



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

**For the labor rights and all human
rights of the maquiladora workers**



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Spanish Version

Mutual Trust and a Global Strategy: Foundations of Cross-Border Solidarity

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One underlying premise of the current debate about the outsourcing of U.S. jobs overseas is that millions of foreign workers are "desperately" lining up for low-wage jobs in thousands of manufacturing facilities around the world - especially in China, Southeast Asia, Mexico, Central America and Eastern Europe.

The sentiment that foreign workers are "stealing our jobs" has appeared intermittently in the U.S. mindset over the years. In recent decades the threat has worn a Japanese face and then a Mexican one (think of Ross Perot's "giant sucking sound" during the NAFTA debate). More recently, it has displayed an Indian ("our high-tech jobs!") and Chinese face ("Red Storm Ahead," in the words of CNN commentator Lou Dobbs).

Simultaneously, thousands of people from the U.S. have crossed the border into Mexico in search of greater understanding of border realities. In the process, many of them have taken a crash course on global economics. One of the first lessons they learn is that U.S. corporations are responsible for the economic hardships affecting millions of workers on both countries.

As the visitors listen to the stories told by Mexican workers and see the neighborhoods they live in, a predictable array of feelings develops. The visitors feel compassion, pity for the locals, and anger against runaway corporations that moved first to the southern U.S., then to Mexico, and then to China. They feel outraged and also depressed.

In their eyes, maquiladora workers are hopeless victims of corporations and globalization. They are, in the words of a U.S. international union president, "the overflowing pool of dirt cheap labor." Nonetheless, the theme of solidarity generally arises from such encounters. "These are U.S. corporations; we can and should do something to help these people." But few of these visitors see maquiladora workers as serious social actors who are in fact challenging the race to the bottom.

From sympathy to solidarity

Some visitors from the U.S. travel to the border through delegations organized by workers' organizations and their U.S. supporters, such as the CFO and AFSC. On such delegations visitors hear stories of courage, dignity and resistance: women who stood up for their rights and now are respected by the bosses; spontaneous work stoppages; denunciations of bad supervisors; strategic slow-downs of production; increases in complaints of labor violations filed at government offices.

Most visitors, however, are hard-pressed to understand recent phenomena like a major labor shortage in urban centers like Ciudad Juárez, as global economic forces and Mexican government policies combine to push the maquiladora industry to new lows.

Maquiladora workers, especially border residents (many of whom did not feel exploited by the industry in the 1980s), are now fed up with the rampant decline of labor conditions taking place in Mexico. Workers are sending the message spontaneously by simply refusing to apply for maquiladora jobs. Industry and government officials in Juárez are worried by a shortfall of nearly 10,000 workers. Meanwhile, maquiladora firms are increasing their recruitment efforts in the interior of Mexico, particularly in rural towns in the state of Veracruz.

A different way of appreciating the contemporary dynamics of globalization is to begin by realizing that every day hundreds of maquiladora workers are fighting back, speaking out, and organizing with minimal resources in a very tough labor environment. The next step is to realize that these struggles are not separate from those being fought in the U.S. by airline mechanics and flight attendants, casino workers, hotel employees, undocumented immigrants, farm workers and many others in similarly difficult environments.

A few activist circles within the anti-free trade movement and the broader labor movement are already considering workers around the world as part of a single struggle for social justice, which dictates the necessity of a global strategy for labor solidarity. Such a vision would lend greater political substance to cross-border solidarity, while moving beyond an undemanding feeling of sympathy for workers in the global South. Most importantly, this global dimension of workers' rights should not be seen as only distantly related to the domestic social and political agenda for workers' rights.

AFSC: A Natural Gateway

For more than two decades, AFSC has stood at the forefront of maquiladora activism. AFSC staff have spent day after day listening to literally hundreds of workers in their homes. Back in Philadelphia, Austin, New Hampshire or Denver, AFSC staff have also encouraged involvement by U.S. labor and social movements in building ties with workers on the Mexican side of the border.

For hundreds of people, AFSC has served as a natural gateway to border realities. Journalists, union members, academics, faith-based groups, company shareholders, and students have had the opportunity to make home visits and meet working families because the latter trust their local organization, the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, which in turn has built a relationship of trust with AFSC.

Continuing with the discussion of visitors to the border, let's assume there is a U.S. union local progressive enough to have factored into its political analysis issues of xenophobia, racism and discrimination against Mexicans in general. To foster solidarity, they decide to go to the border without preconceived notions. Nonetheless, when they return, their pledges of solidarity cannot be concretized.

Such gaps and disconnects do not result from a lack of concern, but rather because understanding maquiladora issues is not simple or straightforward. This in turn creates challenges to the development of stronger cross-border links. Language barriers pose another problem. Most delegations cannot afford professional interpreters; even professionals may still be unfamiliar with the vocabulary of manufacturing and local expressions. Maquiladora workers do not speak English, except for a few supervisors and managers. Reliance on volunteer translators leads to such common mistakes as translating "sindicato" as "syndicate" instead of "trade union." This makes it even harder for participants in delegations to decipher some workers' stories. At a minimum, they are less able to tell a compelling story when they report back to their union local.

A second problem is the very nature of workers' story-telling, which may be expressed in very fragmented and imprecise terms. Most maquiladora companies are not interested in communicating well with their workforce; they may even deliberately spread rumors to sow confusion. Conflicting versions of the same event are common. Organizations like the CFO and AFSC make the effort to distill the workers' information and formulate a coherent picture, helping visitors to understand cases better. When such resources are not available, a fragmentary piece of information from a single worker assumes the status of an absolute truth in the eyes of a visitor. Sooner or later, however, the story may not hold up.

The Anti-Labor Labor Unions

Let's be positive and assume the delegation that has gone to the border has an excellent interpreter and participants with open minds. The next challenge is to understand the Mexican trade union system and the political culture of labor in the country.



US Visitors and CFO members pictured with donations of Mexican Labor Laws books.

After listening to the workers' stories, hosts and guests often engage in a question-and-answer session. A common dialogue goes like this:

A visitor asks, "do you (workers) have a union?"

"Yes, we do have a union, but our leaders are unresponsive to us."

"So you mean you have a company union?"

"No, well, some of them are company unions, but most of them are not; they are part of the CTM (Mexican Workers Confederation)."

"But we thought the CTM and others were government unions attached to the corrupt PRI."

"Yes, but when President Fox took office those CTM unions quickly aligned themselves with him and his current PAN administration. There's no difference for us."

As more details and nuances have to be explained to the visitors, this kind of conversation becomes more complex. Somehow the pieces of the puzzle don't fit. The political culture of Mexican labor is profoundly counterintuitive to most people in the U.S., including most union members. It is not easy to explain, particularly for visitors with little or no knowledge of the history of Mexican labor movements.

This issue can yield a confused picture of the role played by Mexican unions as well as that of those workers who are adamantly opposed to them. If visitors are unfamiliar with the official system in Mexico, which nominally is strongly pro-labor, it would be easy for them to conclude - incorrectly - that the maquiladora workers they have just met are anti-union.

Can They Be Trusted?

In addition to the complexities of Mexico's labor and political context, including the contradictory reality that Mexicans have extremely progressive labor laws but a serious lack of enforcement, the next question reflects another major challenge: who should U.S. unions partner with? The "natural" counterparts for U.S. labor in Mexico - the "official" unions" - are pro-business. Ideally there would be real independent unions, but in reality there are none at the border. Because of this, some unionists may share a tacit reasoning that says: "forget it; the border maquiladoras are hopeless for organizing."

As a result, we are confronted with an arena with savvy U.S. union organizers and social advocates, committed to their constituencies, with a good understanding of globalization, a good interpreter and yet . no support can be mobilized for maquiladora workers.

One factor may be a concealed lack of trust in Mexican maquiladora workers and their organizations on the part of some honest activists in the U.S.

Especially for U.S. labor, the CFO has been a big question mark. It leaves unionists in the U.S. wondering how a big international union can work with a tiny NGO with a staff of four. And yet this tiny group is led by women workers who have trained rank-and-file leaders in six cities along the border, in the process of organizing thousands and thousands of workers, many of them young women who have in turn created shop-floor action networks.

In more than one way, the CFO model of organizing has defied the preconceptions of U.S. labor. Visitors from the U.S. are often amazed when they learn how some workers - by mainstream standards, the "little guys" - have challenged not only the corporations they work for, but local labor authorities and their unresponsive union leaders. They have succeeded in organizing under those repressive conditions. Visitors are also astounded by the CFO's ability to deliver, given the fact that it doesn't collect dues or ask its members to join formally.

Once visitors understand the Mexican labor context, they are more comfortable listening to Mexicans referring to their union leadership as "the enemy" (their immediate enemy, at least). They begin to understand what the workers see: a union leadership that acts on behalf of management and obstructs the real struggle between workers and owners. Listening to maquiladora workers stressing their fight for union democracy in Mexico can make some unionists in the U.S. feel a little uneasy.

CFO organizers have called on U.S. unions to believe that independent labor organizing in the maquiladoras is concretely possible. There is no doubt that such organizing has proven to be a very difficult task. It is, however, not impossible to achieve, particularly if greater resources were committed to support the already existing efforts on the ground. We have seen marches in the streets, ongoing training activities and printing of leaflets targeting 5,000 workers, and countless other direct actions being organized by a couple of CFO women with no vehicles, no cell phones - or any kind of phone - and annual budgets, usually limited to local transportation and photocopies.

There are good examples of solidarity with Mexican maquiladora workers from workers' advocates and NGOs from the U.S. and Canada (such initiatives will be covered in future commentaries on this website). U.S. labor, however, has mainly paid lip service to cross-border solidarity, with a few key exceptions. Resources to support real, effective rank-and-file workers organizations such as the CFO have been nonexistent, even after forty years of the presence of the maquiladora industry in the U.S.' "backyard."

Three ingredients are necessary to take cross-border solidarity to new levels: an understanding and practice of solidarity within a global frame of reference; mutual trust among people from different countries; and true commitment to sharing resources with the workers who are on the frontlines of globalization.

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