

Mass auto parts layoffs expose UAW's fake "solidarity" with US-sponsored unions in Mexico

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VU Manufacturing, a supplier of car upholstery to GM, Stellantis, Tesla, and Toyota, laid off all 400 workers at its plant in Piedras Negras, Mexico, earlier this year after refusing to negotiate a contract with a new trade union called *La Liga* or "The League." Workers now report being blacklisted by employers across Piedras Negras, on the border with Texas.

In August 2022, workers had voted to install *La Liga* to replace the local gangsters of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), which has historically received dues and kickbacks from companies in exchange for enforcing conditions dictated by management. At VU, the CTM had never even requested a formal contract.

The ruthless destruction of the livelihoods of 400 families explodes the narrative of a dawn of "democratic and independent unions" in Mexico under the watchful eye and sponsorship of the US and Canadian governments, working in tandem with their respective union bureaucracies.

The Biden administration filed two complaints against VU under the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement's Rapid Response Labor Mechanism, which has chiefly been used to promote new unions supported by the US and Canadian governments.

In March, after a local court banned a strike authorization at the plant, *La Liga* again turned to appeals to the US and Mexican governments. Later that month, the US Department of Labor claimed it had reached an agreement that "reflects a strong commitment from the company and the government of Mexico that the denial of freedom of association and collective bargaining rights will be properly remedied."

During the following months, however, VU gradually slowed down and laid off its entire workforce, as automakers comfortably looked for other suppliers. It shut down the plant in July.

The government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), who has been heavily promoted as "pro-worker" by the pseudo-left internationally, sat on its hands as it remarked that VU was violating the law. The government has since requisitioned the leftover machinery, claiming it will be used to pay the severance pay illegally denied to the last 71 workers laid off. The fired "worker activists" of *La Liga* have acknowledged that it will likely not be enough money.

The response by the United Auto Workers, which belongs to the AFL-CIO, was entirely opportunistic. On September 26, a handful of UAW bureaucrats drove 20 miles from their Detroit offices for a publicity stunt at the VU headquarters in Troy, Michigan, where they proclaimed their "international worker solidarity."

The UAW apparatus exploited the plight of the Mexican workers to give itself an "internationalist" and "militant" facelift amid growing opposition to its bankrupt "stand-up strike" at the Big Three.

Amid this supposedly "historic" contract battle with the three main auto companies in the United States, the UAW is not demanding that the automakers re-open the supplier plant and hire all VU workers with backpay. This would undoubtedly have a massive support among the rank-and-file.

Moreover, according to *Labor Notes*, some products from Piedras Negras are being assigned to UAW auto parts plants at Adient, Magna and Yanfeng.

Instead of acting to directly oppose this, the UAW bureaucrats, accompanied by their pseudo left backers of the Democratic Socialists of America and *Labor Notes*, briefly occupied the lobby of the VU offices. To attest to their sincerity, these forces brought with them Israel Cervantes, a former autoworker in Mexico and now an "independent" union organizer sponsored by the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center.

Cervantes, who is also being paraded at picket lines by the UAW, belonged to a group of rank-and-file workers at the General Motors plant in Silao opposed to the CTM union. Through the *World Socialist Web Site*, they came into contact with autoworkers in the United States and opposed overtime to support the 2019 US national strike at GM. As a result of these *real* actions of solidarity and their organizing, more than a dozen group members at Silao were fired.

The Solidarity Center intervened with money and a group of lawyers to sideline the most militant workers who had been fired from the auto industry. These US-sponsored lawyers, Cervantes and also the Canadian union Unifor worked to impose a new "independent" union called SINTTIA, which was voted in last year, but is already facing a backlash from many workers who have told the WSWs that it's as devoted to the corporation as the CTM. Significantly, SINTTIA has refused to fight for the rehiring of the workers that began the rebellion at GM Silao, who remain blacklisted across the auto industry.

Both, SINTTIA and *La Liga* are expanding to other workplaces with the support of "activists" from the Solidarity Center, including through a recently established Labor Center in Querétaro in partnership with UCLA and the mining union *Los Mineros*, led by Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, a Senator of the ruling party Morena and a longtime partner of the United Steelworkers and AFL-CIO. *Los Mineros* and Gómez Urrutia gained notoriety in 2006, when a methane explosion killed 65 workers at a mine only about 80 miles south of Piedras Negras, Coahuila, only two weeks after the union had

approved a report deeming the mine safe.

La Liga was formed by the *Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s* (CFO, Workers' Border Committee), which helped pioneer the *modus operandi* used by the Solidarity Center in Mexico and other countries.

In a series of videos published in 2008, a group of former CFO organizers described how a layer of workers that encountered the organization became trained as union organizers with money coming from the US union apparatus.

One of them, Margarita Ramírez Parada, left the CFO after an incident similar to the VU layoffs. In 2005, the CFO had formed an independent union committee against the CTM leadership at the auto-parts plant Macoelmex in Piedras Negras. The owners, multinational Alcoa, responded through mass layoffs (cutting the workforce from 4,500 to 1,200), temp contracts, wage and benefit cuts and other attacks. Ramírez explains: "I organized more than 1,500 workers, about 200 of whom were fired."

Julia Quiñones, the longtime leader of the CFO, had promised to support those fired, Ramírez explains, "because there was a special organization that was supporting the movement—some American unions" that donated "more than \$10,000 as a first assistance package, and workers got no support. All those fired went to the office and she would refuse to see them, hide, and told me to hide as well... I realized that those were not the principles the organization claimed to uphold." Ramírez reports that she witnessed other companies carry out mass layoffs in response to CFO organizing.

As described by researchers Edmé Domínguez Reyez and Cirila Quintero Ramírez in a 2018 publication, the CFO was founded in 1978 in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, as an activist initiative of the American Friend Service Committee, a Quaker religious organization, to expose company misconduct. Initially, "trade unionism was not particularly encouraged as CFO distrusted corporate unions," but "This attitude gradually changed, especially after the financial support by AFSC ended in 2010 and they became closer to the Solidarity Centre of the AFL-CIO." They then turned more fully to training trade unionists in partnership with the National Union of Workers (UNT) in Mexico, they report.

The UNT, itself a split of the union bureaucracy from the CTM, were the first and the closest partners of the AFL-CIO since US imperialism switched its strategy in Mexico in 1997 from backing the increasingly discredited CTM to establishing a new bureaucracy more closely controlled by the US. In the words of the *New York Times* at the time, the AFL-CIO chief John Sweeney and the Clinton administration hoped to change the "fossilized labor system" south of the border.

These efforts coincided with the need to suppress the class struggle and wages during the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which further integrated Mexican cheap labor and natural resources into a North American economic bloc to compete with the rivals of US and Canadian imperialism. Today, with the new USMCA aimed particularly against China, the effort to establish new US and Canadian-sponsored unions is being intensified, with US Vice President Kamala Harris announcing in 2021 a fund of \$130 million to support "democratic unions" in Mexico.

In 2019, when tens of thousands of workers carried out wildcat strikes against the CTM and transnational corporations in Matamoros and marched to the border to call on US workers to join them in struggle, all the AFL-CIO partners like the CFO, UNT, *Mineros*, the Electrician's Union (SME) and others parachuted in to channel the rebellion back behind the CTM and then the formation of another US-

backed "independent" union SNITIS. The initial demand of a 100 percent raise was dropped and changed to a 20 percent raise and a bonus.

Companies took advantage of this suppression and took massive reprisals, including the firing of over 6,500 workers, including those that showed the most militancy. The AFL-CIO and its "independent" partners in Mexico maintained an entirely nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective and opposed any joint struggle against these reprisals. Now, Matamoros workers at the plants with SNITIS tell the *World Socialist Web Site* that conditions have not changed.

Last December, Lorenzo Rodríguez Jiménez, himself trained in a UNT program sponsored by the German government-funded Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation (FES), announced he was leaving the "independent" union of agricultural laborers SINDJA in Baja California, after being voted out of the leadership. He said in the video that SINDJA had come entirely under control of the US government: "The NED [National Endowment for Democracy] hands economic resources to SINDJA of unknown quantity since the [union's new] indigenous Zapoteca leader [Abelina Ramírez] and her advisers of the AFL-CIO refuse to be transparent about that information... The problem is that the US government is financing the union and ordering it to 'hire this lawyer.' And that becomes a new corrupt lawyer kidnapping the union."

The National Endowment for Democracy, which provides virtually all funds for the Solidarity Center, was formed by Washington to carry out operations previously organized by the CIA. The CIA has a long record of working with the AFL-CIO globally to fund trade unions that have supported numerous US-backed coups and military dictatorships across Latin America, resulting in the imprisonment, torture and death of tens of thousands of workers.

Washington is determined to closely integrate Mexico and much of Latin America to its plans to escalate economic and military conflicts with Russia and China, both nuclear-armed powers. The new trade union bureaucracies that US imperialism has been building for over two decades in the region are designed to play a key role in crushing any rebellion that could hamper these plans. Above all, the new apparatus is charged with keeping workers divided along national lines.

All statements and stunts of "solidarity" between bureaucracies are aimed at covering this up. The road to real international unity among workers can only be organized from the shop floor and in uncompromising opposition to all union and political organizations tied to the capitalist state and US imperialism. This is the aim of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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