

Backgrounder



BUILDING A CULTURE OF CROSS-BORDER SOLIDARITY

By David Bacon

Institute for Transnational
Social Change - UCLA

Institute for Transnational Social Change

Based at the Labor Center of the University of California in Los Angeles, the Institute for Transnational Social Changes (ITSC) is a hub for cross-border collaboration among key worker-led organizations (independent unions, worker centers, NGOs, and academics) in Mexico and the United States. We seek to address the needs of a low-wage workforce that is often hard-to-reach – migrant workers, women in the garment industry, farm workers, miners, and other workers in industries dominated by highly mobile transnational corporations. ITSC's activities aim to increase opportunities for cross-border collaboration, and to and increase access to projects and programs of organizations that conduct leadership development, health and safety trainings, and build organizational capacity.

ITSC conducts research and facilitates information exchange and cross-border alliance building to deepen and widen the reach of projects and programs among partners in the network. Facilitation includes strategizing with organizations to increase access to existing trainings, providing organizations opportunities to share best practices, and to actively learn from small and under-resourced organizations. ITSC develops avenues for information sharing in multimedia formats, and promotes cross-border dialogue. ITSC offers synthesized analysis and written updates in accessible bilingual formats.

In our long-term vision we seek to use this program as a model for activities with other regions across the globe. This method can be scaled to develop a laboratory for building international networks of workers rights organizations. We envision a network of organizations with the capacity and alliances needed to build a movement. Ultimately, we hope to shift the balance in favor of workers' organizations, increasing their leverage against exploitative and abusive practices of transnational companies.

Our partners, operating across the U.S.-Mexico border, include four different sectors: independent unions, worker centers, advocates, and academics. Among key participants that attended binational meetings in 2009 and 2010 were individuals representing organizations in each of these four sectors, at the leading edge of cross-border organizing and advocacy.

The present report is part of a series of publications sponsored by ITSC. We hope to provide in-depth analysis of key issues relevant to actors on the ground, working at the binational level, helping them to advance workers rights on both sides of the US-Mexico border. Coming topics include case studies of cross-border campaigns, and analysis of the role of Labor Arbitration Boards, Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje in mediating labor relations in Mexico. -- May 11, 2011

Contents

Introduction
The Hidden History of Mexico/U.S. Labor Solidarity
Labor Law Reform – A Key Battle for Mexican Unions Today
The Rebirth of Solidarity on the Border
Growing Ties Between Mexican and U.S. Labor
Immigration and the Culture of Solidarity
In Conclusion

Introduction

In the period since the North American Free Trade Agreement has come into effect, the economies of the United States and Mexico have become more integrated than ever. Through Plan Merida and partnerships on security, the military and the drug war, the political and economic policies pursued by the U.S. and Mexican governments are more coordinated than they've ever been.

Working people on both sides of the border are not only affected by this integration. Workers and their unions in many ways are its object. These policies seek to maximize profits and push wages and benefits to the bottom, manage the flow of people displaced as a result, roll back rights and social benefits achieved over decades, and weaken working class movements in both countries.

All this makes cooperation and solidarity across the U.S./Mexico border more important than ever. After a quarter century in which the development of solidarity relationships was interrupted during the cold war, unions and workers are once again searching out their counterparts and finding effective and appropriate ways to support each other.

This paper is not a survey of all the efforts that have taken place, especially since the NAFTA debate restarted the solidarity process in the early 1990s. Instead, it seeks to set out some questions, and invite responses and contributions from people involved in this cross border movement. Among these questions are the following:

What is the history of cross-border solidarity? How can we discard the blinders forged by the cold war, and expand our vision of what is possible?

How is the political context changing on both sides of the border? Why is solidarity a necessary response to political and economic challenges?

One of our biggest advantages is the movement of people from Mexico to the U.S. and back. What part do migrants and the struggle for their rights play in solidarity between workers of both countries?

How can we develop new ways of reaching across the border?



The Hidden History of Mexico/U.S. Labor Solidarity

The working class movements of the U.S. and Mexico both began in the decades after the seizure of Mexican territory in the War of 1848, its incorporation into the territory of the U.S., and the unequal relationship cemented by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

After the turn of the century, cross-border solidarity became an important political movement, as Mexicans began migrating to the U.S. as railroad workers, miners and farm laborers. The Flores Magon brothers, on the run from the regime of Porfirio Diaz, began organizing what became the uprising in Cananea and the Liberal Party in the communities of railroad workers in Los Angeles, St. Louis and elsewhere north of the border.

The two were active participants in the radical socialist and anarchist movements of the day, and were associated with the Industrial Workers of the World. After the Cananea rising, J. Edgar Hoover pursued them in his first campaign of organized anti-labor and anti-left repression. The brothers were caught, tried and sent to Leavenworth Federal Prison, where Ricardo died.

Today in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, on the wall of the longshore union hall, hangs a banner dated 1906, declaring the union part of the Casa Obrera Mundial. The Casa Obrera Mundial was a Mexican group associated with the IWW, and the banner testifies to the links that existed between workers of the two countries at that time, and their internationalist outlook. Later, members of the IWW fought in the Mexican Revolution itself.

The roots of the cross-border solidarity movement are very deep, going back more than a century. They are part of the labor culture of workers and unions, and have been almost since the beginning of our two labor movements.

During the 1930s, strong cross border relationships developed between workers on both sides. In Mexico and the U.S., their challenge was the same – to organize the vast bulk of workers in the largest enterprises, especially the basic industries.

Through the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexican labor had a government that depended on a strong, albeit politically controlled, union movement. Communists and socialists organized the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), and began supporting the beginnings of labor movements in other countries through the Confederation of Workers of Latin America (CTAL), headed by Vicente Lombardo Toledano.

In the U.S., the New Deal was a product of the upsurge in labor organizing led by the left, and in turn it also created a favorable environment in which many industrial workers were able to organize.

From that period to the present, the relationships between workers in the U.S. and Mexico grew closer when the left was strong, both in terms of organized political parties, but also as a set of ideas that were supported by large numbers of workers. From the beginning, the strongest relationships have existed between industrial workers – miners, railroad workers, factory workers, farm workers, longshore workers and others.

During the period of the labor upsurge of the 1930s and 40s, most solidarity activity was organized by Mexican unions in support of workers in the U.S. In part, this was due to a point of view among those unions that saw Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, especially along the border, and part of their own constituency. They sought to protect and defend the interests of people they viewed as their own paisanos.

In 1937 5000 workers marched to the bridge in Laredo during an onion strike in the Rio Grande Valley. The major working class organizations of the border states were present – the Congreso de Trabajo, the railroad union and the Mexican Communist Party. Vicente Lombardo Toledano came from Mexico City to speak.

Together with grassroots unions organized by leftwing workers on the U.S. side, the groups cooperated in setting up the Asociacion de Jornaleros (the Agricultural Workers Union) in Laredo, Texas. In the following years, Mexican unions increased their organizing activity in Texas. The CTM held Conventions of Mexican Workers in Dallas in 1938, in San Antonio in 1940, and in Austin in 1941.

The program of these gatherings emphasized the fight for civil rights for Mexican Americans in the southwest. That battle goes on today in Arizona and other states. Other demands included stopping local authorities from dropping Mexicans from the relief rolls during times of high unemployment. Today immigrants, even with permanent residence visas, still can't get most kinds of Social Security and welfare benefits.

As the CIO began to grow, Mexican unions and organizers cooperated in efforts to organize Mexican workers on the U.S. side. The CTM set up committees among Mexican workers in the southwest. After Lombardo Toledano and others established the Universidad Obrera in Mexico City, Mexicans living in the U.S. were sent for training. Emma Tenayuca, the young Communist who led the most famous strike of Mexican women of the time, the pecan strike in San Antonio, got her organizer training beforehand at the Universidad Obrera.

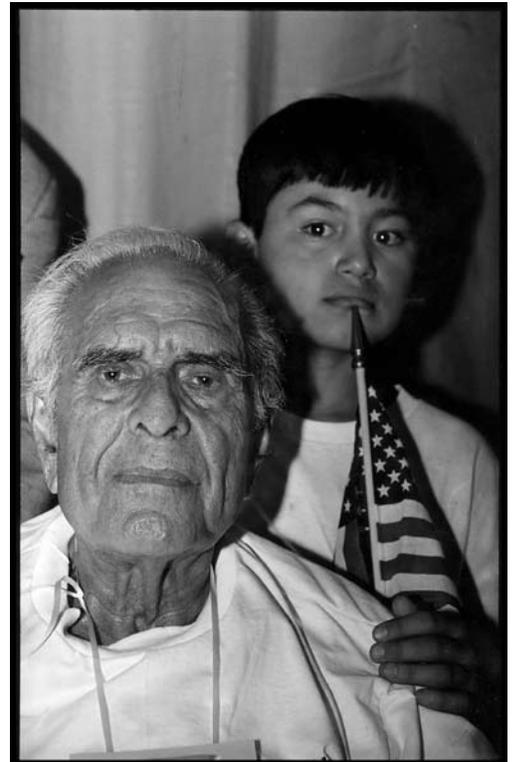
In U.S. copper mines 60% of the workers were Mexican or Mexican American. The Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Union, with roots in the Western Federation of Miners and the IWW, used border alliances to build union locals in mining towns. This was a logical and necessary step, since the same families worked in mines on both sides of the border. They shared a similar union history, in which the fight against the inferior Mexican wage as a central demand in both Mexican and U.S. mines, which belonged to the same companies.

On May Day in 1942 500 Mine Mill members marched with 10,000 Mexican workers in Ciudad Juarez. Humberto Silex, Mine Mill's leading organizer, established Local 509, which became the union's most important local. Silex addressed the rally. The following July 4, Toledano traveled from Mexico City to speak in El Paso's Independence Day celebration.

Solidarity went beyond speeches and conventions. CTM organizers coordinated with U.S. organizers during the first strikes by Mine Mill in El Paso, especially during the key battle to organize its giant smelter. In 1946 Mine Mill struck 14 ASARCO plants to gain national bargaining. The CTM donated money, and pledged to stop Mexicans from crossing the border to break the strike

In Los Angeles, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union established Local 26 for southern California warehouse and light manufacturing workers. The union used Mexican organizers, including Jess Armenta and Bert Corona. Corona, a leftist born in Ciudad Juarez, became local president. Later Humberto Camacho, a Mexican organizer for the United Electrical Workers, helped establish UE Local 1421.

Corona and Camacho became the two most influential leaders of the immigrant rights movement through the 1970s, not just in Los Angeles, but nationally. Their labor and solidarity activity created a base for fighting for immigrant rights. That core of activists and their militant program called for defending the rights of undocumented workers. They made the modern immigrant rights movement possible.



Bert Corona

Corona, Camacho, and their generation of solidarity and labor activists saw that unions in both countries had a common interest. Labor, they believed, should try to raise the standard of living in both countries, and stop the use of immigrants as a vulnerable labor supply for employers.

Immigration laws in the U.S. were constantly used against strikes by Mexican workers. From 1930 to 1935, 345,839 Mexicans were deported from the U.S. As the cold war started, deportations were used to try to break this cross-border movement. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (ICE's predecessor) arrested and tried to deport Humberto Silex. He became one of the most famous anti-deportation cases of the McCarthyite period.

Luisa Moreno, an organizer of garment workers in Los Angeles, was deported to Guatemala. Another political deportee of the cold war was Refugio Martinez, a leader of the United Packinghouse Workers in Chicago. Martinez helped build community organizations in Mexican barrios, including El Frente Popular Mexicano, the Toledano Club, and the Asociacion Nacional Mexicano Americano. Armando Davila, of the United Furniture Workers in L.A., was also deported. The government tried to deport Lucio Bernabe, a leader of the Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers who led organizing drives in San Jose canneries. His deportation was stopped. But Rosaura Revueltas, the Mexican movie actress, was deported after playing a role in *Salt of the Earth*, the movie written by blacklisted Hollywood screenwriters documenting the role of women in the strike by Mine Mill at the Empire Zinc mine.

Many of the deportations were fought by the Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, a leftwing immigrant rights organization based in Los Angeles. The deportation wave marked the rise of cold war hysteria. They were not isolated, but part of the context of the repression of Mexican immigrants generally. In the 1950s, at the height of the cold war, the combination of enforcement and bracero contract labor reached a peak. In 1954 1,075,168 Mexicans were deported from the U.S. And from 1956 to 1959, between 432,491 and 445,197 braceros were brought in each year.

As a political weapon, deportations were part of a general wave of repression that included firings, and even prison for leftwing and labor activists. At the same time, the labor movements on both sides were purged of leftwing leaders. In the U.S., the CIO expelled nine unions, charged with being Communist. In Mexico, independent movements like that of the railroad workers were crushed, and its leaders, also accused of being Communists, were sent to prison.

As a result, the people who had organized the solidarity movement of the 1930s and 40s were fighting just for their survival. Unions that were its base, like the miners or farm workers, were attacked and in some cases destroyed. The labor movements in both countries became more nationalistic. In U.S. a cold war labor leadership defended U.S. foreign policy goals, especially anti-communism. Anti-communism provided a common ground with the charro leadership of the CTM and other Mexican unions, who feared any independent movement challenging them from the left.

The American Institute for Free Labor Development, funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, had an office in Mexico City. But the office did not organize solidarity efforts to defend workers against U.S. corporations and the wars and interventions that supported them. Instead, U.S. labor/intelligence agents helped in the suppression, imprisonment and even murder of militant unionists throughout Latin America. When solidarity efforts began again years later, the distrust and suspicion engendered by that history took years to overcome, and in some areas still exists today.

Even during the worst times, however, there were still relationships among progressive activists and union locals. When miners went on strike in Cananea in the 1960s, a Mine Mill leader, Maclovio Barrajas, organized food and money for them from the U.S. side. When Mine Mill went on strike later, the Cananea miners reciprocated.

During the 60s, as the introduction of container technology transformed work on the



Humberto Camacho urges immigrant workers at Cal Spas to go on strike

waterfront, the ILWU invited Mexican longshore workers to come work in the L.A. harbor and learn to drive the cranes. Today there are still retired members of the Federation of Stevedores in Mexican Pacific coast ports who remember that experience of worker-to-worker solidarity.

Corona and Camacho, and ILWU Local 26 and UE Local 1421, supported some of the first efforts in Tijuana to organize independent unions in the maquiladoras, as the industry started to mushroom. A critical strike at Solidev and Solitron in the late 1970s was supported both by Tijuana's left, including veteran Communist Blas Manriquez, and

a network of activists on the U.S. side led by Camacho.

After the repression of the student movement in Tlatelolco in 1968, and especially in the years just before the PCM became PSUM and eventually the PRD, leftwing worker activists moved from Mexico City to Los Angeles to organize what had become a huge population of Mexican workers living there. Some became organizers for the UE, and eventually other unions as well, helping to spark the city's labor upsurge of the 1980s and 90s.

Corona helped build that same activist base through the Centro de Accion Social Autonoma (CASA). It single-mindedly fought for the rights for undocumented workers, urging workers to join unions, fighting to get unions to defend them, and organizing workers on its own when labor was unresponsive.

Today unions are often so busy just trying to survive that looking at the history of earlier solidarity efforts seems a luxury. But it is important to know that the movement for solidarity among workers and unions in the U.S. and Mexico didn't begin with NAFTA. Those earlier efforts are an important reservoir of experience. They show that solidarity is an integral and indispensable part of the history of the labor movement in both countries. Earlier worker activists and leaders have given unions today a rich, although little-known, store of knowledge of tactics, strategy, and above all, politics. They often paid heavily, so their contributions should not be lightly set aside or ignored.

One important conclusion of those earlier years is that solidarity has always been a two-way street. Mexican unions especially played a key role in the organization of US unions, some of which would not exist today without that early support, particularly in the southwest.

Those early efforts met success by concentrating on the key role of Mexican workers in the U.S. Today's circumstances are different, but the migration of people is just as important to solidarity today as it was eighty years ago.

Solidarity has always been a project of the left in each country. A strong left produced a base for developing common action. It popularized political ideas that helped workers understand that internationalism was necessary to confront transnational corporations, and the governments and policies that supported them. Conversely, the cold war, nationalism, and anti-immigrant hysteria in the U.S., and repression on both sides of the border, were the tools used to break those bonds and proscribe those ideas. Today those threats are growing again. Ties between workers and unions in the U.S. and Mexico must grow stronger to defeat them.

Labor Law Reform – A Key Battle for Mexican Unions Today

Changing Mexico's labor law threatens the lives of millions of workers. It would cement the power of a group of industrialists who have been on the political offensive for decades, and who now control Mexico's presidency and national government. "Labor law reform will only benefit the country's oligarchs," claims Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who most Mexicans think won the last presidential election in 2006, as candidate of the leftwing Party of the Democratic Revolution. Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, head of the miner's union who was forced into exile in Canada in 2006, says Mexico's old governing party, the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI), which lost control of the presidency in 2000, "is trying to assure its return by making this gift to big business, putting an end to labor rights."

In part, the change is drastic because on paper, at least, the rights of Mexican workers are extensive, deriving from the Revolution that ended in 1920. At a time when workers in the U.S. still had no law that recognized the legality of unions, Article 123 of the Mexican Constitution spelled out labor rights. Workers have the right to jobs and permanent status once they're hired. If they're laid off, they have the right to severance pay. They have rights to housing, health care, and training. In a legal strike, they can string flags across the doors of a factory or workplace, and even the owner can't enter until the dispute is settled. Strikebreaking is prohibited.

A new labor law would change most of that.

Companies would be able to hire workers in a six-month probationary status, and then fire them at the end without penalty. Even firing workers with 20 or 30 years on the job would suddenly become much easier and cheaper, by limiting the penalty for unjust termination to one year's severance pay. "That's an open invitation to employers," according to Arturo Alcalde, Mexico's most respected labor lawyer and past president of the National Association of Democratic Lawyers. "The bosses themselves say the PRI reform is the road to a 'paradise of firings.' It will make it much cheaper for companies to terminate workers."

The justification, of course, is that by reducing the number of workers at a worksite, while requiring those remaining to work harder, productivity increases and profits go up. For workers, though, a permanent job and stable income become a dream, while the fear of firing grows, hours get longer, and work gets faster, harder and more dangerous.

The PRI labor law reform proposal deepens those changes. The 40-hour workweek was written into the Federal Labor Law, which codified the rights in Article 123. That limit would end. Even the current 7-peso/hour minimum wage (\$5/day) would be undermined, as employers would gain the unilateral right to set wages. The independent review of safe working conditions would be heavily restricted.

Mexican workers aren't passive and organize work stoppages and protests much more frequently than do workers in the U.S. Greater activity by angry workers, therefore, wouldn't be hard to predict. So the labor law reform takes this into account as well.

Even in union workplaces with a collective agreement setting wages and conditions, an employer could force workers to sign individual agreements with fewer rights or lower wages. Companies could subcontract work with no limit, giving employers the ability to find low-cost contractors with no union to replace unionized, higher-wage employees. And it would become much more difficult to go on strike.

The proposed labor law reform is the fourth in a series of basic changes in Mexico's economic, legal and political framework over the last decade. A fiscal reform began the process of privatizing the country's pension system, much like the Social Security privatization plans

propose for the U.S. Teachers charge that Mexican education reform is intended to remove their influence over the curriculum, which still espouses values that would seem very progressive in a U.S. classroom. In many cases, they say, it will remove them from their jobs also. Current Mexican President Felipe Calderon of the National Action Party (PAN) proposed an energy reform aimed at privatizing the national oil company, Pemex. Fierce opposition, however, was able to restrict it to some degree.

All the reforms have been part of a program of economic liberalization opening Mexico to private domestic, and especially foreign capital. Lopez Obrador calls the labor law reform “part of a series imposed on Mexico from outside over the last two decades, including the energy reform, fiscal reform and education reform.” The World Bank pressured Mexico to adopt an earlier labor law reform after the PRI lost the presidency in 2000, and Calderon’s predecessor,

Coca-Cola executive Vicente Fox, won it. The two labor law reform proposals are very similar. Both reflect the surging power of corporate employers in Mexico, and the way the PRI and PAN often trade places, pursuing the same political and economic agenda.

“At the same time,”



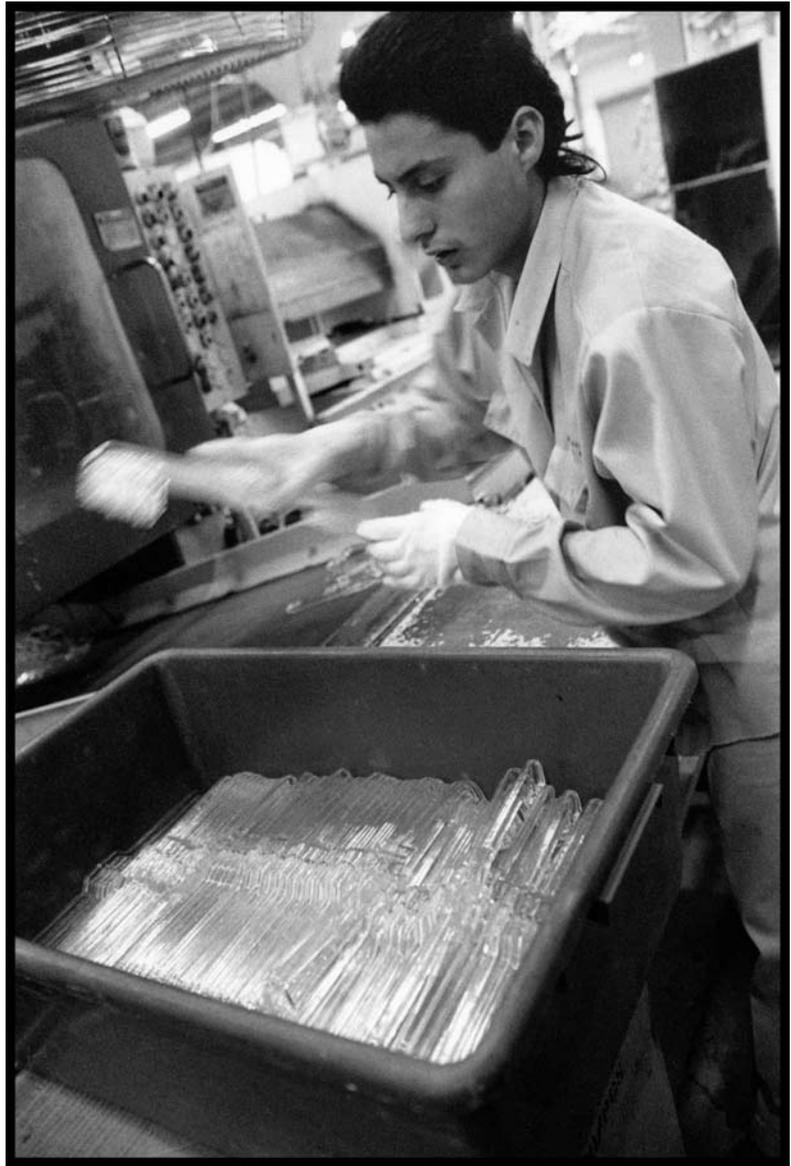
Maquiladora workers in Tijuana march on May Day. Their placard says, “Be Careful with Reforming Article 123.

Lopez Obrador notes, “the fight against inequality and poverty is not on the national agenda.” Mexican poverty contradicts claims by its leaders, who insist its economic growth merits a seat in the “first world.” Changing labor law would make poverty more permanent, however, as well as rendering unions more impotent to challenge it. Juan Manuel Sandoval, a leader of the Mexican Action Network Against Free Trade, predicts, “We will become part of the first world – the backyard.”

In 2010 Mexico had 53 million people living in poverty, according to the Monterrey Institute of Technology. The CIA says half the country’s population lives in poverty, and almost 20% in extreme poverty. The government’s unemployment figures are low – 5-6% -- but a huge number of working-age Mexicans are part of the informal economy, selling articles on the street or working in jobs where the employer doesn’t pay into the official funds (the basis for counting employed workers.) Some estimate that there are more workers in the informal sector than in the formal one.

Even formal jobs don’t pay a wage capable of supporting a family. According to the Bank of Mexico, 95% of the 800,000 jobs created in 2010 paid only \$10 a day. Yet when a maquiladora

worker buys a gallon of milk in a Tijuana or Juarez supermarket, she pays even more than she would on the U.S. side. Prices are a little lower further south, but not much. The price of milk used to be fixed and subsidized, along with tortillas, bus fare and other basic necessities. Previous waves of economic reforms decontrolled prices and ended consumer subsidies, as Mexico was pressured to create more favorable conditions for private investment. Investors have done very well. In one of the recent diplomatic cables published by Wikileaks, the U.S. government admits "The net wealth of the 10 richest people in Mexico -- a country where more than 40 percent of the population lives in poverty -- represents roughly 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product." Carlos Slim became the world's richest man when a previous PRI President, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, privatized the national telephone company and sold it to him. Ricardo Salinas Pliego, who owns TV Azteca, is now worth \$8 billion, and Emilio Azcárraga Jean, who owns Televisa, is worth \$2.3 billion. Both helped current Mexican President Felipe Calderon get elected in 2006.



A maquiladora worker in the factory of Plásticos Bajacal.

German Larrea and his company Grupo Mexico got concessions to operate some of the world's largest copper mines. Grupo Mexico was accused of industrial homicide by miners' union president Gomez Urrutia after 65 people (many of them contract workers) died in an explosion at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine in February 2006. Since June 2007 the Grupo Mexico copper mine in Cananea has been on strike. Last year Larrea and the Mexican government cooperated in using armed force to open its gates and bring in strikebreakers.

Much of the PRI's labor law reform is already the reality on the ground in Cananea, at other mines, and among maquiladora workers near the U.S. Mexico border. For years the rights of workers in northern Mexico, even the rule of law itself, have been undermined by the growing power of corporations.

The corporate transformation of the Mexican economy began long ago, moving the country away from nationalist ideas about development, which were dominant from the end of the Mexican Revolution through the 1970s. Nationalists advocated an economic system in which oil fields, copper mines, railroads, the telephone system, great tracts of land, and other key economic resources would be controlled by Mexicans and used for their benefit.

Under President Lazaro Cardenas in the late 1930s, Mexico established a corporatist system in which one political party, the PRI, controlled the main sectors of Mexican society – workers,

farmers, the military and the “popular” sector. PRI governments administered a network of social services, providing healthcare and housing, at least for people in those organized sectors. Cardenas also nationalized Mexico’s most important resource – oil – in a popular campaign.

National ownership of oil, and later electrical generation, was written into the Constitution. Land redistribution and nationalization had a political as well as economic purpose – the creation of a section of workers and farmers who would defend the government and its political party, into which their unions and producer organizations were incorporated.

After World War Two, Mexico officially adopted a policy of industrialization through import substitution. Factories produced products for the domestic market, while imports of those products were restricted. The purpose was to develop a national industrial base, provide jobs, and increase the domestic market. Large state-owned enterprises eventually employed hundreds of thousands of Mexican industrial workers in mines, mills, transportation and other strategic industries. Unions had their greatest strength in the public sector. Foreign investment was limited.

Enrique Davalos, professor and teachers’ union activist at San Diego City College, calls the system “nationalism in rhetoric, selling out the country in practice.” Under successive PRI administrations a vast gulf widened between the political and economic elite, who managed the state’s assets and controlled government policy in their own interest, and workers and farmers, especially those not in the formal sector. To protect this elite, the country’s political system became increasingly repressive.

In the 1970s, to finance growth while the price of oil was high, Mexico opened up its financial system to foreign capital (mostly from the U.S.), and the country’s foreign debt soared. Managers of state enterprises, like the oil company, ran private businesses on the side, along with politically connected union officials. Rackets and corruption proliferated while labor and campesino leaders who challenged the system were imprisoned or worse.

The debt and the hold it gave to foreign financial interests spelled the end of nationalist development. Oil prices fell, the U.S. Treasury jacked up interest rates, and in 1982 the system collapsed when Mexico could no longer make debt payments. The government devalued the peso in what is still infamous as the great “peso shock.”

In the Constitution Mexicans still had the right to housing, healthcare, employment and education, but millions of people went hungry, had no homes, were sick and unemployed, and couldn’t read. The anger and cynicism felt by many Mexicans toward their political system is in great part a product of the contradiction between the constitutional promises of the revolution a century ago, plus the nationalist rhetoric that followed, and the reality of life for most people.

In a desperate attempt to generate jobs and revenue for debt payments, the government encouraged the growth of maquiladoras, the foreign-owned factories on the northern border. By 2005 over 3000 border plants employed over 2 million workers making products for shoppers from Los Angeles to New York. In 1992 they already accounted for over half of Mexican exports, and in the NAFTA era, became the main sector of the economy producing employment growth.

Maquiladora development undermined the legal rights of workers in the border area, and any laws viewed as discouraging investment. The government had a growing interest in keeping wages low as an attraction to foreign corporations, instead of high enough that people could buy what they were making. The old official unions, including the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), controlled restive workers, rather than organizing them to win better conditions.

One of the most important methods of control is the protection contract. Cooperative unions sign agreements with factory owners, who pay “dues” for workers who often have no idea that the union and contract even exist. They find out quickly, however, when they try to organize any independent effort to raise wages or improve conditions. The company and official union claim a contract is already in place. If workers try to protest, they’re forced into a process before

“tripartite” labor boards dominated by business owners, politicians dependent on them, and the official unions.

Labor history in Mexico for decades has been dominated by valiant battles fought by workers to organize independent unions and rid themselves of protection contracts. Thousands have been fired, and some even killed. Despite defeats, organizations like the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), the Border Committee of Women Workers (CFO), Enlace, and the Workers Support Committee (CAT), have helped workers challenge this system. Some of these battles, fought together with independent unions like the Authentic Labor Front (FAT), have won union contracts, slowly building an independent and progressive sector of Mexican labor.

The FAT and the National Union of Workers, to which it belongs, have made their own proposals for labor law reform. They’ve suggested making all contracts public to let workers know what union they belong to, and to shine a light on the corruption of the present system. They see the tripartite labor boards as so compromised that they’d do away with them, while removing some of the government controls used to punish independent unions.

The PRI proposal would not make protection contracts public or limit them, nor would it change the labor boards or enhance union rights. Instead, it takes direct aim at those independent unions, some of which have been organized in fierce fights against shutdowns and privatization, like the recent one at the government-owned Mexicana Airline. New private businesses don’t want to see these unions spread, organizing their workers. A new private airline, Volaris, for instance, recently started service to the U.S. Now that the government has forced Mexicana into bankruptcy and laid off its workers, Volaris hopes to take over the old airline’s routes, and perhaps even its assets. What it doesn’t want is the Mexicana union.

The PRI labor law reform would restrict unions to the one company or enterprise where they began. Industrial, or even craft, unions, representing workers at many employers, would become impossible to organize. New private businesses, like Volaris, would face no challenge by a union seeking to set a base wage for a particular industry. Unions would have much greater difficulty in organizing solidarity among workers, in any effort like the ones that led to the large industrial unions in the U.S. and Mexico.

Progressive unions in Mexico today are fighting for their survival. The state institutions that enforce Mexican labor law are already heavily stacked against them. PRI’s reforms would make turn the struggle for survival into a desperate labor war.



The Blanca Navidad barrio of maquiladora workers near Nuevo Laredo.

The Rebirth of Solidarity on the Border

The growth of cross-border solidarity today is taking place at a time when U.S. penetration of Mexico is growing – economically, politically, and even militarily. While the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico has its own special characteristics, it is also part of a global system of production, distribution and consumption. It is not just a bilateral relationship.

Jobs go from the U.S. and Canada to Mexico in order to cut labor costs. But from Mexico those same jobs go China or Bangladesh or dozens of other countries, where labor costs are even lower. As important, the threat to move those jobs, experienced by workers in the U.S. from the 1970s onwards, are now common in Mexico. Those threats force concessions on wages. In Sony's huge Nuevo Laredo factory, for instance, that threat was used to make workers agree to an indefinite temporary employment status, even though Mexican law prohibited it.

Multiple production locations undermine unions' bargaining leverage, since action by workers in a single workplace can't shut down production for the entire corporation. The UAW, for instance, was beaten during a strike at Caterpillar in large part because even though the union could stop production in the U.S., production in Mexico continued. Grupo Mexico can use profits gained in mining operations in Peru to subsidize the costs of a strike in Cananea.

The privatization of electricity in Mexico will not just affect Mexicans. Already plants built by Sempra Energy and Enron in Mexico are like maquiladoras, selling electricity into the grid across the border. If privatization grows, that will have an impact on US unions and jobs, giving utility unions in the U.S. a reason to help Mexican workers resist it. This requires more than solidarity between unions facing the same employer. It requires solidarity in resisting the imposition of neoliberal reforms like privatization and labor law reform as well.

At the same time, the concentration of wealth has created a new political situation in both countries. In Mexico, the PRI functioned as a mediator between organized workers and business. PRI governments used repression to stop the growth of social movements outside the system it controlled. But the government also used negotiations in interest of long-term stability. The interests of the wealthy were protected, but some sections of the population also received social benefits, and unions had recognized rights. In 1994, for instance, the government put leaders of Mexico City's bus union SUTAU in prison. But then it proceeded to negotiate with them while they were in jail.

The victory of Vicente Fox and the PAN in 2000 created a new situation, in which the corporate class, grown rich and powerful because of earlier reforms, no longer desired the same kind of social pact or its political intermediaries. The old corporatist system, in which unions had a role, was no longer necessary. Meanwhile employers and the government have been more willing to use force. Unions like SME and miners face, not just repression, but destruction.

In the U.S. a similar process took place during the years after the Vietnam War, when corporations made similar decisions. After the Federal government broke the PATCO strike, the use of strikebreakers became widespread. Corporations increasingly saw even business unions as unnecessary for maintaining social peace and continued profits. Union organizing became a kind of labor warfare. A whole industry of union busters appeared, making the process set up by U.S. labor law in the 1930s much less usable by workers seeking to organize.

Labor law reform, national healthcare, and other basic pro-worker reforms became politically impossible in the post-Vietnam era, even under Democratic presidents whom unions helped elect. Public workers did succeed in organizing during this period, however, and eventually U.S. union strength became more and more concentrated in that sector. But much as the public sector in Mexico came under attack, the U.S. public sector became the target for the U.S. right, for similar reasons. This too changed the landscape for solidarity, giving the most politically powerful section of the U.S. labor movement, at least potentially, a greater interest in solidarity

with Mexican labor.

In both countries, the main union battles are now ones to preserve what workers have previously achieved, rather than to make new gains. Mexican unions are enmeshed in the state labor process, in which the government still certifies unions' existence, and to a large degree controls their bargaining. In the U.S. labor is endangered by economic crisis, falling density, and an increasingly hostile political system. This leads to a rise in nationalism and protectionism, creating new obstacles for solidarity.

As the attacks against unions grow stronger, solidarity is becoming necessary for survival. Unions face a basic question on both sides of the border -- can they win the battles they face today, especially political ones, without joining their efforts together? Fortunately, this is not an abstract question. Enormous progress has taken place over the last two decades.

The U.S. labor movement had to be dragged by its base into opposing NAFTA. The AFL-CIO's international apparatus in Washington DC had a history during the cold war of supporting free trade and U.S. foreign policy. But the unions it supported in Mexico, especially the CTM, lined up behind the Mexican government, and therefore supported the treaty.

Individual U.S. unions began looking across the border for themselves, seeking new contacts with unions opposed to the free trade agreement. The FAT's Benedicto Martinez traveled the US in the free trade caravan, organized by the Teamsters Union, to



Tijuana police prepare to escort strikebreakers into the Han Young factory, where workers were on strike for an independent union.

build rank and file opposition to NAFTA. He spoke in many meetings of the United Electrical Workers. He remembers, "NAFTA shocked a lot of US unions out of their inertia -- not so much their national leaders, but people in local unions. They're the ones who began pushing the structure to move on globalization, to form new international relations and look for solidarity. That's what moved their leaders to pay attention to the border. It was people in local unions that began building the bridges across the border to unions in Mexico. The more local unions got involved, the broader this movement became."

The NAFTA debate provoked discussion about the relationship between workers in Mexico and the US. Many union members responded by supporting efforts to organize independent unions in the border plants. "It was a kind of school," Martinez recalls. "It was not so easy

anymore for someone to say that Mexicans were stealing jobs. They could see there was a real problem.”

The border provided an area for experimenting with new ways to organize workers. The following decade saw an explosion of activity on the border. The maquiladora organizing drive at Plasticos Bajacal in 1993 first highlighted for U.S. unions the reality of public union representation elections and the lack of the secret ballot. The San Diego Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers raised enough money to pay lost time for fired workers, so they could continue organizing the factory.

The AFL-CIO's Ed Feigan and religious orders set up the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras in the late 1980s, which was dominated at the beginning by U.S. unions and organizations. As it began to coordinate campaigns all along the border – CustomTrim/ AutoTrim, Duro Bag, Lajat/Levi's and others, the role of organizations within the coalition changed. Women from the local plants and communities became more assertive, while large unions and organizations grew uncomfortable, feeling they could no longer hold the coalition accountable.

The worker rebellion at the huge Sony factory was the first major battle under NAFTA, and the first place where the false promises of its labor side-agreement became obvious. Hundreds of workers were beaten in front of the plant when they ran candidates in their CTM union's election. When that door was closed, they tried to form an independent union, and were blocked by the company and Mexican government. NAFTA's labor side agreement did nothing to change the situation.

The leader of the Sony workers, Martha Ojeda, was smuggled by her coworkers across the Rio Grande to Texas, and she eventually became director of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras.

In the late 1990s two strikes at Tijuana's Han Young factory led to killing fast track authorization in the U.S. Congress for the Free Trade Area of the Americas. The independent union there became one of the first to successfully force the government to give it legal status. Los Angeles' big oil union, later a local of the Steel Workers, was a major source of support for the strikers. An investigation by the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network documented dangerous conditions and lack of inspections that violated Mexican law, as the network also did at CustomTrim/ AutoTrim. Those experiences in maquiladoras were the precursors of the later investigation into silicosis among striking miners in Cananea.

The Comite Fronterizo de Obraras organized workers at Alcoa Fujikura, and even forced Alcoa's CEO to negotiate over conditions there. Enlace, a unique coalition of Mexican and U.S. unions and non-governmental organizations, supported living wage campaigns among maquiladora workers in north Mexico, and battles for independent unions at Sara Lee. It became the support base for SITTIM, an independent union of workers in Baja California's maquiladora industry. The union first organized garment workers in Korean-owned factories, and then workers in Korean-owned seafood processing plants, in Baja California Sur. Both during the Han Young and SITTIM campaigns the workers made contact with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, a significant step since Korean corporations own a significant part of Mexico's maquiladora industry.

Struggles have taken place in maquiladoras for two decades all along the border. Many centers or collectives of workers have come together over those years. Walkouts over unpaid wages or indemnizacion, or terrible conditions, are still relatively common. Local activists still find ways to support them, like the Collective Ollin Calli in Tijuana, and its network of allies across the border in Tijuana, the San Diego Maquiladora Workers Solidarity Network.

Over the years, support from many U.S. unions and churches, and from unions and labor institutions in Mexico City, has often been critical in helping these collectives survive, especially during the pitched battles to win legal status for independent unions. But overall that support has not been constant. Often the worker groups in the maquiladoras and the cities of the border have

had to survive on their own, or with extremely limited resources. While workers may whisper in secret about Martha Ojeda, and call her when they're in deep trouble, the resource base for the Coalition has diminished seriously during the current recession. Many organizations have stopped supporting it.

Maria Estela Rios Gonzalez, a CJM board member, former legal advisor to Lopez Obrador when he was Mexico City Mayor, and former president of the National Association of Democratic Lawyers, believes greater commitment still faces a perception in Mexico City that the border region is a remote area, far from the places where decisive changes are made in the country's direction. "Local struggles on the border have never been successful in becoming national causes," she charges. The same observation could be made about the way large U.S. unions and organizations see border struggles. In addition, the difficulties of maintaining a cross-border relationship in which unorganized factory workers play a leading role have never been adequately examined.

Despite the flight of many jobs to China, a U.S. economic recession that has caused massive layoffs in border plants, and extreme levels of violence in many border communities, the maquiladora industry in north Mexico is still enormous. Three thousand plants employ over 1.3 million workers. It's not just the size of the industry that makes these plants important. They've been the laboratories for the rightward shift in labor law and labor relations, now being applied to workers across Mexico. The states are a stronghold of political conservatism and corporate power, because of the disenfranchisement of their working population.

A vibrant and strong labor movement on the border would change Mexico's politics. The influence of the maquiladoras on U.S. employment and runaway production over the years is undeniable, and strong unions there would have a tremendous impact on U.S. labor too. The growth of labor solidarity in the last two decades between the U.S. and Mexico owes a lot to the border labor wars. It was there that U.S. unions first acquired a clear vision of the importance of their relations with Mexican workers. The decline in activity in border factories over the last few years, and in the support from major unions and institutions in both countries for it, is a real weakness in the efforts to build a culture of labor solidarity.

When Oaxacan migrants were striking in Sinaloa and Baja California fields in the 1980s, support from U.S. farm worker unions could have helped their movements survive. That, in turn, might have given the U.S. unions leverage in bargaining with those employers on the U.S. side. And when those Oaxacan migrants showed up in U.S. fields, they would already have had a history of friendship and cooperation with U.S. unions.



San Francisco garment workers march to support the union rights of sweatshop workers in Mexico, Latin America and Asia.

Growing Ties Between Mexican and U.S. Labor

In Mexico, the NAFTA debate led to the organization of the Action Network Opposing Free Trade (RMALC), which in turn helped to spark the relationship between the U.E. and the FAT. That relationship, examined in detail in several books, remains a model for solidarity between two unions, based on equality and mutual interest, preserving each union's ability to make its own decisions autonomously. It has been a relationship based on real campaigns on the ground – organizing drives, strikes, and resistance to proposals like the PRI labor law reform. Rank and file workers in both unions have played an important part in those efforts.

In the solidarity upsurge of the late 1990s onwards, other unions also have found counterparts across the border, and tried to develop ongoing relationships. The Communications Workers first supported efforts by maquiladora workers in a small Cananea factory, and then established a close relationship with the Mexican Telephone Workers. The ILWU sent delegations, first to Veracruz when its longshore union was smashed, and then to Pacific Coast ports as they were being privatized. The union has a relationship with the Federation of Stevedores there, part of the Revolutionary Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM). The PRI affiliation of this old, official union, however, is very different from the leftwing culture of the ILWU. While they have a common interest facing their mutual employers -- huge shipping companies -- neither union has been able to put forward a plan for mutual action.

Frustrated with the slow pace of union organizing in Mexico, the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center assisted the formation of the Workers Support Center (CAT) in Puebla, which led to pitched battles in the state's maquiladoras, and some important victories. The first came at Mex Mode (Kuk Dong), where the CAT helped set up an independent union. The United Students Against Sweatshops then successfully pressured Nike Corporation into forcing the sweatshop's management to recognize it and bargain. Subsequent campaigns at clothing plants met with heavy repression. But recently, the CAT helped workers organize at a Johnson Controls plant. The UAW in the U.S., which had earlier organized plants of the same company, pressured it into recognizing the union in Puebla.

The CAT drives developed a sophisticated strategy using cross-border leverage against Mexican and U.S. employers in a well-defined geographical area, producing for the U.S. market. Those campaigns only received lukewarm support from the Mexican independent labor movement for the first few years. Recently, however, that has changed. The Puebla union at Johnson Controls joined the Mexican miners union after it won recognition. The mineros, who have begun a process of merging with the United Steel Workers, are locked in an all-out conflict with the Mexican government and Grupo Mexico. Yet the union is committed to offering resources to Puebla maquiladora workers, and the workers in turn are unafraid to join a union engaged in fierce battles.

The decision by the mineros and USW to draw together rises from their joint struggles in the mines along the U.S./Mexico border, especially the strike in Cananea. Workers in U.S. and Mexican mines have a long history of mutual support, even family relationships. While the cold war restrained such support activity for some years, the Cananea strike in 1998 restarted relationships. Mexican miners came up to Arizona, and their appeals led to caravans of trucks filled with food going south. Support came from the Tucson labor council, headed by Jerry Acosta, and from USW mine locals in Arizona.

When Napoleon Gomez Urrutia became president of the mineros, and increasingly challenged Grupo Mexico and the Mexican government, the USW support efforts increased. Grupo Mexico bought ASARCO, giving the two unions a common employer. Then in June 2007,

the mineros struck the Cananea mine, and Gomez Urrutia was forced into exile. The USW offered him a home in Vancouver, Canada, and the union became a critical source of support for the Cananea strikers, contributing food and money. It organized U.S. health and safety experts to go to Cananea to expose the dangers of silicosis in the mine, one of the reasons for the strike. The USW brought the AFL-CIO into its support activity, and together they pressured both the U.S. and Mexican governments.

USW legal and political assistance, coordinated by Manny Armenta, helped the mineros win a series of court decisions upholding the legality of the Cananea strike, and defending the mineros' leadership against government legal charges and repression. After three years the government and Grupo Mexico finally used armed force to reopen the Cananea mine, but they had to do it in the face of numerous decisions declaring such action illegal. Reopening the mine is one of the clearest examples of the unwillingness of the Mexican government and large corporations to respect the rule of law. The conflict may grow even more intense when the USW contract with

ASARCO expires. During the last negotiation of that agreement, Grupo Mexico, although it was the owner of the bankrupt U.S. employer, could not control it in bargaining. Now Grupo Mexico will face the USW directly.

After years in which the union has defended

Gomez Urrutia from the corporation's attacks, and supported the strikers in Cananea, a sharp conflict is almost inevitable.

Since 2009, the two unions have discussed a merger of their organizations. The idea raises important questions about how such an organization would function under different labor law systems. It also poses challenging questions about how a binational organization would ensure the autonomy of its members in each country, and their ability to act in their own interest. Given the cold war history of U.S. intelligence operations in Mexico, it's not a question that Mexicans are likely to take lightly.

The support by U.S. unions for independent union campaigns in maquiladoras has always been attacked by rightwing Mexican media, government officials and employers, who have accused the Mexican workers and unions involved of betraying their country. They've



Cananea miners traveled to Tucson, Arizona, where a support meeting was organized by Derechos Humanos, an immigrant rights organization with many members from the families of copper miners. At left is Manny Armenta, USW organizer, and at right, Isabel Garcia of Derechos Humanos.

charged U.S. unions with “trying to make trouble” in order to chase employers who have moved production to Mexico into returning to the U.S.

Progressive Mexican unions have had to fight to redefine what nationalism should mean. They’ve argued that the neoliberal development model itself undermines the true interests of Mexican workers, who have the right to fight U.S. and Mexican employers, and to solidarity from U.S. unions when they do it. Further, they charge, the real betrayal is by Mexican authorities, who allow foreign companies to break Mexican labor law. Their position not only defends the historic rights of Mexican workers, but the motives behind the solidarity offered by US unions as well.

“We don’t want to live in a country that’s attracting jobs from other countries like the US and Canada, using the competitive advantage of low wages, the lack of enforcement of labor laws, and even ecological damage,” says UNT and telephone union leader Francisco Hernandez Juarez. “These jobs are bound to be temporary anyway, they don’t give us any permanent benefit, and eventually when there’s some unfavorable event, they move to countries where the labor is even cheaper. The majority of Mexicans are being plunged into poverty. It will get worse if we continue depending exclusively on producing for foreign markets, especially the United States, and if we ignore our domestic market. We won’t accept turning into a maquiladora country that’s attractive simply because of its cheap labor. Through our unions, we want to establish more complex and complete labor relations, that permit us to be competitive in making more sophisticated products.”

The fight over that political direction is at the heart of the Mexican government’s attack on the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME). Here solidarity efforts from the U.S. are not based on a fight against a common employer, but instead challenge the free trade and free market reforms behind the attack on the Mexican union.

President Calderon declared Mexico’s oldest and most progressive major union “non-existent” in October of 2009. He dissolved the state-owned Power and Light Company for central Mexico, and fired all of the SME’s 44,000 members who worked there. Most Mexicans believe this is a prelude to privatizing the electrical industry. Already, despite the Constitutional prohibition, almost half of the electricity generated in the country comes from private producers. Despite the attacks, the union has been able to win back its legal recognition, and is fighting for the rights and jobs of the 16,000 members who have refused to accept their termination.

U.S. unions stayed out of previous fights over privatization, especially around electrical generation, in part because the SME is still affiliated to the World Federation of Trade Unions. The WFTU was organized when the UN was founded, originally with CIO participation. But almost all U.S. unions later abandoned it at the beginning of the cold war. The WFTU became the rival of the AFL-dominated International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

In Mexico, however, that cold war barrier began to soften after the leadership of the AFL-CIO changed, and John Sweeney became president. “There’s more discussion with the SME,” said Stan Gacek, a staffer at the International Affairs Department in the early 2000s. “It’s on a defacto basis, although not on any grand scale. But a number of WFTU affiliates are talking to us because they’ve gotten over the cold war and so have we. There are broader and more important common objectives.”

As the Mexico/U.S. labor solidarity movement grew, so did the number of U.S. activists who saw the important role the SME plays in Mexican politics. They respected its democratic structure and strong contract. In earlier confrontations with Mexican administrations, unions like the U.E., whose relationship with the SME goes back decades, mobilized U.S. support.

When Calderon launched his attack in 2009, that network was mobilized. The UE’s website, Mexican Labor News and Analysis, became a main source of news as the union fought to maintain picket lines at installations, and launched a hunger strike in the Zocalo, at Mexico



Elva Nora Cruz is the sister of a fired SME member.

City's heart. News also came from the Solidarity Center's Ben Davis, who was already putting out daily bulletins for the mineros. Progressive journalists began covering the fight, in the complete absence of any mainstream U.S. media coverage.

In the meantime, delegations of SME leaders, including Humberto Montes de Oca and Pepino Cuevas, came to the U.S., hosted by the San Francisco chapter of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement and local labor councils. Their efforts led eventually to press conferences

and meetings between SME and AFL-CIO leaders in Washington DC, and complaints at the ILO and under NAFTA's labor side agreement. Los Angeles unionists sent a delegation to the Mexican consulate, as did other areas.

In February five international union bodies, the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM), International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), UNI Global Union, and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), cooperated in organizing actions in 40 countries. Over 50,000 workers, students and human rights activists demonstrated at Mexican consulates or otherwise showed their public opposition to the reform. Twenty-seven actions took place in Mexico itself.

The international federations and Mexican unions formed a coalition, which agreed to press the government to abolish the protection contract system and to stop the use of force against strikers at the Cananea mine, the Power and Light Company, and in other similar situations. The unions demanded an end to repression against the miners union and the SME; and that government officials be held responsible for the explosion at the Pasta de Conchos coal mine.

U.S. solidarity activists used several arguments to win U.S. labor support. With power workers, they explained that the destruction of SME and privatization of generation would lead eventually to Mexican power exports to the U.S., using low wages and a lack of unions to undercut U.S. production costs. This argument also helped win support from fair trade organizations.

The solidarity effort with the SME did not have a base in a particular U.S. union, however, as the FAT has with the UE or the mineros with the USW. That limited the Mexican union's ability to plan and carry out a long-term cross border campaign. But after the struggle had gone on for a year, the U.S. Utility Workers Union organized a tri-national conference of unions in the electrical generation industry. SME leaders made a successful appeal for support, and have hopes for creating a more permanent relationship. The struggle against privatization is still not a high priority in U.S. labor, but many U.S. utility unions represent workers at public utilities and understand the threat. In addition, the current attack against U.S. public workers has created a labor audience more sympathetic to appeals to defend public workers in Mexico.

The big turn away from the cold war in U.S. labor came when John Sweeney was elected AFL-CIO president in 1995. Richard Trumka, then secretary-treasurer and now AFL-CIO president, called for dropping the cold war prohibition on relations with leftwing unions like the SME, and declared that solidarity should be based on cooperation between unions facing common

employers, regardless of their politics. The USW / mineros relationship is based in part on that idea.

Cross border solidarity in U.S. labor is still oriented towards private industry, and mutual support during confrontations with huge corporations. It's less focused on opposition to the neoliberal policies pursued by both the U.S. and Mexican governments, regardless of which political party is in power. U.S. unions often see their own needs first. A heightened sense of solidarity requires fighting the battles prioritized by other unions, not just fighting your own battles in someone else's country. U.S. unions are still learning what it would mean to Mexican labor and progressive movements if the SME were destroyed. They would find it much more difficult to develop Mexican allies in a climate of growing repression and a weakened left.

When many U.S. workers think about Mexico, they envision it as the place their jobs have gone. If U.S. workers have lost those jobs, then Mexican workers must have gotten them. Ross Perot captured their imagination by referring to Mexico as "the giant sucking sound." The message from Perot and rightwing broadcaster Lou Dobbs is that Mexican workers are the enemy, the ones who "stole your job."

In the U.S., most workers don't understand displacement, or the enormous impact NAFTA and neoliberal policies have had on Mexicans. When Mexicans, as a result, cross the border looking for work, many U.S. workers often don't understand who they are or why they've come.

The labor movements on both sides are paying a heavy price for giving a low priority to the education of their members. Anti-immigrant hysteria and hostility towards solidarity go hand in hand, and unions must take education more seriously. In the U.S., Bill Fletcher former AFL-CIO education director, initiated a program called "Common Sense Economics" -- an effort to teach union members about globalization and the way it affects them. The program was terminated, however, and Fletcher was reassigned. That effort has to begin again, but so far no such plans are underway. This is a serious brake on winning a mass base for solidarity activity among rank and file workers.

A culture of solidarity asks workers to take a long-term view of their interests. It asks them to look beyond getting a contract tomorrow for their own union or getting a card signed so the union can start bargaining. Both are necessary. But so is a better understanding of their stake in helping workers beyond their country's borders. Solidarity means knowing that workers in one country can't keep their contracts or jobs if workers across the border are losing theirs.



A teacher from Oaxaca marches against the education reform. His placard says, Calderon, Understand -- Our Country Will Not Be Sold.

Immigration and the Culture of Solidarity

One indispensable part of education and solidarity is greater contact between Mexican union organizers and their U.S. counterparts. The base for that contact already exists, in the massive movement of people between the two countries.

Miners fired in Cananea, or electrical workers fired in Mexico City, become workers in Phoenix, Los Angeles and New York. Twelve million Mexican workers in the U.S. are a natural base of support for Mexican unions. They bring with them the experience of the battles waged by their unions. They can raise money and support. Their families are still living in Mexico, and many are active in political and labor campaigns. As workers and union members in the U.S., they can help win support from U.S. unions for the battles taking place in Mexico.

This is not a new idea. It's what the Flores Magon brothers were doing for the rising in Cananea. It's why the Mexican left sent activists and organizers to the Rio Grande Valley in the 1930s, and to Los Angeles in the 1970s. All these efforts had a profound impact on U.S. unions and workers. The sea change in the politics of Los Angeles in the last two decades, while it has many roots, shows the long-term results of immigrants gaining political power, and the role of politically conscious immigrant organizers in that process.

Today some U.S. unions see the potential in organizing in immigrant communities. But most unions in Mexico, in contrast to the past, don't see this movement of people as a resource they can or should organize.

What would happen if Mexican unions began sending organizers or active workers north into the U.S.? In reality, active members are already making that move, and have been for a long time. Yet there is no organized way of looking at this. Where, for instance, will the people displaced in today's Mexican labor struggles go? In 1998, almost 900 active blacklisted miners from Cananea had to leave after their strike that year was lost. Many came to Arizona and California. In Mexico City, 26,000 SME members took the indemnization and gave up claim to their jobs and unions. Many of them will inevitably be forced to go to the U.S. looking for work.

Cananea miners and Mexico City electrical workers have a wealth of experience and a history of participation in a progressive and democratic union. They can help both workers in the



Maria Rosala Mejia Marroquin was picked up in the immigration raid on the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant, and forced to wear an ankle bracelet to track her movements.

U.S., and those they've left back home, building unions in the places they go to work. But to use their experience effectively, unions on both sides of the border need to know who they are, and where they're going, and see them as potential organizers.

Solidarity and the migration of people are linked. The economic crisis in Mexico is getting much worse, with no upturn in sight. With a 40% poverty rate, the government still has no program for employment beyond encouraging investment with lower wages and fewer union rights. And since the maquila sector is tied to US market, it experiences even worse mass layoffs than other Mexican sectors, with the waves of unemployed crossing border just a few miles away from their homes.

Six million Mexicans left for the U.S. in the NAFTA period, a flow of people that now affects almost every family, even in the most remote parts of country. Migration has become an important safety valve for the Mexican economy, relieving pressure as well on its government. It uses the tens of billions of dollars in remittances to make up for social investment cut under pressure from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Teachers' strikes, like the one in Oaxaca in 2006, mushroom into insurrections because there is no alternative to migration and an economic system increasingly dependent on remittances.

Economic reforms and displacement create unemployed workers – for border factories, or for U.S. agriculture and meatpacking plants. Displacement creates a reserve army of workers available to corporations as low wage labor. If demand rises, employers don't have to raise wages. In a time of economic crisis, unemployed people are used to pressure employed workers, making them less demanding, and more fearful of losing their jobs.

Displacement and migration aren't a byproduct of the global economy. The economic system in both Mexico and the U.S. is dependent on the labor that displacement produces. Mexican President Felipe Calderon said on a recent visit to California, "You have two economies. One economy is intensive in capital, which is the American economy. One economy is intensive in labor, which is the Mexican economy. We are two complementary economies, and that phenomenon is impossible to stop."

To employers, migration is a labor supply system. U.S. immigration policy is not intended to keep people from crossing the border. It determines the status of people once they're in the U.S. It is designed to supply labor to employers at a manageable cost, imposed by employers. It makes the laborers themselves vulnerable, especially those who come through guest worker programs where employers can withdraw their ability to stay in the country by firing them.

The economic pressure that produces migration has a big impact on relations between U.S. and Mexican labor. Today, for instance, governments and employers on both sides of the border tell unions that support for labor supply, or guest worker, programs is part of a beneficial relationship. Any movement for solidarity has to address this corporate pressure. An union alliance with employers on immigration policy, based on helping them use migration as a labor supply system, creates a large obstacle to any effort to defend the rights of migrants.

Instead, U.S. and Mexican unions need a common program on trade, displacement and investment, which calls for increasing the security of workers and farmers, and reducing displacement and forced migration.

Anti-immigrant policies were part of cold war politics in the U.S. labor movement. As late as 1986, the AFL-CIO supported employer sanctions, the section of U.S. immigration law passed in 1986 that essentially made work a crime for people without papers. They argued that that if undocumented workers couldn't support their families, they'd deport themselves.

The growth of the cross-border movement coincided with rise of the immigrant rights movement. In the 1990s, as labor activists pushed for support for unions in Mexico, they also organized to repeal sanctions. First the garment unions called for repeal, then SEIU, the California

Labor Federation, and others. They argued that employers used the law to threaten and fire undocumented workers to keep them from organizing unions. Unions trying to organize and grow began to see immigrants as potential members -- workers who would strike and organize. They therefore opposed the idea of pushing Mexicans back across border, because they wanted them to become active in the U.S. They saw immigrants, not just as a force on the job, but in politics. As people gained legal status and then became citizens, they could also vote and elect public officials who would act in workers' interests.

Today, unions criticize the racial profiling law SB 1070 in Arizona for the same reason -- not just that it leads to discrimination, but that it's wrong to make workers leave.

In 1999 the AFL-CIO reversed itself and called for repealing sanctions, for amnesty for the undocumented, for protecting the organizing rights of all workers, and for family reunification. The federation already had a longstanding position calling for ending guest worker programs.

Gradually, unions have seen the importance of workers with feet planted on both sides of the border. This is an important part of building a culture of solidarity. Some unions, like the UFW, have gone further and tried to develop strategic partnerships with progressive organizations in the immigrant workforce, such as the Frente Indigena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB). It has hired Oaxacan activists, fluent in indigenous languages, as organizers, and supported indigenous Oaxacan communities in protests against police harassment in cities like Greenfield in the Salinas Valley.



Indigenous Triqui women during the FIOB binational assembly.

Oaxacan immigrants today are an important and growing section of many immigrant communities in the U.S., especially the rural areas where people work in farm labor. The FIOB is one of many organizations among Oaxacans that people have brought with them from their home state, or have organized as migrants on their travels. Many of its founders were strike organizers and social activists in Oaxaca and the fields of north Mexico. Years ago they saw the organizing possibilities among people dispersed as a result of displacement, but whose communities now exist in many places in both Mexico and the U.S.

For over half a century, migration has been the main fact of social life in hundreds of indigenous towns spread through the hills of Oaxaca. That's made the conditions and rights of migrants central concerns. But the FIOB and its base communities today also talk about another right, the right to stay home. Asserting this right challenges not just inequality and exploitation facing migrants, but the very reasons people migrate.

According to the 2000 census, Hispanic American Indians (the category used to count indigenous Mexican migrants) in California alone numbered 154,000 -- undoubtedly a severe undercount. These men and women come from communities whose economies are totally dependent on migration. The ability to send a son or daughter across the border to the north, to work and send back money, makes the difference between eating chicken or eating salt and tortillas. Migration means not having to manhandle a wooden plough behind an ox, cutting furrows in dry soil for a corn crop that can't be sold for what it cost to plant it. It means that

dollars arrive in the mail when kids need shoes to go to school, or when a grandparent needs a doctor.

“There are no jobs here, and NAFTA pushed the price of corn so low that it’s not economically possible to plant a crop anymore,” says Rufino Dominguez, former binational coordinator for the FIOB, and now head of Oaxaca’s Institute for Attention to Migrants. In the 1980s, Dominguez was a strike organizer in Sinaloa and Baja California. “We come to the U.S. to work because we can’t get a price for our product at home. There’s no alternative.”

Without large scale political change most local communities won’t have the resources for productive projects and economic development that could provide a decent living. “We need development that makes migration a choice rather than a necessity -- the right to not migrate,” explains FIOB coordinator Gaspar Rivera Salgado, a professor at UCLA. “But the right to stay home, to not migrate, has to mean more than the right to be poor, the right to go hungry and homeless. Choosing whether to stay home or leave only has meaning if each choice can provide a meaningful future.”

At the same time, because of its indigenous membership, FIOB campaigns for the rights of migrants in the U.S. who come from those communities. It calls for immigration amnesty and legalization for undocumented migrants. It campaigned successfully for translation and language rights in U.S. courtrooms, and protested immigration sweeps and deportations. The FIOB also condemns the proposals for guest worker programs. “Migrants need the right to work, but these workers don’t have labor rights or benefits,” Dominguez charges. “It’s like slavery.”

Today there is increasing interest among U.S. farm worker unions in activity in Mexico, much of it concentrating on workers recruited into H-2A guest worker programs. In the past, farm worker unions opposed the programs on principle, arguing that the workers recruited were vulnerable to extreme employer exploitation, and deportation if they struck or protested. Today unions like the UFW and FLOC argue that they can organize these workers to win contracts, better conditions, and protection for their rights. But this comes at a price. Some no longer call for the elimination of guest worker programs, which exploit far more workers than those represented by unions. And if unions recruit guest workers themselves, how can they then strike or use jobsite actions against the employers hiring them?

While farm worker unions and organizations like the FIOB disagree about guest worker programs, they do agree about the rights of workers. “Both peoples’ rights as migrants, and their right to stay home, are part of the same solution,” Rivera Salgado says. “We have to change the debate from one in which immigration is presented as a problem to a debate over rights.”

For many years the FIOB was a crucial part of the political opposition to Oaxaca’s PRI government, until the PRI was defeated in the elections of 2010. Juan Romualdo Gutierrez Cortez, a schoolteacher in Tecomaxtlahuaca, was the FIOB’s Oaxaca coordinator and a leader of Oaxaca’s teachers union, Section 22 of the National Education Workers Union, and of the Popular Association of the People of Oaxaca (APPO).

The June 2006 strike by Section 22 started a months-long uprising, led by APPO, which sought to remove the state’s then-governor, Ulises Ruiz, and make a basic change in development and economic policy. The uprising was crushed by Federal armed intervention, and dozens of activists were arrested. To Leoncio Vasquez, a FIOB activist in Fresno, “the lack of human rights is a factor contributing to migration from Oaxaca and Mexico, since it closes off our ability to call for any change.”

During the conflict, teachers traveled to California from Oaxaca, and spoke at the convention of the California Federation of Teachers. Solidarity efforts between U.S. and Mexican teachers have barely started, but with the vast number of Mexican students in California schools, and with many immigrants themselves now working as teachers, the basis is growing for much closer relationships. Mexican teachers, members of Latin America’s largest union, have also organized a leftwing caucus that now controls the union structure in several states, including

Oaxaca.

During the 2006 uprising, the state government issued an order for Gutierrez' arrest, because he'd been a very visible opposition leader already for years. In the late 1990s he was elected to the Oaxaca Chamber of Deputies, in an alliance between the FIOB and Mexico's leftwing Democratic Revolutionary Party. Following his term in office, he was imprisoned by then-Governor Jose Murat, until a binational campaign won his release. His crime was insisting on a new path of economic development that would raise rural living standards, and make migration just an option, rather than an indispensable means of survival.

Gaspar Rivera-Salgado believes that "in Mexico we're very close to getting power in our communities on a local and state level." He points to Gutierrez' election as state deputy, and later as mayor of his hometown San Miguel Tlacotepec, and finally to the election of Gabino Cue as governor. The FIOB's alliance with the PRD is controversial, however. "First, we have to organize our own base," Rivera Salgado cautions. "But then we have to find strategic allies. Migration is part of globalization, an aspect of state policies that expel people. Creating an alternative to that requires political power. There's no way to avoid that."

FIOB presents an important example of another kind of binational organizing and solidarity that complements efforts by unions. It has a strong base among communities on both sides of the borders. It has a carefully worked-out program for advocating the rights of migrants and their home communities, discussed extensively among its chapters before it was adopted. And it sees the system as the problem, not just the bad actions of employers or government officials.

In Conclusion

The interests of workers in the U.S. and Mexico are tied together. Millions of people are a bridge between the two countries, and their labor movements. A blacklisted worker in Cananea one year can become a miner in Arizona the next, or a janitor organizer in Los Angeles. Who knows better the human cost of repression in Mexico than a teacher from Oaxaca in 2006, or an electrical worker who lost his or her job and pension in 2009?

Raquel Medina, a Oaxacan teacher, spoke at the 2007 convention of the California Federation of Teachers. She did more than appeal for support for Section 22. She helped teachers from Fresno and Santa Maria understand why they hear so many children in their classrooms speaking Mixteco. She helped them see that the poverty in her home state, the repression of her union, the growing number of Oaxacan families in California, and the activity of those migrants in California's union battles, are all related. She connected the dots of solidarity. Educators should go back to their schools and union meetings, she said, and show people the way the global economy functions today – how it affects ordinary people, and what they can do to change it.

The historic slogan of the ILWU (and of many unionists beyond its ranks) is “an injury to one is an injury to all.” Today, an updated version of it might say, “An attack on a union in Mexico is an attack on unions in the U.S.” Or it could say, “An attack on Mexican workers in Arizona is an attack on workers in Mexico.” Or it could say, “Organizing Mexican workers at carwashes in Los Angeles will help unions in Mexico, by increasing the power of those willing to fight for the mineros and SME.”



UFW strikers at D'Arrigo Brothers Produce Co. try to convince women working on a broccoli machine to get off the machine and join the strike.

