that there are so many stoppages, well, even less.”

I recently bought a car, a Matiz Pontiac, and sometimes it breaks down and we can’t even afford to repair it. Sometimes I have to try to fix it myself. What I tell my colleagues: what ironies of life! We assemble very expensive vehicles that we cannot afford. We workers make the company run.

There is a Mexican movie called *Los albañiles* [1976], very beautiful, and a bricklayer tells this very truth on May 3, the Day of the Holy Cross of the bricklayers. He is drinking and shouts, “I build houses and they are not mine!” And the same goes for us. These are the ironies of life. Emiliano Zapata [figure of the Mexican Revolution] said it here in Mexico, “The land belongs to those who work it.” It is something similar; unfortunately things are not like that, neither here in Mexico nor in the rest of the world.

Q. US autoworkers said at a meeting Sunday that “they

get worked to death” due to long hours and unsafe conditions. Does this resonate with you?

A. We work 12 hours a day for four days, which adds up to 48 hours. In other words, we work the “normal” hours according to the law. But, yes, as they say, the work is very demanding.

I work where we start to assemble the unit, we put on the exhaust, the disks where the tire goes, the gas tank, the tires, the front axle, the canister and several other things.

It is 12 hours of standing upright; we practically don't sit down. I'm already getting varicose veins in my feet from standing all day. When I get home, my feet hurt a lot. I get off the bus, and my feet practically don't want to respond. Besides, you get sick in this kind of work. Over 12 hours, they don't want to allow us to go to the bathroom.

A co-worker was sent from the upholstery area because he got on bad terms with the supervisor, who told him, “Help me out and don’t go to the bathroom.” Oh boy, tell him not to go to the bathroom all the time he is here! They should be a little ethical, a little humane. They are workers but because they are behind a computer, they want to have authority over you and that is not right. We all have the need to go to the bathroom and, after long working days, this is going to affect us in the future.

It will be a year since the earthquake in Mexico [a 7.7 magnitude quake on September 19, 2022], which was felt here in Guanajuato. They did not follow the protocol of taking people out, but they did take out the office workers and those of the SINTTIA union. The alarm sounded for them, but not for the workers. It began to shake and, as they were moving, some of them could feel it but most of them could not. They realized through social media that there was an earthquake. It was wrong not to get the workers out. Thank God nothing major happened. But why do drills, if when the time comes for the real thing, the company doesn’t care about the workers?

In the pandemic, my wife was also working there at General Motors. She happened to get [COVID-19] in September 2020. When I was asked [at the entrance] if I lived with a person who had COVID, I answered yes. My wife was in bed on oxygen,

here in my house. I had the copy of the doctor's note with me because I took her to an outside doctor. I was told to go to the medical service, so I went, and they have a very bad way of treating you there. They chuckle derisively.

I told the doctor that my obligation was to tell them, according to protocol, that I am living with a person who has COVID. He threw the note back at me and said, "It is not valid because it is not from the public health system." I told him, "I am not here to ask if it is valid or not, my obligation is to tell you to see what actions are taken." He responded, "No, I can't send you to rest. Go to work." I thought he was going to tell me to go get tested to see if I have COVID or not, but he sent me to work, whether I could infect my coworkers or not. I asked him about my wife, and he told me that she had to go to the public healthcare system, otherwise she would get fired. But how was she supposed to go if she is in bed with oxygen?

Q. Has there been any change since the new "independent" union SINTTIA arrived?

A. I have not seen any change. Nor can I say that we are worse off. Many coworkers comment that we are worse off, but they are referring to the fact that they do not make as many loans and that the [previous gangster-ridden union] CTM did give us some things that SINTTIA is now starting to give out, such as backpacks with school supplies.

I see the same thing, that the union is in favor of the company, it does nothing for the worker. I disaffiliated because I have had two or three problems with management, and when I approached the union, they never took my side.

The first one was that, for the night shift, the bus usually picks me up at 4:40 p.m. but it didn't arrive until 5 p.m. We got to the plant at about 5:50 p.m. When I arrived, the supervisor stopped me on the way and asked me, "What happened, Luis?" I told her that my bus was late, and she didn't believe me, asking me what route it was and what city I was coming from. I explained. When I arrived, my team manager, who never wants to do anything, was in my place because the line was already getting started. He says to me in a rude tone, "What happened, Luis?" I told him that I had already talked it over with the group leader. "Ah, so she's going to be the one sending you to the bathroom." And he didn't let me go to the bathroom in the whole shift. I called the union. They told me very formally that they were going to talk to him. I was waiting for them to come and sanction him, but they never showed up.

Another problem was that I missed a day because of the insecurity here in the city. [There were shootings and deadly attacks on civilians, including the burning of trucks with factory workers, allegedly by drug cartels.] It got really ugly that time, and I was absent so they wanted me to sign a correction notice for an unexcused absence. I told them that I had missed work because of the insecurity, that my life and safety came first. And the union sided with the company. They made me sign the correction notice.

A colleague who came from the chassis area told me that he

had not joined the union when the change was made to SINTTIA because it does nothing for you. He told me, "In the team where I was in chassis, the team leader hit a worker and the union guys noticed and didn't do anything. He hit him and, in fact, the guy didn't even put his hands up in defense for fear of losing his job. And the manager is there as if nothing had happened."

Besides, the SINTTIA union is composed of cronies. In the case of [general secretary] Alejandra Morales, she has her boyfriend as her right-hand man, at level 5 pay. If we earn 568 pesos at the top, they make about 700 pesos and don't do anything for anyone. They use the dues to pay for the gas in their cars. That union is a disaster.

They have an office that used to belong to the CTM. They just go there and never show up at the shop floor. They receive paperwork for loans and scholarships for children who are studying. Just office paperwork. They are not on the production lines, and I believe they should also be on the line.

Q. Analysts in Mexico say that if there is a US auto strike, in a matter of four weeks auto parts plants in Coahuila, Guanajuato and across Mexico would shut down. In 2019, the Silao complex stopped just 16 days after the start of the GM strike in the US. The auto industry is firmly linked, and when there is a fight in one country it is immediately an international struggle. But for a long time, the American trade union apparatus and the companies have presented you as enemies, that if workers ask for higher wages the companies will go to other countries like Mexico. What do you think?

A. They say the same thing to us in Mexico, that if we want a raise, companies will go to Central American countries, where labor is still much cheaper than here. But in reality, we are not what they say. We are not the enemy.

A strike would affect us, but it would be for something positive for all of us—here in Mexico. Let it be at the international level. At the end of the day, we workers are the ones who move the whole country and the world because we all work in symbiosis. This world is in symbiosis. We need them, and they need us. And if we don't put a stop to so many injustices and low wages, the companies will maintain all these problems.

There has to be this [struggle] to improve workers' economic conditions and interests. It is good that we unite because, seeing that the union does nothing, we as workers must organize ourselves and raise our voices to fix this situation.



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