Mexico's *Frente Auténtico del Trabajo* (FAT) and the Problem of Unionizing Maquiladoras

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This paper’s title is somewhat problematic. Since the 1960s unions have existed in maquiladoras. Nowadays unions are even formed before maquilas open their doors. Thus the issue at hand is not simply unionizing maquiladoras. Rather it has to do with securing unions that authentically represent the interests of their workers and that have the ability to protect those interests.

I feel it is useful to face the normative thrust of this paper and most writings in this field directly. While a great many contributions masquerade as objective social science (especially those of grad students and untenured faculty seeking to gain professional acceptance) most authors in this field are driven primarily by normative—let us even say political—motivations. We seek to advance the political fortunes of workers facing a system heavily weighted against them.

If we accept this starting point, then papers might usefully begin with a statement of political goals, rather than the standard review of the literature, before moving on to a resolutely objective effort to determine how to advance those goals.

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Early maquiladora unions that best represented workers seem to have been those of northern Tamaulipas under the strong leadership of Agapito Gonzalez. This judgment is based simply on the dramatically higher wages and better working conditions of workers in those unions compared to those in other regions. However, in the NAFTA era the leadership of the aging Gonzalez was first weakened and then destroyed, and most of the benefits to workers in SJOIM unions were severely eroded. Quintero\(^2\) shows that other relatively more authentic unions along the border have also been replaced or transformed themselves into subordinated unions that are either “elements of exploitation and control of workers through a relationship of unrestricted collaboration with capital” or more traditional official unions whose acceptance of government led economic policy is so advanced that their policies of assuring labor peace and administering regional economic policy amount to virtually the same thing. Both of these types of unions have as their primary goal gaining or maintaining contracts to administer for the personal benefit of union leaders, their union bureaucracies, or both. Representation of their workers’ interests would frequently conflict with this primary motivation.

This distinction between subordinated unions and authentic unions is essential for political clarity. Over 90% of total collective labor contracts in Mexico are designed primarily to protect the interests of the employer.\(^3\) As long

\(^2\) Quintero op.cit., 174-75.
as we live in a capitalist world, authentic unions must be seen as both a means and a necessary end for those seeking a just and democratic world.  

Current trends are ominous. Businesses keep moving industrial and, increasingly, service sector work away from non-subordinated unions in both the north and the south. Economic power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer corporations world-wide. And the efforts of those few corporations to refashion the world's political institutions to serve their own needs continue despite popular outcries. What is at stake is enormous. In this case the old radical criterion applies: those unions that are not part of the solution are part of the problem.

**FAT: The Authentic Labor Front**

In the NAFTA era there have been dozens of spontaneous efforts of workers to make maquiladora employers address their concerns. Only a few of these have led to sustained efforts to form or to transform unions into democratic organizations authentically representing the interests of rank-and-file workers. The Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT) has been involved either directly or indirectly in most of them. By examining these experiences this paper hopes to

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4 For a clarification of what I mean by justice and democracy in this context please see the extended discussion in my *Allies Across the Border: Mexico's Authentic Labor Front and Global Solidarity*. South End Press, 2000, pp. 221-26.
derive lessons of what has worked and what has been lacking to achieve authentic unions in the maquilas.

At its founding in 1960 the FAT dedicated itself to these principles: “union liberty, union democracy, independence from all political parties, autonomy from government and employers, and the material and spiritual elevation of the working class.” Since its break from early church ties the FAT talks less of “spiritual elevation” and more of human dignity, a quality eroded by most maquiladoras. With this slight exception, the FAT’s history shows that it has been faithful to these principles for the last 40 years. The unions it supports in maquiladoras are thus consistent with the normative/political goals of this paper.

In addition to these core principles, the FAT has been distinguished from most Mexican unions by its early and continuing conviction that profound political change is needed for workers to be able to achieve their goals. Thus the FAT has worked as a political and social movement that has reached both beyond the formal union sector and across national boundaries since its early years.

Even before the signing of NAFTA, the FAT formed alliances across borders to confront what they foresaw as an intensification of the exploitation Mexican workers had suffered since the early 1980s. In 1991 the FAT joined with the US-based United Electrical Workers (UE) in a strategic organizing alliance. This led them to undertake their first maquiladora organizing drive at
General Electric’s CASA plant in Ciudad Juarez. Since that initial struggle they have been involved in various capacities with struggles at Honeywell, Han Young, ITAPSA, Duro, K&S Mexicano, Kuk Dong, and other on-going covert efforts which can be discussed here only in generic terms.

**GE in Juarez**

The UE was not only a political soul-mate with the FAT; it also had objective reasons to want to work with it in Mexico. Since the early ‘80s, the UE had lost the jobs of several thousand members due to plants moving to Mexico, many of them linked to GE. The organizing drive at GE’s CASA plant in Juarez showed a number of important, hard-won successes. This first case will be addressed in some detail since it exemplifies a number of issues that come up in later cases.

In 1994, just after NAFTA took effect, the FAT assigned its most effective organizer, Benedicto Martinez, a national leader, to lead the drive. When he began to ask CASA workers if they wanted to form a union, they replied with enthusiasm that they had already begun organizing and would have a group of 80 of the plant’s 950 workers meet with him. This was not entirely good news, as the FAT had found that forming groups larger than 10 workers early in an organizing drive increases the chances of being discovered by management.

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*For more on the history of the FAT see Hathaway 2000. Citation is from p. 54.*
GE did discover the drive and responded by firing 120 workers. Firing a worker for union activities is, of course, against the law. As is common practice, GE tried to cover its offense by offering severance pay to the workers who would in turn sign an agreement ending any further claims. They also threatened those who refused to sign with trumped up charges of theft or drug use. Facing this carrot-and-stick combination, most workers signed. Two who refused became full-time organizers, paid with funds provided largely by the UE, but other, very effective potential leaders had been lost.

The UE also responded to the firings by organizing a visit of rank-and-file members from three of its GE plants. This was the beginning of what has continued to be a very important tactic: cross-border worker visits. In this case the workers were shocked to see Mexicans doing the same work they did for one tenth the pay and doing it under far worse conditions. GE responded to the trip by firing six of its CASA workers for meeting with the delegation. This outraged UE workers—now back home—who responded by generating local and national publicity that stung GE. Thus, a cross-border dialogue was established with GE resulting in a pledge to rehire the 6 workers and to engage in no more retaliatory firings.

With the campaign now in the open, the FAT was free to engage in actions at the plant gates. It also did the hard work of door-to-door visits to nearly every worker. When the breadth of its support was well established, the
FAT filed a demand for a contract with GE, the legal alternative being a strike. At this point the drive moved from the difficulties of organizing to the difficulties of the political system. The state labor board launched a series of procedural delays. Martinez tried to surmount these by meeting directly with the state’s political leaders. According to Martinez, a meeting with the secretary of government (the number two leader of this PAN-controlled state) finally led to this frank statement:

Look, this is not a legal question. It’s a political question. We know who you are. We know your history of independence. There is no legal solution for you. We won’t allow you to organize a maquila. We can’t risk the jobs. If we did, the business might leave. Others wouldn’t come. We can’t allow it.6

Following this meeting the state secretary of labor offered Martinez a deal. GE had agreed to allow an election to see if the workers wanted a union. Since this was not what the law called for—a contract or a strike—but since it appeared as good as they might get, Martinez negotiated for the best conditions possible, including an end to in-plant indoctrination sessions, no more firings, and a vote by secret ballot at a neutral site outside the plant.

GE kept its word on the secret ballot. This was an important historic breakthrough, since most labor elections require workers to declare their
preference orally often in presence of their boss who has threatened to fire any who vote for change, often in the presence of paid thugs. However, GE broke its word on all other conditions. They used a sophisticated psychological campaign of in-plant indoctrinations, agreed to all economic demands of the union, and detained most union leaders in the plant while other workers were marched out to vote. The FAT lost the election by a huge margin.

The NAO

This struggle then became the basis for the first complaint filed with the NAFTA created labor review board, the NAO in Washington. There it was combined with a case that the FAT was also involved in, that of Honeywell in the city of Chihuahua. The Chihuahua case was one in which a group of workers in the initial stages of organizing a union with the FAT were quickly discovered and all fired. In discussing the case with the UE, the FAT found out that the Teamsters had contracts with Honeywell plants that were also losing jobs to Mexico. The FAT contacted the Teamsters who joined them in the complaint to the NAO.

These first cases with the NAO confirmed the fears of many: that it was not only toothless, but also that it was not even interested in looking into the reality of labor conditions in Mexico. In bringing the FAT and Teamsters together, however, these cases accomplished what has been the main benefit of the NAO: facilitating cross-border union contacts and understanding. Since that

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first case, the NAO has improved its willingness to look into actually labor conditions in all three countries, but it has still shown itself to be powerless as a mechanism for enforcing the labor rights it was supposedly designed to protect. With its counterparts in Mexico and Canada, the NAO remains a place for cross-border labor communications, for documentation of abuses in each of the three countries, and—when its recommendations are routinely violated by offending governments—it helps to clarify the lawless and anti-democratic nature of transnational corporations and their captive governments.

New Approaches

After these defeats via the mechanisms of both Mexican and transnational labor laws, the FAT and UE changed tactics somewhat. While they had effectively organized workers within the plant in Juarez, they had not been able to rally any support from the broader community there. Additionally, one of the tactics that GE had used most effectively against them in their captive meetings was to remind workers of what they already knew about most unions in Mexico; that they are corrupt and more interested in collecting dues than in serving their members. They decided that before rushing into another struggle in Juarez, they would open CETLAC, a worker education center, to improve their ties with the local community, and to educate workers about both their rights and about the history and possibility of authentic, worker-controlled unions. With the support of the UE and other international allies, they have been able to hire local organizers to prepare the basis for more effective work in the future.
The FAT—which had not been a strong presence in Chihuahua since the late 1970’s—chose its next organizing targets in the center of the country where it was more firmly established.

There the FAT-UE Alliance targeted ITAPSA, an automotive brake factory owned by the auto-parts giant, Echlin, which was shortly bought out by the even larger Dana Corp. As part of this effort the FAT and UE organized the Echlin Workers Alliance, an exciting breakthrough. This tri-national alliance brought together 5 additional unions: the Teamsters, Paperworkers, Unite, the United Steelworkers and the Canadian Autoworkers. Unfortunately, this new alliance has not had the staying power to endure the breaking of a militant California Echlin local, the return of Hoffa to the Teamsters, and the absorption of the Paperworkers into the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union (PACE).

**The Lessons Learned**

Since the advent of NAFTA the most significant change in the maquiladora industry has been its spread throughout Mexico. This trend will likely accelerate as President Vicente Fox pushes his Puebla-to-Panama plan, and as manufactures seek workers even more docile than those on the border, where the profusion of maquiladoras gives workers a slight advantage. When
conditions become too bad at one place, one can leave and go to another. This has led to slightly more generous benefits packages as businesses try to stem the high cost of frequent employee turnover (a rare instance of a competitive market benefiting workers.) The dispersion of maquiladoras to more rural settings throughout the country will take away this small benefit to workers and make it even harder to organize unions.

The FAT's efforts beginning at GE and continuing to the present offer a number of apparent lessons about tactics and conditions necessary for effective organization of unions in maquiladoras. They are based on my direct studies of these cases and the Mexican labor environment as well as conversations held with FAT organizers and allies in the summer of 2001. I have broken these lessons into two groups, the necessary-but-not-sufficient group and the necessary-and-hopefully-sufficient group.

Necessary-but-not-sufficient

Clandestine organizing

As already demonstrated in the cases above, employers in Mexico frequently respond to union organizing by firing any workers suspected of being involved. Thus, it is extremely important to accomplish as much initial organization as possible bajo el agua, clandestinely. Meeting in small groups only is important so that if one group is discovered an informer within the group
will not be able to share much information, and only a fraction of those involved can be fired at once.

This needs to be understood well by international allies supporting organizing drives. FAT organizer Jorge Robles assisted the Teamsters in an attempt to organize apple pickers and packers in Washington State. (NAO #9802) He was surprised to find that the Teamsters asked all newly organized workers to wear Teamster tee shirts or hats on the job as a way of spreading the movement. (Mexican workers afraid of deportation did not take this suggestion readily.) FAT’s efforts to organize a union at the ITAPSA brake plant were complicated by a US union leader in the Echlin Workers’ Alliance who defiantly informed his boss that his union was helping to organize workers at ITAPSA. Up until that point, workers had formed small groups that were spreading the message through most parts of the plant in all three shifts. After the whistle was inadvertently blown by the US supporter, ITAPSA fired several workers who looked like natural leaders.

Local ties

Nowhere in Mexico is it difficult to find a majority of maquiladora workers who are ready to complain about their oppressive work conditions and their miserably low wages. Thus, organizing opportunities are everywhere. What is difficult for organizers is winning the confidence of workers. Workers are quite aware of the fact that trying to organize a union may cost them their job.
Workers are also aware that most unions in Mexico are corrupt and only rarely serve their worker-members.

Since most maquiladoras have been along the northern border this has raised an additional problem for the FAT which is currently strongest in central Mexico. In the 1960s and '70s the FAT was an important force in the capital city of Chihuahua. It has never had a strong presence in other border states. So when workers along the frontier do seek to organize they often turn to the traditional corporatist unions, the CTM, CROC, and CROM which are most available to them. This rarely solves their problems. Workers that know they want to avoid these unions sometimes try to organize on their own or simply engage in sporadic wildcat strikes. Due to the forces arrayed against them, these efforts rarely endure. Occasionally a group of workers seeking help is encouraged to call on the FAT due to its history of integrity and its decades of experience in helping workers organize authentic unions.

The FAT was called in to help workers organize at Han Young in Tijuana. An organizer flew to Tijuana every week or two with surprisingly good results. Against tremendous opposition the workers were able to both hold and to win an election establishing the legitimacy of their independent union. In fact, they won a series of such elections. However, ties with the FAT eventually broke down. Partisans of authentic unions are left with an empty victory: a tightly organized
union with its own independent registry, but no contract, no work, and solidaristic ties in a shambles.

Two main factors led to the breakdown. When the union won its second election it was granted its registration as a union affiliated with the FAT’s metal workers union, STIMAHCS. But they were also given something they had neither voted for nor asked for: a state chartered union independent of the FAT with the legal power to organize in any industry. Local leaders gladly accepted this Trojan horse and broke with the FAT. While the FAT has its own explanation for the break, local workers say they did not want to be controlled by Mexico City, that they did not want to rely on people who flew in on airplanes rather than living amongst them.

Other observers in Tijuana as well as observers at the Duro Bag plant in Rio Bravo say this is a general problem. People on the border generally do not trust people from Mexico City. The border has its own culture, and resentment against the capital is an important part of it.

The FAT’s establishment of CETLAC in Cd. Juarez, its decision to staff it with local people, and its willingness to settle in for the long run there is a realistic response to this very real problem. It is already beginning to bear fruit.
CETLAC has been spreading the word of its presence throughout Juarez through actions like the innocuous looking “First Aid for Workers” brochure it gives out at plant gates. When workers open it up they find information about their legal rights as well as the phone number and address of CETLAC. CETLAC also offers worker education classes at its office, and it has established strong ties with local NGOs concerned with human rights, the environment, and women’s issues.

Workers who have been in contact with CETLAC have won control of a union’s executive committee without declaring any ties to FAT. Due to government policy it has been difficult for them to raise wages significantly, but they have greatly improved benefits, and they have established effective grievance and safety committees which have been able to make real gains in working conditions. While this clandestine model has its limits, it is certainly worth replicating while building strength and continuing to work for improved government labor policies.

To have success establishing authentic unions along the border will require a commitment to establishing a locally based, long-term presence in several border cities. Such a proposal has been floated recently by the AFL-CIO. Its details remain to be seen.
Worker Education

One of the historical strengths of the FAT’s organizing style is its commitment to worker education. It has found that workers need to be educated about their legal rights if they are to overcome their learned deference to abusive employers. A sense of the existence—both historically and in the present—of independent worker-controlled unions that have made gains from their employers, from the government, and in terms of their own sense of human dignity, give workers a new sense of themselves and helps to overcome their sense of isolation. Instruction in how to run a democratic union helps them to break ties to existing corrupt unions, and it helps them avoid falling into despotic patterns in any new organization they create. Finally, a sense of solidarity with other workers in their region, throughout the country, and world-wide are essential if a newly established union is to be a part of a growing union movement rather than simply a vehicle for the advancement of its own members.

Secret ballot

While the FAT won an apparent procedural victory in the GE struggle, the use of secret ballots to determine if a new union can be established remains extremely rare.

The ITAPSA case is a good illustration of the abuses that happen without the requirement of a secret vote in a neutral site. An election to see if the FAT or the company-favored CTM would represent the workers was held on September
9, 1997. In the middle of the night two busloads of young men armed with pipes, clubs, knives, and some with guns drove into the plant and unloaded. The night shift, which usually leaves at 6 a.m., was not allowed to go home. The day shift arrived to see banners hanging over the factory saying, "Get out foreign unions! Get out FAT!" They were also greeted by the young thugs reminding them that if they valued their jobs and their lives they had better vote for the CTM.

Nineteen recently fired workers who had come to exercise their legal right to vote in the election were not allowed to enter. One worker who dared to voice his support for the FAT within the plant was beaten in front of other workers and in front of labor board officials who refused to intervene.

Late in the day, when the night shift arrived, the election began. The third shift and the day shift were now being held against their will by armed guards. Workers proceeded to the voting table through a gauntlet of armed thugs, reminding them how to vote. Workers had to declare their choice openly before management, union representatives, and labor board officials. Under these conditions only 15% of the workers dared to vote for the FAT.

This case was appealed to the NAFTA labor board (NAO #9703.) Pressure was brought to bear and the Mexican government agreed that future elections would use secret ballots. After his election but before taking office, Vicente Fox agreed to a number of important labor reforms including the use of
secret ballot elections. Despite these agreements, when the workers at Duro bag demanded a secret ballot in a neutral site—just months into the new Fox administration—they were turned down. They also faced armed golpeadores (literally: beaters) who exercised control over the election proceedings held within the plant.

More encouraging news on this front comes from Mexico City where the president of the local labor board (JLCA) has announced that all elections held under his jurisdiction will be by secret ballot and conducted in a neutral setting. The FAT, the UNT, and international allies have all commended this action and reminded Fox that he needs to keep his word and do the same thing nation-wide. Fox did not respond.

**International solidarity**

It is obvious that victories against a system of globalized exploitation cannot be won by any one nation’s workers in isolation from workers world wide. Workers within the US that have strong unions have shown themselves capable of maintaining good wages and working conditions—until their jobs are moved abroad. Workers in countries like Mexico that are attracting those jobs on the basis of low-cost, controlled labor cannot, by themselves, convince their governments to change their policies. If the workers of Mexico were able to change their country’s policies unilaterally, jobs would flow to Central America and Asia.
Yet workers united across borders have been able to win at least some tactical victories. These eventually must be followed by long-term changes in the structure of the global economy. These early victories are worth celebrating, but clearly they must be built upon.

**Tactical Victories**

- By putting pressure on GE within the US, members of the United Electrical Workers were able to get six fired workers rehired and helped win the agreement for a secret ballot election.

- In the Han Young case, extremely effective work by a diverse coalition of unionists, congressional representatives, and other activists all linked into a steady stream of information via the internet forced the government of Baja California to hold an election, and then to hold another election, eventually leading to the establishment of an independent union.

- International cooperation between unions in the Han Young and the ITAPSA cases led to an NAO ruling that forced the Mexican government to commit itself to holding secret ballot elections.
Pressure from the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) at the Kuk Dong (Nike contractor) clothing plant in Puebla is allowing the consolidation of an independent union and tangibly improved working conditions. USAS represents a new type of international pressure. It has organized the consumers within a specialized market to insist on certain labor conditions from its suppliers. While this would be more difficult to repeat in many industries, it suggests a tactic that could be used by US and European autoworkers that work with a stream of inputs from increasingly exploitative suppliers.

International exchanges that increase ties between workers from other countries, such as the worker-to-worker tours developed by the FAT-UE Alliance, help build the understanding and the heart-felt commitment that will be so necessary in the long struggle ahead.

International solidarity with Mexican workers began with US and Canadian unions seeking to unionize plants that had taken jobs from their own members. When this was motivated by revenge or by a sense of strategic insurance against more job losses, it was rarely successful. The FAT has failed to organize a single runaway UE plant. Benedicto Martinez of the FAT notes that allies north of the border are now taking a broader view of the problem. They have come to see the value of organizing wherever they can in Mexico. They have come to
see that they are not dealing with a single corporation but with an entire system that links corporations to governments. It is that system which must be confronted.

Yet international support for unions like the FAT does bring a particular political problem, especially as financial resources are transferred, and especially as unions take a more political approach. The FAT is frequently derided as a tool of foreign unions who want to prevent jobs from coming to Mexico. In a country where nationalism has been an important tool for controlling workers this can be a significant problem. Such attacks come from both business federations and the Mexican government. They must be denounced for the manipulative hypocrisy that they are. If these businesses and government officials had not been so collaborating against the interests of Mexican workers, there would be little need for the workers to collaborate internationally.

Resources

Workers in the US, Canada, and Europe have clear strategic reasons for wanting to see effective unions organized in Mexico and around the world. They can do nothing towards this goal without effective local allies. As an ally the FAT brings its decades of experience as well as its reputation of honesty, integrity and a commitment to democratic unions. However, the dues it collects from its members are insufficient to do more than to service their local concerns and their national support staff. Yet the FAT is often called upon to organize or to advise

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workers all over the country. It relies largely on international support to be able to do what it does. More support would allow it to do more.

As we have seen above, the problem of suspicion raised by its airborne organizing in Tijuana is being confronted in Cd. Juarez by its long-term commitment through the CETLAC workers center. This center is sustained by international support. To develop centers along the border would require more resources. Early in the summer of 2001 AFL-CIO proposed just such a plan. Yet people question how much control the AFL-CIO wants in return for its resources, and they question what its policies would be.

The AFL-CIO watched the Duro Bag struggle closely. Jeff Hermanson, the Federation’s point man for Mexico, pointed out that the CROC had devoted 15 full-time professional organizers for three months to win that election. He criticized the independent union forces for trying to compete with only two organizers with limited experience. A US-based labor activist who had traveled to Rio Bravo to observe the election commented that if that is how he felt, he could have thrown in a lot of resources early on. Instead Hermanson was seen walking into Duro Bag on good terms with the CROC leader who had hired thugs to assure his victory. This outraged the workers who had struggled for their rights as well as both the FAT and international observers present for the election.

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Hermanson did propose sponsoring a serious labor research center within Mexico. This is clearly needed. Specifically, Hermanson believes that Mexican unions need to professionalize their organizing capabilities, and here he is putting his money where his mouth is. He feels that appropriately targeted, internationally connected research can help build pressure on employers so unions won’t be so reliant on a non-cooperative legal system.10

Honest, respected, pro-labor researchers in Mexico were attracted not only by his offer of scarce resources, but also by these ideas. However, when he asked them to work with the same CROC leader who had used gangster tactics to assure that the company favored union—his—won the election at Duro, some staged a rebellion.

The position of the AFL-CIO has been fairly consistent. They are in favor of democratic unions, but they will work with whoever has the contracts with the workers. In the case of Duro, Hermanson said he was waiting to see if the CROC union would actually improve conditions for the workers or not. The FAT and its allies maintain that if it had the interests of the workers as its priority it would not have had to hire golpeadores to win an election. While it may be helpful to recall that democratically-controlled unions are not that common within the AFL-CIO, it is pragmatic to realize that only a commitment to drastically improving the lives of workers in Mexico and around the world will save the jobs
of workers in the US. Dealing with company-favored unions will not help that process.

Necessary and Hopefully Sufficient:

Political Change

Let us begin by recalling the comment of the PANista Secretary of Government in Chihuahua that a democratic union in the maquiladoras will not be allowed. His rationale for this policy was that it would lead some companies to leave and would cause new plants to be located elsewhere. He was basing his judgment on what he sees as the international market as it now exists.

A similar story can be told about numerous US manufacturing firms who have claimed they wished they could maintain employment in the US, yet once all of their competitors had moved to cheaper labor sources abroad, they had to follow as well. It was the pressure of the unrestrained market, they claimed, that made them do it. Both points are logical up to a point.

Unrestrained markets can be restrained by policy change. Faced with pressure brought to bear by the NAO hearings on ITAPSA and Han Young, the Mexican government under President Zedillo agreed to use secret ballots in all future disputed elections. The historic election of Vicente Fox in 2000 was driven

in large part by the population’s rejection of the government’s two-decade commitment to globalization and marketization of the economy. Not surprisingly, President-elect Fox also agreed to implement secret union elections as well as other demands of the mildly progressive UNT. Yet, as the Duro Bag case makes painfully clear, these promises were motivated by temporary expediency rather than indicative of real policy change. Evidently, the best Fox feels he can do at this point is to work to improve conditions for Mexicans working in the bottom rungs of the US economy.

While happy to see the PRI losing power, few labor analysts expected any PAN government to be a true friend of labor. Yet PRD administrations in Mexico City have been little better. Pro-labor moves under the Cardenas and the Robles administrations were minimal. There has been some significant improvement under the Lopez Obrador administration, most notable the appointment of a pro-labor president to the local labor board, the JCLA. Yet Mexico City itself has only limited foreign industrial-sector investment. Most TNCs in the area build their plants in the state of Mexico, beyond the reach of the more progressive city government.

Just as the north-south movement of jobs has hurt many US and Canadian unionists, there are north-south movements both within and beyond Mexico. The state of Tamaulipas has long been the site of the best manufacturing wages along the border, especially within the city of Matamoros.
Yet recent years have seen the development of new jobs within the state moving further to the south. The notorious CustomTrim autoparts plant was located in Valle Hermoso, an hour south of the AutoTrim plant in Matamoros. The same corporation later opened another plant—Trimex—still further south in Ciudad Victoria. Each new plant offered lower wages than its affiliate just north. This is just one example of an accelerating move of manufacturers to locate new plants in more rural, more southerly, and less unionized parts of Mexico.

Throughout Mexico, unionized workers in the maquiladora sector find themselves facing the same threats faced by unionists in the US and Canada. If workers don’t give in to management, their jobs will be shipped south to Guatemala, El Salvador, China, or Indonesia. As a series of broken promises show, in the judgment of both the Fox and Zedillo administrations, pro-labor reforms would hurt Mexico economically as it competed for international investment in a world not yet dominated by labor-friendly governments. Workers in Guatemala were right to celebrate their victory at the Phillips-Van Heusen maquiladora, but the victory was followed by the plant’s closing. In the long-run, the only way to establish authentic unions in maquiladoras is to change the international policy environment in which they operate.

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It was no accident that the first strike wave to sweep the United States, the great upheaval of 1876, was initially directed against the railroads. Railroads were destroying local markets, replacing them with a vast national market. Striking workers won many of their local battles because both police and merchants were loyal to them, not to new distant corporate interests. Yet as corporations increased their holds within local communities, they crushed strikes with increasing effectiveness.\textsuperscript{13}

Labor within the United States won real gains only when they were able to unite and exercise leverage at the national level politically. Their real victories came after strong local organizing and effective strike tactics combined with their political power. Needing labor cooperation during World War II, the Roosevelt administration forced even the most reactionary corporations to accept unions and to pay decent wages. When all corporations faced the same legal requirements in dealing with labor, all could afford to pay better wages in a newly reshaped market environment.\textsuperscript{14} These gains have been severely eroded as first the ability and later the need to invest abroad allowed corporations to break out of this modified market.


Until workers are able to force similar requirements respecting labor rights and adequate minimum wage and safety requirements into the international market, (and thus regain them in the US) victories in maquiladoras will be limited and probably temporary. This does not mean that any of the necessary-but-not-sufficient tactics described above should be abandoned. All should be continued, because the struggle for workers rights in maquilas and elsewhere is an essential part of building the movement that is required to change the world. Yet organizers and researchers must also have an eye on the larger picture: building a movement for labor policy change both within and beyond nations.

Being clear about this should mean that workers never allow themselves to be played off against each other when bosses threaten to move a plant. Increased ties of solidarity must be built that can help turn even lost battles into larger victories that help to win the war. Being clear about this should require that big unions and big federations like the AFL-CIO engage in a serious re-evaluation of policies that prefer contact with existing but corrupt unions over contacts with more democratic unions that are struggling to emerge. Far more resources must be devoted to the effort. Only strong democratic unions with a clear sense of international solidarity will be useful allies in the long effort to build sufficient strength around the world to alter the rules of the global economy. Unions without this vision can only be counted on to sell out the larger movement for the sake of more limited gains.
Building a decent union within a single maquila is now an enormously
difficult project. Building an international movement for workers’ rights will be
even harder. They both must be done.

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