



# International Solidarity in Action



The relationship between the United Electrical Workers (UE) and Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT)

**Robin Alexander**



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*“Solidarity Without Borders / Solidaridad sin fronteras” graphic created by UE cartoonist Gary Huck.*

*Cover photos: TOP: Solidarity photo sent from the FAT to UE Locals 506 and 618 in Erie, PA during their 11-day strike against Wabtec in February and March of 2019. MIDDLE: UE Local 623 President Jim Cook (right) joins hands with FAT representative Felipe Ortuño at a rally in Leetsdale, Pennsylvania, just outside of Pittsburgh, October 1997. BOTTOM: UE Local 150 and Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) members in North Carolina join Global Days of Action for Trade Union Freedom in Mexico, February 2011.*

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“Robin Alexander has written what is a political memoir, an analysis of the struggle for militant, democratic unionism in Mexico, and a strong argument for international working class solidarity. This is a compelling examination of the efforts by a USA-based union — the United Electrical Workers (UE) — and an independent Mexican labor federation — Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT) — to forge a working strategic alliance. What makes this examination so interesting is that it evaluates the experience of moving beyond ‘resolutionary solidarity,’ i.e., the over reliance on passing resolutions at conventions where nothing further happens, and instead into the approaches and means that can be undertaken to build worker power across borders. This is the book that is needed to spark deeper strategic thinking in our efforts to build the international solidarity of the oppressed in this world of increasingly authoritarian capitalism.”

—Bill Fletcher, Jr., coauthor of *Solidarity Divided*, author of “*They’re Bankrupting Us*” - *And Twenty Other Myths about Unions*, and former president of TransAfrica Forum

“This timely ebook builds up to the story of labor law reform in Mexico, getting there via micro-histories of some of the struggles to win against the corrupt charro unions, worker-to-worker exchanges among UE and FAT members, and cross-border cultural projects. Consequently, the reform process really does come across as the culmination of real workers’ struggles, and not as an imposition from above, or the technical fiddling of lawyers.”

—Ashwini Sukthankar, former coordinator of the International Commission for Labor Rights and former director of global campaigns for UNITE HERE

“At a time when we need global unions perhaps more than we have ever before, the story of the UE-FAT cross-border relationship provides just the inspiration and model needed.”

— Kate Bronfenbrenner, Director of Labor Education Research at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations

“Corporate globalization has destroyed millions of good jobs in the U.S. through trade deals like NAFTA. Robin Alexander’s book demonstrates that the most effective way for workers to fight back is by building links with workers in other countries. Her account of our union’s alliance with the FAT shows how worker-to-worker exchanges can transform attitudes and lives, and how international solidarity can win real victories for working people.”

—Carl Rosen, UE General President

“As a long time member, activist, and leader of the UE and its international work, I highly recommend sister Alexander’s work and this book as critical pieces to understanding what is meant by “member-to-member” international trade union solidarity work. Her account provides valuable insights and will deepen the understanding of the necessity and potential for U.S. workers to join hands with trade unionists and workers from other countries.”

—Peter Knowlton, retired UE General President

“Robin’s book is an excellent source when it comes to understanding what international solidarity has meant for workers in a ‘right to work’ state like North Carolina. Even though we have yet to repeal the state law that prohibits collective bargaining, the lessons, tools, networks we built, petitions, delegations, workers we met, hearings, and even a few legislative actions have all been valuable parts of the UE-FAT relationship that help us keep moving forward with our eyes on the prize!”

—Larsene Taylor, retired UE Local 150 President

# Preface

By Arturo Alcalde Jusiniani\*

When we observe the impressive changes involving labor that have occurred in our country over a period of just four years, we frequently ask ourselves what were the causes: how was it possible to move from a world of corporatist control, with high levels of corruption and deception and judges who were subjugated to economic and political interests, to another model: a new system of independent justice, where workers recover their right to a free, direct and secret vote to approve and negotiate changes to their collective bargaining agreements and also to elect their union leaders. In short, we are facing a new panorama of justice and labor democracy which, while still passing through a transition period, is already reflected in various aspects of the current reality in the country.

The response to these questions about the causes of the change includes the presence of both internal and external factors. Mexican workers have struggled for their rights over the course of many years and, in doing so, turned to international solidarity to gain strength, raising awareness of the obstacles that explain the lack of democracy and low wages in the country. At the same time, the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA at the beginning of the nineties by the governments of Mexico, the U.S., and Canada opened an opportunity for organizations from the three countries to come together. They demanded that beyond trade and financial openness, there should be an agreement to achieve economic development based on justice and liberty. It was in this context that alliances emerged that over the last two decades came to work with progressive elements in our governments.

The book by Robin Alexander that you have in your hands provides an account of how seeds of solidarity were sown between unions in concrete areas which subsequently bore rich fruit. Free from academic pretensions, the author describes in the first person the details of a singular accomplishment by unions from Mexico and the United States that we would have difficulty finding in other narratives. Her book is like a journey that we are sharing with multiple people and which takes us to different places based upon a clear roadmap that can be described by the phrase: “we are not demanding the moon, just respect and a living wage.” Behind this affirmation, there is a profound commitment towards a change in favor of decent work, not only in our country but throughout the world. It has to do with a two-way street, not only from North to South, but from South to North, proof of which is the struggle of public-sector workers in North Carolina. The electoral results — rejecting rightwing governments in both countries and electing a progressive government in Mexico — are not unrelated to these efforts.

Robin constructs her story with particular sensitivity to the men and women who are engaged in social struggle. She does not take credit for triumphs or tasks that do not pertain to her, but has taken great care to mention names, and the legal, material, or financial support provided by each. What is most impressive about this beautiful text is the respect for others. To accomplish this, she has them speak in the first person, often quoting the evaluation process that took place after each exchange. She does not fall prey to the common error of self-indulgence, but despite the fact that she was a key person in building these relationships, when she describes them she gives everyone their due.

The axis of reference of the book is the solidarity pact between two organizations which discovered their affinities along the way as they built solid and permanent bonds of unity: the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT) and the United Electrical Workers (UE). The account reveals how they could easily join together based on their practices of honesty, their common interest in truly defending workers without bureaucratic atavism but, above all, as survivors of adversity. This relationship was facilitated by the

genuineness of the work and clarity that the origin of the problems that were encountered transcended national boundaries. But these sorts of relationships are not built automatically. Rather, it is necessary for there to be people who make them operative and Robin has played a fundamental role in this work, moving beyond the limitations of a union pact to create broader forms of common international action, both in a tri-national ambit (Mexico, U.S., and Canada/Québec) as well as with other countries in the world.

Those of us who worked together with Robin during many years on a common project were impressed by her tireless character; for some it was, frankly, exhausting. Antonio Villalba, a leader of the FAT said: "Let's invent some pretext to relax because, with the batteries that Robin has, no rest is possible." The sisters and brothers returned from the worker exchange trips she organized both in Mexico and in the United States very happy and satisfied, but exhausted. Robin was in a hurry to build lasting relationships. She sought to take advantage of the time available because she knew the value of those experiences. "There is no substitute for exchanges between workers," she tells us in her book, but also because she was sure that the effort to achieve them depended on the effective use of the few economic resources available, of which she also provides a clear account.

Robin's text describes several campaigns in detail, thanks to her capabilities and, without doubt, to the support of the activist and leader of the FAT, Benedicto Martínez, who is as tireless as she. The scope of the joint actions between the two organizations included different areas: union organizing; cooperatives; legal; political and also artistic, an angle which is uncommon, but present, as well. Suffice it to mention the Itapsa-Echlin case, which provided the first historic legal step towards secret ballot elections in our country, as it obligated the governments to sign off on a commitment in favor of secret ballot elections, trustworthy voter lists, and secure locations for union elections. The beautiful history of the murals in both countries illustrates another facet of the fruits achieved by this fraternal relationship.

At the present time, labor law reform is being implemented in Mexico as a result of the democratic regime under construction. As bridges are being built between the old and the new, texts such as this one by Robin Alexander acquire an additional importance due to their informative and educational character, providing a global approach that is built brick by brick, day after day. For this reason, it will be used in settings such as night-time meetings and study circles, to provide insight into the exchange of experiences, the mobilization of workers, and also the material and economic support by the rank and file that give life to solidarity. As Robin notes, the most valuable aspect of this international experience is that it is the result of various collective efforts, but always built from the bottom up.

There can be no doubt that a book such as this can only be the fruit of a great commitment by someone who has taken on the struggle for labor democracy, independence and justice in Mexico, as has Robin. Without it, much of what has been written here would not have been possible. Thank you, Robin, for the commitment you share with us. You are a part of history and of the accomplishments that we are now achieving.

*\*Arturo Alcalde Justiniani is one of Mexico's most highly regarded labor lawyers. His firm is based in Mexico City and he has dedicated more than fifty years to fighting for labor justice and provided legal representation throughout the country to labor unions, workers aspiring to form democratic unions, and workers who have been fired. He serves as legal advisor to the FAT and has provided legal counsel to many other unions and democratic movements fighting for freedom of association over many decades. In addition, he is a lecturer and author of numerous articles and books, including a publication, of which he was the lead author, containing commentary and annotations regarding the recent labor law.*

# Introduction

The following pages tell the story of the partnership between the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) and the Mexican *Frente Auténtico del Trabajo* (FAT) from my perspective as UE's first Director of International Affairs.

This became the UE's longest and deepest international relationship — we began working together in 1992 — and the range of work undertaken by our Strategic Organizing Alliance came to include organizing campaigns, international legal challenges, education, culture, fundraising, publicity, and alliances with a wide variety of unions and other organizations that were striving to create a better world. It was exciting, rewarding and challenging work and expanded organically and exponentially over several decades.

Because of the vast amount of material, I have selected several campaigns and worker-to worker exchanges that are particularly significant, while leaving out many others. A working knowledge of Mexican labor law and Mexican politics are helpful in order to appreciate the obstacles faced by workers seeking to organize independent, democratic unions in Mexico, the need for labor law reform and the tremendous victory that its accomplishment represented, so I have attempted to include essential information within the text. To the extent possible, I have placed more technical material in footnotes and appendices for those who are interested in greater detail.

Finally, although I have divided this account into sections, it is not simply chronological: a variety of types of work occurred at the same time on parallel often intersecting paths and furthered many of the same goals and objectives. As we gained experience and analyzed and learned from what we were doing, we also faced new challenges and were able to take advantage of new opportunities. While the scope and depth of the work increased rapidly, we were also able to accomplish far more because of the relationships we had built over time.

Part 1 provides an introduction to the UE and FAT and how we came to form what we called the UE-FAT Strategic Organizing Alliance. The sections that follow describe various aspects of our work.

Part 2 focuses on worker organizing, the institutional barriers faced by independent, democratic unions, and the long-term struggle to overcome those obstacles by reforming the federal labor law. The story begins in Cd. Juárez, with the organizing campaign at a large General Electric plant. This was the first major effort undertaken by the UE-FAT Alliance and was where we developed a working relationship and some of the elements that came to characterize our work. It also resulted in a defeat and included some valuable lessons about the challenges faced by independent Mexican unions in confronting the institutional obstacles posed by the government, corrupt official unions and employers and the need for labor law reform to counter the extreme version of sweetheart deals known as protection contracts.

Although we had met the FAT through our common struggle to oppose the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC), better known as the Labor Side Agreement, became a mechanism that we utilized to highlight the need for labor law reform and to begin to change the terms of public discourse. This section also includes two additional organizing campaigns and provides an overview of Mexican labor law, laying the groundwork for the final parts of the book.

Part 3 examines our efforts to build effective international relationships from a rank-and-file per-

spective and in which workers played a significant role. The first worker-to-worker delegation was composed of GE workers who traveled to Cd. Juárez to support their Mexican counterparts. These exchanges became a hallmark of the UE-FAT Alliance and I have included three examples: the exchanges of public-sector workers from the U.S., Mexico, Quebec and Japan that we called International Public Sector Convergences; a pair of organizer trainings that involved rank-and-file workers and organizers from the U.S. and Mexico; and another pair of exchanges of workers from co-ops in the U.S. and Mexico.

While these exchanges were designed to be educational and develop leadership, they also played a major role in developing the UE's work at home. As examples, I have included a discussion of how the international work had a significant and very positive impact on the efforts of UE Local 150 and Black Workers for Justice in North Carolina and in dealing with anti-immigrant sentiment in Connecticut.

This section also describes our efforts to develop on-going communication and inform and energize support through the creation of a grassroots network. Although this began during the campaign against General Electric in Cd. Juárez, it evolved to include the creation of Mexican Labor News and Analysis (MLNA); an extraordinary cultural exchange that included several murals; the publication of two histories of the FAT; and the development of a web site with an innovative educational tool that permitted the user to go shopping as a Mexican or U.S. worker and compare the costs of basic food, rent, and other items based on the wages of workers doing various types of work in Mexico and the U.S.

Our network of relationships extended far beyond the UE and FAT, so Part 4 contains a description of how our work included active participation in the World and U.S. Social Forums and culminated with the creation of the Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA) and the coordinated pressure it exerted at local, national and international levels on the Mexican government to cease its attack on Mexican unions and to reform its labor laws so that Mexican workers could exercise their right to freedom of association.

This leads to Part 5, a discussion of the long fight by Mexican unions and their international allies to remove obstacles to organizing and the stunning victory represented by Mexican labor law reform.

In the final pages, I share some reflections about international solidarity and what I have come to believe are essential elements in building relationships. Following the text is a section of additional photographs, with links to more on the website [internationalsolidarityinaction.org](http://internationalsolidarityinaction.org). For readers who are less familiar with Mexico, I have also added appendices containing the presidential terms and party affiliations of recent Mexican presidents, a more detailed explanation of Mexican labor law and "protection contracts," a glossary of organizations, and a dictionary of labor terminology in Mexico.

As with organizing, each campaign is different and a successful organizer is able to build on established practices and experience while maintaining the capacity to analyze each situation and operate with the creativity and initiative that is required. Not everything the UE and FAT attempted was successful and it was not possible to include much more than highlights here, but it is my hope that our example will prove useful to others.

## Part 1: The UE, FAT, and our Strategic Organizing Alliance



FAT and UE representatives at a 1993 meeting. Left to right: Alfredo Domínguez Arraufo (FAT), Antonio Villalba (FAT), unknown, Benedicto Martínez Orozco (FAT), Bertha Elena Luján Uranga (FAT), Amy Newell (UE), Manuel García Urrutia (FAT), David Johnson (UE).

### **The United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (UE)<sup>1</sup>**

In order to appreciate the relationship between the UE and FAT and our accomplishments, it is important to have a basic understanding of who we are and our histories, so here is a quick overview.

In the 1930s, the labor movement became a powerful force for economic and social justice in the United States. At that time, unions grew rapidly and labor won the right to organize, bargain collectively and strike, along with many of the benefits that are under attack today: the eight-hour day, minimum wage protection, social security, unemployment insurance, and many other social benefit programs.

UE was founded in March 1936 by workers who had organized local unions and workers' committees in electrical manufacturing and radio assembly plants. It was soon strengthened by the addition of machine worker locals. In November 1938 UE became the first union chartered by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), where it joined the eight other industrial unions including the United Mineworkers Union that had left the American Federation of Labor (AFL) due to increasing tensions arising from different visions about how and what kinds of workers to organize.

Labor organizers were young workers who believed in aggressive organizing. Many were communists and socialists who were committed to industrial unionism, to building a working-class political

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1. For a history of the UE, see *Them and Us: The Struggles of a Rank-and-file Union*, James J. Matles and James Higgins, Prentice-Hall, 1974 and [Them and Us Unionism](#), published by UE in 2020.

party and the creation of a socialist society. Many came from immigrant families that had dreams of a better future. They also created a new way of organizing: in contrast to the AFL, which was predominantly composed of unions of workers in the skilled crafts and which did not welcome industrial workers, the CIO unions sought to represent “wall to wall” units composed of workers throughout the plant, as well as other workers employed within the same company or industrial sector.

These concepts are embedded in the preamble to the union’s constitution which provides: “Realizing that the old craft form of trade union organization is unable to defend effectively the interests and improve the conditions of the wage earners, WE THE ELECTRICAL, RADIO AND MACHINE WORKERS (UE) form an organization which unites all workers on an industrial basis, and rank-and-file control, regardless of craft, age, sex, nationality, race, creed, or political beliefs, and pursue at all times a policy of aggressive struggle to improve our conditions.”

The structure set out in the constitution sought to ensure that UE would operate that way by mandating that officers could not be paid more than the highest paid workers, establishing annual conventions and elections, and requiring democratic control by locals over their own finances, contract demands and negotiations and the decision to strike. There is no provision for trusteeship and staff are expressly forbidden from interfering with “UE rank-and-file control, including election processes.”

Remaining true to its origins, members were involved not only in organizing, but in electing their officers and making decisions about how the union was to operate. Long-time UE officer and organizer Ernie DeMaio explained that the members elect officers who were required to report back to them about the “...policies, program, expenditures and contract negotiations which must have the prior consent of the members and their approval on all of the actions taken, and contracts negotiated, on their behalf. The essence of rank-and-file unionism is not democratic rhetoric, but democratic practice. The members run the union.”

Organizing on a plant-wide basis proved to be an effective strategy. UE and the other industrial unions grew rapidly and by the end of World War II, UE was the third largest union in the CIO, with a membership of well over half a million members. They worked at industrial giants such as GE, Westinghouse, RCA, and Honeywell as well as at smaller companies, with contracts covering workers at 1,375 plants. In reading through old issues of the UE NEWS, I was amazed by reports of multiple organizing victories in each issue.<sup>2</sup>

From early on, the U.S. labor movement had a vision of international solidarity. In the early 1900s the Wobblies or Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) believed that we were engaged in a common struggle without boundaries. For example, between 1900 and 1920 the IWW recruited Mexicans working in mines, construction, agriculture and on the railroads in the U.S. into their organizations, some of whom organized IWW locals upon their return to Mexico. IWW members from the U.S. also traveled south, organizing IWW locals in the Mexican mines where they worked, among sailors, stevedores in the port of Veracruz, and later among Mexican oil field and refinery workers. Although very different politically, even Samuel Gompers, the much more conservative head of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) spoke about internationalism as an ideal held by “liberty-loving men and women of all ages and the labor movements of all countries...”

In the fall of 1945, the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) was founded: an international organization of labor unions which included the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) from the

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2. The University of Pittsburgh Archives, where the UE Archives reside, has [digitized every issue of the UE NEWS from 1939 to 2010](#). Many stories from the UE NEWS are published online in the [UE NEWS Updates](#) section of the UE website.

United States<sup>3</sup> together with unions from the Soviet Union, Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

***So, what happened to disrupt the growth of the U.S. labor movement?*** What happened was the Cold War. UE was only one of many militant unions at that time which operated with a class conscious or left perspective. Meanwhile, companies were seeking to increase profits, avoid more New Deal legislation, and prevent organizing in the South, objectives that were threatened by the militance of the CIO unions.<sup>4</sup>

In 1946, GE's president and CEO Charles E. Wilson described the company's perspective: "The problems of the United States can be summed up in two words: Russia abroad, labor at home."

One of the remedies for the labor "problem" was the Taft-Hartley Act, which was designed to halt the organization of unskilled workers and to divide the industrial union movement. It eliminated the Wagner Act's requirement of employer neutrality, added unfair labor practice violations by unions, attempted to weaken the active shop steward systems, to fragment worker unity by encouraging separate units for craft and professional workers, prohibited strong union security provisions and secondary boycotts, and required "noncommunist affidavits." The refusal by union officers to sign these affidavits meant that their locals were no longer permitted to participate in elections held by the National Labor Relations' Board (NLRB).

Faced with increased raiding by other CIO unions, this prohibition was devastating and UE demanded that the CIO halt the raids by its affiliated unions. When the CIO failed to do so, the UE withheld its dues in protest. As explained by the union:

"...within months, a CIO convention 'expelled' UE and 10 other unions with a total membership of one million workers. The CIO joined big business, the press and politicians in smearing UE as 'communist-dominated'; the CIO chartered a new union (IUE) to take the union's place.

"UE came under ferocious attack as the anti-communist hysteria intensified in the early 1950s. Attempts were made to officially brand the union as a 'subversive organization' and to deport UE leader James Matles. UE shop leaders were fired and blacklisted, even jailed. Politicians, big business and the CIO worked closely together to destabilize UE; the union lost more than half its members."<sup>5</sup>

UE leaders were also investigated for "un-American activities" and called to testify before Senator Joseph McCarthy's Committee on Government Operations and many other congressional committees. UE hunkered down, determined to withstand the crusade against it and to continue to operate as an independent, democratic, rank-and-file union.

The large, militant left wing of the labor movement in the United States was virtually destroyed,

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3. The CIO included the more progressive wing of the U.S. labor movement; the more conservative AFL did not participate. The WFTU retained its original composition only until 1949 when serious efforts to resolve political differences failed and the non-communist affiliates withdrew and formed the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

4. The only unions that survived the onslaught and remained independent were UE and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). Although beyond the scope of this book, a summary of the ILWU's inspiring history of international solidarity as well as of the 95-day strike — where it successfully opposed the waterfront employers' union-busting efforts including the attack on its "communist leadership" and the government's use of the Taft-Hartley Act to win what it describes as "one of the finest trade union agreements ever made" — can be found in the history section of its web site at [www.ILWU.org](http://www.ILWU.org).

5. [www.ueunionm/uewho5.html](http://www.ueunionm/uewho5.html)

impacting the perspectives and policies of the unions that remained for decades to come. But the left-wing unions were not the only casualties. In joining government and corporations in their efforts, the labor movement lost its way.

The prosperity of the American economy had made it possible for both corporations to make profits and for unionized workers to earn higher wages and benefits. This also led pragmatic union leaders to succumb to the myth that labor and corporate managers have common interests and that through cooperation both would benefit, and caused many workers to view their own economic welfare as primary and to set aside the idea of broader solidarity with others, leading to reliance on arbitration rather than shop floor action.

Labor leaders came to assume the role (not to mention getting paid) as labor statesmen, cutting deals on golf courses and in the halls of Congress. And many of those leaders embraced business unionism: focusing primarily on bread-and-butter issues rather than the broad range of economic and political issues which affect our society and relying on politicians and corporations rather than on organizing as the source of labor's strength.

Meanwhile, internationally the labor movement split along ideological lines between the capitalist International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the communist unions which remained in the WFTU, and the World Confederation of Labor (WCL), a smaller Christian federation, each with regional and sectoral bodies. Instead of solidarity among labor, ideological divisions had been institutionalized.

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Although it had lost the vast majority of its membership, UE did survive with its principles intact and, as a college student, I devoured labor history including *Labor's Untold Story*<sup>6</sup> and *Them and Us* and dreamed of working for UE. The union was not hiring at the time I graduated from law school, so I headed down to South Texas where farmworkers were organizing and joined the staff of Texas Rural Legal Aid (TRLA) where I represented both individual farm workers and their unions. It was wonderful work, but seven years later when a friend told me that UE was looking for a lawyer, I was excited about the possibility of working directly for a progressive union and applied for the job. Sometimes dreams come true and in November of 1985 I started work at UE as an attorney and, some years later, after the UE moved its national office to Pittsburgh and Bob Lewis retired, as the union's general counsel.

The UE had emerged from its survival mode, had begun a generational transition to young, energetic leadership, and was reaching out to industrial workers beyond UE's traditional base as well as public-sector workers, graduate workers, and workers in right-to-work states in the South, and experimenting with new approaches to organizing. However, it had also been hit by more massive job losses as employers moved plants overseas in search of cheap labor. Overall, the union estimated that it had lost some ten thousand jobs as corporation had moved plants to Mexico.

Amy Newell, a talented organizer and leftist with a clear political vision, had been elected General Secretary-Treasurer of UE, the first woman to become a national officer of an industrial union. The responsibilities of her new position included international relations. Although UE had always had an internationalist approach, there was not a separate department and, like many unions at that time, international relationships were mostly a formality. With increasing job loss to Mexico and the debate

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6. *Labor's Untold Story*, Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America; 3rd edition (June, 1979)

over NAFTA in the early 1990's, the UE leadership became convinced that the union needed to find a labor organization it could work with in Mexico and also that it was essential to connect international work more directly with UE members and with organizing.

## **The Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT)**

After the Mexican revolution ended with the passage of the 1917 Constitution, a party was formed that bore the name *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (National Revolutionary Party). It later became the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party), known by its acronym PRI and governed for more than 71 years with virtually no competition. The PRI came to control almost everything: neighborhoods, small businessmen and farmworkers were organized into sectoral organizations within the PRI. Labor was also organized under the umbrella of the *Congreso del Trabajo (CT)*, with its largest and most notorious affiliates, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM)* or Confederation of Mexican Workers and *Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC)* or Revolutionary Confederation of Mexican Workers and Peasants.

Sectoral leaders of the party turned their membership out to vote for the PRI and were rewarded with government posts: from local mayors, to federal deputies, senators and state governors. These were positions of power that afforded the opportunity to amass great wealth through corruption.

Until the 1990s, membership in a union meant that workers were also members of the PRI. Fidel Velázquez was the General Secretary of the CTM for nearly fifty years and had accumulated such power that he could announce beforehand who would be the party's candidate and, without a doubt, that person would become the next president. Because Velázquez liked horsemanship and dressed as a cowboy or *charro*, workers referred to him as El Charro. Unions such as the CTM or CROC came to be referred to as charro unions, a pejorative term used to indicate government control or corruption, referring back to the leader who distinguished himself by his corrupt practices, betrayal of workers' interests, and control over the unions, or as official unions due to their relationship with the PRI.

In striking contrast is the *Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT)* or Authentic Workers Front, an independent and democratic labor federation composed of labor unions, worker-owned cooperatives, and farmworker and community organizations. It was founded on October 18, 1960 by groups of workers in the shoe and textile industries who believed that it was necessary to create a labor organization that truly represented workers. At that time, only corporatist or state-dominated trade unions existed, the largest of which were still the CTM and CROC.<sup>7</sup>

Over time, in addition to the industrial workers who founded the organization, the FAT grew to include farmworkers and, later, public-sector workers. A FAT affiliate in Chihuahua now represents the vast majority of municipal workers in that northern Mexican state, while another affiliate represents public-sector workers in the state of Nayarit.

The upsurge of neighborhood movements brought in community organizations and workers also organized savings and loan and production cooperatives under the banner of the FAT. The latter arose from workers' plant-based struggles during strikes or as the result of the legal distribution of assets and the decision by workers to invest the money they received as severance in workers' cooperatives.

7. Fidel Velázquez and the leaders of dozens of federations within the *Congreso del Trabajo (CT)* remained in power until they died. Following their deaths, struggles for control resulted in splits and the formation of additional federations with similar anti-democratic and corrupt practices. Today, in addition to the charro unions there are many unions that are referred to as *sindicatos blancos* or company unions, where the control is exercised by corporations rather than by the government. Quite distinct, are unions that are independent of both state and corporate control.

The FAT came to represent workers in over half the states of Mexico in national unions in industries such as textiles, auto-parts, and transportation, and many others on a local level, including service workers in Mexico City.

The FAT prides itself on its independence and democratic structure and practice, which it calls *autogestión*, or self-management. This is virtually identical to the UE's concept of rank-and-file trade unionism, but applied more broadly to include all of the sectors of the FAT. In 1989 the FAT modified its structure to include a more collective leadership to replace the traditional Secretary General. It also took steps to encourage greater participation by women throughout the organization by creating a national women's network to coordinate work on gender and equity and by providing for the representation of women in FAT's leadership body and within all of its sectors and zones.

Although the FAT was initially affiliated with the World Confederation of Labor (WCL) through its Latin American affiliate, the *Central Latinoamericana de Trabajadores (CLAT)* (Confederation of Latin American Workers), the national and regional labor organization with a Christian Democratic ideology, the FAT broke with the CLAT over the role it played in opposing liberation struggles in Central America in the 1980s.

The FAT has also played an important role over the past sixty years in the struggles of Mexican workers for freedom of association, collective bargaining and the right to strike. In the process it has helped to create and participated in coalitions including the *Red Mexicana Frente al Libre Comercio (RMALC)* or Mexican Action Network Against Free Trade<sup>8</sup> and has denounced the violations of worker rights in various international forums. The principles for which it has fought also informed the structure, practice and agenda of the *Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT)* or National Union of Workers, the federation of independent unions which it helped to found in 1997.<sup>9</sup>

## **The UE-FAT Strategic Organizing Alliance**

UE first met the FAT in 1992 when it sent its Washington Representative, Bob Kingsley, to a tri-national meeting in Zacatecas, Mexico to discuss how to best oppose the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). At that time, there was strong opposition to NAFTA in the U.S. and Canadian labor movements because of the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement and one of the principal objections was the lack of protection for workers' rights. In Mexico, the situation was very different: it was President Salinas' heyday, the economy appeared to be flourishing and the Mexican government had launched a nationalist public relations campaign that claimed that with NAFTA Mexico would finally become a first world country. It took great courage at the time to put forward a public position that NAFTA would not benefit poor and working people in Mexico or in the other NAFTA countries.

The FAT, a founder and one of the leading organizations in RMALC, was the only Mexican labor organization to take such a stand. And that came as no surprise: the FAT had a reputation and influence which greatly exceeded its size due to its principled determination to create independent, democratic unions under extremely adverse conditions. Unfortunately, because of their alignment with the government, other Mexican unions did not attend the Zacatecas meeting. Nor was there other U.S. or Canadi-

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8. RMALC is the coalition of more than 100 Mexican organizations which opposed NAFTA and has, in recent years, worked to analyze the impact of neoliberal economic policies and create affirmative proposals for change. For many years it operated out of the FAT office in Mexico City.

9. From the time the UNT was founded, FAT was elected to the position of vice-president, a recognition of the role it played in the creation and in defining and developing the structure and program of work and action of the UNT.

an labor representation due to the institutional relationships that existed at that time,<sup>10</sup> something that has changed dramatically since then.<sup>11</sup>

Soon after the Zacatecas meeting, the UE invited representatives of the FAT to Pittsburgh where they quickly worked out a framework for what would become the UE-FAT Strategic Organizing Alliance.<sup>12</sup> The organizations were both convinced that NAFTA would be a disaster for workers in all three countries. What had once been high paying union jobs with excellent benefits and working conditions were transformed into extremely low-wage jobs when corporations moved them across the border. Workers in the United States were increasingly outraged and believed that “Mexicans were stealing our jobs.” They were generally unaware that the better paying jobs in Mexico were provided by small and middle-sized businesses that were being bankrupted by the much larger transnational plants with their lower wages and benefits. Similarly, Mexican farmers were greatly concerned that the decreasing tariffs under NAFTA would flood the Mexican market, eliminating their ability to survive and forcing them to migrate.

It was agreed that the UE would host a tour of the United States by one of the FAT’s leaders so that workers in the U.S. could begin to learn about the dangers that NAFTA posed to working people and small farmers in Mexico from a Mexican perspective. That tour took place over fifteen days in the spring of 1992 when UE’s lead organizer in California, David Johnson, accompanied two representatives of the FAT to eight cities where they toured UE-represented plants, attended UE meetings, participated in rallies and met leaders of a central labor council and held joint press conferences with opponents of NAFTA.

In addition, the UE and FAT found that their interests regarding potential organizing coincided. Both were concerned about the number of jobs that had been moved by corporations, primarily to Mexico’s northern border to take advantage of the tax benefits provided by the Free Trade Zone that had been established there. These assembly plants, known as maquiladoras, operated under the protection of the Mexican government which encouraged foreign investment in exchange for a lack of environmental regulation or union interference. The UE was interested in seeing the plants organized by a union that would serve as a partner and ally in Mexico and believed that it could provide solidarity, including some leverage, where it continued to represent workers employed by those companies in the United States. The FAT was eager to organize the plants that were moving across the border, but lacked the resources to do so. A plan quickly emerged. It was agreed that the UE would provide research regarding potential targets and that the FAT would then assess the organizing potential.

UE still represented thousands of workers employed by the General Electric Company and Ron Carey, a union reformer and ally, had been elected president of the “New Teamsters” which represented workers at Honeywell. The result was a decision to focus on two plants: a General Electric (GE) plant in

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10. The *Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico* (CTM) or Confederation of Mexican Workers was notorious for its collaboration with the Mexican government. Unsurprisingly, it supported NAFTA, parroting the government line that it would make Mexico into a first world country. The AFL-CIO and Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) were both affiliates of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and had institutional relationships with the CTM, the ICFTU’s Mexican affiliate. As a consequence, both the AFL-CIO and CLC refused to work with the FAT, the only Mexican labor organization at that time that was opposing NAFTA, although several of their affiliates began to do so. Opposition by the AFL-CIO was channeled through the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), emphasizing the environmental risks posed by the maquiladora plants. Subsequently, both the CLC and then the AFL-CIO reversed their positions that they would only deal with their institutional ICFTU counterparts.

11. See footnotes 10, 18 and 63 and the discussion of the Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA) in Part 4.

12. The agreement was signed by the UE February 27 and by the FAT leadership on March 16, 1992.

Cd. Juárez and a Honeywell plant in Cd. Chihuahua. Both campaigns were to be run by the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Metálica, Acero, Hierro, Conexos y Similares (STIMAHCS)*, the metal workers' union that was a national affiliate of the FAT.

At the UE Convention that fall, UE's national Secretary Treasurer Amy Newell told the delegates that NAFTA was designed to "ratchet all of us down to the lowest possible level so that a tiny, wealthy corporate elite can benefit... It's becoming something of a platitude to say that either their wages are going to come up to ours or our wages are going to go down to theirs. We can say that from now until the end of the next century and if all we do is talk about it, that's exactly what's going to happen."

She then described UE's new alliance with the FAT and explained that the union was devoting resources to support organizing in targeted plants in Mexico that were owned by U.S. corporations that employed UE members in the U.S. "And we're going to do more than that... We're going to pledge that if the workers in those plants under the leadership of the FAT are willing to undertake the risk to struggle to form a union to raise their wages towards ours, then we're going to stand ready in this country to come to their defense." Speaking to UE delegates at the union's convention the following year, Bertha Luján, one of the FAT's three national leaders declared: "Unity and solidarity across borders is the only real possibility to confront in a meaningful way the new power of capital."

Since the union's international work was increasing, the UE decided to create a new position as Director of International Affairs and invited me to assume those responsibilities. I was both honored and excited. I welcomed the opportunity to develop the international work in a way that was consistent with the union's principles and traditions as a left, member-led union and to build a new kind of international relationship focused on organizing and based on rank-and-file solidarity. Yet, I was also awed and somewhat intimidated by the prospect of trying to move the UE's legacy forward in a new way.

## Part 2: Organizing Campaigns and the Fight for Labor Rights



Echlin worker María Villela of UE Local 1090 in Irvine, CA addresses a rally at the Department of Labor calling on Echlin to respect workers' rights in all three NAFTA countries, as UE Director of Organization Bob Kingsley (right) listens.

### FAT Takes on GE in Cd. Juárez

Although the campaign at Honeywell never really got off the ground, there was great enthusiasm among GE workers at *Compañía Armadora* or *CASA*, which manufactured small motors, the same product previously produced by UE members in Decatur, Indiana.

Approximately 950 workers at the plant faced problems ranging from the failure to properly pay overtime to serious health and safety violations. GE was well known for its union-busting approach and GE management actively obstructed the union's organizing efforts in a variety of ways, including requiring workers to get on and off buses inside company property in order to prevent receipt of union literature, snatching fliers out of their hands, and terminating or pressuring over one hundred workers into "voluntary" resignations.

One of my first tasks as Director of International Affairs was to accompany a group of UE workers from General Electric plants in California, Ohio and Pennsylvania to Cd. Juárez to learn about the situation and provide encouragement. Despite the obstacles, the campaign had taken off and victory seemed within reach.

The lead organizer, Benedicto Martínez, had led an extraordinary winning streak: fourteen orga-

nizing victories in a row without a single loss. Prior to his election as one of the FAT's leaders, he had worked for many years as a machine operator at a U.S.-based transnational, Sealed Power. After organizing the workers there, he was elected General Secretary of STIMACHS, the Metal Workers Union affiliated with the FAT. He continued to serve as General Secretary of STIMAHCS, but went on leave from his plant in 1991 when he was elected to the national leadership of the FAT. From its inception, Martínez also served as the Mexican coordinator for the UE-FAT Strategic Organizing Alliance.

In the border region, unlike in much of Mexico, most industrial plants were non-union because this was one of the incentives employed by the government to attract foreign investment. Where no union had already been certified, much simpler legal procedures applied: instead of having to seek an election to determine which union represented a majority, the union seeking to represent the workers was only required to file its proposed contract along with a strike notification. This put the employer on notice that it had to either accept the contract, negotiate something different or face a strike. This gave the union significant leverage, so at the point that STIMAHCS and the workers determined that it was time to move forward, they were in high spirits and ready to take on the company. Prior to the union campaign the buses that transported the workers had picked up and dropped them off outside the plant. But, once the campaign began, the company moved them inside the plant gates to keep workers from taking union fliers as they arrived or left work. As workers became enthusiastic, instead of furtively accepting leaflets, they eagerly reached outside the bus windows to take them from Martínez and the other organizers. Meanwhile, during shift change, workers would call back and forth to each other, chanting "Sindicato! Sindicato!"

However, when Martínez went to file the demand for recognition and strike notification with the tripartite *Junta Federal de Conciliación y Arbitraje*, the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board in Cd. Juárez, the clerk seemed agitated, told him to wait five minutes and then rushed off. When he returned, it was to tell Martínez that he could not accept the paperwork because it was addressed to the Junta. "But that is the institution receiving it!" exclaimed Martínez. He was then informed that it should be addressed to the president of the board (*Ciudadano Presidente de la Junta*) instead of to the *Honorable Junta*. He demanded to speak to the president, who confirmed what the clerk had previously told him. When Martínez protested that the president was not the entire Junta, just one of the three representatives, he was told: "That is my rule and if you don't like it you know what you have to do." Since an appeal would have taken five or six months and workers were ready, he made the required change and presented the petition a second time. Not surprisingly, it was rejected again for another "error" in how it was written.

Since it was clear that the Junta was not about to consider the demand for recognition, Martínez and the FAT's attorney, Arturo Alcalde, traveled to Cd. Chihuahua for a meeting with the General Secretary of Government, the second in command after the Governor. There, the FAT was informed with remarkable candor that their case would not move forward. They were told that they were an independent union and the economic interests — given that the petition involved General Electric — were simply too great. They continued to press the issue and after several additional meetings a compromise was reached: a "consultation" would take place by secret ballot asking the workers if they wanted a union or not. However, they would have no legal right to enforcement under the labor law in the event of a positive outcome. Anticipating an overwhelming victory, STIMAHCS accepted, concluding that with a demonstration of strength they would have greater leverage in forcing the company to deal with them.

They had not counted on the anti-union campaign orchestrated by the company. Work ground to a halt as management held captive audience meetings and hosted barbecues for the workers. In a blatantly sexist move, the company selected some of the most beautiful women workers and had them

accompany ice cream carts and hand out cones throughout the plant. They were given costumes to wear that had very short skirts and a band across the chest declaring “No Union!” To drive the point home, workers who had met with the UE were fired.<sup>13</sup>

Yet up until the last day, STIMAHCS still believed it would win. On that afternoon, Martínez was in his office when one of the most militant and committed of the workers came into the office. He was both depressed and angry and told Martínez that “they were screwed.” He had just come from a captive audience meeting where three people had spoken. The first told the workers that he had formerly been with the CTM and explained that union leaders were millionaires, that they never did anything for workers, that they forced them to go to marches and fined them if they didn’t go and went on at length bad-mouthing unions.

The second person who spoke was the Plant Manager. He had the proposed contract that STIMAHCS had attempted to file with the Labor Board in his hand and went through the provisions, cynically assuring the workers that the company hadn’t realized that this was all they had wanted and that “we can give you this and more.”

He told Martínez that the third speaker was from New York and that he had “spoken so convincingly that I left thinking that it wasn’t necessary to have a union and it wasn’t until I crossed the street that I realized what had happened.”

He was not the only one swayed and, as he predicted, the union lost. In evaluating the defeat, it was evident to the UE and FAT that one key element was the anti-union campaign: although STIMAHCS was more than prepared to deal with the threats and violence that were common during organizing campaigns in Mexico, this was the first time it had faced a psychological campaign.

Despite the loss, this initial organizing effort actually represented the first secret-ballot election in Mexican labor history. In addition, the way in which UE and FAT came to work together had its origins in that campaign. From the beginning, our relationship was based on mutual respect — on solidarity not charity. There was also frequent communication and clarity about decision-making: the FAT was responsible for final decisions regarding work in Mexico, as the UE was for work in the U.S. As our work developed, we tried to always do things in a bi-lateral way, both in terms of supporting each other’s organizing work as well as with all of our subsequent educational and cultural exchanges.

UE built strong support for the FAT in the U.S. during and after the campaign, including the creation of a grassroots network that provided financial and other kinds of support. The solidarity efforts that were begun during that campaign, along with the first worker to worker delegation, became touchstones of our work.

## **Financial Challenges and the Creation of CETLAC**

During the GE campaign, UE had become concerned about how we would be able to support workers in the event of a strike and began to create a solidarity network composed of UE members and officers as well as activists and workers from other unions. We also sent periodic updates and set up a solidarity account for those who wanted to contribute. One GE local donated a fax machine, another donated a typewriter, an Iowa local donated \$400 towards the purchase of a car, while several other UE

13. The UE and Teamsters organized a tour of 13 cities by two of the fired workers and filed the first complaints under the Labor Side Agreement of NAFTA to protest the discharges and raise awareness of the violations of workers’ rights in Mexico. GE Chairman Jack Welch was also pressed to offer reinstatement to the fired workers by Seamus Finn of the Oblate Conference Justice and Peace Office at the GE shareholder meeting in the spring of 1994.

locals organized plant gate collections or voted to sell union jackets and hats to raise funds or to make contributions from union funds. One local asked its members to contribute the \$10.00 they normally received on Thanksgiving, and most did so. We also received many contributions from individuals and other unions as a result of the tour with the fired GE and Honeywell workers.

Following the GE campaign, the FAT analyzed the situation and concluded that the lack of information and the fact that many workers came from different states, often from rural areas where they lacked even the experience of working in an industrial plant, meant that it was necessary to establish an educational center that would provide support for organizing, as well as education about labor rights and other areas of interest to workers.

In hindsight, it was clear that the UE had little understanding of the institutional barriers that democratic unions faced in Mexico. As we learned about the obstacles, we came to realize that not only was it necessary to provide support for organizing campaigns, but that we needed to join our partner's struggle for labor rights and to change a system that made it extremely difficult to ever win an election. To the UE's credit, it concluded that it was in for the long haul, confirming what Amy Newell had told the UE delegates in its 1994 convention: "We need to look at the UE-F.A.T. Alliance as one small step in what is a very huge and enormous process that will take decades to accomplish."<sup>14</sup>

As the FAT established the educational center in Cd Juárez that they called the *Centro de Estudios y Taller Laboral, AC* or Labor Workshop and Study Center (CETLAC), I set up a non-profit organization with its own board which we called the UE Research and Education Fund (UEREF) so that we could begin to solicit funds from foundations. The Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock provided the first grant which enabled the FAT to buy a computer and provided consistent support for many years, along with several other small progressive foundations.

At that time, Cd. Juárez was home to more than 300 factories owned by U.S. corporations that employed more than 120,000 workers. CETLAC's opening was celebrated by over 100 trade unionists from the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, maquila workers, international solidarity organizations, educators and several members of the Mexican Congress. Benedicto Martínez expressed the optimism among the participants:

"We are here this afternoon in this Center with the hope that it will become a center for workers, a center for those who struggle, a center of education where we can plan a better world for workers."

UE's National President John Hovis spoke about the alliances between corporations to control money and jobs, concluding: "Just because they have drawn borders that separate our feet, they can't separate our hearts and our minds..."

CETLAC operated at a number of levels. Initially, organizers passed out fliers at industrial plants, organized workshops and arranged for a local attorney to provide legal counsel and assistance for workers who were fired. It also assisted workers who were interested in organizing, although it was an uphill battle at that time to organize independent, democratic unions in industrial plants along the border where one of the government's priorities was to encourage investment in maquila plants by providing

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14. The officers of both the UE and FAT were enthusiastic about the work of the Alliance over time, recognizing that organizing victories were extremely difficult to achieve given the institutional obstacles involved and recognizing the value of the relationship and its accomplishments over the course of several decades during which there were gradual changes in leadership in both of our organizations.

infrastructure and tax breaks and keeping them free from “onerous” government regulations or real unions.

Having a base in Ciudad Juárez turned out to be extremely important for the FAT. In addition to assisting workers in several plants to democratize their unions, CETLAC staff worked closely with the new union leadership at the Protecto-Deco company, a GE affiliate which was represented by the FAT’s *Sindicato Gremial de Promotores, Sub-promotores, y Representantes de Ventas en General del Estado de Nuevo Leon*, providing guidance to workers in setting up union committees and negotiating a new collective bargaining agreement.

In the state of Chihuahua, municipal workers began leaving their old, official union, *La Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado (FSTSE)* in droves, joining a newly established labor federation, the *Federación de Sindicatos Municipales del Estado de Chihuahua*, an affiliate of the FAT. Chihuahua also became home to two new locals in the FAT’s national transportation union: 100 truck drivers who hauled wood and 200 mining transport drivers.

CETLAC also assisted workers in the informal sector to organize, including workers who parked cars, and became a trusted resource for journalists and others who were concerned about conditions along the border.

### **Fighting to Win Elections also Meant Fighting for Institutional Change: Challenges to Protection Contracts and the Institutional Barriers Preventing Freedom of Association**

As organizing on the border had moved to a slower track, UE did a thorough analysis of UE employers and the location of sister shops around the world and began to identify union allies in other countries and build relationships with them.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, together with the FAT we began to target companies with plants in the interior of Mexico and, over the course of a number of campaigns, we gained a deeper understanding of the obstacles they faced. Although I am sure that my Mexican counterparts were just as appalled at the thought that most U.S. workers have no legal right to job security or free health care and can be fired for virtually any reason, and that in the United States an employer had no obligation to respect legal strikes and could bring in strikebreakers with impunity, many of the practices I came to know during the course of my work with the FAT left me with a similar sense of outrage. Perhaps the most offensive was the system of “protection contracts” that served to protect employers, and the way that the official unions and the state itself collaborated to deny workers their rights.<sup>16</sup>

While it was clear that labor law reform was needed, for any progress to be made it was essential that there be a change in the public attitude and discourse about labor rights because all of the elements of the institutionalized repression of freedom of expression were considered totally normal. In fact, it

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15. Although the focus here is on the UE’s relationship with the FAT, from early on UE worked to build relationships with labor organizations in other countries with an emphasis on sister shops. This permitted us to obtain information and international support from other unions for organizing, bargaining, grievance handling and other activities and to provide assistance to them. Over time, we developed close relationships with the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT)* in Brazil, *Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT)* in France, ZENROREN in Japan, New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) in India as well with many unions in Canada and Québec. (Workshops were presented at District Council and staff meetings to focus attention on transnationals and encourage UE locals and provide them with tools to develop international relationships. See UE NEWS April, 2002 “Sister shops: Building solidarity in the Global Economy” and “Stepping Stones to International Solidarity” pp. 8-9).

16. For a very brief history of Mexican labor law and a more detailed description of the ways in which the law at that time made it virtually impossible to organize an independent union, see Appendix 2.

was the FAT and their lawyers who were dismissed as dreamers who were a little crazy when they spoke of the need for secret-ballot elections, the elimination of protection contracts, independent labor judges or registries of unions and contracts.

With few options available, we decided to try to make use of the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC), popularly known as the Labor Side Agreement of NAFTA.<sup>17</sup> NAFTA had been approved by the U.S. Congress despite tremendous popular opposition.<sup>18</sup> Workers and unions — including UE — were extremely critical of the Labor Side Agreement from the beginning because both the procedures and standards for obtaining sanctions appeared to be prohibitively time consuming and restrictive, making it highly unlikely that sanctions would ever be imposed.<sup>19</sup>

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17. The terrific work done by popular organizations to promote “fair” rather than “free” trade, meant that President Clinton did not initially have the votes he needed to obtain the passage of NAFTA through the U.S. Congress, so he effectively bought the votes which were required for approval. More than one hundred promises were made to 62 members of Congress. Among the more egregious: \$300 million was allocated for C-17 cargo planes to be built by a contractor in the district of a Texas legislator; two international air routes to London from cities within districts of legislators from Tennessee and North Carolina; a million-dollar subsidy to a shipyard in the district of a Massachusetts Congressman; and the list goes on.

Another factor that facilitated the passage of NAFTA was the inclusion of labor and environmental side agreements. The labor side agreement provided that each of the three participating countries had a National Administrative Office (NAO) which was authorized to hear complaints of labor law violations in the other two NAFTA countries. The theory behind this structure was that a violation of labor rights in one country constituted an unfair trade advantage with respect to the other two.

18. The heart of that opposition came from rank-and-file workers who were fed up, saw NAFTA as a symbol of what was wrong, and pushed their leadership to take a stand. They were frightened by the loss of jobs overseas, shocked by the decline in strength and numbers in the labor movement, and they believed that it was time for a change. Unfortunately, opponents were unsuccessful in defeating the alliance between the transnationals and both Republicans and Democrats in their all-out support of NAFTA.

Fortunately, workers in AFL-CIO unions were more successful in changing the direction of the labor movement. The election of John Sweeney, Richard Trumka and Linda Chavez-Thompson in 1995 to the leadership of the AFL-CIO reflected that desire for change and resulted in some very significant reforms. For the first time in decades, the AFL-CIO began to put resources into organizing and, not surprisingly, the workers who were most interested in organizing were women and people of color. The AFL-CIO also began to replace the cold warriors and spies who conducted their international affairs with younger, far more progressive people who had a different approach to international solidarity. And, also not surprisingly, for the first time in decades the labor movement began to have a positive image.

19. The NAALC addressed only the labor practices of the participating governments, and established three tiers of protection for labor rights. The first tier encompassed freedom of association and the right to organize, the right to bargain collectively, and the right to strike. The second tier covered forced labor, discrimination, equal pay for men and women, workers’ compensation, and migrant labor. The third and final tier safeguarded labor rights, including child labor, minimum wage, and occupational safety and health protections. In addition, six articles set forth broader obligations and included requirements that each party maintain high labor standards, enforce its labor laws, and comply with various procedural guarantees.

Violations of first-tier rights led to a review by the NAO located in the country where the petition was filed. The NAO could recommend that the Secretary of Labor request a “ministerial consultation,” a process that entailed the participation by the labor departments of the countries in a program designed to clarify and resolve outstanding issues. However, cases could not be brought directly against companies, so relief such as reinstatement, back pay or other compensation was not available to workers. In addition, since there were no discovery mechanisms available and the NAOs lacked subpoena power, access to information was effectively limited to what was voluntarily provided by either the company or government.

The same mechanisms available under the first tier of protection applied to violations of the principles articulated in the second tier, as well as the utilization of an Evaluation Committee of Experts, which was comprised of individuals from outside the NAALC who were enlisted to make non-binding recommendations on the issues presented.

Violations of third-tier rights were subject to review, evaluation, and ultimately, arbitration between the parties. Arbitration would result in a report by an arbitral panel of five experts, detailing the panel’s factual findings, its evaluation of whether there had been a “persistent pattern of failure,” and recommendations for remedying any infractions, which had to be incor-

Nevertheless, we thought that in the GE and Honeywell cases a vigorous investigation which would focus public attention on the company's egregious violations would be of value in highlighting some of the institutional barriers faced by democratic unions. At the request of the FAT, the UE and IBT filed the first complaints with the U.S. NAO on behalf of the Mexican workers who were fired by GE and Honeywell.<sup>20</sup>

The reception by the NAO was terrible. Its staff acted as if they had done us an immense favor by accepting the GE and Honeywell cases, and an even greater one by ordering a public hearing. They refused to request documents from the company and acted offended when we objected to their insistence on holding the hearing in Washington D.C. rather than on the border so that workers would have been able to testify. Representatives from the companies were not required to attend or testify. Nor would they permit us to amend the GE complaint to include the violations related to the election. At the hearing, they only permitted a maximum of ten minutes for each witness and refused to provide simultaneous translation — or any translation from English to Spanish to enable the Spanish speaking witnesses to understand what was being said in English. They also refused to permit any participation by the lawyers for the Petitioners and denied entry during the hearing to all electronic media, limiting publicity regarding the case. Not surprisingly, during the hearing they asked very few questions of the witnesses, exhibiting a great lack of interest and disrespect.

Our concerns about the shoddy investigation and hearing were borne out by the report itself.<sup>21</sup> The NAO reviewed the testimony in an extremely cursory fashion, generally ignored the evidence presented, and failed to even request ministerial consultations. We had been successful in obtaining some publicity, but the time and effort involved led us to question whether it had been worthwhile to use the process.

Martínez and Fernando Castro and Ofelia Medrano, the two workers who were fired by GE and Honeywell, received a far more enthusiastic reception on the 13-city tour organized for them by the UE and Teamsters. They spoke with rank-and-file members, officers and staff from a wide variety of unions as well as with members of Congress, city officials, congressional aides, students, community activists, and reporters from newspapers, magazines, radio and television. In Pittsburgh, the home of UE, the City Council presented them with a proclamation declaring the week that included their visit “Labor Rights Week.”

## **The Echlin Workers Alliance**

One of the principles UE stressed in both its domestic and international work was the importance of building links between unions representing workers employed by the same company. Some years after the GE and Honeywell campaigns, we helped build a trinational union alliance that came to include some 5,000 workers represented by a dozen unions at Echlin (later purchased by Dana), a transnational

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porated into a plan for resolution of the violation. Only if a Party failed to implement the plan could a monetary fine could be assessed; and only a Party's failure to pay the fine could result in the suspension of NAFTA benefits. In fact, no cases ever reached arbitration.

20. [See U.S. NAALC Submissions on Department of Labor website](#)

21. Although the UE did file a supplemental complaint regarding violations related to the election, after receiving the NAO report finding that there was “no basis” for action on the unions' complaints, UE decided to withdraw it, citing the agency's failure to hold the hearings in a location that would have permitted workers to participate, its failure to conduct a meaningful investigation and poor track record. In the letter informing the NAO of its decision to withdraw its complaint, UE's president wrote that the union would have no further dealings with the agency until it began to meet its responsibility to protect workers' rights.

auto parts manufacturer operating in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. The New York Times described it as “the first joint effort by workers for the same corporation in all three countries of North America.”<sup>22</sup>

One of the campaigns supported by that alliance was also undertaken by the FAT’s metal workers’ union, STIMAHCS, and involved a brake plant known as ITAPSA, located just outside of Mexico City.

The predominantly young workers had suffered serious exposure to asbestos and solvents in the course of their work. Not surprisingly, there were chronic deficiencies in worker protection, training, the labeling of chemicals and an inspection system where inspectors were clearly not competent to detect violations related to occupational exposures or disease and where a minor slap on the wrist was the most serious sanction assessed.

Although workers were eager to change to a democratic union so that they would be able to address their problems and STIMAHCS was able to obtain an election, the *junta*, company and official union worked closely together to ensure that the CTM would remain as the union at the plant and that STIMAHCS would be defeated. Among the obstacles that were raised:

- The workers were unable to get a copy of their contract;
- The company alleged that STIMAHCS did not possess a registro to represent workers in the auto parts industry because it was a metal workers’ union;
- Fifty two workers were fired for union activity. Their cases were considered to be individual cases. There is no unemployment compensation system in Mexico and by accepting the severance due under Mexican law, they were required to give up their rights to reinstatement;
- In some cases where workers refused to give up their rights and were eventually reinstated, they were discharged a second time because the company claimed that the union invoked the exclusion clause;
- The labor board switched the date of the election the day before it was to occur, failed to notify STIMAHCS and when union activists showed up early to give encouragement to other workers they were videotaped by the company and fired that afternoon;
- The night before the election the company allowed the CTM to bring approximately 170 thugs, some wielding metal rods, clubs and guns, into the plant and workers had to vote out loud in front of representatives of the labor board, company, and official union.
- The Mexican government officials conducting the election ignored the intimidation, even when one of the STIMAHCS representatives was attacked while attempting to verify the credentials of those claiming to be workers. They refused to suspend the election and then certified the CTM as the winner.

In actions at Echlin’s shareholders meeting, the Echlin Workers’ Alliance stood up together to back its commitment that an injury to one Echlin bargaining unit was an injury to all. “We took over that otherwise polite and orderly meeting of very wealthy people,” said Bob Kingsley who had by then been elected Director of Organization. The Alliance also made a decision to file complaints in the U.S. and Canada on behalf of workers whose rights had been violated during the course of the election.

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22. “After 4 years of Nafta, Labor is Forging Cross-Border Ties,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1997, Section A. p.1

Since our experience in the GE and Honeywell cases, various organizations had presented additional complaints and it appeared that there was a greater receptivity by the U.S. NAO to the claims which were presented and an increased willingness to handle cases in a manner which facilitated the collection of evidence. In subsequent cases, the NAO had held hearings at places more convenient to petitioners, permitted witnesses more time in which to present their testimony, and provided simultaneous translation. In addition, Fast Track legislation had been defeated, so that there was also a political incentive for the NAO to handle cases in a manner that would enable the Clinton Administration to claim that the NAALC was effective.

We had also learned from our prior experience. The U.S. case, which was filed on December 15, 1997,<sup>23</sup> was structured to emphasize the practices by the Mexican government that the FAT and its lawyers considered to be the most serious violations of rights: the lack of a secret ballot election; the lack of a public registry of unions and contracts; and the lack of impartiality of the juntas. Bob Kingsley was the first person to testify and placed the case in the context of NAFTA:

“We are here because the Echlin Corporation has visited all manner of workers’ rights abuse on employees of its Itapsa and American Brakeblock plants in Mexico — and because an injury done to these workers injures and reduces the rights of workers throughout North America.

“We are also here because the Mexican government has done nothing — I repeat, nothing — to stop Echlin’s abuse of workers’ rights. We are here on behalf of all workers who are paying the hidden price of NAFTA.”

The Canadian case emphasized the lack of a viable health and safety inspection system.<sup>24</sup>

We organized dozens of unions, community, human, civil rights, and faith organizations from the U.S., Mexico and Canada to join us as petitioners, including the AFL-CIO, the CLC, and the UNT — the first time that any of the three federations had participated in a complaint under the labor side agreement of NAFTA. We also had significant support from progressive legal organizations: The International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL) conducted its own investigation and submitted a report<sup>25</sup> and the Center for Constitutional Rights<sup>26</sup> subsequently coordinated the drafting and submission of the post-hearing brief.

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23. The U.S. Petition was drafted by Dan Kovalik of the USW, who joined me as co-counsel, along with Earl Brown, General Counsel for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT).

24. That case was handled primarily by Mark Rowlinson of the Canadian National Office of the United Steelworkers and Jeffrey Sacks from the Canadian Association of Labor Lawyers (CALL) who, along with their colleagues, did a remarkable job in discrediting the company’s contention that it provided a clean and safe workplace. This aspect of the case was particularly heartbreaking to me: the workers were quite young and exposed to asbestos and solvents in the course of their work, substances that were very likely to cause serious health problems later in their lives. [See U.S. NAALC Submissions on Department of Labor website.](#)

25. From the time I had been in law school I had been active in the National Lawyers Guild (NLG). See [www.NLG.org](http://www.NLG.org). Through its International and Labor Committees I came to work with an incredible network of progressive lawyers who provided support in various ways. Jeanne Mirer organized and participated in the IADL investigation referenced above and soon after became the moving force behind the International Commission for Labor Rights (ICLR) which she formed in 2001. The Commission describes itself as: a “global network of lawyers and labor experts committed to advancing workers’ rights through legal research, advocacy, cross-border collaboration, and the cutting-edge use of international and domestic legal mechanisms.” See [www.laborcommission.org](http://www.laborcommission.org). We also developed close ties with [CALL](#), based in Canada and Québec and with the [Asociación Nacional de Abogados Democráticos \(ANAD\)](#) in Mexico.

26. <https://ccrjustice.org/>

This time, the NAO decision concluded that there were serious problems in all of the areas in which we had presented testimony and, while the decision was not all that we had hoped for, it laid strong groundwork for serious consultations on a ministerial level.

However, it was not until May 18, 2000, almost two years later, that the consultations resulted in an agreement with the Mexican Ministry of Labor.<sup>27</sup> A review of the terms left those of us from the U.S. and Canada highly skeptical of the process. Instead of firm commitments to change policies and practices which constituted major violations of Mexican and international law, we found platitudes, commitments only to “promote” change, rather than to change itself, and more seminars. Yet, our partners in Mexico were far more sanguine about the outcome, citing the commitments made by the Mexican government. They subsequently attached the agreement to promote secret-ballot elections in all subsequent requests for elections that they filed. They were also right that this marked a major turning point in the national debate over labor law reform.

## **DMI (formerly Metaldyne)**

One of the most successful organizing campaigns of the UE-FAT Strategic Organizing Alliance took place at the Metaldyne auto-parts plant in the the southern part of Mexico City. It was a sister shop to a UE plant in Edon, Ohio and both manufactured suspensions systems for automobiles. It was also a textbook case of the sorts of obstacles that could be placed in the path of a democratic union by the combined power of the employer, state and official unions.

When STIMAHCS first filed its petition seeking an election, the company claimed that it had filed the election petition with the wrong *junta* or labor board.<sup>28</sup> It subsequently became clear that the company had previously filed two collective bargaining agreements that it had signed with two different unions (where the officers were the same but held different positions) with two different *juntas* — the *junta local* and the *junta federal* — although both contracts covered the same group of workers. Instead of imposing sanctions against the company or official unions for illegal conduct, the junta used it to justify additional delays. Further delays were caused by other CTM unions that filed multiple election petitions, but then failed to even appear.

There were also serious organizational challenges: some forty workers were fired in an early stage of the campaign. Although the company claimed that the discharges were all justified based on tardiness or some other fault, it caused STIMAHCS to shift to a much more underground strategy. Of those who had been fired, six workers were determined to democratize their workplace and elect a real union. Refusing to accept severance and move on, they fought for their right to reinstatement. When ordered reinstated by the junta, they insisted on returning to their previous jobs and turned down the many thousands of dollars offered by the company to resign. One activist was offered more than \$10,000 and when he turned it down was asked to “tell me an amount.” When the workers insisted on exercising their rights to reinstatement, they were fired a second time.

Although it took two years from the time the petition was filed to get the junta to order an election, it finally did so on October 7, 2010. By then, workers in Mexico had won the right to secret ballot elections. However, this one was anything but fair. Notice of the election was served on the union later that day, informing them that the election would take place ***the following day at 5:00 pm.***

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27. [See U.S. NAALC Submissions on Department of Labor website](#)

28. Mexico had both local and federal labor boards, with the latter covering what are considered strategic industries. Although automobile assembly and auto parts were considered strategic and within the jurisdiction of the federal labor board, in this case workers had a contract that had been filed locally, leading STIMAHCS to file its election petition accordingly.

This posed a significant organizational problem. For the company and CTM to stop orchestrating delays and the junta to order the election, the company had to believe that it could easily win. STIMAHCS had accomplished this by going deeply underground, encouraging workers to be patient rather than building momentum for an election. Now, they had only one day to prepare the workers and get ready to challenge the list of “eligible” voters which included the head of labor relations.

STIMAHCS rapidly organized a meeting with leaders from the plant to determine how best to proceed. The union quickly learned that the company had failed to inform workers in the plant of the upcoming election. They were surprised, but uncertain what this might mean and were in the midst of a discussion about what they should do when they received a call from one of the workers at the plant: he had been notified by the company that he would be one of the ten workers from each shift who would be leaving by bus for a training event the following day. With this information, the union was able to design its strategy: it had to beat those 30 votes without alerting the company or official union that it had learned of their plan. If they raised any suspicions, it would likely result in a move to delay the election yet again along with additional discharges of those suspected by the company of being involved as punishment to them and as a warning to the other workers.

The union organizers determined that they would need to focus primarily on the third shift. They set up cots in the FAT’s office so that the third shift workers could get some sleep before the election. They also informed the most trusted workers from the first shift, who traveled an hour and a half by subway after they got off work, then gathered secretly with those who had arrived from the third shift at the metro station closest to the labor board to wait. They knew that if the company or official union got wind of their presence, they would move to scuttle the election at the last moment.

The company, official union, its lawyers, and thugs were relaxing inside the labor board along with the workers they had selected. Only after the legal proceeding had officially started and as the election was set to begin, did the workers emerge from the metro and file into the Labor Board ready to vote. The result of the vote was that, of a total of 59, 43 voted in favor of STIMAHCS, 10 against, one was annulled and five were not permitted to vote. This sent a clear message to the company that most of the workers it had chosen had actually voted for an independent union!

Members of UE Local 715 in Edon, Ohio had shown solidarity with their counterparts in Mexico at various points throughout the campaign. UE Local 715 Vice President Pat Berry visited the Mexican shop and met with the human resources and plant managers. Local 715 members signed a petition and continued to press the company to deal fairly with their Mexican counterparts. Following the election, the DMI union leaders wrote to their UE counterparts:

“...from now on we would like for our relationship with you to be closer and more direct, and that this will permit us to collaborate more with you. We know that we have a lot of work ahead of us, but we are also aware and convinced that a change such as this is what is needed by the majority of workers in Mexico and other parts of the world. We are therefore willing, whenever you ask us, to provide our testimony so that it may serve as inspiration and motivation to other workers who are experiencing a situation similar to the one we have just lived through.”

UE Director of Organization Bob Kingsley declared: “This is one of the more significant strides in the history of our strategic alliance with the Authentic Workers Front (FAT). The unity of workers employed by the same company and represented by fighting democratic unions has been a central goal of that alliance from its very inception.”

Although STIMAHCS had won the election against incredible odds, the workers continued to encounter serious opposition from the company and official unions. However, by the following year, the labor board finally certified the election, the FAT won all of the appeals, and the company finally negotiated a first contract with STIMAHCS. It had been a long and rocky road: as explained by Benedicto Martínez, “During the entire time, the charro union manipulated the legal process by having other unions present petitions in order to delay the proceedings, while the company continued to fire workers it viewed as allied with our movement.”

But just when the workers thought they could finally focus on problems in the plant, an official union that they had previously defeated during the legal maneuverings reemerged to threaten their hard-won victory. Among the unions that had intervened prior to the election to delay the legal process was the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Metal Mecánica, Automotriz, Similares y Conexos de la República Mexicana (SITIMM)* or National Union of the Sector of Metal, Automotive, Similar and Allied Workers of the Republic of Mexico, an affiliate of the CTM. On April 22, 2010, it had presented a petition that was denied by the labor board, then filed an appeal and won. A court subsequently ordered that the petition be reinstated — although now against STIMAHCS, since it had been certified in February of 2011 by the authorities as having won the election the previous October. So STIMAHCS, the company, and the charro union were called before the labor board on July 4 for a hearing to determine the date for a new election. All three parties agreed that there should be a quick election. The Federal Arbitration and Conciliation Board then ordered that the election take place on July 6 at 4:30 p.m. at the plant.

Martínez described the election as follows:

“The three of us who were to represent STIMAHCS in the election arrived early on July 6 in order to avoid a confrontation with thugs in front of the plant. This strategy served us well, as later in the day there were a lot of goons who at times attempted to block the front gate, although they were prevented from doing so by the local police who had been sent by the municipality.

“Starting around 3:00 in the afternoon, union brothers and sisters who supported us began to arrive. Some of them who were not well known were able to hang out near the thugs without being detected, as the area is extremely busy because of the proximity to the metro exit and the bus stop. In that way, with the miracle of cell phones, from quite early we were able to obtain information about what was going on outside of the plant.

“By 4:15, when the labor authorities arrived to hold the election, there had been no incidents. This reassured us that if everything went as we had calculated with the workers, the results would be legally certified, because one of my concerns was that even if the charros didn’t show up in sufficient numbers to win, if they thought they were going to lose they would try to prevent the election from taking place in order to gain more time.

“At 4:30 the three charro representatives entered with a very overbearing attitude. The attorney for the company had already arrived, so the parties began the election by formally entering their appearances.

“All went smoothly until the charros discovered that the company had hired someone to videotape the proceeding. They created a row, attempted to physically injure the videographer and called outside to the thugs by phone to break down the door and to raise hell. Those who were outside kicked the door, but it did not lead to anything further.”

The election continued and in the end the vote was 58 for STIMAHCS, four for the charros and one voided. Although there were now 184 workers in the plant, only those who were eligible to vote in the prior election and who still worked for the company — 101 workers — had a right to vote.

When asked why more than one third of the workers failed to vote, Martínez explained:

“The charro union had been very insistent that the election take place on Friday July 6, and it was not until afterwards that we realized that this was the final day of the school semester and many parents were likely to miss work that day to accompany their children to school. It is a tradition throughout Mexico that when children complete a period of study — whether it is pre-school, grade school, high school or university — on that day the schools organize events where graduation documents are presented to the children. This is an important day for many parents who often organize family gatherings to celebrate. One theory is that the charro union was counting on the absence of a lot of workers that day. However, even with the absence of 38, the vote in our favor was decisive.”

Martínez added: “Juan, Hilario, José and other local leaders played a really key role and it is important to mention that the company did not interfere and did everything it could, so that the election would take place without problems.” For a company to behave in a neutral manner was unusual in Mexico, where company complicity with corrupt unions is still rampant.

José Pérez San Luis, the new local’s Secretary of Education said, “We are really happy with the outcome of the election and hope that in light of such a clear victory the charros will finally leave us in peace!”

Over the next few years, the locals continued to build solidarity, touring each other’s plants and engaging in other activities. For example, in 2012 two leaders from the Mexican DMI local traveled to the U.S. with Benedicto Martínez to participate in the *Labor Notes* conference<sup>29</sup> and visit UE’s DMI local where they toured the plant and met with the local membership.

“On this visit we saw that we shared many things, above all common problems,” said Hilario Nava Maldonado, one of the rank-and-file leaders from Mexico. “We could also see the differences that exist between workers at the same company but in different countries. This helped us to understand that workers should be united and that companies should not be able to play games with our needs in different countries.”

“Personally, I think the visit was a great idea.” Tim Whitney, a member of Local 715’s executive committee explained: “We learned things from them about the company and we shared information with them...I thought those guys were really cool.”

Later that year, a member of the UE local spent several weeks working at the Mexican DMI plant as the result of proposals by the two unions.

STIMAHCS also succeeded in establishing a good working relationship with management and significantly improving conditions in its plant. However, in 2014 DMI merged with another company. Although this did not affect the Mexican plant, the new management announced that due to excess capacity in the Midwest it was closing the plant represented by the UE.

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29. [labornotes.org](http://labornotes.org)

Despite two more changes in ownership, at a forum eight years later where they shared their experience in light of the new labor law, the STIMACHS representatives reported that they now have a six-person leadership, have won significant wage increases and ensure that the company respects the contract. One of the leaders reflected that “it wasn’t easy and we needed to do it in secret but when there is unity anything is possible.”

## **A Two-Way Street**

It is important to emphasize that we created a binational partnership which benefited workers on both sides of the border. Although UE supported the FAT in various campaigns, this is definitely a two-way street. In an early example, the FAT provided critical support for a successful UE organizing campaign in a Milwaukee foundry. When UE requested assistance, the FAT sent Roberto Valerio — one of the activists who had been fired by GE in Cd. Juárez and one of the few who had refused to accept severance and had filed a demand for reinstatement — to join the UE organizing team. In innumerable house meetings with the workers who were predominantly of Mexican origin, he was able to speak from his own experience in telling them that the UE was a democratic union, unlike the official unions they had good reason to distrust in Mexico. He explained:

“Most people come to the United States because they are looking for a better future, a better way of living, but it turns out that they’re very much mistreated as workers. That’s the basis for the relationship between the UE and the FAT. We tell people in Mexico and in the United States that it’s necessary to fight for our rights as workers. And the way to do that is by joining a union that fights for the rights of workers.”

It was December and undoubtedly the coldest two weeks of Valerio’s life, but his contribution was invaluable and UE won the election!<sup>30</sup>

FAT representatives also provided assistance to UE when they were in the U.S. for other reasons. For example, when Benedicto Martínez was in Chicago for the UE convention in 2013, he joined UE workers during the first day of their strike. On the same trip, he met with workers at another plant who had an election scheduled for the week following the convention. UE also won that election.

More recently, as UE began a campaign in Houston to organize workers at a plant established by General Electric to siphon work out of its Erie plant, Martínez spent several weeks in Houston where he provided organizing assistance. Unfortunately, once again, GE ran a tough anti-union campaign and UE lost.

Meanwhile, in 2006, the FAT took the lead in filing a complaint under the NAALC on behalf of public-sector workers in North Carolina who were denied collective bargaining rights under state law. This had a marked impact and is described in more detail below.

The FAT also supported UE in numerous other ways. For example, in the heat of contract negotiations with General Electric in 2007 the FAT’s national leadership sent the following message:

“We are aware that you are entering into negotiations with the company General Electric, which had earnings of \$20 billion last year. Although this money should be equitably distributed between shareholders and workers, since they are a fundamental part of producing such earnings,

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30. Terry Davis, “Cross Border organizing Comes Home: UE & FAT in Mexico & Milwaukee,” *Labor Research Review*, Vol. 1, No. 23, Cornell University ILR School, 1995

through our own experience we know that companies do not see things in that manner.

“Your negotiations will be difficult and will require much strength, in order to have the company recognize your rights and to win a contract that increases wages and benefits and above all that ensures job security.

“Therefore, please know that you are not alone, and that you can count on the support of the sisters and brothers of the FRENTE AUTENTICO DEL TRABAJO. It is important to remember that this struggle is GLOBAL and that the workers of México are with you. Please receive our solidarity in support of all the actions you undertake in order to win your just demands.”

### Part 3: Worker-to-worker Exchanges



Marie Lausch, UE Local 222 president, speaks at gathering of municipal workers from the U.S. and Mexico in Chihuahua, Mexico, February 2008. Azucena Villalba, president of the public-sector workers' local in Guerrero, Chihuahua that is affiliated with the FAT, is on the right.

The UE and FAT both believe in the importance of education to prepare our members to make the decisions that are needed to guide the policy of our national organizations and the work of the local unions. As explained earlier, in the UE we call this rank-and-file unionism; in the FAT, with a membership that is much broader, they speak of *autogestión* or self-management. The result is strikingly similar: Gilberto Martínez, a local FAT leader, was amazed after attending a local Executive Committee meeting in Iowa: “It was just like attending one of our executive committee meetings in Aguascalientes!”

The UE officers described the role that the international work came to play and its relationship to building a rank-and-file union as follows:

“Our members’ daily work in factories and offices increasingly has a global dimension, particularly since NAFTA and GATT. Our international work, especially our Strategic Organizing Alliance with the Authentic Workers’ Front, is directly related to our organizing, bargaining, and political action. Here, too, UE has put special emphasis on worker-to-worker exchanges and membership involvement.

“We remain convinced that the dynamic, living concept of UE rank-and-file democracy is truly liberating — in sharp contrast to the various schemes peddled on Capitol Hill. There is no ‘empowerment’ in belonging to a company union or ‘freedom’ in working 10 hours at straight time under hazardous conditions or at a wage unilaterally dictated by the boss.

“To protect their interests, workers must build organizations of their own that function independently of the employers, the government, or political parties. That’s what the founders of UE

did 60 years ago. That's the task we are still pledged to: Building the union."<sup>31</sup>

Our first delegation of GE workers to Ciudad Juárez was followed by many others. We came to use worker-to-worker exchanges to deepen understanding of the actual conditions in both of our countries while undercutting the stereotypes that exist on both sides of the border.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the exchanges served to develop leadership within our organizations. In all of the exchanges and training programs, UE and FAT involved rank and filers who had shown the potential to become future leaders. A significant number of people who came to be elected to the national leadership of both UE and FAT participated in these programs.

These exchanges clearly demonstrated that the most effective way to educate workers in the United States and in Mexico — and to motivate them to educate others — was through direct contact with each other. As explained by Tom Dunne, vice president of UE Local 1172 at the time he participated on a UE delegation to Mexico, “As corporations exploit global markets, the labor movement must aggressively act to organize the unorganized on a global basis as well. Educating our members is the first step towards realizing that goal.” Donna Cramer, Political Action Chair for UE Local 506, hosted a FAT representative at various meetings in Erie in 1997 and observed afterwards: “People are starting to understand that it's not that Mexican workers are taking their jobs, it's that corporate America is abusing, misusing, and discarding workers here.”

We also made use of the exchanges to support organizing work, participate in key meetings, or learn about experiences that were of particular importance.

Rank-and-file members of the UE and FAT and, at times, other organizations toured plants, ex-

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31. UE NEWS Vol 57, No. 9, August 20, 1995 “UE's Contract with American Workers”

32. I always worked out the agendas for these trips with Benedicto Martínez. After an initial discussion he would prepare a draft agenda if the trip was in Mexico, or I would if it was to the U.S. In either case, we would share the proposal, make or accept suggestions and adjust the plan accordingly.

Because it was necessary to identify the participants, purchase tickets and obtain passports, exchanges were generally planned months in advance. For delegations to Mexico, this provided time for me to begin to get to know and work with the participants, the vast majority of whom had never traveled outside of the United States. Most were excited but nervous and a few were terrified of flying. By the time we left, I wanted them to feel like they knew and could trust me: that they were moving beyond their comfort zone, but had a safety net. I also wanted them to feel proud that they had been selected and understand that they would have obligations while on the trip and that after they returned home, at a minimum they would need to make a report at their local and regional meetings. In addition to phone calls, for each delegation I would provide each participant with a folder containing a draft agenda, a description of all of the members (that I had obtained from them), and basic information about the logistics of the trip, the FAT and its relationship with the UE, customs that were different, and some basic phrases in Spanish. Where possible, I arranged flights so that people coming from different cities would meet up at airport hubs like Chicago or Houston, sit together as they flew into Mexico, and that those coming on different flights would arrive at approximately the same time.

We would often check in and debrief during the delegations and at the end would always schedule an evaluation session to provide the participants with an opportunity to review and discuss what they had learned, in part to help them prepare for the reports that they would have to give when they returned home. We also asked that they talk about what they found most useful and if there were things that we could have done better or differently. Many suggestions were incorporated into later exchanges or in the initial materials I provided as preparation. For example, early on I came to realize that some people loved to read while for some it was a chore or they lacked the time. Although I don't remember who suggested it, someone suggested that the folders I provided to them in preparation should have basic information that was labeled as required reading on one side and articles and additional materials on the other for those who were interested. This elegant solution became my practice on all subsequent delegations. Although I encouraged participants by telling them that the more they read beforehand the more they would get out of the trip, I left it up to them whether they read anything on the right hand side of the folder.

changed experiences, walked picket lines, attended meetings, assisted with organizing drives, taught high school and university classes, and participated in radio and television programs in an effort to share information, learn about each other, and take the information back to their locals and communities. Some participated in more intensive training programs for rank-and-file organizers, for women, for co-op workers and for workers from the same sector.

In addition to intentionally including young workers in worker-to-worker exchanges, UE also developed a special program for young activists in order to prepare the next generation of leaders for the union. A Young Activist Convergence was organized prior to several conventions and Victor Salas, a young general secretary of one of the largest locals of FAT's metalworkers' union, STIMAHCS, completed a successful three-month internship in New Bedford in a collaborative project between the Northeast Region of the UE, the FAT and a local NGO. During his time there, he completed a survey of low-wage workers and made numerous presentations to labor and community organizations in New England. At the same time, he learned English through an ESL class geared towards immigrant workers and learned about the labor movement by accompanying his host, Peter Knowlton, who was then president of UE's Northeast Region and was later elected general president of the National Union.

There is no substitute for direct exchanges between workers, especially where they do similar work or are employed by the same company. I still have a vivid recollection of workers bonding over their mutual outrage that instead of bonuses the company rewarded both groups by buying them pizza. Numerous rank-and-file workers and organizers have told me that their commitment was deepened and their perspective broadened through this effort, and some told me that these delegations changed their lives and how they viewed the world. They certainly changed the culture within UE! As explained by former President Knowlton:

“On many, many occasions I have personally witnessed our members’ corporate-fed attitudes towards workers from other countries (Japan, Mexico, and elsewhere) evaporate and transform after discussing issues with rank-and-file members from those countries. ONLY through a serious, concerted member-to-member international solidarity effort will U.S. workers understand that their boss at home is the same boss of workers abroad and then take the next step to link arms with these workers in an active international expression that ‘An injury to one IS an injury to all.’”

The exchanges also created some additional financial support for the union's international work with the FAT. I was impressed and intrigued by the system utilized by many of the large Canadian unions, where their contracts provided that a certain amount per hour per worker would be contributed to a solidarity fund.<sup>33</sup> Although we were unable to do that, we did set up a voluntary system where UE staff and officers could designate an amount to be deducted once or twice a month from their checks. Several industrial UE locals began making monthly contributions — Rich Drylie, president of UE Local 683 at the time he visited Mexico explained to other UE locals: “It's important to stay solid with the FAT” — and the UE public-sector locals in Iowa implemented a voluntary system where members could have supplemental dues deducted and paid into the solidarity fund.

Bill Austin from UE Local 893 explained: “We live in a global economy and we have to fight corporate greed on all fronts. Although we're public-sector employees, we're indirectly affected by the loss

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33. Somewhat ironically, I worked far more closely with unions in Canada in the early period than with those in the United States. I especially appreciated the encouragement and support from Gerry Barr and his successor David Mackenzie, Directors of the Solidarity Fund created by the USW Canada, Annie Labaj, International Affairs Director of the Canadian Auto Workers and Sheila Katz, International Affairs Director at the Canadian Labor Congress (CLC).

of jobs in Iowa because of the reduced tax base.” Dan Kelley, president of Local 893 put it more bluntly: “This isn’t charity, this is self-interest... this is united workers organizing against a common enemy.” UE Local 896, which represents graduate workers at the University of Iowa went one step further in using solidarity to encourage participation: each person who signed up to have additional dues deducted received a pin that was produced by a shop represented by the FAT in Mexico. The advantages of these systems are clear: not only was this a way to raise money on a fairly consistent basis, but it required that officers or members speak to others in their locals, explain the program and convince them that it was worth supporting.

While it is not possible to describe all of the exchanges, it is worthwhile to highlight a few of the more memorable because of the impact both on individual members and on the UE as an organization.

## **Public-Sector Convergences**

One of the fascinating things about UE’s relationship with the FAT is that, despite our different histories, the organizations have very similar perspectives and approaches. Both also went through a similar period of serious evaluation and restructuring and independently concluded that a new focus should be placed on the organization of public-sector workers. On the international front, this led to the series of Convergences — the name we gave to the dynamic exchange between public-sector workers from the U.S., Mexico, Japan and Québec — that developed out of our worker-to-worker exchanges.<sup>34</sup>

An important focus of UE’s organizing work was in North Carolina, where it partnered with Black Workers for Justice under the banner of the North Carolina Public Service Workers Union, UE Local 150. North Carolina is a “right-to-work” state, which means that security clauses requiring workers to pay dues are prohibited: workers can choose to join or to refuse to join a union. This makes it harder to organize and even more difficult to maintain a union, since workers who were not part of the original organizing effort often are unaware of how bad conditions were before unionization brought improvements. Public-sector workers have it even worse — although the North Carolina law forbidding unions was eventually declared unconstitutional, they are still prohibited by state law from signing a collective bargaining agreement with their employer.

Al Locklear was president of the Charlotte City Workers Union in North Carolina, where he had to confront the reality of the anti-Union south on a daily basis. He explained:

“I got involved because I’d worked out there on the sanitation trucks for over 21 years and knew it wasn’t right how they was treating us. In our department, we’ve always been overworked, understaffed and underpaid. A brother had his leg amputated; he was picking up some trash behind a truck when the driver — pressured by management to speed up to finish longer and longer routes — crushed his leg between the truck and a phone pole. I know it could have been me or anyone else.”

But even though they have had to fight an uphill battle, Locklear says that standing together has made a difference: “Since starting the union, we have stopped the city selling 50 public jobs to a private company, helped workers get their jobs back after they were unjustly fired, won some wages increases, and gained self-respect and dignity speaking out.”

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34. The UE and FAT benefited from relationships each had with other unions. It was through the FAT that UE came to work with the *Centre International de Solidarité Ouvrière (CISO)* and trade unionists from Québec, leading to several trinational delegations and clearly demonstrating that workers share the same problems in all three NAFTA countries. Similarly, the FAT was able to turn to ZENROREN for assistance in dealing with a Japanese employer through an introduction by UE.

During the summer and fall of 2003, Local 150 participated in an exchange of delegations with the FAT. The summer delegation, in which two women from Mexico traveled to the Southern U.S., was co-hosted by UE and Black Workers for Justice and was organized around a broad theme of women and international solidarity. It was followed in the fall by a delegation to Mexico which was hosted by the FAT. At the request of UE, the focus was on the use of ILO complaints by Mexican unions to challenge barriers to organizing. The delegation was expanded to include other unions that had made use of international law, including public-sector labor organizations from Québec and the progressive Japanese labor federation, ZENROREN.

The exchange in Mexico was so dynamic that during the final evaluation session the *Syndicat de la Fonction Publique du Québec (SFPQ)* offered to host a meeting the following year. The Local 150 representatives, Raymond Sanders and Larsene Taylor, were also inspired by what they had learned, and brought the information back to their local. Discussions once they returned home led directly to the creation of the International Worker Justice Campaign (IWJC) which combined grassroots organizing with the use of international law to confront obstacles to organizing.<sup>35</sup> This was tremendously energizing for the low-wage, primarily African-American workers in North Carolina's public sector because it turned the long-held belief that public-sector workers "just don't have that right" on its head: from the perspective of international human rights law, it is the state's ban on collective bargaining that is "illegal," not workers' attempts to assert their rights.

Workers from North Carolina were not the only ones impacted. Mary Dobrochowski, a UE Local 893 leader from Iowa, wrote to me to recount her experience in Washington, DC at one of the Political Action Conferences, where rank-and-file members of UE spend several days engaging their members of Congress. She said: "I always enjoy a good debate with my local representatives. This trip, however, I felt more knowledgeable and educated in regards to NAFTA since I had met with local people in Mexico. It was nice to have a personal account of how NAFTA has not only hurt the U.S. but has totally screwed the people of Mexico. Course, when I gave a first-hand account to the representatives, they couldn't argue with me."

The second meeting of the International Public Sector Workers Convergence took place in the fall of 2004 in Québec and was designed to increase an understanding of the challenges public-sector workers in Québec faced in their struggles against their new neoliberal government. Benedicto Martínez and four representatives from public-sector unions affiliated with the FAT traveled from Mexico to participate along with representatives of UE and ZENROREN. The meeting was co-hosted by the SFPQ and by the *Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ)*.

In the evaluation form that participants were asked to fill out after the Québec meeting, Allen Layman, the local president of UE's Virginia public-sector workers' local, Local 160, wrote:

"Like last year's trip to Mexico, I really enjoyed the change in cultures and the opportunity to interact with others from different countries. The stark realization of how NAFTA, WTO, globalization and privatization are impacting working people and unions all across the world and the complexity of these issues is evident and frightening. Also, how interconnected we all are, no matter what nationality. The world has reached a point where no country is safe from the effects of corporate cruelty and immorality, whether by deteriorating and exploitative working conditions or environmental degradation. We must look to those common interests and dreams

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35. Saladin Muhammad contributed greatly to the thinking behind the IWJC and became one of its coordinators. Other leaders and rank and filers from BWFJ and UE also made major contributions, including Angaza Laughinghouse, Natha-nette Mayo, Larsene Taylor, Denis Orton, Dante Strobino, Steve Bader, Ashaki Binta, and many others.

which draw us together as humans, while respecting, learning from and relishing in the differences in our cultures. We must find ways to transcend these differences to work together to fight off those who exploit the dignity and intrinsic value of our labor.”

Another of the participants from UE in Québec was Raymond Sanders, the president of UE Local 150. He offered to host a convergence meeting in North Carolina in 2005 to educate participants from other countries about conditions faced in the U.S. South and to provide them with an opportunity to participate in the campaign to win collective bargaining rights for public-sector workers.

As part of that campaign, in the autumn of 2005, the International Commission for Labor Rights (ICLR) sent an independent delegation of lawyers and jurists from South Africa, India, Sweden, India, Nigeria, Canada, and Mexico to North Carolina to document working conditions for public-sector workers in the state. After meeting with workers, visiting work sites, and taking testimony at hearings attended by hundreds of public workers, the ICLR delegation determined that North Carolina’s prohibition of collective bargaining had resulted in deplorable working conditions for state and municipal workers and that, if granted the right to bargain collectively, these workers could significantly improve their working conditions.

A few months later, the North Carolina International Worker Justice Convergence provided workers from North Carolina with a real shot in the arm. Their testimony at the ICLR hearing, when worker after worker described a shocking pattern of race and gender-based discrimination in hiring, promotion, pay, and in the exercise of discipline and termination, served as the basis for an official complaint before the ILO in Geneva. It was filed on December 10, 2005 — International Human Rights Day — alleging that North Carolina’s ban on collective bargaining for public-sector workers violated ILO Conventions 87, 98, and 151. Public-sector allies attending the Convergence from Mexico, Japan and Québec joined UE Local 150 and representatives from unions and organizations from North Carolina in hand-delivering the complaint to the office of the governor, Mike Easley. Fortunately, the UE research department discovered that Mexico, Canada and Japan were actually North Carolina’s largest trading partners, so the international participants were able to emphasize that point.

The following year, sanitation workers in Raleigh walked off their jobs protesting intolerable working conditions. Although the strike was illegal, they had tremendous community support and won virtually all of their demands.

Then, in April, 2007, UE won a stunning decision from the ILO, which called for the repeal of the prohibition on collective bargaining and recommended that the state sit down with the unions to begin to discuss a framework for collective bargaining.<sup>36</sup>

Although the IWJC did not achieve the goal of repealing the ban on collective bargaining, its efforts changed the terms of discourse around collective bargaining and low-wage workers in the state. Its work with other unions to build a strong coalition of labor, community, student and faith organizations in support of collective bargaining have also energized workers to take collective action to improve their wages and working conditions.

In addition to laying the groundwork at the inception of the IWJC, the knowledge, experience, and solidarity of our international allies were crucial to its success. In 2006, the FAT had taken the lead in filing a complaint under the NAALC on behalf of public-sector workers in North Carolina challenging

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36. The case was handled by Joseph Cohen, then General Counsel for UE. See UE NEWS, April 2007, p.15

their denial of collective bargaining rights under state law.<sup>37</sup>

Benedicto Martinez described the FAT's decision to file the complaint this way:

“I traveled to NC and was shocked at the level of discrimination and that a country that places such importance on democracy does not permit public-sector workers in North Carolina to bargain collectively. We are filing this complaint to support workers in the U.S. ”

More than six years later, in December 2012, the Mexican office that handles complaints filed under the Labor Side Agreement of NAFTA, issued a favorable report and series of recommendations.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, the U.S. NAO failed to respond in any way, declining to even translate the report into English. However, Local 150 was able to make use of the case to exert pressure on the state of North Carolina, to strengthen alliances, and to educate its members and to change the view of what was possible. The inherent message of solidarity resonated with UE locals far from North Carolina and contributed in a very real way to supporting the internationalist vision and changing culture within the UE itself.

Saladin Muhammad reflected on the contribution of the UE's international work to building the movement in North Carolina:

“Black Workers for Justice made the decision to work with UE Local 150 because we really appreciated the union's core democratic structure and rank-and-file approach. Although we were concerned about improving wages and working conditions for UE members, the way we have been doing this is by building organization, consciousness and unity in action, in other words by building a deeper structure, a movement.

“Our involvement in the international work of UE was very welcome and entirely unanticipated. The International Worker Justice Campaign that we developed together with the National Union, provided us with a vehicle that allowed us to reach out into our communities in a meaningful way. Bringing workers from other countries into our workplaces meant that we needed to deal with translation and came to see that beneath that difference in language, we shared so many things. The hearings, especially, provided us with tools and allowed us to clearly make

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37. The case was presented on October 18, 2006 by the FAT, the UE, the Canadian Labour Congress, and the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), among 53 petitioners. [See U.S. NAALC Submissions on Department of Labor website](#)

38. The Report referred extensively to the previous decision of the International Labor Organization (ILO) that ordered the U.S. government to repeal North Carolina General Statute 95-98 and to set up a framework for collective bargaining. The Mexican NAO noted that it “places particular emphasis on the topics of freedom of association and the right to Collective bargaining,” and stated: “if freedom of association exists for the public workers of North Carolina, the prohibition on Collective bargaining limits the exercise of that freedom. In this respect, there are recommendations and follow-up reports from the Committee on Freedom of Association of the International Labor Organization to the effect that North Carolina must repeal the statute NCGS 95-98 and permit public employees of that state to negotiate collectively, as well as to promulgate a legislative framework that promotes that result.”

The report urged the U.S. to “continue its efforts in order to establish a legitimate means for collective bargaining in North Carolina” and stated that the Mexican NAO “indicates its interest in knowing of the actions taken by the government of the U.S. in order to promote the right to Collective bargaining by public workers North Carolina, as well as requesting that it be maintained informed about the presentation of new initiatives on this subject ...”

The Mexican NAO also recommended cooperative consultations on the question of health and safety, finding that “it is not clear what actions are taken by the government of that country and concretely by that of North Carolina, in order to guarantee the protection of the health and safety of public employees in that state.”

the point that the situation faced by workers in North Carolina was not acceptable or normal, but clearly violated international law. This was tremendously empowering. And it was really important to us that we had the freedom to determine what would be most useful to us in North Carolina. We really felt that we were experiencing and applying the UE's rank-and-file approach at its very best and the result was that we really felt ownership of the IWJC and that the FAT was not only an ally at the national level, but was a friend and ally to our statewide union."

Al Locklear was particularly inspired by getting to know workers from other countries:

"One of our first experiences with the union was the 2005 Southern International Workers Justice (SIWJC) Public Hearing in Charlotte. We realized that we had support from elected officials, the community, and other leaders. Then we came to Raleigh to meet with union leaders from Japan, Mexico, and Canada. This gave me more ideas about the most effective way to run our union and to pay more attention to what was happening around the world. We now had friends in other countries that supported us and depended on us to support them. The end of that year, we brought a van load of workers to Raleigh for the Statewide Public Hearing by the International Commission for Labor Rights - lawyers from all over the world. They decided that NC and the U.S. were violating international standards by banning collective bargaining. That that ban led to racism, sexism, dangerous conditions, lack of respect and other problems. This was the first time that I realized that we weren't just fighting for workers' rights or civil rights but HUMAN rights."

Locklear had previously participated in a worker-to-worker exchange delegation to Mexico that was hosted by the FAT. Not only did it open his eyes about living and working conditions in Mexico, but it totally changed his understanding about immigration to the United States. He explained:

"We visited public workers who were having the same troubles as us — lack of equipment, mean supervisors, intimidations. But when we visited the communities, the conditions were mostly worse than here. For the first time I could understand why they were coming to the U.S., even illegally; it was not just to steal our jobs like the TV says. A lot of us here are fooled about this but some coworkers have changed their minds like I did once I explained it to them.

"With all of these experiences, I have brought back information and stories to the rest of the 200 workers in sanitation, 1000 others in Charlotte City and many thousands in our union statewide, south-wide and nationally. I know that without this international part of our work, we would not be as strong and workers in other countries have told me that they are strengthened by meeting and learning from us. I look forward to many more of my coworkers getting to have this type of experience and continue building this movement for justice and follow in the example of Dr. Martin Luther King."

The fourth Convergence took place in October 2006 in Tokyo, Japan, and was hosted by five public-sector affiliates of ZENROREN. Participating labor organizations included UE, FAT, the SFPQ and CSQ from Québec, and a nurses' union from Australia. A new element in that exchange was a concern about anti-nuclear issues and peace.

In the evaluation and planning session following the meeting, we concluded that rather than organizing another convergence in 2007, we should work to strengthen relations between similar groups of workers within our network, while at the same time taking advantage of spaces where at least some of our organizations could come together, such as the World and U.S. Social Forums or union conventions.

One of the most exciting developments that followed was the growth of a relationship between municipal workers who were members of UE Local 150 in North Carolina and UE Local 222 in Connecticut and the *Federación de Sindicatos Municipales del Estado de Chihuahua*, a FAT affiliate which organized and represented municipal workers in the state of Chihuahua.

UE members traveled to Chihuahua in March of 2007 where they met workers from the small Mexican town of Guerrero who proudly showed them the union hall they had begun to build for their local. Periodically, as they raised enough money, they would add to the hall. A few months later, our Connecticut local returned the favor by inviting Daniel Martínez to visit them in Connecticut.

Martínez was a heavy equipment operator from Guerrero and a leader in his local union. He met with UE members at various public works' garages and compared notes on subjects ranging from street maintenance to union rights. He also provided a context for the immigration debate raging in Connecticut at that time, explaining the economic factors pushing Mexican workers to emigrate to the U.S in terms of NAFTA and his personal experiences.

In a meeting in Danbury, he was asked about increased immigration to the U.S. He said that he thought that neither the U.S. nor the Mexican governments were dealing with the heart of the problem: "The policies of our governments are making it harder and harder to find jobs that pay a decent wage. I, myself, came to work in the U.S. when I lost my job on the railroad when it was privatized." The UE workers were clearly surprised that he had returned to Mexico and one asked him why he didn't stay in the U.S. He paused for a moment and then explained that when he was able to get a job with the city, it gave him the opportunity to go home. "I wanted to be there with my wife and for my kids as they were growing up." It was one of those moments when change was palpable.

Danbury, Connecticut had been a center of extreme anti-immigrant backlash, which was affecting the UE Local 222 membership. Martínez' visit and his answer to the question about why he had gone back to Mexico filtered through the local and had a profound impact on the perspectives of the mostly white and African-American members and leaders and how they viewed immigration.

At the end of his visit, he participated in the local's statewide convention at which it launched a "Buck-a-Brick" campaign to raise funds to help the municipal workers' union continue to build its union hall in Guerrero. This initiative, which came from Local 222 — Daniel and I were informed about it by Local 222 President Marie Lausch, an emergency response operator for 911 in Connecticut, when we arrived at the convention — not only raised funds for UE's allies in Mexico but became a mechanism for the local to engage its members and those of other UE locals in discussions about the importance of international solidarity. Each person who donated a dollar received a paper with an image of the number of symbolic bricks he or she had contributed. The campaign was subsequently adopted by UE's Northeast Region, which proudly presented a check for \$1,300 to the FAT representative who attended the UE convention that fall as a contribution to the next phase of construction of the union hall in Guerrero, Chihuahua. In addition to raising funds for their sister union in Mexico, this effort helped to create a broader understanding of the UE's international work within the union's national membership, as well as education on the question of immigration.

The completion of the hall the following spring provided a further opportunity to deepen this relationship when members of Local 222 traveled to Guerrero for the inauguration. This also set the stage for some amazingly effective international solidarity. At the request of their hosts, the UE delegation joined the local leadership in a breakfast meeting with the municipal president. He was from the conservative *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) or National Action Party, and the local had been very

concerned that he would fire workers and replace them with his own people, common in Mexico and one of the major problems faced by public-sector workers. That had not occurred and the local had negotiated an excellent contract, so the breakfast meeting had been very friendly. As described by one of FAT's leaders: "We spoke about the importance of a different sort of trade unionism in Mexico — one which is democratic, honest and responds to current conditions."

It was only later in the day that the delegation learned that the previous evening he had requested authority to fire thirty workers to resolve a budget issue. Not surprisingly, the UE delegation was furious, but the local's leaders urged us to remain calm, noting that his approach in the morning had been quite different and it was necessary to figure out what was going on. In the course of our conversations over the next few days, the president re-assured the UE representatives that he would seek other alternatives.

However, before leaving, the UE delegation agreed that we should leave a letter for the president. It was drafted during the final farewell event and the local's general secretary left the party to get it printed for us to sign. Shortly after our return, we received word from her that she had met again with the president and that he had made a commitment that the layoffs that had been approved would not be implemented. International solidarity should always work this way!

## **Co-op Exchange**

In both UE and FAT, the union sector is the largest and the vast majority of our worker-to-worker exchanges took place between union members. However, starting in 2013 in both of our organizations there was a renewed interest and emphasis on co-ops. In UE, this was due to the struggle of UE Local 1110 at Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago, IL, where workers occupied their plant to prevent it from closing and eventually took over the plant and began operating as a co-op, New Era. The FAT includes a cooperative sector which is also part of their leadership structure, and at that time had recently elected a young man who was working hard to expand the sector.

This led us to organize a delegation in November 2013 in which five UE members traveled to Mexico to take part in our first co-op exchange. The delegation included workers from two food co-ops in Vermont (Locals 203 and 255) and a printing co-op in Massachusetts (Local 274). Also participating was Armando Robles, one of the leaders of the occupation and of the New Era Co-op, just getting off the ground as a co-op manufacturing windows and doors.

One of the things that became clear very quickly was that there are different kinds of co-ops, and that they vary in size, experience, and in their views of what it means to be a cooperative. The delegation met with small production co-ops formed by family members or friends who produced ceramics, woven or embroidered handicrafts and vegetables, as well as Mexico's best-known production co-op, Pascual Boing, which operated several production and multiple distribution facilities. They also met with representatives from three savings and loans co-ops of varying sizes, providing members with necessary financial expertise as well as micro-lending capabilities. Some were affiliated directly with the FAT; others had recently become familiar with FAT and participated in an informal network or simply had friendly relations.

One interesting strategy utilized by the FAT involved linking savings and loan co-ops with production co-ops to provide the financial support the production co-ops needed to get off the ground, while providing jobs to members of the savings and loan co-ops.

The trip was also the beginning of something bigger. Elizabeth Jesdale<sup>39</sup> observed:

“Being on this delegation let us step out of our day-to-day work and talk about our ideals and learn from each other’s practical experiences... Spending a whole week with a group of workers and organizers who are very committed to building a better world allowed us to have the time to build trusting relationships. This allowed us to really talk about both the bigger picture and dive into some deeper conversations and talk further strategies. Not only were we able to make valuable and inspiring connections with workers in Mexico, the UE delegation was able to form new connections with each other.”

This was the first time that representatives of UE’s co-ops had come together as a group, let alone with their counterparts in Mexico. They found it tremendously useful and afterwards began discussing ways in which they would continue to work together. One result was the development and approval of a resolution on cooperatives that was approved at the next UE convention.

The UE co-op locals in Massachusetts (Local 274) and Vermont (Locals 203 and 255) also planned and hosted a delegation composed of five members of the FAT’s cooperative sector. The trip coincided with New Economy Week in the Northeast where co-op members were featured at events in Burlington and Boston, as well as engaging in meetings over the course of ten days with cooperatives that were both independent and affiliated with UE.

The participants spoke at the UE regional council meeting and joined UE members in a demonstration in front of the Ft. Edwards GE plant to protest plans to close the plant. One of the Mexican co-op representatives, Alma Contreras Torres, the Secretary of the Housing Commission for the state-wide union from Nayarit, SITEM, was moved by the solidarity shown by a range of different union and community supporters:

“It is gratifying to know that we share the ability to be united with others in actions and mutual support, especially in difficult times. It is motivating and inspiring because it demonstrates that although we are of different nationalities and speak different languages we coincide in our belief in unity, cooperation, solidarity, honesty and the commitment to struggle in defense of our labor rights and for a decent standard of living. And this, sisters and brothers, is a universal language.”

Although I accompanied the Mexican delegation and assisted in a variety of ways, most of the planning for that delegation was done by Elizabeth Jesdale, Adam Trott from Collective Copies, Jonathan Kissam, who was a web designer with a cooperative that was part of UE Local 203 and is now communications director for UE and managing editor of the UE NEWS, and Autumn Martínez, another local leader from Hunger Mountain who later became president of UE’s Northeast Region, all of whom took time off work to accompany the Mexican delegation during parts of the trip.

## **Organizers’ Institutes**

In August 2004 twenty-two local leaders, organizers and staff from the FAT and UE met in Mexico to exchange ideas, experiences and strategies for organizing, and to develop plans for international solidarity.

The overall objective of the institute was to strengthen our organizing capabilities and provide an

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39. At that time, Jesdale was president of UE Local 255 at the Hunger Mountain Food Co-op and a member of the UE’s National General Executive Board. She was later elected president of UE’s Northeast Region.

opportunity for organizers to compare and analyze experiences and approaches in organizing transnationals, drawing on the different areas of expertise acquired by the UE and FAT.

The intensive program was developed jointly by a team from both the FAT and UE and responded to interests and training needs that were expressed by the participants during the planning stage. Part of the institute was carried out at a retreat center outside Mexico City, giving participants the chance to live and work together. The program was designed to provide ample opportunity for interactive learning and dialogue among the participants.

Topics included learning about organizing strategies and methods used in the two countries, a comparative look at the U.S. and Mexican labor codes, union busting, leadership development, and dealing with actual problems encountered during campaigns in both countries. Participants also shared skills with each other and took part in practical exercises, including “mapping” workplaces, learning how to analyze a company, and planning shared solidarity campaigns.

In addition to workshops specifically related to organizing, we arranged for presentations by several noted Mexican and U.S. experts on globalization on topics including how to analyze corporations; changes currently being made to Mexican labor law; and the historical development of capital in the U.S, Mexico, and larger context.

The process through which the Institute was developed was itself a reflection of the strength of the UE-FAT relationship and how we work together: once participants had been selected by the two organizations, they were asked to complete a detailed questionnaire in order to ascertain their level of skills and education, type and extent of experience, and the principal challenges they wanted to deal with during the Institute.

Based on this information, the sessions were designed to be interactive with co-facilitators from each country calling upon the participants themselves to contribute from their experiences in various areas. In this way the Institute was geared to maximize the sharing of information and knowledge while pursuing the broader goals described above. UE’s Education Director, Carol Lambiase, helped shape the program through the use of various popular education techniques. In one memorable example, participants from each country prepared and performed a skit illustrating how labor law operated in the course of an organizing campaign in each country.

During the participants’ evaluation on the last day, the institute was rated “excellent” in nearly all areas. Although simultaneous translation was provided, it became clear that participants were not just relying on words to communicate. Friendships were formed and plans were made for maintaining communication among the group and for building on commitments made at the institute. Participants from UE expressed great pleasure at finally being able to make contact with their Mexican counterparts and learn first-hand about their experiences and views.

As explained by one of the UE organizers who participated: “The UE and FAT have done something extraordinary. The Organizers’ Institute held in Mexico City for eight days managed to break down barriers between the two organizations and made all the participants feel united in one single struggle. All the organizers involved, whether they were rank-and-file members, organizing committee members, or paid staff learned equally from each other and left with profound feelings of respect and solidarity.”

Some of the recommendations were quickly implemented. For example, through Jobs with Justice<sup>40</sup> and the NTUI, GE leaders from India visited Local 506 in Erie four months later and we developed an excellent educational piece that was used to prepare UE members prior to the visit. UE also hosted a fund-raising tour for SITESABES, the independent education union that was organizing with the FAT in Guanajuato, raising a bit over \$3,000 and, most important, helping them to connect with the New York Labor Religion Coalition and New York State Union of Teachers (NYSUT) in order to begin a relationship with a union in their own sector. This was extremely significant as their campaign developed and led to a subsequent delegation coordinated by the New York State Labor Religion Coalition and UE where teachers from New York State came to Guanajuato to monitor their union election.

In addition, UE organizers were able to apply some of the lessons they learned in Mexico to campaigns underway among Latino workers in Chicago. There was also an immense psychological value which had not been anticipated. One of the lessons we learned was the tremendous benefit of bringing organizers and leaders who are engaged in extremely difficult and often isolated struggles together in a context where they could simply relax, think, and learn from each other. Some called it therapeutic, others inspiring, but the energy and excitement was unmistakable!

One of the principles underlying the relationship between the UE and FAT was to do things in a binational way wherever possible, so the second meeting of the Institute took place in Chicago during the first week in October 2005. It was designed to focus in greater detail on organizing skills, what is needed to consolidate an organizing effort, building power, and to permit participants to share their ideas and skills in a practical setting.

Chicago had been selected as the U.S. location because it was at the heart of UE's campaign to organize workforces that were composed largely of Latino workers. A large percentage of workers in Chicago's factories were immigrants, both documented and undocumented, many from Mexico and other Latin American countries. Wages were low and benefits often non-existent.<sup>41</sup> In one factory where the UE had recently won an election and contract, wages had been so low that some workers commuted from a homeless shelter.

Given the interest in Latino workers, the organizations agreed to conduct the second phase entirely in Spanish and that each organization would select some of the same participants and also include new ones. This Institute used the same methodology but emphasized the development of skills through role play and focused on particular problems, including the difficulties in building a democratic union after winning an election against a corrupt union; sustaining a campaign over the long haul; and organizing immigrant workers. A particular highlight for the Mexican workers was the labor history tour conducted by Professor Joe Berry that concluded at the tomb of the Chicago Haymarket martyrs. Also

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40. <https://www.jwj.org/>

41. At the time, approximately 1.4 million immigrants lived in Chicago. In 2000, immigrants comprised one in five, or 20.2 of all metro Chicago workers. Yet, in spite of their immense contributions, both documented and undocumented immigrant workers in Chicago's factories generally earned very low wages and were vulnerable to all types of workplace abuse. Immigrant workers were the least likely to receive benefits and fewer than 25 percent had job-based health insurance. It was well documented that many workers in Chicago factories worked in unsafe conditions and experienced abuses like non-payment or under-payment of wages, no payment for overtime work, discriminatory firings, dangerous and unhealthy working conditions, employers' refusal to acknowledge workplace accidents, sexual harassment, and inappropriate questioning about their immigration status. In some cases, workers were required to work six or seven days a week and received no paid holidays at all. Yet, immigrant workers were often afraid to report workplace abuse because they believed they would be fired or deported.

of note, in addition to educational sessions, participants shared their knowledge and experience with immigrants who were rank-and-file members from recently organized UE locals and we also arranged for representatives from the FAT to make presentations at several universities.

Inspired by the process, one of the FAT participants wrote: “The path of solidarity must be built through daily concrete actions, with a lot of love, tolerance, patience, and education, and with a good dose of courage. In this way we will create the world about which we workers dream.”

## Cultural Exchanges

The UE’s strategic organizing alliance with the FAT was a relationship based on organizing, but it also became one that celebrated art — a people’s art rooted in working-class traditions. Fred Wright had worked as the staff cartoonist for UE from 1949 until he died in 1984, creating thousands of political cartoons. Gary Huck was hired to replace him about the same time I came to work for UE, and contributed immeasurably to the union’s work overall as well as to the international work.

Culture fortuitously became a vital part of the UE-FAT partnership when Mike Alewitz, a labor muralist from New Jersey and friend of Gary wrote to me to say that he really liked the solidarity work of the UE and FAT. He explained that he could not support the Strategic Organizing Alliance financially, but would be very interested in painting a mural. I contacted Benedicto Martínez and we agreed that although neither of us had ever been involved in such a project, it was certainly worth considering... with one important addition: that there should be two murals, one in Mexico and one in the United States and muralists from both countries. We brought the proposal to our organizations and obtained approval.

After making some inquiries, Martínez got in touch with Daniel Manrique, a community muralist who led the neighborhood-based movement *Tepito Arte Acá*. A self-taught artist, Manrique’s work could be found on many walls in the working-class neighborhood of Tepito in Mexico City.<sup>42</sup> When approached by Martínez, Manrique initially declined to be part of the project because of his negative view of Mexican unions. Only after learning about the UE and FAT and our commitment to organizing independent, democratic unions did he become enthusiastic about the proposal and agree to participate.

The artists began a wonderful exchange of letters and, together with the unions, it was decided that Alewitz would be the principal artist in Mexico, while Manrique would take that role in Chicago.<sup>43</sup> It was also agreed that both artists would receive the same compensation. In each case, the principal artist presented sketches of the mural to the host organization and revisions were made based on their suggestions. For example, the Mexican hero Emiliano Zapata was added as a central figure to the Mexican mural and mountains were replaced by the volcanos that surround Mexico City. Later, after he arrived in Mexico City, Alewitz also added the Angel of Independence, a monument of great historic and symbolic importance in Mexico City and the jacaranda trees that were in full bloom while he was there, displaying an abundance of purple blossoms.

The first mural, *Sindicalismo Sin Fronteras/Trade Unionism Without Borders*, was painted during April of 1997 in the meeting hall in the FAT’s headquarters in Mexico City. Three meters high and 12 meters

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42. He was later recognized as a major voice in modern Mexican art and his work can also be found in universities, public buildings and museums in Mexico and abroad.

43. For an in-depth account and analysis of this mural exchange, see Barbara McCloskey and Fred Evans “The New Solidarity: a Case Study of Cross-Border Labor Networks and Mural Art in the Age of Globalization,” in Anatole Anton and Richard Schmitt, eds., *Toward a New Socialism* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

long, the mural depicts workers tearing up borders imposed by bosses. In the center is Zapata; on either side are Albert and Lucy Parsons. Albert Parsons was a labor leader who was executed on trumped-up charges following a demonstration in 1886 in Chicago's Haymarket Square to protest police killings of workers who had been locked out. His wife, Lucy Parsons, a courageous woman of Mexican and African descent, spent much of her long life fighting to prove her husband's innocence and advocating for the rights of workers and women.

The mural also depicts two FAT heroes: Nicolás Medina, a founder of the organization who was killed in a tragic accident and Efraín Calderón Lara who was tortured and murdered for his role in organizing FAT-affiliated unions that were free from company and corrupt union domination. Worker-angels hold a banner with a translation of the following quote from August Spies, another of the Haymarket martyrs: "...you will tread upon a spark...flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out." Many hand and footprints of workers and staff who assisted ring the outer edge of the mural; Gary Huck is represented bearing his drawing pencil; and I appear as a bird, a robin, carrying the purple briefcase I used at the time.

After assisting Alewitz with the initial work on the mural, Manrique painted a smaller one on the ground floor in an area used both for preparing banners and gathering for food during major events. Entitled "Marcha Por La Autogestión/March for Self-Management," it celebrates the FAT's guiding philosophy, which is similar to the UE concept of rank-and-file unionism when applied to the FAT's broader membership.

The inauguration was celebrated in the FAT's Hall and was attended by an impressive group of workers, union leaders, and left activists and intellectuals. The FAT arranged for several young videographers to document the event and, when they asked what I wanted them to do, I requested that they interview people at the reception, especially workers, and find out what they thought of the mural. I expected that the responses would focus on the its content, art work, or perhaps on what people liked best or disliked. I was stunned when I finally had an opportunity to watch the raw footage after I returned to my office in Pittsburgh to find none of those things. Instead of comments about the mural, the tapes contained lengthy, heartfelt and extremely eloquent extemporaneous speeches about the significance of the relationship between the UE and FAT and the critical importance of international solidarity. It provided a lasting lesson to me about the power of artists to convey an emotional message and the importance of incorporating culture as a fundamental part of our work.

The second half of that labor-community cultural project was completed the following September when a second mural executed by Daniel Manrique was unveiled on the southern exterior wall of the UE District 11 hall in Chicago. The project had been enthusiastically supported by Carl Rosen who was district president at the time and widely respected in Chicago. His relationships led to co-sponsorship by the Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG)<sup>44</sup> which had been co-founded by John Pitman Weber who, with José Guerrero, had created wonderful murals detailing the UE's history on the inside of the building.<sup>45</sup> Manrique was assisted by three young muralists associated with that organization.

The mural is entitled "Hands in Solidarity - Hands of Freedom." Its powerful imagery is described by the artist in a section at the bottom of the mural: "The female on the left is solidarity, her open right hand symbolizes honesty and purity of spirit; the other hand holds a bolt of lightning which is a symbol

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44. <http://www.chicagopublicartgroup.org/>

45. See "[Chicago Murals: This hidden mural on South Ashland Avenue tells the story of one of the most radical unions](#)" by Syd Stone, Chicago Sun Times, August 30, 2019.

of electricity and energy. Energy and purity of spirit generate union, represented by the clasped hands. The two large hands symbolize the strength to prepare for solidarity and freedom. The two faces on the right represent the racial and cultural diversity of the working class. The two smaller hands express the call to organize and the power of the union. The group of figures signifies the freedom of working in solidarity.”

While Manrique worked on the UE mural in Chicago, Mike Alewitz was painting a second mural down the street at Teamster City to commemorate the recent UPS victory.

The inauguration took place at the UE Hall in Chicago and celebrated the murals through poetry, music and speeches which gave voice to the needs, aspirations, and demands for economic and social justice of immigrants and working people in both the U.S. and Mexico. It included inspiring words from leaders of the UE and FAT, the artists and from community, immigrants’ rights and labor leaders. State Senator Jesús García used the occasion to announce that he, State Representative Sonia Silva and Chicago Alderman Rick Muñoz would be introducing a resolution opposing fast track and NAFTA expansion and setting forth a different approach to trade. In addition, some twenty-five artists contributed paintings, photographs and sculpture for an exhibit inside UE Hall organized by the Guild Complex.<sup>46</sup>

While the first cross-border mural project was underway, I received an inquiry from another friend of Gary Huck. Juana Alicia, an artist from San Francisco, whose murals appear on the Women’s Building and San Francisco International Airport, the University of California at Santa Cruz, the façade of the headquarters of the National Teachers Union in Nicaragua, and many other locations, wrote to say that she would also be very interested in participating in a mural exchange.

Several years later we began to develop a plan and raise money for an exchange of women artists that would include Juana Alicia and Beatriz Aurora, a Chilean artist who had long been based in Chiapas where she worked with the Zapatistas, the organization that had led an armed rebellion of indigenous people in the southernmost Mexican State of Chiapas in 1994 to protest the NAFTA agreement. The original plan involved both a mural on the FAT’s Women’s Center in León, Guanajuato and in the hall of UE Local 506 in Erie Pennsylvania, where the local represented thousands of workers who manufactured locomotives for General Electric at its sprawling plant nearby. Although fund-raising was slow, we decided to go ahead with the planning and both artists traveled to Leon and to Erie to meet with members of UE and FAT to learn about our organizations, receive input, and gather material.

The initial meeting with the Executive Boards of Local 506 and its sister clerical Local 618 involved a lively exchange, but then took on a more somber note as the workers spoke about the various lines of work that had been moved out of their plant and transferred to Mexico. I was increasingly concerned about where the conversation might lead, but in response to one of Juana Alicia’s questions, the UE leaders began describing the UE’s relationship with the FAT and the importance of the organizing work that was taking place in Mexico. I sat, quietly listening, once again proud to work for UE and impressed by our members and their ability to understand the larger political picture and speak about solidarity rather than attributing the loss of jobs to workers in Mexico.

Local 506 was predominantly composed of men and many of the women who had been hired more recently were among the first to be laid off. Yet, the local leadership, led at the time by Dave Adams, Pat Rafferty, and David Kitchen, was terrific and enthusiastic about having a mural in their hall that was painted by artists who were women and with the struggles of women workers as the focus. They

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46. <https://guildcomplex.org/>

were supportive throughout the process, which included an initial survey and communication between Juana Alicia and women from the two locals who were generous in providing personal stories and poems. They also provided information about the two locals and their history. From Pittsburgh, I also researched the history of women in the UE and of the Erie locals and provided Juana Alicia with large stacks of material including photographs, articles from the UE NEWS, and other documents about that history as well as about the union's work with the FAT. We also reached out to Amy Newell, who contributed material and memories.

The mural, *A Women's Place: Una Guerrillera para la Solidaridad Internacional*, was incredible in its scope and depth and magnificent in its implementation. The image at the center of the mural is a butterfly, the Aztec symbol of movement and change, "Ollin." According to Juana Alicia, its evolution from the chrysalis to caterpillar to cocoon to butterfly represents the evolution of women's strength and leadership in the world of work. The main elements of the mural are two trains, one containing the logo of the FAT and the other UE, which meet in the center, running through the landscapes of Erie and Leon. The trains represent the journey of working women over the last century and the link of solidarity between the UE, FAT, and workers internationally. The rail cars contain panels with detailed depictions of the lives and struggles of women workers both past and present.

The poem in the center of the mural was written by Lynda Leech, a clerical worker from UE Local 618 who had participated in the first women's exchange between the UE and FAT in August, 1996:

### **Hands Across the Border**

Hands across the Border,  
Women united as one;  
Workers coming together  
To see what can be done.  
We don't all speak the language  
But a smile can say much more;  
Extending a hand in friendship  
Has opened many a door.  
No matter what our country,  
Our culture, or how we live,  
As workers united for a cause  
We all have much to give.  
The bosses' border divides no more  
As we stand strong and tall.  
It starts with just a few of us,  
But we will take down that wall.  
Let history repeat itself  
As oppression is overcome;  
Without borders or barriers —  
And workers together as one.

The mural also includes a young woman with a soccer ball, a tribute to the daughter of Donna Cramer — another woman who had participated on that delegation — who prepared the wall to be painted, together with other members of her school soccer team.

The inauguration of the mural took place during the UE's 65th national convention, which was

held in Erie at the end of August 2000. The UE NEWS reported that the mural electrified the delegates, Local 506 and 618 members, and guests:

“Bright and vibrant, big in size and conception, it celebrates working women and international solidarity. Muralist Juana Alicia proclaimed that ‘organizing and art are one and the same movement,’ making possible the eradication of racism and sexism.

“Amy Newell, former general secretary-treasurer, reminded listeners that for UE, interest in ‘international solidarity was there from the beginning. UE and FAT developed an alliance of different components, including the fight against NAFTA, but the heart was organizing,’ Newell said. ‘We put platitudes into concrete action.’ The alternative to rampant corporate globalism, she said, is ‘true internationalism.’”

In the end, structural problems in the building in León, lack of funding and other complications meant that we were unable to complete the companion mural. However, Beatriz Aurora subsequently completed the final piece of the artists’ exchange by creating a wonderful painting for the FAT. The content was designed to grace the poster they produced for their 13th Congress in November, 2004 and has also appeared on various FAT publications and calendars.

One final example illustrates how culture and solidarity with other organizations were continually incorporated into our on-going work. On May 1, 2012 the FAT was honored in Chicago, when a plaque with their message was added to the Haymarket Memorial.<sup>47</sup> Benedicto Martínez spoke briefly at the dedication and at the May Day march that followed. The next day, he accompanied two of the elected leaders from the Mexican DMI plant to Edon, Ohio, where they met with their UE counterparts and participated in a plant tour. Returning to Chicago, they made presentations in four different workshops at the *Labor Notes* conference and addressed the international convention of Railroad Workers United.

## Communication

One of the most rewarding parts of my work with the FAT were some of the people I came to meet and work with along the way, both within and outside of UE. Three people who generously volunteered their expertise and time made a tremendous contribution in helping us reach a much broader audience, so I want to pause for a moment to tell you about them.

Early on, I was feeling frustrated that the FAT was so busy with the organizing work that they rarely had time to send information about what was going on in Mexico. At the time, Dan LaBotz was in Mexico researching his doctoral thesis. Although I didn’t know him well, I asked if he would be willing to occasionally send me updates. He agreed, and later told me that he was thrilled to be asked. His reports far exceeded my wildest dreams and in January, 1996 we launched *Mexican Labor News and Analysis (MLNA)*. Directed at an English-speaking audience and featuring news, data, and insightful analysis about Mexican labor, social, and economic issues, MLNA became a valued resource for activists, researchers, students and educators around the world for almost twenty years.

In the beginning, we had to subscribe to a clipping service of Mexican newspapers, and Dan had the remarkable ability to synthesize, analyze and then sit down and rapidly write each issue. Later, material became available on the internet via web sites of Mexican newspapers, periodicals and labor organizations, and MLNA became a monthly publication. Each month we would review the articles to

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47. “1886-2012 More than 100 years of struggle! Through solidarity without borders, the working class builds a new world with dignity and rights for all. May 2012” (The message appears in both Spanish and English on the memorial).

be included and Dan would work his magic, sending articles on major developments, smaller items we called “labor shorts” and “social statistics,” along with occasional book reviews or the translation of significant documents. Each January he prepared an extensive analysis of labor, political, and economic events and trends over the past year along with thoughts regarding what might be expected; each March MLNA featured articles and statistics about women.

Although Dan did the bulk of the work, I wrote articles about campaigns and other work UE and FAT were involved in and every month edited MLNA and emailed it to supporters. Once we set up a web site, I also posted it on our site. As we developed a relationship with LabourStart, we began to post MLNA articles monthly on their site as well.<sup>48</sup>

Dan and I also collaborated in other ways. He accompanied several of our delegations to Mexico, contributing immensely through his presentations, assistance with interpretation, and deep knowledge of the history, culture, economy and politics of both the U.S. and Mexico. In addition, articles we wrote for NACLA provided much of the background information contained in this ebook on labor law reform.<sup>49</sup>

Although our initial web site was pretty basic, thanks to the extensive volunteer efforts of former UAW webmaster Nancy Brigham, we acquired a wonderful new look. She also created an incredible educational tool: an interactive page where the viewer could compare expenses (rent, food, and a variety of other items) based on the wages earned by workers in similar occupations in the U.S. and Mexico. The viewer would first select an occupation and then go shopping. By automatically converting the cost of each item into minutes worked, it became easy to understand and make a comparison between the costs of ordinary items in the U.S. and Mexico.

Most of the workers whose photos appeared in the various occupations were members of the UE and FAT, and the wages reflected their actual earnings. We included our own members where possible, but in cases where we didn’t represent workers who performed the same job we looked elsewhere: I remember contacting the Garment Worker Center<sup>50</sup> in Los Angeles who put me in touch with a seamstress and speaking to my favorite teller at my local bank in Pittsburgh; both liked the project and agreed to participate. Nancy also created a template that made it possible for me to input MLNA each month. This gave it a much more professional appearance and made it far easier to read. Many years later, she set up MLNA so that it could appear on the web site of the Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA) as well as the sites of other organizations through an RSS feed, so that the newest headlines and issues would automatically show up as soon as I posted them on our site. At the time, this all seemed like magic!

A third person who was inspired to support our work was Dale Hathaway, a history professor and former factory worker. Dale called me at the office one day to see if he could help in some way. He lived relatively close by, so he and his wife came to Pittsburgh and we spent an afternoon getting to know each other and exploring what would be of interest to him and useful to us. There was no comprehen-

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48. In another example of grassroots solidarity, that posting came to be done by Richard Leitch, the education officer from a local of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) in Newcastle, England.

49. Dan LaBotz and Robin Alexander, “[Origins of Mexico’s Labor Law Reform](#)” NACLA, September 25, 2007; Dan LaBotz and Robin Alexander, “[The Escalating Struggle over Mexico’s Labor Law](#)” NACLA September 25, 2007; Dan LaBotz and Robin Alexander, “[The Abascal Plan: Codifying Employer Control](#)”; Robin Alexander and Dan LaBotz “[Mexico’s Labor Reform: A Workers’ Defeat—For Now](#)” NACLA, April 3, 2014; and Robin Alexander and Dan LaBotz, “[Elements of the New Labor Law](#)” NACLA, April 4, 2014.

50. <https://garmentworkercenter.org/>

sive history of the FAT at that time, much less in English. The result was a literary exchange: when Dale Hathaway wrote his book about the FAT in English<sup>51</sup> he researched it together with Jorge Robles, who was responsible for communication for the FAT at that time, and who wrote a quite different book in Spanish.<sup>52</sup>

Not only did Dan, Nancy and Dale contribute greatly to the effectiveness of our work, but I enjoyed the pleasure of their friendship over many years and all came to have close relationships with the FAT.

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51. Dale Hathaway, *Allies Across the Border*, South End Press, Boston, MA, 2000

52. Emiliano Robles Becerril, Luis Angel Gómez, Jorge Robles, Dale Hathaway, *El Frente Auténtico del Trabajo Cuarenta años de Lucha Libertaria*, El Atajo Ediciones, 2000.

## Part 4: Deepening and Expanding International Solidarity: Building a Broader Movement

English | Español | Français

### Tri-National Solidarity Alliance

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**Mission**  
The Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA) engages in solidarity work around the demand for freedom of association with an internationalist vision of union struggle.

We recognize that the structural causes of our oppression are the same in Mexico, Canada and the United States. Together with the Global Union Federations and the ITUC, we denounce the attack on the working class, and strive to resist and repel the forces that are working against our interests and to promote a decent standard of living and work with dignity for working people in all of our countries.

[Read about the origin of TNSA »](#)

**Mexican Labor News & Analysis**

### Participating Organizations

MEXICO CANADA USA GLOBAL

Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT)  
Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos, Siderúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana

Tri-National Solidarity Alliance website, [www.trinationalsolidarity.org](http://www.trinationalsolidarity.org).

UE's domestic and international work were closely linked and the UE and FAT became active participants in the U.S. and World Social Forums, in Grassroots Global Justice, at *Labor Notes* conferences, and within Jobs with Justice. Because our resources were extremely limited, we sought to fully utilize these spaces to share our experiences, build and strengthen alliances with labor and community organizations around the world and to educate and build leadership within our organizations.

Perhaps most significant, as the Mexican government escalated its attack on independent unions, we helped to build and coordinate the Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA).

### World Social Forums

The First World Social Forum (WSF)<sup>53</sup> took place in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The Brazilian Workers Party had governed the city for some time and had implemented an innovative participatory budgeting process, making the city an appropriate and inspiring host for the gathering of civil society organizations that believed “another world is possible” and were seeking to build an alternative to the neoliberal agenda that was being promoted by the World Economic Forum taking place in Davos, Switzerland at the same time.

I was fortunate to attend that WSF on behalf of UE as part of a grassroots delegation from the United States that considered it critically important that organizations of poor and working people composed predominately people of color should be able to speak for themselves in international fo-

53. See [Wikipedia entry on the World Social Forum](#)

rums. This contrasted with the practice that U.S. NGOs — based primarily in New York or Washington and staffed largely by people who were highly educated and white — should not be the voices in the forefront of discussions of problems we faced nor the ones to develop and present proposed solutions in our absence. Upon our return, we agreed that we should continue to work together and formed the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ),<sup>54</sup> which is now composed of more than sixty organizations from around the United States.

Although its focus has since expanded, one of the major accomplishments of GGJ in its early years was to organize U.S. participation within the WSF (and subsequently USSF) process. This provided an incredible opportunity for UE and FAT to connect with a wide variety of progressive organizations from the U.S. and from around the world. From the beginning, the Brazilian CUT was deeply involved and we worked closely with Fernando Lopes to use the meetings in Brazil to create links between sister shops owned by the same transnational corporations. As the WSF became more established, trade unions began to participate in larger numbers from other countries and organized an additional labor forum the day before the WSF opened.

The UE and FAT participated in many of the WSF meetings as part of GGJ delegations and, although it is not possible to describe them all, the January 2004 WSF in Mumbai, India provided an unusual opportunity for solidarity involving workers employed by General Electric, at that time the largest company whose workers were represented by UE.

As was typical of the GGJ delegations, the group that year was composed of leaders and members of grassroots organizations of poor and working-class people, mainly people of color, and a majority were women. GGJ had organized a session prior to the opening of the WSF which was an invaluable crash course about the situation in India. The WSF itself was also an amazing educational experience for our rank-and-file members and an opportunity to compare knowledge and experience and to build relationships and develop strategies with other organizations.

We had previously gotten to know the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) of India, one of the WSF host organizations, and representatives from the UE and FAT spoke at six different workshops and panels and assisted the NTUI in identifying other international participants. We also seized the opportunity to hold relevant side meetings with unions engaged in similar struggles in other countries and were able to have valuable discussions with unions we did not know well, most notably the KCTU from Korea, as well as others we had come to work with over time, including the Brazilian CUT and CGT's metalworkers' federation from France and several unions from Canada.

However, we were particularly interested in meeting other workers and unions at GE and the WSF provided us with that opportunity. The year before, UE had received a fax out of the blue from a lawyer from India we did not know, V. Prakash, who said he represented GE workers in Hosur who were engaged in a sit-down strike and that he was coming to the U.S. and was interested in meeting. We invited him to the UE headquarters in Pittsburgh where he met with President John Hovis and International Representative Steve Tormey, who was responsible for coordinating the union's work involving GE. They discussed the struggle of the workers at the Hosur facility in some detail, as well as the political and labor situations in the United States and India.

Two days later, Prakash joined us in Detroit at a meeting with officers and members of UE Local 506, who manufactured locomotives for GE, and from IUE/CWA Local 201 from the GE plant in Lynn, Massachusetts, who manufactured aircraft engines. Plans for communication and solidarity were de-

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54. [GGJAlliance.org](http://GGJAlliance.org)

veloped, including meetings with local management, a formal letter to GE, and distributing information to members and other U.S. workers about the situation.

Commenting on the meeting, David Kitchen, Chief Plant Steward from UE Local 506 said, “Having an opportunity to meet with a representative of GE workers from India is truly global worker solidarity in action. We in the labor movement must reach out to our sisters and brothers regardless of geography if we are to have a chance at stopping exploitation of workers and exportation of jobs.”

Alex Brown, vice president of IUE/CWA Local 201 added: “Too often workers are pitted against each other in a continual forced competition over jobs and working conditions. It is exciting to sit down and talk directly and learn about their struggles against GE, which are similar to ours. Their sit-down strike is inspiring and we will help in any way we can.”<sup>55</sup>

Among UE’s representatives to the WSF was David Kitchen, who was eager to get to know GE workers from other countries, to follow up on the information provided by Prakash, and to meet the GE workers at the Hosur plant in person. By then, we also had made connections with GE unions in other countries, and of particular importance for UE at the Mumbai WSF was an initial meeting of union leaders who represented workers from General Electric in Brazil, France, the U.S., Mexico and India.<sup>56</sup>

We had made plans for the UE and FAT representatives to travel to the city of Hosur, located in the South of India, following the WSF. Prior to leaving for Mumbai, Kitchen had requested a plant tour, something that was routinely approved when the request was made by a GE worker. Although initially his request was granted, after arriving in India he was informed that it had been denied. We visited workers on the picket line as planned and then, instead of touring the plant, we participated in a press conference denouncing management’s union-busting approach at the GE-owned factory.

Once we returned to the U.S., we were able to contribute to the struggle of the GE Hosur workers in two additional ways. David Kitchen worked with the other leadership of UE 506 to organize a plant-gate collection on their behalf. We also coordinated with Prakash, who succeeded in obtaining a court injunction preventing GE from closing its plant — in part due to information we were able to provide regarding the company. Following our return, we also learned that the Human Relations Manager at the Hosur plant had been fired.

In the article he contributed to the UE NEWS upon his return, David Kitchen wrote:

“Is international solidarity work important? A question many of us ask ourselves often, especially when we are locked in what seems to be an eternal battle right here in our own plants.”

His conclusion:

“The 30-hour flight back home gave me plenty of time to consider the purpose of the trip. I have never doubted the importance of international solidarity. The trip only convinced me of the need to step up our efforts because time is not on our side. Corporations and politicians have their act together. With the cooperation of the World Bank, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and other such groups they are quickly buying entire countries for the benefit of multinational corporations. As workers we are asking for a voice in the process to ensure our

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55. For more information about the struggle at the GE plant in Hosur, see Anannya Bhattacharjee and Robin Alexander “[GE Workers Fight Back in India, Reach out to GE Workers in the US](#)”, *Labor Notes*, November 1, 2003.

56. At the next WSF, the CUT hosted a separate meeting of the GE Unions in Sao Paolo before the start of the WSF.

interests are considered. We are not demanding the moon — only respect and a living wage. It was uplifting to see that we are not alone in these demands.

“To see 500,000 people demanding to be heard and believing ‘another world is possible’ would or should inspire anyone who cares.”

## **The Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA)**

In October of 2009, President Felipe Calderón launched an attack on the *Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME)* or Mexican Electrical Workers Union, occupying the plants it operated at *Compañía Luz y Fuerza del Centro* (the Power and Light Company of Central Mexico), liquidating the company, sweeping aside the union and firing 44,000 workers.<sup>57</sup> However, this was simply the most dramatic example of the escalating attacks against workers.

Since taking office in 2006, the Calderón government had worked with *Grupo México* in carrying out a continuous onslaught against the Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union, the *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos, Siderúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana (STMMRM)*, known as *Los Mineros*.<sup>58</sup> In 2007, *Los Mineros* had launched a strike at *Grupo México*'s Cananea copper mine in northern Mexico, occupying the mine to protest the company's refusal to remedy extreme safety hazards. In February 2010, a Mexican appellate court gave the green light to terminate 1,200 miners and to break the three-year old strike.

The court's decision set the stage for the government's invasion of Cananea, dislodging the striking workers, attacking them in their local union headquarters and closing it down. Although a separate order from a district court specifically permitted the strikers to remain in the mine, that order was disregarded and federal and state police occupied the mine while scabs worked inside.

Meanwhile, in Nacozari, Sonora, a conflict similar to the one at Cananea was underway. In July 2007 *Grupo México* had taken over the mine, firing all of the workers and imposing a company union. The Pasta de Conchos mine disaster, which had occurred on February 19, 2006 when a methane explosion had killed an estimated 65 workers, also continued to fester. Less than a week after the explosion, *Grupo México* suspended the rescue efforts and more than four years later the government had still failed to conduct a thorough investigation, punish those responsible, recover the bodies or compensate the families of the victims.<sup>59</sup>

Then, on March 18, 2010, Mexico's right-wing PAN presented a proposal for labor law reform that would have virtually eliminated the right to strike, permitted employers to evade obligations under the law by legalizing sub-contracting, replaced wages and benefits based on seniority with a merit-based system, and undercut various other labor protections.

Meanwhile, independent airline, bank, and oil workers' unions had all been subjected to serious at-

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57. For an excellent review of the history, struggle and current operation of SME as both a cooperative and in partnership with a Portuguese company, see David Bacon, [“The Rebirth of Mexico's Electrical Workers”](#).

58. *Grupo México* was the largest of the mining companies to receive the support of the government in dealing with strikes by *Los Mineros*. In April, 2006 two miners were killed and some forty others injured by police who were trying to evict strikers from the SICARTSA plant in Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán. Parts of the plant were then taken over by the Mexican army and navy.

59. On February 18, 2020, the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador announced that it would resume the search for the missing miners; on October 23, he signed legislation committing to recover the remains and in November, 2020 began issuing payments for compensation to the 65 families.

tacks and the government had also refused to recognize union leaders who had been elected, by simply failing to approve their *toma de nota*, the registration that provides union leaders with the legal authority to negotiate contracts, provide strike notifications and conduct other union business.<sup>60</sup>

These attacks against the SME, *Los Mineros* and other unions as well as renewed efforts to reform the *Ley Federal del Trabajo* were part of a concerted strategy by the PAN, following and deepening the PRI's turn towards neoliberalism in previous decades.

By 2010 other partnerships had formed between U.S., Canadian and Mexican unions, including an alliance of energy workers, the Trinational Energy Workers Alliance, spearheaded by the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) of Canada, the Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA) of the U.S. and SME and the *Unión Nacional de Técnicos y Profesionistas Petroleros (UNTyPP)*, the new, democratic union of workers at PEMEX from Mexico; a partnership between the Steelworkers from the U.S. and Canada and *Los Mineros* in Mexico; and the Communications Workers of America (CWA) had established a relationship with the *Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana (STRM)* Mexican Telephone Workers Union. Many of us had worked together on various solidarity campaigns that had been initiated by our unions or other organizations and by then we were all beginning to feel overwhelmed and unable to effectively respond to the increasing volume of requests for solidarity.

This was the context in which trade unionists, democratic labor lawyers and several global union federations gathered in Toronto in June of 2010. The discussions at that meeting resulted in a strong resolution condemning the Mexican government for its attacks on Mexican unions, violation of domestic and international law, and for its effort to enact an even more repressive labor law; highlighting the cases of *Los Mineros* and SME; demanding the non-intervention by the government in internal union affairs; and “agreeing to establish a tri-national coordination made up of representatives and activists of unions and non-governmental organizations to organize a program of legal, political and global actions to ensure the restoration of the labour rights of our Mexican sisters and brothers and for mutual support for the struggles we each face in Canada, Mexico and the U.S.”<sup>61</sup>

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60. The General Secretary of *Los Mineros*, Napoleon Gómez Urrutia, remains a controversial figure in the Mexican labor movement. Although he inherited the leadership of the union from his father, he played an important role in defeating the 2005 Labor Law Reform proposals that were being promoted by Vicente Fox. He also accused *Grupo México* and the Mexican government of “industrial homicide” following the Pasta de Conchos mine explosion that resulted in the deaths of dozens of miners. Following his announcement that he was seeking to head up the *Congreso del Trabajo (CT)*, the Mexican government withdrew his *toma de nota*. He was also charged with misappropriating \$55 million dollars in union funds due to workers following the privatization of the Cananea mine. To avoid what he declared were false charges, he fled to Vancouver where he was hosted by USW Canada for over a decade. During that time, he faced eleven different law suits, but was successful in all. The Mexican government also attempted to extradite him in 2009 and filed charges with Interpol. He returned to Mexico in 2018 to be sworn in as a plurinominal senator for MORENA. As president of the Senate's Labor Commission he played a primary role in the recent legislation limiting outsourcing. Upon his return, he also launched a new labor federation, the *Confederacion Internacional de Trabajadores (CIT)*.

61. TORONTO LABOR UNION RESOLUTION: SUPPORT FOR MEXICAN WORKERS  
BUILDING SOLIDARITY WITH THE DEMOCRATIC LABOUR MOVEMENT IN MEXICO  
TORONTO, JUNE 20, 2010

*As union and social movement groups from Mexico, the United States and Canada, as well as labour lawyers and trade union activists from around the world, we have come together to express our solidarity and commitment to the defense of human and labour rights in Mexico.*

*We are concerned that the Mexican government, acting in complicity with business, has been continually and violently contravening Mexican law as well as international labour conventions. We are speaking out against those proposals for labour law reform that threaten to worsen the already weakened protections for workers, virtually annihilating trade union freedoms in that country.*

*We reject the criminalization of labour organizations and the repression by military and paramilitary forces against them, and commit*

Following the Toronto meeting, a number of us drove to Detroit for the first U.S. Social Forum (USSF). Events of various sizes and types at the USSF were all self-organized, and the proposal of the UE in collaboration with the FAT, Jobs with Justice, Grassroots Global Justice, and the Centro Obreiro de Detroit had been accepted for a “People’s Movement Assembly” — the largest type of forum for discussion. In addition, proposals emerging from these assemblies could subsequently be incorporated into the declaration approved at the final plenary session.

The USSF offered a tremendous opportunity to broaden our work and, when planning the assembly, we identified four goals. First, we would build on whatever would come out of the meeting in Toronto. We also hoped to develop a plan for better coordination between organizations in Mexico and between Mexican organizations and those in the U.S. and Canada, perhaps through an emergency response and solidarity network with Mexico.

We felt that it was important to develop a frame that would address the underlying issues, while at the same time raising awareness of the war on Mexican unions and labor rights and providing support for the specific struggles of our brothers and sisters in Mexico. Finally, we would seek to identify potential common activities and strategies, and a limited number of points — ideally one — that we could bring to the national assembly for adoption into the final declaration.

While the meeting in Toronto had been relatively small and was composed of union leadership, some staff, progressive lawyers, and a few activists from NGOs that worked closely with labor unions, the USSF brought together virtually all of the significant progressive labor and community organizations in the U.S. along with thousands of their members and other activists.

The panel we organized included five prominent independent trade union leaders from the FAT, SME, *Los Mineros*, and UNTyPP.<sup>62</sup> The challenge we posed to those attending our assembly was: “How do we take the next step and move from solidarity in particular cases to a tri-national defense of work-

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*ourselves to the support of our sisters and brothers who are under attack. In particular we criticize Grupo México, which, acting in complicity with the Mexican government against the Miners’ union, both in the Cananea and Pasta de Conchos mines, has seriously weakened the right to strike and the right to work.*

*We are outraged, as worker representatives from the international community, about the attack by the Mexican government against the Mexican Electrical Workers’ Union (SME), using armed forces to raid the workplaces of the publicly-owned Central Light and Power Company, and unjustly firing 44,000 workers, especially since eight months into the conflict, and more than sixty days into a hunger strike, the conflict has not been resolved. Conflicts should be resolved through negotiation and the good will of all parties, with absolute respect for trade union autonomy and the international standards of labour rights.*

*We demand the non-intervention of the government in the internal affairs of unions, and the unconditional recognition of their democratically elected leadership. We therefore call for the recognition of the Secretaries-General of the Mining and Electrical Workers’ Unions, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia and Martín Esparza Flores.*

*In our meeting, it was agreed to establish a tri-national coordination made up of representatives and activists of unions and non-governmental organizations to organize a program of legal, political and global actions to ensure the restoration of the labour rights of our Mexican sisters and brothers and for mutual support for the struggles we each face in Canada, Mexico and the U.S.*

#### LA LUCHA OBRERA NO TIENE FRONTERAS / WORKERS’ STRUGGLES HAVE NO BORDERS

*This statement is supported by: Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), United Steelworkers (USW), Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), United Electrical Workers (UE), ICEM, UNI, IMF, Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (Authentic Labour Front — FAT), Mexican Electrical Workers’ Union (Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas — SME), Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros (National Miners’ Union — SNTMMSRSM) and the Mexican Telephone Workers’ Union (STRM).”*

62. Benedicto Martínez Orozco, one of the three co-presidents of the FAT and vice president of the UNT; Martín Esparza, General Secretary of SME; Humberto Montes de Oca, Interior Secretary of SME; Didier Marquina, General Secretary of UNTyPP; and Carlos Esquer, Member of the National Executive Committee of *Los Mineros*, from Local 65 in Cananea.

ers' rights?"

The Assembly issued a lengthy resolution that concluded:

*"We therefore call upon the USSF to ...*

- 1. Affirm support for the Toronto declaration and raise awareness in the U.S. about the ongoing attacks against Mexican unions and labor rights;*
- 2. Denounce the violation of labor rights and the virulent attack on labor organizations in Mexico such as the Miners and Electrical Workers through our unions and social movements; and*
- 3. Join in developing an effective and coordinated response with our North American partners."*

By late summer, the situation in Mexico was heating up even more. On August 20, workers at Nacozari voted unanimously to return to *Los Mineros*, but the company refused to recognize their decision, instead bringing in 1000 federal police and firing some 25 leaders. The following month, hundreds of thugs in civilian clothes attacked the striking miners at Cananea and the Sonora State Police illegally and arbitrarily arrested 26 strikers.

Other significant meetings also occurred that fall. An October 29 post on the AFL-CIO blog announced a "joint action plan" with "the major independent Mexican labor federation, *Unión Nacional de Trabajadores* (UNT) ... to bring economic and social development to both countries."

Referencing the close working relations between the USW and *Los Mineros* and the CWA and the Telephone Workers of Mexico (STRM), the plan — signed by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and the three co-presidents of UNT — represented "an important step forward towards realizing a shared prosperity agenda for workers struggling in both Mexico and the United States." The union leaders agreed to "work together to oppose any further weakening of labor laws and to work jointly to strengthen labor laws through the ILO and other global groups." They also specifically identified the problems posed by protection contracts and committed to:

- "Developing a plan for immigration that protects, promotes and respects immigrant rights.*
- Working together to combat unscrupulous labor recruiters and end labor abuses in both countries.*
- Pushing for changes in both the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the labor side agreements.*
- Using the existing systems in trade agreements to push for enforcement of worker rights in each country.*
- Conducting joint corporate campaigns to build authentic representation for workers."*

The agreement between the AFL-CIO and the UNT was historic in that it formalized what had been operationally the case for several years: that the AFL-CIO's partner in Mexico was explicitly no longer the CTM. This was a huge step in terms of breaking with a historic relationship dating back to the ICFTU.<sup>63</sup>

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63. The CTM and CROC were subsequently expelled from the *Confederación Sindical de las Américas* (CSA) or Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) and eventually from the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) on December 7, 2018.

Also in October, the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) held a Strategic Meeting on Union Building in Mexico City with an objective of finding ways to jointly build democratic union power in Mexico. The meeting brought together over 50 participants including the leadership of six major independent unions, unions affiliated to the IMF and ICEM, representatives from IMF, ICEM, UNI and ITF, and international and Mexican civil society organizations which supported the need to build a coordinated approach in solidarity with trade unions around the world.

“This meeting expressed great solidarity and unity to go forward together in building strong and democratic unions in Mexico,” said IMF Assistant General Secretary Fernando Lopes. “We need two legs to stand and walk. The Toronto agreement to fight at all levels for freedom of association and trade union rights is only one leg, the expansion and capacity building of the democratic unions in Mexico is our second leg. Each organization has different capacities and needs, we must examine each case and strategically coordinate our union-building efforts,” added Lopes.

One important result of all of these discussions was that we began to work together in what we called the Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA). In building solidarity for the independent trade union movement in Mexico, we intentionally chose to build on and support relationships that already existed rather than trying to supersede them via a new structure or organization. Functionally, the Mexican unions met in person as a group. Because of tensions between them, it was agreed that the FAT would convene meetings. The U.S., Canadian and Québécois unions coordinated through periodic phone calls. I operated as point person for the unions in the U.S. and coordinated with Duncan Brown, who was responsible for international affairs for the CEP and performed the same function for unions north of the border.

Lorraine Clewer had recently taken over as Director of the Solidarity Center in Mexico. We were extremely fortunate in that she attended all of the Mexican TNSA meetings and was able to provide both a neutral space for the Mexican unions to meet and to serve as a vital bridge with the participants on the U.S./Canada calls. In order to communicate and coordinate better amongst ourselves and to reach out more effectively, we subsequently established a Google group and eventually developed a new web site at [www.TrinationalSolidarity.org](http://www.TrinationalSolidarity.org) that linked with both Facebook and Twitter.<sup>64</sup> MLNA appeared on the TNSA web site through an RSS feed, providing information about current struggles.

Our principal goal was to provide effective solidarity, so our approach was pragmatic: we focused on getting the work done. This meant that various unions would take the initiative on different campaigns or issues and participants in TNSA would support initiatives wherever possible. To a large degree we were able to keep bureaucracy and self-promotion to a minimum. Both Duncan and Lorraine were a delight to work with, as both were thoughtful, perceptive, worked hard, and were committed to moving the solidarity work forward rather than in self-aggrandizement.

In Mexico, TNSA provided a way for unions to work together despite some important differences. However, it also served to bring together U.S. and Canadian unions and to link all of us at times with the Global Union Federations and, later, with the ITUC. Two NGO's — USLEAP and MSN — also worked closely with us from the beginning and many others participated in what became annual Days of Action.

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64. A few years later, we initiated a pilot project in response to the urgent request by Mexican unions to be kept abreast of labor news in the United States. I began preparing short articles which were translated into Spanish by the Solidarity Center in Mexico and distributed to the independent unions. The material was made available not only on the *Labor Notes* web site, but was also available in English and Spanish via RSS feed to other sites.

We rapidly agreed upon the following mission:

“The Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA) engages in solidarity work around the demand for freedom of association with an internationalist vision of union struggle. We recognize that the structural causes of our oppression are the same in Mexico, Canada and the United States. Together with the Global Union Federations and the ITUC, we denounce the attack on the working class and strive to resist and repel the forces that are working against our interests and to promote a decent standard of living and work with dignity for working people in all of our countries.”

The coordinated work of TNSA over the next few years was impressive. One of our first actions was to support SME and *Los Mineros*. Remarkably, the SME survived the government’s October 2009 attack, regrouped, and some 16,000 members remained determined to regain their jobs. Responding to SME’s agreement with the Mexican government to end its hunger strike in exchange for negotiations, members of our Alliance co-sponsored a LabourStart campaign to encourage the Mexican government to honor its commitment to negotiate in good faith with SME and to address the conflict with the miners at Cananea. This campaign generated well over fifteen hundred email messages, considered a significant accomplishment at that time.

We translated and reproduced large quantities of the tripartite flier that had been developed in Mexico for the hundredth anniversary of the Mexican Revolution and distributed them throughout Mexico, Canada, Québec and the United States. With a banner “Little to celebrate...” it laid out the attack on Mexican workers and independent unions.

We also generated approximately a hundred letters to the Mexican Supreme Court regarding the case brought by *Los Mineros* which challenged the Mexican government’s power to interfere in union elections by failing to register its newly elected officers (not approving their *toma de nota*). An amicus brief was subsequently filed by our allies at ICLR on behalf of forty-seven organizations based upon the investigation by legal experts the previous May.<sup>65</sup> The case was ultimately successful: after much delay, in May 2012, the Supreme Court handed down a decision in favor of *Los Mineros* which served as an important precedent for other unions.

TNSA responded enthusiastically to the call by four Global Union Federations and the ITUC to participate in Global Days of Action for Trade Union Freedom in Mexico in February, 2011 and took responsibility for coordinating actions in the U.S., Canada, Québec and Mexico. Working in coordination, the UE, USW, UAW and AFL-CIO identified cities where we would be responsible for actions and the UE also reached out to the Cross-Border Network in Kansas City and the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice. Altogether we organized demonstrations or delegations in at least 13 U.S. cities, in the four largest cities in Canada, and in Mexico there were 27 different actions following the massive annual demonstration on January 31. In all, more than 50,000 trade unionists and their community allies around the world, in 40 countries on five continents, strongly denounced the attack on independent Mexican trade unions and on the freedom of association in Mexico.

Our actions generated an immediate response: On February 24, 2011, just days after the 2011 Global Days of Action, the Secretary Treasurer of *Los Mineros*, Juan Linares Montefur, was released after spending two years, two months and 20 days in jail and being subjected to 19 mistrials.<sup>66</sup>

65. Patricia Muñoz Ríos, “La Secretaría interpreta que el fallo 6 permite ‘verificar’ los comicios,” *La Jornada*, June 21, 2011 at p.31; the brief is available on the [International Commission for Labor Rights website](#).

66. See [“Mexican Trade Unionist Juan Linares Released from Jail”](#), IndustriALL, February 28, 2011.

As part of our efforts in 2011 to raise awareness, we also took the lead in organizing several tours of prominent national leaders of Mexican unions. Trade union leaders from Mexico participated in the February Days of Action events in Vancouver and Ottawa. In late March, a national leader of *Los Mineros* traveled to New York and New Orleans where he spoke at labor conferences and law schools. A national leader of SME joined UE in Pittsburgh, sharing information about the assault on workers' rights in Mexico and showing solidarity with U.S. workers and students who were fighting against cuts and the attack on fundamental labor rights in the U.S.

In addition, three representatives from TNSA delivered the opening witness testimony to the International Tribunal on Trade Union Freedom which was held in Mexico City on May 28, 2011.

TNSA unions also assumed the responsibility of coordinating NAALC cases for the SME that were filed in the U.S. and Canada. On October 27, 2011, eighty organizations filed a complaint in Canada and on November 14, 2011, ninety-seven organizations submitted a parallel complaint in the U.S. — the largest number ever to sign on to such cases. This generated a response from both agencies: they accepted the petitions and sent an investigatory mission to Mexico, where they asked both sides to set up interviews. We learned that on the first day they met with the SME leadership, women, workers with serious medical issues at the time they were fired, and workers who took severance or took jobs at firms that went bankrupt; on the second day they interviewed expert labor witnesses Arturo Alcalde, Nestor De Buen, and Graciela Bensusan; and on the last day they interviewed government witnesses. The investigation exerted significant pressure on the Mexican Government and helped keep them in negotiations with the union.

For the next two years, we continued to coordinate the Days of Action in solidarity with the independent unions in Mexico, targeting embassies and consulates around the world. These actions were generally timed to coincide with the anniversary of the February 19, 2006 Pasta de Conchos mine disaster.

In 2012, the focus was on holding discussions with the Mexican Consulates, and the following details provide some flavor of the sorts of events that were organized and the variety of participants who were involved. Peter Knowlton, president of UE Northeast Region, Stephen Lewis, Secretary-Treasurer of SEIU Local 509 who also represented the Greater Boston Labor Council, and Russ Davis, Executive Director of Massachusetts Jobs with Justice participated in a productive, hour-long meeting with the Mexican Consul in Boston. “We left them with the letter to President Calderón and a version of the sheet explaining the particular struggles of Mexican workers, independent trade unions, and why reforms are necessary to improve the living standards of Mexican workers - especially in light of the destructive effects of NAFTA over the last 20 years,” Knowlton said. In Raleigh, representatives from the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) delivered a letter to the Mexican consulate along with FLOC's petition to President Calderón to bring to justice those responsible for the assassination of Santiago Cruz. In Chicago, a crowd of Steelworkers and retirees, Teamsters, ARISE Chicago (the inter-faith labor group in Chicago) and UE participated in an action at the consulate that included reading of the names of the dead miners.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, TNSA unions organized an impressive event in the auditorium of the SME. In addition to Martín Esparza (SME), Napoleón Gómez Urrutia (*Los Mineros*, via Skype), Cap. Perfecto from the *Asociación Sindical de Pilotos Aviadores (ASPA)* the Pilots' Union and Benedicto Martínez (FAT/UNT), labor leaders from around the world denounced the violations of fundamental labor rights. Bruce Klipple, president of the UE and Louis Roy, president of the *Confederation des syndicats nationaux (CSN)* presented the declaration of the Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA). In addition, Duncan Brown

(CEP) spoke on behalf of UNI, underscoring the repeated failure to hold a free and fair election at Aten-to, a campaign that had been undertaken by the Telephone Workers. Jyrki Raina sent a recorded mes-sage from the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) and Jorge Almeida, the IMF representative from Latin America and the Caribbean spoke in person. Cathy Feingold, International Affairs Director for the AFL-CIO, also sent a recorded video for the occasion.

Participants in the 2012 Days of Action also signed an Open Letter to the President of Mexico on behalf of Mexicana airline workers. Horacio Vázquez, Political Advisor to ASPA, noted that the letter was published on February 23 in two national newspapers, *Milenio* and *La Jornada*.

In October 2012, the arrest warrants against leaders of the SME were lifted and one of the jailed leaders was released.

In the fall of 2012, trade union representatives from the three countries met in Mexico to develop a work plan for the coming year. We agreed that the immediate priorities would be to provide support for the campaign opposing labor law reform and to begin to plan for the next Days of Action. Since the meeting coincided with the introduction of the proposed reform legislation, we took advantage of the occasion to issue a denunciation which was published in *La Jornada*. When it subsequently appeared that labor law reform would pass the Mexican Congress, we generated letters from various unions and began planning a legislative strategy in Washington DC and Ottawa, Canada to share information with members of the U.S. Congress and Canadian Parliament.

In 2013, IndustriALL<sup>67</sup> and other global union federations organized meetings and demonstrations in some fifty countries around the world. TNSA was responsible once again for coordinating events in the U.S., Canada, Québec, and Mexico. In preparation for the Days of Action, TNSA created an excel-lent overview of the challenges facing independent unions and a summary of current struggles. Labor representatives met government officials at the embassy in Ottawa, while other events took place in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. In the U.S., we targeted seventeen embassies and consulates. UE took the lead in Boston and Raleigh and participated in demonstrations in Chicago and Los Angeles.

UE and FAT had planned an Organizers Institute so that the participants could join *Los Mineros* on March 18 for a silent march which included 65 coffins representing the miners who died. The follow-ing day began with a press conference at the headquarters of the pilots' union. This was followed by a meeting of the TNSA and concluded with a rally in support of the SME at their headquarters.

These actions laid the groundwork for measures taken by the global union IndustriALL, the In-ternational Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), and the Latin American Union Confederation (CSA) to follow up on an International Labor Organization (ILO) case that had been filed by IndustriALL regarding protection contracts.<sup>68</sup>

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67. On June 10, 2012 three of the global union federations — the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), the Interna-tional Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Unions (ICEM), and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF) — merged to form IndustriALL. The IMF, ICEM and later IndustriALL played a really significant role in convening and generating support for the international days of action on Mexico over successive years, something quite unprecedented and with considerable impact at the highest political levels in Mexico and within the global union movement. This contributed to the expulsion of CTM and CROC from the ITUC (See note 63) and pressure at the ILO was important both in the fight against protection contracts and labor law reform and in leading to the Mexican government to sign on to ILO Convention 98.

68. For the history of the struggle for labor law reform, see Part 5; for a description of the allegations and the ILO's initial recommendations see the [ILO website](#).

In an August 2013 meeting with President Enrique Peña Nieto and Labor Secretary Alfonso Navarrete Prida at the Los Pinos Presidential Palace in Mexico City, the government conceded that protection contracts were an issue and agreed to consult with the ILO Director General regarding a technical review of Mexico's labor laws. The Peña Nieto administration also agreed to work towards a resolution of the dispute involving SME, stated that the General Secretary of *Los Mineros* was free to return to Mexico, and said it would take steps to ratify ILO convention 98 governing the right to bargaining collectively. These statements represented a rare government recognition of labor rights and even rarer promises to do something about them.

On September 20, 2013, representatives from the U.S. and Canada gathered in Mexico City to exchange updates, to review and evaluate our joint work, and to develop a plan that we could present to participating organizations. Five representatives from the U.S. and Canada (UAW, UE, Solidarity Center, UNIFOR and MSN) were present and USW representatives from the U.S. and Canada participated by Skype. We joined approximately 20 participants from various Mexican unions including UNT, SME, UNTyPP, FAT, STRM, ASPA, and organizers with MSN and UAW. *Los Mineros* sent last minute apologies. Global union federations represented at the meeting included IndustriALL and UNI.

As a result of those discussions, the TNSA unions went on to organize NAFTA at 20: a multisectoral event in Mexico City which focused on NAFTA, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and current labor struggles, culminating in a major march on January 31. We also supported an action in various border cities on January 1 and contributed to the labor section of the report the AFL-CIO directed at the media on the 20th anniversary of NAFTA. Throughout, we continued to demand that the Mexican government comply with the recommendations issued by the ILO.

Although the primary focus of TNSA was on providing solidarity to unions in Mexico, on several occasions support took a different path. For example, in 2011, unions in Mexico sent letters of solidarity during coordinated negotiations by unions in the U.S. with the General Electric Company. In 2012, unions in Canada and Québec helped the Farm Labor Organizing Committee break a deadlock, resulting in the announcement by Reynolds Tobacco that it would open discussions with the union.

Lorraine Clewer recently reflected on the significance of the TNSA:

“In hindsight, TNSA represents the convergence of unions around a common agenda to confront and repel the Mexican government's unprecedented attacks on Mexican workers and independent unions. It emerged organically and reflected a new and tremendously energizing way of working together, including local, national and international organizations from different and sometimes conflicting parts of the global trade union movement in a huge, respectful, and concerted solidarity movement that ultimately contributed to the favorable current situation: a constitutional reform to end protection unionism, a progressive labor law reform codifying workers' collective rights and providing tools for the democratization of Mexico's labor rights system, as well as specific provisions that deal with discrimination against and representation by women and protections for domestic workers.”

Although in some ways it seems strange that TNSA disappeared nearly as quickly as it emerged, it played a strategic role in supporting — while intentionally not attempting to play a leading role in — the Mexican labor movement. As a result of its efforts, attacks by the government decreased in their frequency and intensity and independent and democratic Mexican unions were strengthened and accorded some breathing room. This allowed them to take the lead on national issues, as well as supporting organizing in unorganized sectors and increasing membership of non-traditional populations. It also contributed to SME's survival in its new phase as the cooperative *LF del Centro* and the organization of consumers who use their services in a separate organization.

## Part 5: Labor Law Reform



FAT delegation during May Day march, May 1, 2014.

The need for labor law reform in Mexico is one of the themes that has consistently informed the work of the UE and FAT. It emerged most acutely during every organizing campaign: there can be no doubt that if workers had the freedom to choose, in all of the cases described in this account and many others they would have chosen a democratic union. Even during successful campaigns, the time and effort that was necessary to organize clandestinely and to confront the myriad of legal barriers required an impressive commitment and great courage on the part of workers and their unions. Victories under such circumstances are not only to be celebrated, they are extraordinary accomplishments. But the need for reform also arose in discussions during our exchanges, appeared as a topic in our updates and other educational work, and at key moments was the focus of our efforts to build and demonstrate solidarity through action.

It was the determination of workers and independent unions in Mexico to keep organizing against all odds, to fight to maintain their unions and contracts against what was truly an onslaught, and their understanding that fundamental reform was imperative that is at the heart of the victory involving labor law reform mentioned above and described in more detail in this final section. The UE-FAT Strategic Organizing Alliance made a significant contribution to that outcome. We highlighted the demands of the independent unions for freedom of association in the NAALC cases we filed more than twenty-five years ago, providing a platform, changing the terms of public discourse, and beginning the slow process that forced the Mexican government to begin to cede ground.

Later, UE and FAT played key roles in initiating and guiding international opposition to the right-wing reforms, both in response to specific proposals launched by employers and the government and through the coordinated force of the TNSA. We did not accomplish this on our own: there were many, many other unions, attorneys, and organizations that played vital roles. Nor could we have done so: both of our organizations were and remain limited in size and in resources. However, it is my belief that our vision and commitment to building democratic unions coupled with our integrity and determination to work with other organizations in a manner that was respectful, without arrogance or self-promotion, and focused on common goals, were of critical importance.

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The idea of labor law reform had been raised first by unions such as the FAT in the 1960s and 1970s, during a period of democratic reform within unions and worker militancy in the workplace and in society. In confrontations with the official unions, workers seeking to form democratic unions encountered abuse by the labor boards and discovered the control exercised by the government on behalf of employers. With each campaign their anger increased and their demands for justice from the labor boards grew stronger: to be free to choose their own union, to form independent unions, to conduct democratic elections by secret ballot, and to freely bargain collectively and to strike.

Yet, the push for freedom of association was not the only type of reform envisioned. Towards the end of the 1980s the PRI and COPARMEX, the association of large Mexican employers, began arguing for “flexibilization” in order to increase productivity. President Salinas de Gortari promoted a “new labor culture” to accompany NAFTA and increase foreign investment and the CTM and COPARMEX entered into an agreement with that name. They argued that workers’ wages and conditions would improve with rising investments, new technology and, above all, increased productivity.

By the mid-1990s, the democratic and independent union movement had succeeded in making the issues of workers’ rights to elections by secret ballot and public access to information regarding unions and contracts, along with other demands described above, a matter of public debate. Some of these issues were incorporated in a proposal for labor law reform that featured the employer demands for “flexibilization” that was developed by Néstor de Buen for the PAN in 1995. Although it was put forward by the PAN, it was not simply a pro-business bill. The de Buen proposal, inspired in part by Spain’s labor law and by ILO standards and language, incorporated not only ideas emanating from management, but from the independent unions as well.

De Buen called for a new labor relations system as well as a new labor law for Mexico in the “globalized” world. His proposal would have replaced the tripartite labor boards with independent judges. He offered the employers a system that would give them more productivity, and offered workers greater transparency along with a system of union and contract recognition that would provide them more democracy and potentially more power. His proposal did not please the employers who wanted productivity but feared workers’ democracy and power. It did not please leaders from the official unions, many of whom held positions in the Mexican Congress on behalf of the PRI and who feared the loss of their government positions and the access the tripartite system provided to money and control. And it did not please workers who did not want to give up historic protections to increase productivity for their employers. Nevertheless, it served as a preview of things to come.

The struggle that played out in the succeeding decades was reflected in variants of two very different visions for labor law reform: one based on flexibilization and the other on democratization; one which sought employer productivity and another which was grounded in workplace democracy.

With the election of Vicente Fox of the conservative PAN as president in 2000 and his appointment of Carlos Abascal, the former president of the business group COPARMEX as Secretary of Labor, the issue of labor law reform moved to the top of the political agenda. Abascal had been an advocate of reform since the 1980s and his pet project received a boost when, in May 2001, the World Bank presented President Fox with specific recommendations regarding the country's labor policies. The Bank called for greater flexibility to attract foreign investment and specifically listed aspects of collective bargaining, severance pay, benefits, company-sponsored training programs, and company payments to social security and housing plans as items that ought to be eliminated or reduced.

In July of 2001 Abascal initiated talks between his department, the *Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social (STPS)* or Labor Secretariat, the *Consejo Coordinadora Empresarial (CCE)* or Business Coordinating Council, and both major union confederations, the *Congreso del Trabajo (CT)* and the UNT. The talks were entitled *Mesa de Modernización y Actualización de la Legislación Laboral* (Discussions on Modernization and Effectuation of Labor Legislation).

Abascal initially promised that any labor law reform would come as the result of a process of consensus and that, unless all parties agreed, he would propose no new legislation. However, as the discussions progressed, he worked more closely with employers and with the official unions, while marginalizing the UNT and its lawyers.

Fearing that Abascal was going to introduce legislation in the absence of a consensus, the UNT engaged in a preemptive strike, taking its proposal to sympathetic PRD legislators who introduced a democratic labor law reform bill.<sup>69</sup> The UNT-PRD proposal contained constitutional and legislative changes which would enable workers to freely assert their rights to organize, bargain collectively, and strike. The most profound structural changes were directed at the heart of the corporatist system, including the elimination of the *juntas* and their replacement with federal labor judges; the creation of an independent public registry of labor unions and contracts (an entity along the lines of the electoral commission with responsibility for conducting elections); and a prohibition that unions could not "require their members to join or leave any party or political group or to pressure them to vote for a particular candidate in the public elections."

The proposal also included detailed provisions designed to protect the right of workers to associate freely, providing for a secret ballot in all representation matters and union procedures (to vote on collective bargaining agreements and in union elections); prohibiting both employer and government intervention in union affairs; freeing unions to determine what types of workers should be included in the union; requiring employers to make visible in the workplace and to distribute the text of collective bargaining agreements and wage tables to counter the practice of protection contracts; requiring unions to make the same information available, as well as financial information; and prohibiting employers from firing or disciplining workers for exercising their labor rights including voting for or against contract ratification or for any union during a representation election.

As anticipated, Abascal also moved forward with his own draft proposal, which became known as the *Plan Abascal*. The Fox-PAN proposal was introduced on December 12, 2002 with support from 17 deputies from the PRI and PAN. Far from a consensus, the proposed legislation would have made it vir-

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69. During the spring of 2002 it became increasingly apparent that the Secretary of Labor was holding separate meetings and preparing a proposal. Consequently, while continuing to participate in the Discussions, the UNT also began work on its own proposal. The UNT proposal was presented in the House of deputies on October 31. Some days later, a discussion meeting was held at which the STPS presented its proposal for approval. At that point the UNT left, formally breaking with the process.

tually impossible for democratic unions to organize. Workers would have been required to reveal their identities when organizing a union or seeking an election to demonstrate a majority in order to gain the right to administer an existing contract, thus exposing themselves to virtually certain discharge. In addition, workers would have had to produce documentation that was only available from labor authorities, entities which were institutionally opposed to independent labor unions.

Meanwhile, labor boards would not have been able to consider more than one petition at a time. This would have provided employers with the opportunity to turn to “ghost unions” at the first hint of a union campaign. If that union were to file a preemptive petition it would create delays and keep the petition for recognition by the independent union from being heard.

Workers would also have lost job security, as employers would have been given greater latitude to hire contingent and temporary workers who could be fired at any time with no penalty. This would have been a dramatic change from the law at the time, which did not permit workers to be hired for less than a day at a time or on a temporary basis, except under very limited circumstances.

Other provisions would have eliminated the mandatory eight-hour work day and given employers wide latitude to change hours of work; would have given employers additional rights to substitute productivity bonuses for wages without specific obligations to share productivity gains; would have provided three new ways in which union certification could be revoked; would have weakened provisions requiring employers to notify workers or unions regarding grounds for dismissal; would have weakened seniority in filling job openings; and would have shifted the burden of proof against workers in disputes involving overtime.

Yet, divisions both between the political parties and between unions meant that the proposed reforms did not move forward. It is likely that the PAN was reluctant to force the question, given the historic alliance between the PRI and official unions. There was also a difference in strategies among the democratic unions. All wanted the government to actually enforce Article 123 and the *Ley Federal del Trabajo*. However, some wanted to go farther, demanding independent tribunals, secret-ballot elections and a public registry of unions and contracts and the additional provisions described above. Others were concerned that this would simply serve to provide an opening to those seeking to gut existing protections for workers.

Over the next few years, the PAN was successful in privatizing the pension system, passed regressive tax measures and appeared ready to proceed yet again with labor and other neoliberal reforms. In response, labor and other organizations joined together to form a broad front: *The Frente Sindical, Campesina, Social, Indígena, y Popular (FSCISP)* or Union, Peasant, Social, Indigenous, and Popular Front.<sup>70</sup>

In the most militant labor action since the early 1980s, hundreds of thousands of workers throughout Mexico — many of them health care workers — walked off the job on August 31 and September 1, 2004, some for just an hour, some for the day, to protest the government’s neoliberal policies. Thousands of others joined in protest demonstrations and marches, the largest of them a huge procession of hundreds of thousands through Mexico City. The huge protest at the end of August was followed on September 8 by another at President Vicente Fox’s state of the union address to the Mexican legislature

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70. *The Frente Sindical, Campesina, Social, Indígena, y Popular (FSCISP)* was founded in 2002 by the UNT, *El Barzón* (the debtors’ union), the *Congreso Agrario Permanente* (Permanent Agrarian Congress), *El Campo no Aguanta Más* (Countryside Can Stand No More), and the *Promotora por la Unidad Nacional de Lucha en contra del Neoliberalismo* (Movement for National Unity in the Fight against Neoliberalism), as well as by many other smaller unions, farmers’ and peasants’ organizations, and urban social movements.

where police held off thousands of angry demonstrators.

On November 25, 2004 the PRI and CTM suddenly announced an agreement to move forward on the Abascal Plan. Mexican labor and social movements responded rapidly, beginning a sit-in at the Chamber of Deputies on December 1, and calling for major mobilizations in Mexico City and around the country. The initiative was presented on December 12, 2004 by the PAN, PRI, and PVEM.

As the international liaison for the UNT, the FAT called on UE to spearhead international opposition. It was a challenge to develop a strategy that would have any impact on such short notice. Unions in U.S. and Canada generally require more time to plan and obtain approval than their Mexican counterparts, and December made it even more difficult to respond quickly. Fortunately, many trade unionists from the U.S., Canada and Québec reacted quickly to our urgent request and sent letters of protest which were used effectively in actions in Mexico. In addition, our allies at Human Rights Watch<sup>71</sup> issued an excellent letter condemning the reforms that received extensive coverage in the Mexican press.

Faced with mounting national and international pressure and threats of major mobilizations, the government blinked, with leaders of the PRI announcing that consideration would be delayed until the Mexican Congress re-convened on February 15. This delay allowed the opposition to gather strength. When the Mexican Congress reconvened in February, there were major mobilizations, including marches and demonstrations led by the UNT.

On February 9, Human Rights Watch sent a new letter to leaders of the three largest Mexican parties arguing that “the Abascal Project, under consideration in the Labor and Social Welfare Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, would be a serious setback for workers’ human rights in Mexico.” The letter asked Mexican Deputies not to vote on the proposal because it would violate workers’ rights, and suggested they return to the drawing board and come back with a more democratic labor law reform bill.”<sup>72</sup>

Soon after, twenty two labor organizations from Mexico, Canada, Québec and the U.S., represented by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA),<sup>73</sup> a non-governmental human rights organization, filed a NAALC complaint that challenged the Abascal Plan as a violation of the terms of that agreement for failing to maintain high labor standards, as well as for violating Mexican and international law.<sup>74</sup>

71. [HRW.org](http://HRW.org)

72. [“Mexico: Fox’s Labor Reform Proposal Would Deal Serious Blow to Workers’ Rights: Letter to Mexico’s Chamber of Deputies”](#)

73. [Wola.org](http://Wola.org)

74. Ben Davis, then Director of the Mexico Office of the AFL-CIO, helped draft the petition, UE coordinated the signatories, and Jeff Vogt, Senior attorney of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), was lead attorney on the case, filing the petition on Feb. 17, 2005 on behalf of twenty labor organizations and subsequently adding two others:

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, (AFSCME), USA

Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW), Canada

Canadian Energy and Paper Workers’ Union (CEP), Canada

Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Canada

Communications Workers of America, (CWA), USA

Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ), Québec, Canada

Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), Québec, Canada

Federation des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ), Québec, Canada

International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, (IAM), USA and Canada

International Brotherhood of Teamsters, (IBT), USA

International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, (UAW), USA

While most of the unions involved had little hope that the NAALC would be able to prevent the reform, or would even attempt to do so, the petition was an important political document, a scathing indictment of lack of labor rights in Mexico.

In early March, Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur and thirty-six other legislators sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao in which they urged her to accept the submission, review the Abascal Plan, and immediately initiate consultations with the Mexican government to “discuss the numerous, serious issues raised in the petition.”

*“Mexico simply cannot be allowed to repeal those laws that protect workers and replace them with laws that plainly violate the terms of the NAALC, ILO Conventions and the Mexican Constitution,”* they wrote. *“Inaction would no-doubt signal the death knell of the NAALC and would send a strong message to other countries that the labor clauses they are negotiating in U.S. bilateral trade agreements will simply not be enforced.”*<sup>75</sup>

A controversy within the CT also played an important role. Opposition came from Napoleón Gómez Urrútia, head of *Los Mineros* which, at the time, was one of the most significant unions within the official labor confederation. The union criticized some 60 articles in the proposal and stated that it didn’t want to see the law reformed, it wanted to see it enforced. The critique by *Los Mineros* was followed by a denunciation from another of the official unions, the CROC. Gómez Urrútia had previously backed Isaías González in an attempt to win control and democratize the CT. Although unsuccessful, expressions of concern with some of the provisions in the proposed reform by *Los Mineros* risked a rupture within the CT.

Although the PAN had been struggling for the better part of a decade to pass its labor law reform, in the face of major opposition from the independent unions, their national and international allies, as well as some of the official unions, it again decided not to press the issue for the time being.

The debate over what the labor law reform should look like acquired another player when, on February 5, 2009, the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) filed case 2694 with the International Labour Organization (ILO). This created an uproar among the employers and their organization, COPARMEX, as well as within the official unions because the ILO complaint challenged the lack of freedom of association and transparency and called into question the corrupt system of protection contracts. The ILO had requested that the Mexican government respond to each allegation and there was tremendous pressure on the Mexican government to refuse to do so, demanding that it should not permit a foreign organization that had nothing to do with Mexico to interfere in its internal affairs. The IMF and independent unions quickly responded by adding four Mexican unions as petitioners: STIMAHCS, the STRM, *Los Mineros*, and the *Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la Universidad*

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Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), USA  
Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical & Energy Workers International Union, (PACE), USA  
Public Services International (PSI)  
Service Employees International Union, (SEIU), USA and Canada  
Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME), Mexico  
Sindicato Unico de los Trabajadores del Gobierno del Distrito Federal (SUTGDF), Mexico  
Syndicat de la fonction publique du Québec (SFPQ), Québec, Canada  
Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), México  
UNITE-HERE, USA and Canada  
United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), USA  
United Steel Workers of America, AFL-CIO/CLC, USA and Canada

75. “Congressional Letter to Elaine Chao Condemns Mexican Labor Law Reform,” in: *Mexican Labor News and Analysis*, March, 2005.

*Autónoma Metropolitana (SITUAM)* or the Union of the Autonomous Metropolitan University of Mexico.<sup>76</sup>

In another interesting twist, in October, 2010, the CTM and the CT, the two most important organizations comprising the so-called “official” unions which were historically loyal to the PRI, announced that they would present their own labor law reform proposal, permitting some students to be employed by the hour rather than the week. CTM leader Joaquín Gamboa Pascoe said that the country must have a reform which both created economic growth and respected unions and rights of workers to organize themselves and defend their interests. He said that the PAN’s proposal would take away protections for pregnant women, did not respect union rights, would threaten the right to strike, and weaken severance requirements.

In 2012 regressive labor law reform proposals were once again introduced by the PAN and the PRI. Fortunately, the unions in Mexico along with their allies were able to halt the legislation for a few days for failure to follow procedural requirements. Immediate mobilization resulted in a further commitment to delay consideration of the proposed legislation until further consultations could take place. An impressive series of hearings featuring testimony by civil society was quickly organized.

Then, on September 1, 2012 outgoing President Felipe Calderón designated labor law reform as one of the two “preferential” pieces of legislation authorized by the Mexican Congress under a new thirty-day, fast track process. Both democratic and official unions voiced strong opposition and issued a call for a demonstration and a sit-in at the Congress.

The proposal was severely criticized by the independent unions, primarily on three grounds: 1) procedural requirements would have made it virtually impossible to ever win an election or conduct a legal strike; 2) back pay for unjustified discharges was capped at a year plus interest, when proceedings often took four to five years; and 3) the law would permit outsourcing, payment by the hour and probationary periods, undercutting workers’ rights, encouraging exploitation and ultimately leading to a decline in living and working standards.

The bill moved rapidly back and forth between the Chamber of Deputies and Senate several times, resulting in major changes along the way. The procedural limitations on elections and strikes were dropped before the bill even reached the Chamber floor — perhaps in recognition that the provisions constituted a clear violation of international law. Unfortunately, provisions requiring transparency in internal union elections and finances were eliminated at the same time. However, the Chamber also imposed restrictions on outsourcing before sending the proposed law to the Senate.

In the Senate, a surprising alliance between the PRD and PAN reintroduced the transparency provisions but, once the bill was returned to the Chamber, the PAN re-aligned once again with the PRI, resulting in further revisions.

Yet again, the bill was returned to the Senate where most of it was approved and sent on to the president for signature. However, one hotly contested provision that would have given workers the right to vote on first contracts — designed to force ghost unions and protection contracts into the light of day — was ultimately sent back to the Chamber for consideration at a future time. During the rapid transfer back and forth, several provisions that had been approved, including protections for miners, disappeared from the text entirely.

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76. For a description of the allegations and the ILO’s initial recommendations see footnote 68.

Despite massive demonstrations, including marches and protests that blocked access to the Senate, the reform was finally approved. The independent unions, left political parties, and their allies vowed to continue the fight both in the courts and in the streets. Some of the worst provisions in terms of restrictions on freedom of association had been removed from the bill prior to passage, a remarkable accomplishment that left some room within which independent unions could operate. In addition, workers had won some of the rights that they had been demanding for decades, including a prohibition on exclusion clauses, the obligation that the *juntas* were required to publish information on unions, their constitutions and contracts, the right to request financial information, and a requirement that employers publish and disseminate collective bargaining agreements covering their workplaces.

However, the legalization of temporary and part-time work made jobs in the formal economy much more precarious, and the hundreds of thousands of jobs that were purportedly to be created were likely to be these sorts of jobs.

The forces that had been promoting a neoliberal vision of legal, unrestricted outsourcing were also far from pleased with the restrictions that were imposed. Yet, overall, there was no doubt that passage of this law was a serious step backward — both because it allowed a neoliberal frame to be imposed on labor relations in Mexico and because it failed to remedy the serious problems that deprived workers of their fundamental rights, including protection contracts and a government bureaucracy designed to support them rather than to provide a fair and impartial system of labor justice as documented by numerous studies and the ILO in case 2694.

In June, 2015, the Committee on the Application of Standards of the ILO requested that the Mexican government take measures including further legislative reforms to protect freedom of association and prevent the registration of unions that could not demonstrate the support of the majority of workers they claimed to represent. The ILO continued to exert pressure in the following years.<sup>77</sup> In addition, pressure on the Mexican government to reform its labor laws to effectively deal with protection contracts was exerted by U.S. and Canadian unions as well as the U.S. and Canadian governments — which viewed the denial of labor rights as an unfair trade advantage — through trade negotiations, first via the TPP and later through the renegotiation of NAFTA that ultimately resulted in Annex 23-A in the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).<sup>78</sup>

The work of the Mexican unions combined with international pressure culminated in the unlikely introduction, on April 26, 2016, of a significant proposal for constitutional reform by the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto. The proposal contained many of the historic demands of the independent trade union movement, including replacement of the tripartite labor and conciliation boards with impartial labor judges as well as measures designed to eliminate protection contracts and ensure freedom of association for workers. The proposal was rapidly approved by the Mexican Congress and States and went on to become law less than a year later, on February 24, 2017.<sup>79</sup>

Although the law incorporated a requirement that implementing legislation be approved within one year, a proposal to do so that was introduced in April languished. Instead, Tereso Medina and Isaías González, at the time Members of the Chamber of Deputies who represented the CTM and CROC, vigorously promoted their own proposal which, although undoubtedly unconstitutional, would have

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77. See the [ILO website](#) for the ILO's 2017 observations regarding various aspects of Freedom of Association.

78. See [USTR website](#).

79. For an excellent summary of the background of the Constitutional Reform and ILO measures in English, see the [Maquila Solidarity Network website](#).

undercut the requirements of the constitutional reform and included even more noxious provisions. Once again there were major mobilizations and intense debate, but fortunately two other major pieces of legislation took precedence and the session ended without passage of the new proposal.

With the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as president and of a majority from MORENA in both chambers of Congress in 2018, the stars finally aligned to enable the passage of ILO Convention 98 on September 20, 2018 (signed into law on October 30, 2018 and effective on October 30, 2019) and labor legislation that implemented the constitutional reforms and which became effective on May 1, 2019.

In her presentation on May 1, 2020, Luisa María Alcalde, the Secretary of Labor, described its significance:

“The Labor Reform is perhaps the most important change in the past 100 years in the labor world, a reform that was accompanied by the ratification of Convention 98 of the International Labor Organization on freedom of association and collective bargaining. It is to move from protection contracts, from union corruption, and achieve that unions and labor guilds shall have autonomy and independence in dealing with employers and also in dealing with the government; that they should be strong and able to perform their role in defense of the workers, and succeed in moving from a regime of pretense to one of true and legitimate representation.”<sup>80</sup>

The May 1 reform includes an ambitious timeline for transitioning from the tripartite labor and conciliation boards to labor judges who are part of the judicial branch. It also creates a new federal entity that is responsible for mandatory conciliation and the registration of unions and contracts as well as for certification that unions filing their first contract under the new system enjoy the support of at least one third of the workers covered by the agreement and includes provisions for an election where the majority is contested by another union.

It mandated voting procedures that are free, secret, direct, and personal for both the election of union officers and the approval of collective bargaining agreements. There are new requirements regarding women, prohibiting discrimination, and requiring that the leadership of unions must include women in proportion to their number in the work force. There are also requirements for financial reporting to union members; requirements for transparency, ensuring that documents and information be provided to the labor authorities and that they be made easily available to workers in a variety of ways; and protections for domestic workers.<sup>81</sup>

As expressed by Benedicto Martínez:

“On May 1, 2019, the legislation that implemented the constitutional labor law reform went into effect. This triumph by the working class marked the successful conclusion of many years of struggle by Mexican workers, years during which international solidarity was expressed in a variety of ways. The reforms provide a legal framework for our future campaigns, but our struggle will continue. We now have the law that we fought for, but workers must learn to exercise the rights it contains and employers and unions must be held accountable and respect the freedom of association that is now the right of all workers.”

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80. See the [Government of Mexico website](#).

81. For a more detailed explanation of the reform as well as how it may serve to aid in dismantling the system of protection contracts and provide workers with the tools to democratize their workplaces and other rights, see Appendix 2.

## Conclusion

Building and maintaining relationships takes work and where they are international there is an added level of complexity: The diversity of backgrounds and experience which is one of our greatest strengths can also cause confusion or serious misunderstandings if we don't question our assumptions and make a serious effort to become familiar with each other's realities.

Yet, our commonalities are greater than our differences. COVID-19 has stripped away any pretense that capitalism is benefiting working people, starkly exposing inequalities in income and wealth and their deadly implications. The neoliberal agenda transcends borders and we are seeing the devastating impact of decades of deregulation and privatization on the vast majority of the world's population and on the earth itself. On the political level, what was already emerging as a right-wing push towards nationalism is exacerbated by racism and xenophobia. Restrictions that are essential for the purpose of saving lives are being exploited for political objectives, undermining the increasingly fragile structures of democracies.

Many people around the world have expressed the idea that in crisis there is also opportunity. While we may be facing austerity and the rise of fascism, we also have the chance to create something different if we come together to fight for a more just and sustainable future.

During the initial wave of the COVID pandemic, UE issued a call to workers to do just that and created a tool kit to provide unorganized workers with the information they need to take the first steps. It also joined with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to create the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC) to help workers organize and has called on other unions and on volunteers to join the effort to put workers into motion.<sup>82</sup> This resulted in a general uptick in worker militancy, increased organizing activity, and the formation of a surprising number of new UE locals. Many other organizations are also trying to figure out how to move forward in ways that are creative and courageous.

Unions are one of the most important democratic institutions we have in our society and hopefully they will rise to the occasion.<sup>83</sup> Now, more than ever, issues of inequality, equity, militarization, climate justice, immigration, racism, peace and access to food, water, shelter and health care have become global issues that must be seriously addressed by unions while developing relationships and working with organizations well beyond the traditional labor movement.

International solidarity must be a piece of this new strategy and we must stand together if we are going to have any chance of success. In this e-book I have described some of the work undertaken by the UE and FAT in the hope that a new generation of workers and activists can build on our experienc-

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82. <https://workerorganizing.org/>

83. As described above, I came to work productively with many of the unions in the United States. However, it is certainly not a secret that there are lots of problems within the U.S. labor movement. Among them, it is seriously divided; there are still far too many arrogant, over-paid leaders and staff, most frequently white men, who view themselves as superior and at times still think of themselves as labor statesmen; it is often bureaucratic; it is still too closely tied to the Democratic party; and the AFL-CIO still receives the bulk of its funding for international work from the government. But it is also critically important to remember that unions are one of the most vital democratic institutions we have in our society, that the U.S. labor movement is not monolithic, that there are many terrific leaders, that it has made significant strides and continues to change, and that there are hundreds of thousands of fine, creative, and committed people who are working tirelessly to build a different kind of labor movement.

es. In these final pages, I have tried to reflect on our approach and to convey some of the lessons we learned along the way.

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Because of its independence and perhaps because it had survived the Cold War, UE's officers did not feel constrained by the historical relationships and structures that still limited the AFL-CIO and its affiliates at the time UE and FAT formed our Alliance. From the beginning UE used a different lens: seeking to build relationships with organizations that had integrity, shared common goals and approaches, represented workers employed by the same companies or in the same sectors, and functioned democratically.

Although our goal was to build relationships with key partners for the long term, and it is clearly preferable to have a good working relationship before a crisis occurs, that was not always possible. However, various campaigns offered an opportunity to meet people, unions, and other organizations and assess how they operated and what sort of relationship was viable or desirable: we learned who we could trust, who we could count on, who worked in a cooperative way, and who was merely looking for personal or organizational self-aggrandizement or to take credit for the work of others. Some short-term campaigns led to long-term relationships.

As trust grows within a relationship it creates a more solid foundation for work. If you know a person or organization well, you are better able to recognize issues that require further discussion without generating discomfort or suspicions regarding motivations. In addition, trust makes it possible to discuss matters that are complicated and find more creative solutions. When coupled with frequent communication, this can create opportunities to take advantage of political or organizational openings that may occur.

It is important to keep in mind that cultural differences and assumptions can interfere with communication in unexpected ways because we all function on the basis of our own knowledge and experience. A simple example involves reaching for salt during a meal. I was taught as a child that it was extremely rude to reach over somebody to get something I wanted and that I should ask for it to be passed to me. But it was not until much later that a friend who had worked extensively in Brazil shared a story with me about how it was only after years of hanging out with Brazilian friends that one of them got annoyed enough to tell her to get it herself, and she learned that it is considered rude in Brazil to interrupt someone who is eating to ask them to pass something.

While it is unlikely that a relationship will founder over poor table manners, other assumptions we make can have far more serious consequences. For example, I was participating on a conference call with lawyers and trade unionists from Mexico, Canada and the U.S. in preparation for a hearing. A Canadian lawyer made a suggestion and a Mexican trade unionist responded, "That would be very difficult." The Canadian lawyer replied, "Well, let's see how we can do it." While this was a totally appropriate response to what had literally been said, he completely misunderstood. When someone from Mexico or Japan tells you something is "difficult" they are most likely saying politely that it is not possible or advisable and it is time to move on, although the same expression in the U.S. or Canada would be correctly interpreted as suggesting the need to find a way to overcome a particular challenge. In that case I was able to guide the conversation in a more productive direction, but this serves as a cautionary reminder that we can't simply assume that we understand things the same way and need to be alert for signs that a conversation may be going off track. I have learned that it is far better to ask questions or seek clarification than to make assumptions.

Although credibility and communication are essential elements to building a relationship or coalition, I found that since solidarity is a core principle within the labor movement, it was usually relatively easy to obtain organizational approval from national leaders. However, our experience was that frequently the actual solidarity work was done by local leaders, rank-and-file members, or staff who were passionate and committed.

Time, distance, and lack of resources may cause unions to limit or even preclude the vital role of rank-and-file workers and leaders. However, members contribute knowledge, ideas, energy, and resources, and ultimately their participation will be vital to the success and implementation of whatever plans are made. In addition, some of those members will become future union leaders and their experiences will help shape their perspective and future work. I have no doubt that the active involvement of UE members in the union's international work influenced their worldview on important issues such as trade and immigration, and at the same time impacted the culture of the UE, reinforcing an internationalist perspective and contributing to the growth of the union.

For example, the North Carolina International Worker Justice Campaign grew out of an exchange in Mexico that focused on the use of international law as a tool to confront obstacles to organizing. Similarly, the use of the NAALC grew out of actual organizing campaigns and provided progressive forces in Mexico with a platform they could use to denounce the lack of freedom of association and to put forward their proposals for labor law reform. This was an important step on the path that led to victory many years later when those proposals were ultimately enacted. It is therefore essential that we develop strategies together with our international allies in which workers are front and center in any struggle and also be able to communicate and respond as circumstances change.

It is also critically important to show respect and really listen to each other. We must evaluate joint work in a constructive manner so that we can learn from our mistakes, valuing what we did right and understanding what we could or should have done differently. We must think hard before we criticize and do so with great care. We must be honest about our accomplishments and failures, and always act with integrity, especially where money is involved.

Although I don't like to make broad generalizations, many of us from the United States are taught that it is important to act as if we have all of the answers, and some actually believe that they do. Although it is important to be generous in sharing what we know, we must be extremely cautious about being arrogant, and remain open to learning from others, to new ideas and ways of doing things, and to moving in new directions, recognizing that successful organizing strategies and tactics must be based on an understanding of a country's law, reality, and culture and cannot be foisted from outside.

The Organizers' Institutes worked well because they provided insights into the different strategies and techniques that we each used, but left each country's participants free to incorporate ideas or practices in a manner that made sense given the laws and culture in their country. Mutual respect was also reflected in the way the UE and FAT operated — by consensus, but leaving each party free to make final decisions about what would be most effective in their own country.

Our most complex and in some ways most successful effort to build an international coalition, the Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA), attempted to minimize self-promotion by individuals and organizations by creating a largely informal and flexible structure and focusing on work that needed to be done, while encouraging all organizations to contribute in whatever ways they could. This responded in part to the reality that organizations and individuals may have shifting priorities, resources, and capacities, so what is possible at one moment in time may not always hold true or may become viable at an-

other time. As a result, we were able to do far more than what any of us could have accomplished alone.

One of the most important reflections I can offer is that there is a profound chasm that exists between solidarity and charity, and it is essential to understand the difference. In that context, it is imperative to think about all of the resources which we collectively bring to an alliance or struggle, and consider economic resources as only one element among many — and really mean it. Too often it is assumed that organizations that provide resources have the right to make decisions, irrespective of whether they have the knowledge or experience with which to do so. In addition, consideration should be given to where resources come from and whether there are strings or consequences attached. It is also worth noting that we encountered many generous individuals along the way who made tremendous contributions; at times they were financial, but often their solidarity took other forms. The creation of Mexican Labor News and Analysis (MLNA) and our international web site with its educational shopping tool are merely two examples.

Over time, I also came to realize that conditions do not always exist for international solidarity to be effective and that our touchstone must be whether workers are in struggle or under attack and whether there is a viable organizing strategy. Legal or other strategies may be critically important, but they are not a substitute for the organized power of workers. Early on, many NGOs and unions (including UE and FAT) came together to support various struggles of Mexican workers who had been fired when they attempted to organize. While the intentions were admirable, the reality was that solidarity often came too late for workers who had already signed away their rights; or by the time we became aware of the situation, the campaign had already been irreparably weakened or destroyed. Although not always avoidable, some believe that workers who are discharged provide a focus for struggle. For us, every discharge represents a hardship to those workers and their families and a truly successful campaign strategy is one in which there is a victory without any workers having been fired.

There are other times when international solidarity is not possible, perhaps because it is not viewed as a priority by the workers or union involved or where their time and resources are already stretched so thin that there is no room to add another level of communication or develop an appropriate strategy. Solidarity cannot be imposed.

It is also important to study the larger political picture and learn from our allies. The FAT assisted us in looking below the surface and understanding the political context. For example, in the case of Mexico, revolutionary rhetoric may signal a left political perspective or militancy but in itself is insufficient: in Mexico it has often served as a mask for corruption and lack of democracy.

Dealing with nationalism can also be complicated. For example, as expressed in the UE Officers' Report in 1998: "While our interests in international trade questions may at time coincide with the right, we must be clear about our differences; the UE is committed both to international solidarity and to international regulation of capital, as distinguished from a nationalistic or protectionist approach."<sup>84</sup>

We must be prepared to denounce actions that our governments take in our name when they run counter to our interests and those of our sisters and brothers around the world. While it is essential to have political allies, we must retain our capacity for independent political action.

Finally, we must not only celebrate our victories but we must also savor the fights that were well fought. One of the most valuable lessons I learned from friends in Mexico and Japan is that personal

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84. For an interesting insight into UE's perspective, see UE NEWS, December, 2000 pp.10 and 12, "[The Untold Story \(and Failure\) of Buy America Campaigns](#)".

relationships are important and that we must treasure the friends we make along the way. We must take the time that is necessary not just to do the work we are doing, but to build the kind of relationships that will nourish and sustain both ourselves and our movement over the long haul.

UE was tremendously fortunate in that the FAT was an excellent partner organization with a remarkably similar perspective and a commitment to building democratic, rank-and-file led, unions. The principles that guided our relationship — integrity, mutual respect, communication, and solidarity — are evident in our organizing campaigns, worker-to-worker and cultural exchanges, and other work. However, the strength of the relationship between UE and FAT — two relatively small organizations with very limited resources — can also be seen in our role in the progressive labor law reform that was finally enacted in Mexico, in the formation and operation of the Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA), and in the impact on the domestic work and on the members and cultures of both organizations. The story of the UE-FAT Alliance is a testimonial to the power of rank-and-file solidarity.

## Photographs

More photographs are available online at [www.internationalsolidarityinaction.org/photos](http://www.internationalsolidarityinaction.org/photos).



UE and FAT were part of the GGJ delegation to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2005. This provided an opportunity for Terex workers Tim Holmberg from the UE and Alceu Siqueira from the Brazilian CUT to establish a relationship and an opportunity for GE workers from the U.S., Mexico, India and Brazil to meet for the first time.



Public Sector Convergence in Charleston, West Virginia, October 2008.



Jonah Neale (UE Local 255) and Victor Felipe Rivera Díaz from FAT's Met-Life affiliate, during worker-to-worker exchange, Mexico City, November 2009.



Bruce Reese from UE Local 332 with Francisco Martínez from FAT-affiliated co-op, 6 de julio in Saltillo, during worker-to-worker exchange in November 2009.



Salia Warren, Bruce Reese and Emigdio López Sanders from UE visit with a family that had successfully fought for land and services in Gómez Palacio, Durango as members of FOCEP, an affiliate of the FAT, on worker-to-worker exchange in November 2009.



Women leaders of the FAT are joined by international guests in celebrating the FAT's 50th anniversary.



Tribunal Internacional de Libertad Sindical (International Tribunal on Freedom of Association), Mexico City, April 2011.



Delegation from FAT affiliate STINCA during May Day march in Mexico City, 2011.



UE-FAT co-op worker-to-worker exchange, Mexico, Noember 2012. Ali St. Onge (UE Local 255) and worker from textile co-op, Mexico.

## **With gratitude...**

This e-book would not have been possible without the contributions of numerous brothers and sisters from the UE, compañeras y compañeros from the FAT, and many, many other partners, allies, and friends. I thank you all for your commitment and determination to build a better world and for the courage, thoughtfulness, creativity and joy you have brought to this work!

I want to give a special thanks to Amy Newell, who set me on this path by offering me the newly created position of Director of International Affairs; to Carl Rosen, who thought this manuscript was of value and offered to publish it as an e-book; and to both of them and to Dan LaBotz, Polly Halfkenny, Ashwini Sukthankar, Larsene Taylor, Saladin Muhammad, Peter Knowlton, and Lorraine Clewer who took the time to read all or part and provide feedback. The book is better for your input and I take responsibility for any errors that may remain.

I also want to thank Jonathan Kissam for his care, patience and humor in working with me to turn this manuscript into an e-book. I had no idea of the work involved and greatly appreciate the skill with which he has worked his magic.

In this process, I have also had the opportunity to work with Kari Thompson, UE's Director of International Strategies, and have been impressed with her commitment and clarity and am thrilled that a younger generation recognizes the critical importance of international solidarity and is carrying the UE's work forward.

Finally, a profound thanks to Benedicto Martínez, my partner at the FAT in planning and implementing the work described in this e-book and, much more recently, my partner in life. Your capacity and creativity as an organizer and personal integrity continue to provide inspiration.

Peace and solidarity to all!

Robin Alexander

## Appendix 1: Recent Mexican Presidents, Terms of Office, and Party Affiliations

The PRI governed Mexico for 71 years, finally losing in 2000 to the right-wing *Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN)* or National Action Party. In 1988, the left wing of the PRI joined with other left forces to form the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)* or Party of the Democratic Revolution. The *Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (MORENA)* or [National Regeneration Movement](#) was formed much more recently. It became a national party in 2014 and [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#) was elected president in 2018; at the same time, MORENA won a majority in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies.

[Carlos Salinas de Gortari](#) (1988—94) PRI

[Ernesto Zedillo](#) (1994—2000) PRI

[Vicente Fox](#) (2000—06) PAN

[Felipe Calderón](#) (2006—12) PAN

[Enrique Peña Nieto](#) (2012—18) PRI

[Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#) (2018— ) MORENA

## Appendix 2: Mexican Labor Law and Protection Contracts

Mexico's labor law originated in the revolution of 1910-1920, producing the Constitution of 1917. Article 123 of that Constitution gave workers the right to organize labor unions and to strike. It also provided protection for women and children, the eight-hour day, and a living wage. At the time it was written, it was the most progressive labor law in the world. However, it was not until 1931 that Article 123 found expression in national legislation in the form of the *Ley Federal de Trabajo* or Federal Labor Law. By then, the Mexican state dominated by former president and power-behind-the-throne Plutarco Elías Calles had found inspiration in Benito Mussolini's fascist state with its authoritarian corporatist structure. The state thus became the ultimate arbiter of labor relations, a role strengthened over time.

The *Ley Federal de Trabajo* established the *Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje* or labor boards, made up of representatives of the government, employers and labor unions. The Secretary of Labor and the *Juntas* maintained a strict system of legal control over labor unions: unions were required to have obtained a registration authorizing them to represent particular kinds of workers (*registro*), to have an officially recognized right to negotiate collective bargaining agreements or administer their contracts (*titularidad*), and to periodically re-register their officers with the government (*toma de nota*).

Although early on this system of labor relations initially conferred real benefits on workers and peasants whose organizations supported the government, it later came to maintain a status quo where benefits flowed only to corrupt union leaders. Consequently, democratic unions had to confront not only corporations but the corrupt official unions and, in most cases, the government labor authorities as well. Under the tripartite structure described above, one seat was held by business, the seat of the representative of labor was almost always filled by the largest of the official union federations — the CTM — and the presidency of the labor boards was held by the government — generally the PRI, occasionally the rightwing *Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN)*, and only on very rare occasions by the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)*. This meant that in virtually all cases at least two, and usually all three members of the *junta*, had a vested interest in seeing that the independent union lost.

There were also practices that interfered with a democratic union's ability to navigate the legal maze which it encountered. First, unlike the United States, a union was required to have a certification or *registro* before it could legally represent workers in a particular workplace. While these were theoretically available by following a relatively simple administrative process and, in fact, were available to the official unions in a matter of days or weeks, the pretexts for denying them to independent unions were, in the words of one democratic lawyer, "as vast as one's imagination."

The second major obstacle was the practice by employers of entering into protection contracts. Various groups, such as the *Asociación Nacional de Abogados Democráticos (ANAD)* or National Association of Democratic Lawyers and the UNT estimated that between 80 and 90 percent of all contracts fell into that category. The system was so effective that it was extremely difficult for independent unions to obtain *registros*, win elections, or gain the legal right to represent workers.

Protection contracts impeded real unionization in several ways. The first was that these contracts usually contained only the minimum wages, benefits, or other conditions required by Mexican law. Second, agreements generally included "exclusion clauses" that gave the union the right to instruct the employer to fire workers. Despite the fact that Mexican courts had held it unconstitutional to fire workers for seeking to organize or change representation to a different union, these provisions were routinely used for that purpose. As a consequence, one of the major differences in organizing in the United States and Mexico was that while U.S. unions often use public demonstrations of unity (buttons,

stickers, petitions or demands for recognition) as a test of strength prior to petitioning for an election, in Mexico such tactics would undoubtedly result in discharges.

The third way in which protection contracts functioned to deter real unionization was that they made it legally much more difficult to organize: in Mexico different legal procedures applied depending on whether a union had already been certified. As in the GE case described above, if there was no union, the workers who were seeking union representation would file their proposed contract along with a strike notification, putting the union in a much stronger position than in the U.S. where it is necessary to first win an election and only then is the employer legally obligated to bargain with the union.

However, in most cases workers were already “represented” by one of the official unions. In those campaigns, the democratic challenger had to file a petition with the *junta* seeking an election to determine which union in fact represented a majority of the workers. Since the *junta* was almost always strongly biased against the independent union, this usually resulted in interminable delays. And if and when an election was finally held, it would generally take place within the plant so the employer had the right to permit entry to thugs and exclude all but a few representatives from the independent union. Finally, even if the independent union won the election, the original contract remained in place until its expiration, locking the workers into an agreement based on what were generally the minimum requirements mandated by the *Ley Federal del Trabajo*.

Another practice that served as a major obstacle to independent union organizing was the failure to make registries of unions and contracts available to the public. When a union filed for representation, the petition had to contain the correct name, legal address, and other information of the incumbent union. A petition would be dismissed if the union had either chosen the wrong process (for example, it thought there was no union when one had been certified) or where information such as the name or address of the incumbent union was inaccurate or even simply misspelled.

Often, employers would sign protection contracts with *sindicatos fantasmas* or ghost unions before a plant was ever built. The danger is obvious: if the workers were unaware of the existence of a protection contract, they might file the wrong type of petition, it would be dismissed, and they would be exposed to discharge directly by the employer or at the behest of the official union pursuant to the exclusion clause. The Alice in Wonderland character of these proceedings can be illustrated by very real cases where the labor board dismissed a representation petitions because the name or address of the incumbent union which was being challenged was incorrect, when it was the government — and not the independent union which had filed the petition — which had exclusive access to the correct information through registries of unions and contracts which were not available to the public.

On top of that, the Juntas typically declared strikes to be *inexistente* or non-existent, with the result that striking workers lost legal protections. Consequently, despite many labor protests and work stoppages, the number of legal strikes in Mexico had become negligible.

Finally, the system of corruption within the official unions was nurtured by the concentration of power in the position of general secretary, and the lack of transparency in union affairs and finances.

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As described in Part 5, in the course of the struggle over labor law reform much has been accomplished to dismantle the structure that kept most workers constrained within a system of protection contracts.

Despite its overall regressive character, the 2012 reforms also contained some positive features (although they were generally not enforced): new provisions prohibited exclusion clauses; obligated the juntas to publish information on unions, their constitutions and contracts; included the right to request financial information; and a requirement that employers publish and disseminate collective bargaining agreements covering their workplaces.

However, it was not until the 2019 reforms that the system was changed dramatically, although both the fact that it has been phased in over time and delays due to the pandemic have caused some confusion during the transition, created additional challenges, and have obscured its impact to some extent.

Most notably:

- The tripartite *juntas de conciliación y arbitraje* were abolished and replaced by labor judges who are part of the judicial system;
- The administrative functions of the *juntas* are now in the hands of a newly created entity, the *Centro Federal de Conciliación y Registro Laboral (CFCRL)* or Federal Center for Labor Conciliation and Registration (this removes the inherent conflict of interest that was a major source of corruption in the juntas where, as described above, at least one, often two and, at times, all three representatives of the junta were institutionally biased against independent unions and, in the case of the union or employer representatives, might well have been deciding matters in which they or their close friends or colleagues were directly involved);
- All votes regarding the choice of a union, ratification of a labor contract, and election of union leaders must be free, direct, secret and personal;
- All unions are required to demonstrate that they have the support of at least 30 percent of the workforce. Only upon providing this documentation will the CFCRL issue a *Constancia de Representatividad* providing the union with the right to demand recognition, negotiate, sign or revise its collective bargaining agreement. This is designed to prevent employers from signing contracts with unions behind the backs of workers as well as preventing unions from extorting money from employers by filing demands for recognition in the absence of any worker support, to be withdrawn upon receipt of a pay-off;
- All unions must provide copies of their contract to their members and hold a secret-ballot vote to determine whether the workers support their existing contract, a requirement termed *legitimación*. If a majority of the workers who vote are in favor of the contract it will be determined to be valid by the CFCRL; if a majority of workers are opposed, the contract will become void, although the employer is required to continue to apply the terms of the contract to the workers as individuals;
- If a contract is voted down during the legitimization process, upon presentation of its *Constancia de Representatividad* (showing at least 30 percent support by the workforce), either the original union or a different union can demand that the employer enter into negotiations for a new contract. In the event that more than one union presents such evidence, the CFCRL will hold an election and the union that wins the majority of the vote will be entitled to demand that the employer negotiate a new contract;

- All new or revised contracts must also be submitted to workers for approval in a secret ballot vote. However, as distinguished from the process of *legitimación*, if those contracts are rejected the union can request further negotiations or, if rejected by the employer, strike.
- There are also specific requirements regarding transparency and financial reports (*Rendición de cuentas*) which must be provided to union members and to the CFCRL.

In addition to the provisions designed to protect freedom of association and to provide workers with the tools to reject corrupt unions and protection contracts, the new labor law reform includes other important protections:

- For the first time, there is a requirement that women in the union's elected leadership constitute a proportion that is representative of the women in the workforce. Gender discrimination is also prohibited;
- Domestic workers are also included for the first time, with specific requirements regarding inscription in the health care system, pay, treatment, rest periods, and other protections for those workers who also live in the home where they provide their services;
- All individual disputes must go through a conciliation process prior to trial in order to expedite the resolution of cases and prevent employers from dragging on disputes. Offices of the CFCRL will operate in all states to handle conciliation cases.

Two other changes on an international level provide additional tools that can be used by Mexican workers who are seeking to organize democratic unions in their workplaces.

- In September 2008, Mexico ratified ILO Convention 98, guaranteeing workers the right to organize and to bargain collectively; and
- The renegotiation of NAFTA resulted in the inclusion of Annex 23-A, covering labor rights, under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The agreement became effective on July 1, 2020.

The impact of some of these reforms are reflected in the administration of the law. For example, regulations now require that all unions modify their constitutions to come into compliance with the new labor law by including provisions for secret-ballot votes, for the representation of women in leadership in numbers that are proportional with the percentage of women in the workforce, submission of contracts for ratification, financial reporting, and that general assemblies attended by all members and which include the election of officers replace congresses attended only by delegates.

Similarly, although the CFCRL only began to operate on November 3, 2021, it has now received all *registros*, contracts, and other materials from the *juntas* and has started its operations. One startling change is that administrative processes are now conducted online and all unions must register and obtain a password for using the online platform. The CFCRL requires that information be provided at each stage of an election or contract negotiation and relevant documents are subsequently made available online. For example, a union simply can now download its *toma de nota*, the administrative acknowledgement of the outcome of an election. Another example is that the registration information provided by a union such as its name, address and officers now becomes public information that is available online and contracts are uploaded and made public following their ratification.

In short, the true mafia that has functioned largely unseen based on the exchange of money for protection — and which benefits corrupt unions or attorneys and protects employers from having to negotiate better contracts with democratic unions — and has only been glimpsed when an employer defends itself against a challenge by pulling out its protection contract, is likely to disappear when exposed to the light of day. This is effectuated under the new labor law through the publication of *registros* of unions and contracts and the requirement that unions demonstrate actual support in order to obtain the *Constancia de Representatividad*, without which they cannot legally function.

However, these provisions will not by themselves eliminate unions that actually exist but maintain control through corrupt or undemocratic practices. Although the requirements for *legitimación*, secret-ballot votes, for the provision of information and the elimination of the *juntas* in favor of more neutral arbiters are critically important protections, workers must be aware of their rights, have the will to assert them, and be prepared to organize. The fact that very few contracts have been voted down during the legitimization process is indicative of the challenges ahead.

Yet, while legal and administrative changes alone are insufficient to dismantle the system of protection contracts that has existed for decades, for the first time Mexican workers have a fighting chance!

## Appendix 3: Glossary

### Mexico

1. **Asociación Nacional de Abogados Democráticos (ANAD)** or National Association of Democratic Lawyers: A progressive organization of Mexican lawyers. <https://anad1991.wordpress.com/>
2. **Asociación Sindical de Pilotos Aviadores de Mexico (ASPA)** or Union Association of Mexican Pilots: <https://aspa.org.mx/>
3. **Centro de Estudios y Taller Laboral, A.C. (CETLAC)** or Labor Workshop and Study Center (CETLAC): The FAT educational center in Cd. Juárez
4. **Centro de Investigación Laboral y Asesoría Sindical, A.C. (CILAS)** or Center for Labor Research and Union Advice: <https://www.facebook.com/cilas.ac.58>
5. **Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana (COPARMEX)** or Confederation of Mexican Employers: The equivalent under Mexican law to a labor confederation, but for employers. <https://coparmex.org.mx>
6. **Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC)** or Revolutionary Confederation of Mexican Workers and Peasants: One of the largest official federations within the Congreso del Trabajo (CT). <https://croc.org.mx>
7. **Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM)** or Confederation of Mexican Workers: The largest of the official confederations within the Congreso de Trabajo (CT). <https://ctmoficial.org/>
8. **Congreso del Trabajo (CT)** or Confederation of Labor: Mexico's largest labor body, historically allied with the PRI. <https://ctoficial.org>
9. **Consejo Coordinadora Empresarial (CCE)** or Business Coordinating Council: Composed of 12 employer organizations which it claims include 2,000 members which produce 80 percent of Mexico's GDP. <https://cce.org.mx>
10. **Federación de Sindicatos Municipales del Estado de Chihuahua** or Federation of Municipal Unions of the State of Chihuahua: The federation of municipal unions in Chihuahua formed in 1988, affiliated with the FAT. <http://www.fatmexico.org.mx/sector-sindical/federacion-de-sindicatos-municipales-de-chihuahua/>
11. **Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado (FSTSE)** or Federation of Unions of Workers in the Public Sector: Public-sector unions formed an Alliance in 1935 and restructured in 1938 as FSTSE, the large official federation of public-sector workers within the Congreso del Trabajo (CT). <https://fstse.org>
12. **Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT)** or Authentic Workers Front: See Part 1 and <https://fat-mexico.org.mx>
13. **Frente Sindical, Campesina, Social, Indígena, y Popular (FSCISP)** or Union, Peasant, Social,

Indigenous and Popular Front: Founded in 2002 by the UNT, El Barzón (the debtors' union), the Congreso Agrario Permanente (Permanent Agrarian Congress), El Campo no Aguanta Más (Countryside Can Stand No More), and the Promotora por la Unidad Nacional de Lucha en contra del Neoliberalismo (Movement for National Unity in the Fight against Neoliberalism), as well as many other smaller unions, farmers' and peasants' organizations, and urban social movements.

14. **LF del Centro:** The cooperative formed by the SME in 2015 to enable its members to return to work, either for the cooperative or directly for the Fenix partnership between Mota Engil, a Portuguese construction company and the SME. <http://www.lfdelcentro.com.mx> and <https://www.facebook.com/LF-del-Centro-1116949791656593/>
15. **Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN)** or National Action Party: Conservative party that first won the Mexican presidency in 2000 with the election of Vicente Fox Quesada, defeating the PRI which had governed for 71 years. <https://www.pan.org.mx/>
16. **Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)** or Party of the Democratic Revolution: Formed after the 1988 presidential election (which is widely believed to have been stolen) as a leftwing split from the PRI. Since then, it has moved right and allied with the PAN and PRI during the 2021 elections. <http://prd.org.mx>
17. **Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)** or Institutional Revolutionary Party: formerly the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* or National Revolutionary Party: A corporatist party that governed Mexico for 71 years, from 1929 until 2000, when it was defeated by the PAN. During the 2021 elections it allied with the PAN and PRD. <http://pri.org.mx>
18. **Pascual:** one of Mexico's largest co-ops: <https://www.pascual.com.mx/>
19. **Red Mexicana Frente al Libre Comercio (RMALC)** or Mexican Action Network Against Free Trade: The coalition of more than 100 Mexican organizations which opposed NAFTA and has, in recent years, worked to analyze the impact of neoliberal economic policies and create affirmative proposals for change. <https://www.facebook.com/RMALCMX> and <http://rimalc.org>
20. **Sindicato Gremial de Promotores, Sub-promotores, y Representantes de Ventas en General del Estado de Nuevo Leon** or Union Guild of Promotors, Sub-promotors and Sales Representatives in General of the State of Nuevo Leon: The union of workers who sell funeral insurance in the State of Nuevo Leon. Now an affiliate of the FAT, the workers began to organize in 1988 and in 1992 received their registro. <http://www.fatmexico.org.mx/sector-sindical/sindicato-de-ventas-de-nuevo-leon/>
21. **Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (SITUAM)** or the Union of the Autonomous Metropolitan University of Mexico. <http://situam.org.mx/>
22. **Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME)** or Mexican Electrical Workers Union: Founded in 1914 and known for its tradition of militant struggle as well as for the democratic election of its leadership at a time that this was rare. It was instrumental in founding the Nueva Central de Trabajadores in 2014. <https://nuevacentral.org.mx/>
23. **Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos, Siderúrgicos y Similares de la**

**República Mexicana (STMMRM)** or National Union of Mine, Metal, Steel and Similar Workers of the Republic of Mexico, known as *Los Mineros*: Although previously affiliated with the Congreso del Trabajo (CT), its General Secretary, Napoleon Gómez Urrutia, angered the Mexican government when he played an important role in defeating the regressive 2005 labor law reform proposals and accused Grupo México and the Mexican government of “industrial homicide” following the Pasta de Conchos mine explosion. Following his announcement that he was seeking to head up the CT, the Mexican government withdrew his *toma de nota*. He was also charged with stealing \$51 million dollars in union funds. To avoid what he declared were false charges, he fled to Vancouver where he was hosted by the USW Canada for over a decade. During that time, he faced eleven different law suits, but was successful in all. The Mexican government also attempted to extradite him and filed charges with Interpol. He returned to Mexico in 2018 to be sworn in as a plurinominal senator for MORENA. <http://www.sindicatominero.org.mx/> Upon his return, he also launched a new labor federation, the Confederación Internacional del Trabajo (CIT). <https://portalcit.org/>

24. **Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana (STRM)** or Union of Telephone Workers of the Republic of Mexico, known as the *Telefonistas*: One of the unions that played a significant role in challenging the practices of the Congreso del Trabajo (CT), first through the formation in 1990 of a new federation of service workers’ unions, la Federación de Sindicatos de Empresas de Bienes y Servicios (FESEBS) and, after leaving the CT, through the formation of the Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT). <https://www.facebook.com/UnionNacionaldeTrabajadores/> Its long-time General Secretary, Francisco Hernández Juárez, has served as co-president of the UNT since its inception and was also elected to the Mexican House of Deputies for a three-year term. <http://portal.strm.net/>
25. **Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Metal Mecánica, Automotriz, Similares y Conexos de la República Mexicana (SITIMM)** or National Union of the Sector of Metal, Automotive, Similar and Allied Workers of the Republic of Mexico: An affiliate of the CTM.
26. **Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Metálica, Acero, Hierro, Conexos y Similares (STI-MAHCS)** or Union of Workers of the Metal, Steel, Iron, Allied and Similar Industry: A metalworkers’ union affiliated with the FAT. It was a founding member of the UNT and has held the position of vice-president of communications and, more recently, relations. <http://www.fatmexico.org.mx/sector-sindical/stimahcs-2/>
27. **Sindicato de Trabajadores al Servicio de los Poderes del Estado, Municipios y Organismos Descentralizados en Nayarit (SITEM)** or Union of Service Workers for the State, Municipalities and Decentralized Agencies of Nayarit: The public-sector union affiliated with the FAT in the state of Nayarit. <https://sitemnayarit.org.mx/>
28. **SITESABES**: The democratic education union in Guanajuato, affiliated with the FAT, that won the right to one of the earliest secret-ballot elections in 2003.
29. **Unión Nacional de Técnicos y Profesionistas Petroleros (UNTyPP)** or National Union of Petroleum Technicians and professionals: An independent union of technicians and professional workers within PEMEX. <https://www.facebook.com/UNTyPP/> and <https://www.untyp.org/historia/> (although the website appears to be under construction, there is a lengthy section containing the union’s history).

30. **Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT)** or National Union of Workers: The confederation formed in 1997 by unions that had left the Congreso del Trabajo (CT) in order to build an independent and democratic alternative. <https://www.facebook.com/UnionNacionaldeTrabajadores/>

## Canada/Québec

1. **Canadian Association of Labor Lawyers (CALL)**: A progressive, national organization of labor attorneys from Canada and Québec. <https://call-acams.com/>
2. **Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW)**: Although a separate union during the time covered by this e-book, on August 31, 2013 two of the largest Canadian unions, the CAW and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), joined together to form Unifor. <http://unifor.org>
3. **Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)**: During the period covered by this e-book, the CLC included the vast majority of Canadian unions with the notable exception of the independent unions in Québec. <https://canadianlabour.ca/> The CAW and CEP subsequently formed Unifor. <http://unifor.org>
4. **Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ)** or Confederation of Québec Unions: An independent union originally composed of education workers and known as the CEQ, it now also includes health care, social service, communication as well as community and municipal workers: <https://www.lacsq.org/>
5. **Centre International de Solidarité Ouvrière (CISO)** or International Confederation for Worker Solidarity: The solidarity organization formed by unions in Québec. <https://www.ciso.qc.ca/>
6. **Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP)**: Although a separate union during the time covered by this e-book, on August 31, 2013 two of the largest Canadian unions, the CEP and Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW), joined together to form Unifor. <http://unifor.org>
7. **Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN)** or Confederation of National Unions: An independent confederation based in Québec that is composed of both private- and public-sector workers, it is one of the oldest allies of the FAT. <https://www.csn.qc.ca/>
8. **Federation des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ)** or Federation of Workers of Québec: The FTQ is responsible for the coordination and representation of the Québec affiliates of the CTC as well as Unifor. It is also the only provincial body of the CLC that conducts its own international activities. <https://ftq.qc.ca/>
9. **Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN)**: An NGO based in Toronto, Canada that works closely with trade union, women's and labour rights organizations to support the efforts of workers in the global garment and footwear industries to win improved wages and working conditions and greater respect for their rights. <https://www.maquilasolidarity.org/>
10. **Syndicat de la fonction publique du Québec (SFPQ)** or Union of Public Service Workers of Québec: The union that represents provincial government and para-public workers in Québec. <https://www.sfpq.qc.ca/>

11. **UNIFOR:** Formed in 2013 from the merger of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP). <http://unifor.org>
12. **USW Canada:** A part of the USW, the USW Canada maintains a national office in Toronto and operates a solidarity fund, the Steelworker Humanity Fund, which is financed by provisions in union contracts with employers. <https://www.usw.ca/>

**United States (see below for UE-affiliated locals, organizations and campaigns)**

1. **American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO):** <https://aflcio.org> Although it still has an international department, much of its international work is now done through the Solidarity Center: <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/>
2. **American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, (AFSCME):** <https://www.afscme.org/>
3. **ARISE Chicago:** the interfaith labor group in Chicago. <https://www.arisechicago.org/>
4. **Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ):** An organization of Black workers formed in December of 1982 out of a struggle led by Black women workers at a K-mart store in Rocky Mount, North Carolina against race and gender discrimination. <http://blackworkersforjustice.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/BWFJ.NC>
5. **Center for Constitutional Rights:** Based in New York City, CCR works with communities under threat to fight for justice and liberation through litigation, advocacy, and strategic communications. Since 1966, it has taken on oppressive systems of power, including structural racism, gender oppression, economic inequity, and governmental overreach. <https://ccrjustice.org/>
6. **Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG):** <http://www.chicagopublicartgroup.org/>
7. **Communications Workers of America (CWA):** <https://cwa-union.org/>
8. **Cross-Border Network for Justice and Solidarity:** An important solidarity organization based in Kansas City, Missouri. <https://www.crossbournetwork.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/crossbournetwork>
9. **Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC):** <http://www.floc.com/>
10. **Garment Worker Center:** An important workers rights organization based in Los Angeles, California. <https://garmentworkercenter.org/>
11. **Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ):** An alliance of over 60 U.S.-based grassroots organizing groups comprised of working and poor people and communities of color. <https://ggjalliance.org/>
12. **Greater Boston Labor Council:** <https://gblc.us/>
13. **Guild Literary Complex:** A 30-year-old grassroots literary arts organization creating performance-based events in and around Chicago involving social and restorative justice issues and providing arts and advocacy programming for marginalized voices. <https://guildcomplex.org/>

14. **Human Rights Watch:** An NGO based in New York that investigates and reports on human rights abuses around the world. <https://www.hrw.org/>
15. **International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM):** <https://www.goiam.org/>
16. **International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT):** <https://teamster.org/>
17. **International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU):** <https://www.ilwu.org/>
18. **IUE/CWA Local 201:** A progressive local representing General Electric workers in Lynn, Massachusetts. <https://www.local201.org/>
19. **International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW):** <https://uaw.org/>
20. **Jobs with Justice (JWJ):** A national organization that brings together labor, community, student, and faith voices at the national and local levels to win improvements in people's lives and shape the public discourse on workers' rights and the economy. <https://www.jwj.org/>
21. **Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA):** <https://lclaa.org/>
22. **Labor Notes:** Through its magazine, website, books, conferences, and workshops, it promotes organizing, aggressive strategies to fight concessions, alliances with worker centers, and unions that are run by their members. <https://labornotes.org/>
23. **Labor Religion Coalition of New York State:** <https://www.laborreligion.org/>
24. **National Lawyers Guild (NLG):** Established in 1937, the NLG is the nation's oldest and largest progressive bar association. It includes lawyers, law students, legal workers, and jailhouse lawyers who are committed to using law in the service of the people, valuing human rights and the rights of ecosystems over property interests. <https://www.nlg.org/>
25. **New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice:** <https://www.nowcrj.org/>
26. **New York State Union of Teachers (NYSUT):** <https://www.nysut.org/>
27. **Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical & Energy Workers International Union (PACE):** A progressive union that merged with the USW in April, 2005: <https://www.usw.org/union/history>
28. **Service Employees International Union (SEIU):** <https://www.seiu.org/>
29. **UNITE-HERE!:** <https://unitehere.org/>
30. **United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE),** commonly known as the United Electrical Workers or UE: See Part 1 and <https://www.ueunion.org/>
31. **United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing, Energy, Allied Industrial and Service Workers International Union (USW),** commonly known as the United Steelworkers (USW): <https://www.usw.org/>

32. **U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project (USLEAP):** In 2013, USLEAP became a program of the International Labor Rights Forum previously known as the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF). See <https://laborrights.org/programs/usleap>
33. **Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA):** <https://uwua.net/>
34. **Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA):** A leading research and advocacy organization advancing human rights in the Americas. <https://www.wola.org/>

## UE Locals and Affiliated Campaigns and Organizations

1. **Charlotte City Workers Union:** a sub-local of UE Local 150 in North Carolina. <https://ue150.org/charlotte-chapter/>
2. **North Carolina International Worker Justice Campaign (IWJC):** <http://iwjc.org/>
3. **UE Local 123:** The UE-affiliated local at Daikin Industries in Verona, Virginia.
4. **UE Local 150, North Carolina Public Service Workers Union:** The UE-affiliated statewide local of state, municipal, university and manufacturing workers in North Carolina. <https://ue150.org/>
5. **UE Local 203:** The UE-affiliated local at City Market Co-op in Burlington, Vermont <https://www.facebook.com/UE203/>
6. **UE Local 222:** The UE-affiliated statewide local of municipal and board of education workers in Connecticut. <https://www.facebook.com/UE222>
7. **UE Local 255:** The UE-affiliated local at the Hunger Mountain Food Co-op in Montpelier, Vermont. <https://www.facebook.com/UELocal255>
8. **UE Local 274:** UE-affiliated local representing several employers in Western Massachusetts, including the worker-owners of the worker co-op Collective Copies.
9. **UE Local 332:** The UE-affiliated local at the General Electric plant in Fort Edward, New York, which closed in 2016.
10. **UE Locals 506 and 618:** UE-affiliated locals that represented workers at General Electric in Erie, Pennsylvania, since 1937, and subsequent to the sale of the GE Transportation division in 2019, at Wabtec. <http://uelocal506.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/UE618>
11. **UE Local 683:** UE-affiliated local in Erie, Pennsylvania that used to represent several small shops in the area. Due to plant closures, currently only represents workers at Liberty Iron & Metal (LIM).
12. **UE Local 715:** The UE-affiliated local at the Diversified Machine Inc. (DMI) plant in Edon, Ohio. The plant closed in 2014.
13. **UE Local 893-IUP:** The UE-affiliated statewide local representing state social workers and other public-sector workers in Iowa. Formerly an independent union, Iowa United Professionals affiliated with UE in 1993.

14. **UE Local 896-COGS:** The UE-affiliated local representing graduate workers at the University of Iowa, also known as COGS, or the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students.
15. **UE Local 1090:** The UE-affiliated local at the Echlin-owned Friction, Inc. plant in Irvine, California, which closed in the late 1990s.
16. **UE Local 1110:** Known for its stunning victory against Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago, Illinois (see <https://www.ueunion.org/ue-news-feature/2018/republic-windows-and-doors-plant-occupation-10th-anniversary/>), in 2012 workers purchased the factory and transformed it into a co-operative, New Era Windows Cooperative. <https://newerawindows.com> and <https://business.facebook.com/NewEraWindowsCoop/>
17. **UE Local 1172:** The UE-affiliated local at the Everbrite plant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which closed in 2020.
18. **UE Local 1177:** The UE-affiliated local representing Hallcon rail crew drivers in Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Wisconsin and Minnesota.
19. **UE Research and Education Fund (UEREF):** <https://www.uerf.org/>

### **Binational/Trinational**

1. **Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM):** <https://www.facebook.com/Coalition-for-Justice-in-the-Maquiladoras-160139804091426/>
2. **Echlin Workers' Alliance:** the trinational union alliance that came to include some 5,000 workers represented by a dozen unions at Echlin (later purchased by Dana), a transnational auto parts manufacturer operating in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. See <https://nacla.org/article/shadow-nafta-budding-cross-border-resistance>
3. **North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC),** also known as the Labor Side Agreement of NAFTA, was the mechanism for addressing labor rights issues arising under NAFTA within the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/pdf/naalc>
4. **North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA):** Neoliberal trade agreement between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico that became effective on January 1, 1994 <https://www.trade.gov/north-american-free-trade-agreement-nafta>
5. **Trinational Energy Workers Alliance:** Loose alliance of energy unions from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico spearheaded by the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) of Canada, the Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA) of the U.S. and SME and the *Unión Nacional de Técnicos y Profesionistas Petroleros (UNTyPP)* from Mexico.
6. **Tri-National Solidarity Alliance (TNSA):** The broad alliance between unions from Mexico, Canada, Québec, and the U.S. that was formed in 2010 to support the right of Mexican workers to freedom of association in light of the increased attacks on unions, especially against SME and *Los Mineros*. See part 3 above for a detailed discussion. <http://www.trinationalsolidarity.org/>
7. **U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement:** Neoliberal trade agreement between the U.S. and

Canada that went into effect on January 1, 1989 <https://www.international.gc.ca/trade-commerce/trade-agreements-accords-commerciaux/agr-acc/united-states-etats-unis/fta-ale/background-contexte.aspx?lang=eng>

8. **United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA):** Neoliberal trade agreement that replaced NAFTA on July 1, 2020. <https://www.trade.gov/usmca>

## International

1. **Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT)** or General Confederation of Labor: The large, left, labor confederation in France was founded in 1895. <https://www.cgt.fr/>
2. **Central Latinoamericana de Trabajadores (CLAT)** or Confederation of Latin American Workers: The Latin American affiliate of the World Confederation of Labor (WCL), which merged with the ICFTU in 2006 to form the ITUC.
3. **Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT)** or Unified Workers' Confederation of Brazil: Brazil's largest union confederation. The left labor organization played a significant role in challenging Brazil's military dictatorship. <https://www.cut.org.br/>
4. **Confederación Sindical de las Américas (CSA)** or Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA): Regional arm of the ITUC. <https://www.ituc-csi.org/trade-union-confederation-of-the>
5. **IndustriALL:** formed in 2012 from the merger of the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), the International Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Unions (ICEM), and International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF). <https://www.industrial-union.org/>
6. **International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL):** <https://iadllaw.org/>
7. **International Commission for Labor Rights (ICLR):** An NGO based in New York that coordinates the pro bono work of a global network of lawyers and labor experts committed to advancing workers' rights through legal research, advocacy, cross-border collaboration, and the cutting-edge use of international and domestic legal mechanisms. Its legal network also responds to urgent appeals for independent reporting on gross labor rights violations. <http://laborcommission.org/>
8. **International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU):** Formed in 1949 as a capitalist alternative to the WFTU. In 2006 it merged with the WCL to form the ITUC.
9. **International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM):** One of the global union federations concerned about the struggle for freedom of association in Mexico; in 2012 it merged with other GUFs to form IndustriALL. <https://www.industrial-union.org/>
10. **International Labor Organization (ILO):** <https://www.ilo.org/global/lang--en/index.htm>
11. **International Metalworkers Federation (IMF):** One of the global union federations concerned about the struggle for freedom of association in Mexico; in 2012 it merged with other GUFs to form IndustriALL. <https://www.industrial-union.org/>

12. **International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC):** Formed in 2006 from the merger of the WCL and the ICFTU. <https://www.ituc-csi.org/about-us>
13. **International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF):** <https://www.itfglobal.org/en>
14. **Industrial Workers of the World (IWW):** <https://www.iww.org/>
15. **Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU):** <https://www.facebook.com/kctueng>
16. **Labourstart:** Labourstart conducts online campaigns to support workers under attack. Some 1,000 volunteers also post labor news in 35 languages on its website. <https://www.labourstart.org>
17. **New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI):** A progressive trade union federation in India; first organized in 2001 and constituted as a federation in 2006. <http://www.ntui.org.in/>
18. **Public Services International (PSI):** <https://publicservices.international/>
19. **Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP):** In 2005 a group of Pacific Rim countries reached a trade agreement; in 2008, George W. Bush announced he would engage in negotiations, causing other countries to join; in 2009, President Obama announced that the U.S. would negotiate a trade agreement, now with 11 other countries (Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam). Although agreement was reached, the U.S. Congress never ratified the TPP and President Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement. The remaining countries then negotiated the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP.
20. **UNI Global Union:** founded in 2000 by four global union organizations: FIET (International Federation of Employees, Technicians and Managers), MEI (Media and Entertainment International), IGF (International Graphical Federation and CI (Communications International). <https://uniglobalunion.org/>
21. **World Confederation of Labor (WCL):** Founded in 1920 as the IFCTU, a confederation of unions associated with Christian Democratic Parties in Europe, in 1968 it transformed into the WCL which merged in 2006 with the ICFTU to form the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). <https://www.ituc-csi.org/about-us>
22. **World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU):** <http://www.wftucentral.org/>
23. **World Social Forums (also U.S. Social Forums):** See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Social\\_Forum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum)
24. **ZENROREN:** The progressive labor confederation in Japan. <https://www.zenroren.gr.jp/jp/english/index.html>

## Appendix 4: Mexican Labor Dictionary

This is a dictionary of labor terms as used in Mexico. These terms are not necessarily the same in other Latin American countries or in the United States. Also available online at <https://www.ueinternational.org/mexican-labor-dictionary/>. The original version was created by Dan La Botz and Robin Alexander and has been updated by Robin Alexander.

**Abogado/a laboral** — labor lawyer

**Adecuación de estatutos** — requirement that all unions modify their constitutions to come into compliance with the new labor law regarding secret ballot votes, proportionality of representation of women in leadership, submission of contracts for ratification, financial reporting, and general assemblies of all members (not congresses by delegates) to include the election of officers.

**Administrador** — the manager of a plant or agency

**Administradores de Fondos para el Retiro (AFORES)** — the pension accounts administered by banks and insurance companies for the part of the pension system that was privatized.

**Aguinaldo** — the Christmas bonus, required by law, and expected in all workplaces; may be as much as an additional month's wages.

**Almacén, bodega** — warehouse

**Amparo** — an injunction or writ of appeal

**Anexo 23-A** — Annex 23-A contains the labor provisions in the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which went into effect on July 1, 2020.

**Artículo 123** — Article 123 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 gave workers the right to organize unions, strike, protective legislation, etc. and is the basis for all subsequent labor legislation.

**Asamblea General** — Requirement in the new labor law that officers be elected at an assembly of all members, not by delegates at a union congress.

**Aviadores** — aviators or pilots, but also used for ghost workers, that is workers who do not show up for work but collect pay, usually in government employment.

**Banderas de huelga** — red and black strike flags put on the door of the workplace when there is a strike.

**Bandera rojinegra** — the red and black union flag put up on the door of the workplace when there is a strike

**Base** — the rank-and-file of the union, the grassroots

**Boicot** — boycott as in English

**Burócratas** — public employees, government workers

**Campesino** — peasant, farmer

**Centro Federal de Conciliación y Registro Laboral (CFCRL)** — Federal Center for Labor Conciliation and Registration: the entity created under the new labor law that is responsible for registration of unions and contracts; verification that at least 30 percent of workers have chosen to be represented by their union; that a majority have voted in favor of their collective bargaining agreements; and conciliation prior to trial in individual cases.

**Chamba** — slang for job

**Chambear** — slang for to work

**Charro** — corrupt, violent, union bureaucrats in collusion with government

**Chofer** — driver, truck driver

**Cláusula** — clause or provision in a collective bargaining agreement

**Cláusula de exclusión** — permits the union to expel those who violate its discipline. These clauses were often used by incumbent charro unions against their democratic opponents; the employer would then fire the workers because they were no longer members of the union. Under the new labor law, a union can expel a member if provisions exist in its constitution to do so, but the worker cannot be fired because of that separation; similarly, a worker can no longer be required to pay dues or belong to a union.

**Compañero/a** — friend, comrade, union brother or sister

**Conciliación** — requirement under the new labor law that all individual disputes undergo conciliation prior to trial in order to expedite the resolution of cases and prevent employers from dragging on disputes.

**Confeción** — garment manufacture

**Constancia de Representatividad** — Certification by the CFCRL that a union has the support of at least 30 percent of workers; provides the union with the right to demand recognition and to negotiate, sign or revise a collective bargaining agreement.

**Consulta** — formal consultation; in the labor context a ratification vote on a contract.

**Contrato colectivo** — collective bargaining agreement or contract

**Contrato individual** — in Mexico, workers sometimes sign an individual employment contract which is not a union agreement.

**Contrato ley** — a pattern bargaining agreement required by Federal Labor Law in some industries — that is a contract covering many enterprises, workplaces.

**Contrato de protección** — contract, generally with charro union, that protects the employer, signed without knowledge or consent by workers, or before workers are hired

**Corporativismo** — the system of state-party control which includes government-controlled unions.

**Correr** — fire

**Costura** — garment industry

**Costurera** — garment worker, seamstress

**Cuotas** — union dues

**De planta** — to be a permanent, full-time worker

**Delegado** — union representative, could be translated as steward

**Demanda por firma de contrato** — legal petition to require recognition of the union and the signing of a contract. It is the legal procedure which must be followed if there is no certified union in a work place and has as a prerequisite that the CFCRL has certified the union filing the petition by issuing a *Constancia de Representatividad* based on a showing of support by at least 30 percent of the workforce.

**Demanda por titularidad** — This is the legal procedure which must be followed if there is already a union with a collective bargaining agreement. In that event, there will be an election and the union that wins the majority will have the right to administer the already existing contract. It is also the procedure if the certified union has failed to win a majority of those voting in a proceeding for the legitimation of its contract (*legitimación del contrato*), and more than one union claims to represent 30 percent of the workforce. This will also result in an election to determine which union represents a majority of the work force and is therefore entitled to demand that the employer initiate negotiations, but for a new contract.

**Descriminación por género** — gender discrimination, prohibited under the new labor law.

**Despedir** — layoff or fire

**Despido injustificado** — a discharge that does not fall within the acceptable causes for discharge provided by the law; the employer must provide the employee with the reason for discharge in writing.

**Destajo** — piecework, pay for the piece

**Dueño** — owner of property, landlord

**Emplazar una huelga** — file the notice with the government, required for a legal strike

**Empresa** — the firm or company

**Esquirol** — scab, strikebreaker

**Estado (Estatal)** — 1) the Federal government, the state; 2) a state, such as Chihuahua

**Estallar una huelga** — to go out on strike in accordance with the notice

**Fábrica** — factory

**Flexibilidad** — the employers' demand for more flexibility in the disposition of labor, generally getting rid of contractual protections

**Gerente** — company manager

**Golpeadores** — goons, thugs

**Gremio** — a trade or craft; also a guild

**Guardias blancas** — employer goon squad, especially in the countryside, but also in urban areas — boss's gangsters

**Guarruras** — riot police

**Honorarios** — professional fees paid for specific tasks of a temporary nature; however, often used as a way to avoid paying benefits or other legal requirements to full time workers.

**Huelga** — strike

**Huelga de hambre** — hunger strike

**Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social (IMSS)** — Mexican Institute of Social Security: the national health care system and also the retirement plan for those who began work prior to 1997 for most industrial workers.

**Instituto de Salud para el Bienestar (INSABI)** — Since January 1, 2020, provides health care to those not entitled to coverage under IMSS or ISSSTE.

**Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado (ISSSTE)** — Institute for Health and Social Services for Public Sector Workers: provides health care and social services for public-sector workers, and is also the pension system for those who began work prior to 2007.

**Jornalero** — day laborer, usually in agriculture

**Junta Federal/Local de Conciliación y Arbitraje** — the federal or local Board of Conciliation and Arbitration, comparable to the National Labor Relations Board in the United States, although tripartite in structure. Replaced under the new labor law by the CFCRL (administrative functions) and Tribunales Federales (legal functions).

**Legitimación del contrato colectivo** — under the new labor law, all unions must hold a secret-ballot vote to determine whether workers support their existing contracts. If a majority of the workers who vote are in favor of the contract it will be determined to be legitimate by the CFCRL; if a majority of workers are opposed the contract will become void, although the employer is required to continue to apply the terms of the contract to the workers as individuals. If the contract is void, upon presentation of its *Constancia de Representatividad* (showing at least 30 percent support by the workforce), either the original union or a different union can demand that the employer enter into negotiations for a new contract. If more than one union presents such evidence, the CFCRL will hold an election and the union that wins the majority of the vote will be entitled to demand that the employer negotiate a new contract.

**Ley Federal de Trabajo or LFT** — Federal Labor Law — basic labor law for all workers, based on Artículo 123 above; substantial revisions are being phased in between May 1, 2019 and May 1, 2023.

**Libertad sindical** — union independence or union democracy, as opposed to corporativism.

**Limpieza** — cleaning — a trabajador/a de la limpieza is a cleaning worker or janitor

**Liquidación** — severance pay, as provided for in the Federal labor law

**Maestros** — teachers

**Magisterio** — teachers

**Maquila** — assembly or manufacturing plant

**Maquiladora** — assembly or manufacturing plant

**Maquinista** — machinist

**Mayordomo** — the foreman

**Mecánico** — mechanic

**Menores de edad** — minors

**Mesa directiva** — executive board of a union or other organization

**Militante** — activist or militant

**Montacarga** — Forklift — (Driver — **montacarguista**)

**Negociaciones colectivas contractuales** — contract negotiations over language (generally take place every other year).

**Negociaciones colectivas salariales** — contract negotiations over wages (generally take place annually).

**Obrero/a** — worker

**Oficinista** — office worker, clerical worker

**Oficio** — a trade or craft

**Operador/a** — operative, machine operator in a factory

**Padrón de socios** — list of employees maintained by the employer; voting list.

**Pago / pagar** — pay

**Pagar por hora** — to pay by the hour — not legal in Mexico where workers must be given a full day's work. Part-time, hourly work is not legal, although it is very common.

**Paracaidista** — squatter

**Paro** — a work stoppage

**Paro de brazos caídos** — a work stoppage at the machine or in the workplace, a sit-down strike.

**Paro técnico** — a temporary plant shut down for a period of time where workers receive a portion of

their pay.

**Patrón** — boss

**Pistolero** — gunman, gun thug

**Planilla** — slate during a union election

**Planta** — the plant or factory (see de planta above)

**Plantón** — protest, usually a sit-in, in front of a factory

**Porros** — union or political loyalists, cheerleaders, can mean goon squad

**Prestaciones** — benefits provided by law or by contract, usually such things as transportation, food, clothing, etc. (Health coverage is provided by government.)

**Profesionista** — professional worker

**Profesor** — teacher, higher education

**Proporcionalidad** — requirement of the new labor law that women in the union's elected leadership constitute a representative proportion of the women in the workforce.

**Registro** — The legal prerequisite for participation in a representation proceeding. Registros may be limited to a particular workplace or company, may be based on a type of industry within either a defined geographic area or the entire Republic of Mexico, or, under the new labor law, may include various types of workers.

**Rendición de cuentas** — accounting for dues and other income and expenses; the new labor law requires that the union provide financial reports to its members and to the CFCRL.

**Requiza** — government take-over of a communications or transportation company or industry during a threatened or actual strike.

**Riesgos de trabajo** — safety risks on the job

**Salario** — wages

**Salud y seguridad** — health and safety on the job

**Secretaría de Trabajo y Previsión Social (STPS)** — the Mexican government's Secretary of Labor, a cabinet minister position

**Secretario general** — general secretary, the top officer of a labor union

**Sector Obrero** — the parliamentary representation from unions in the old Institutional Revolutionary Party governments, that is union leaders who were also congressmen or senators

**Seguridad Social** — see IMSS above, the Mexican national health plan and retirement program for industrial workers

**Sindicato** — union

**Sindicato blanco** — company union, a union controlled by the bosses

**Sindicato charro** — a union run by corrupt, violent union bureaucrats in collusion with government.

**Sindicato democrático** — democratic union where workers run the union

**Sindicato fantasma** — a union known only to the boss and union bureaucrats, which issues protection contracts

**Sindicato independiente** — independent unions, including unions affiliated with the FAT, which are not controlled by the government, the company or the “official” unions or charros. The term “Independent union” is also used by the employers to refer to the sindicatos blancos or company unions, and sometimes appears in government, employer or news publications that way.

**Sindicato oficial** — an “official” union, that is a government controlled “charro” union

**Sueldo** — salary or wages

**Taller** — a shop, a workshop

**Temporada** — season

**Temporal** — temporary worker

**Tiempo completo** — full-time work

**Titularidad** — a union’s legal right to represent workers and engage in collective bargaining with an employer

**Toma de nota** — government recognition following the election of union officials

**Turno** — shift

**Tortuguismo** — from tortuga, turtle, to go slow, a slowdown.

**Trabajador/a** — worker

**Trabajadores de confianza** — confidential employees

**Trabajadores del hogar** — domestic workers who are now protected under the new labor law.

**Trabajar** — to work

**Tratado de Libre Comercio (TLC)** — NAFTA

**Tratado de México, Estados Unidos y Canadá (T-MEC)** — United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), neoliberal trade agreement that replaced NAFTA and went into effect on July 1, 2020.

**Tribunal Laboral** — Under the new labor law, tribunals that are part of the judicial system replaced the tripartite *Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje*.

**Unión** — the union, used in some places on the northern border and in the United States. **Sindicato** is the preferred Spanish word in Mexico.

**Utilidades** — profit sharing, all workers are entitled to profit sharing under the law

**Voto secreto** — the requirement under the new labor law that all votes regarding the choice of a union, to ratify a labor contract, and to elect union leaders must be free, direct, secret and personal.