

Behind Ciudad Juarez's New Labor Movement

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The Mexican and U.S. government first agreed to the creation of the maquiladora plants along the U.S.-Mexico border in 1965 and already by 1975 there were strikes for union recognition. Yet in the last 40 years, thanks to the cooperation of the multinational corporations and the U.S. and Mexican government virtually no group of workers has succeeded in organizing a genuinely independent labor union. Most plants have no unions. Some plants have unions run by lawyers and gangsters who are allied with the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the government. A combination of legal chicanery, intimidation, and violence have been used to keep workers from organizing. Now, once again, after many years there are labor protests in Ciudad Juarez one of the major maquiladora centers across the border from El Paso Texas as reported by Kent Paterson of Frontera NorteSur News where this article originally appeared.- Dan La Botz

In a virtually unprecedented development, labor protest is widening in the maquiladora industry of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. While worker dissatisfaction or protest is nothing new in the foreign-owned border factories that produce goods for export to the United States, previous manifestations of discontent in the generally union-free industry have usually been confined to one company at a time.

But recently, movements for better pay and working conditions- and union representation- have emerged at four different companies-Foxconn, Lexmark, ADC/Commscope and Eaton. Hundreds of workers have participated in street protests, hunger strikes and leafleting.

"This is the time bomb going off," said Elizabeth Flores, director of Pastoral Obrera, the Ciudad Juarez Catholic Archdiocese's labor justice and human rights arm. "It's interesting to see how all the people are demonstrating."

Flores spoke to FNS as ex-workers of the North Carolina-based Commscope company, a manufacturer of products for networking infrastructure like fiber optics, joined in on an October 26 demonstration at the Bridge of the Americas organized by rural, human rights and environmental activists.

Several former workers complained to FNS about abusive treatment by company management that included shouts, insults and arbitrary changes in work shifts. The workers said they had been fired for forming an independent union on September 16, Mexican Independence Day. Many of the former employees are single mothers like Veronica Rodriguez, who said more than 100 workers joined the new union.

According to the mother of three, her earnings came out to less than \$50 in base pay weekly plus bonuses that averaged about \$40 per month. "You can't get by very well. You have to look for

another source of income," Rodriguez said. "We are also protesting to see if the government helps." To press their cause, Rodriguez and fellow workers have set up an encampment outside Commscope's Juarez plant.

"The company isn't disposed to negotiate and doesn't want to dialogue," said Cuauhtemoc Estrada, lawyer for the fired Commscope workers. "We don't know why the company fired 120 workers in an act of revenge."

Estrada told FNS that he filed a legal complaint on behalf of the dismissed workers with Mexico's Labor Arbitration and Conciliation Board. The firings, he contended, were not only illegal but a violation of human rights.

In addition to the guarantees of union association written in the Mexican Constitution, Mexico belongs to the International Labor Organization of the United Nations and recognizes the American Convention on Human Rights, both of which uphold freedom of labor association.

Despite its commitments, the Mexican government has privileged the power of the semi-official Mexican Workers Confederation and other unions historically tied to the ruling PRI party in the places where nominal union representation exists, while "independent organizing has been impeded in the northern border part of the country," according to Estrada.

Rick Aspan, vice-president of corporate communications for Commscope, disputed the workers' version of the labor conflict. "We terminated fewer than ten people from the facility recently," Aspan told FNS in a phone interview. Although declining to go into details, Aspan said the workers were fired for violation of work rules and not because of joining a union.

Commscope's spokesman said he was in the process of obtaining more information about the Juarez conflict, but maintained that his company had been a "good employer" with a productive work force of more than 3,000 employees at its Juarez facility.

Formerly run by ADC, the Juarez plant was acquired by Commscope in August of this year, Aspan said.

The status of labor rights in Juarez is being monitored by Cereal, a Jesuit-supported worker advocacy organization with offices in Mexico City and Guadalajara.

In recent conversations with Juarez workers, Cereal staff member Felipe Burgueno said he found commonalities in their grievances, including wages and benefits, safety, union representation and management practices.

The current wave of protest "has to do with the conditions under which workers are laboring and how they are being recruited," Burgueno said. Low wages, he added, lubricate a "vicious circle" of poverty that does not allow workers the necessary income to obtain educational studies that could improve their lot in life.

"Who thinks that a father or a single mother can provide food, education and health care for their children on 90 pesos (less than six dollars) a day?" labor attorney Estrada separately weighed in. "Nobody can do this."

Burgueno said Cereal's findings on the Juarez labor situation will be included in a forthcoming report on the Mexican electronics industry's working conditions also in Tijuana, Mexicali, Reynosa and Guadalajara. "They are the same violations of labor rights, but each region has its own particularities," he added.

The surge in labor protest at Juarez factories comes as the local industry trade association, AMAC-Index Juarez, celebrates the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the maquiladoras to the border city.

The assembly-for-export plants were envisioned as an alternative source of employment for former Mexican guestworkers in the United States who lost their jobs in the agricultural industry when the Bracero Program was terminated in 1964. However, the maquiladoras largely harnessed a distinct workforce, especially young women workers.

FNS spoke to two Juarez women with a combined experience of 30 years in the maquiladora industry. One of the women is still actively employed. Both asked that their names not be used for this story due to security concerns. The women identified three major reasons why worker protests are escalating now as opposed to earlier years, when wages and shop floor conditions were also burning issues.

According to the industry veterans, the first reason has to do with a changed composition of the labor force, from younger and even adolescent workers to employees with more household responsibilities. The second factor is connected to the current crisis of worker recruitment, in which many locals are shunning factory jobs because of the low pay. Consequently, to lure workers, employers offer new hires better deals over long-time employees, who with ten years or more of service are resentful to see their compensation stagnating.

“The majority of the new movements are arising in repudiation of these policies,” one of the women said.

Last but far from least is the decline of violence in Juarez in comparison with the years between 2008 and 2012, when more than 12,000 people were estimated murdered during the so-called narco war. During that time the city was under virtual occupation by soldiers, federal police or warring gangs. Extortion, kidnapping and car theft were rampant. According to the two women, free speech was suppressed while labor organizing was rendered virtually impossible.

“People are survivors and have lost some fears,” one woman said. “When you lose your fear, you act.”

Still, the atmosphere for labor organizing is a fragile one. Cereal’s Felipe Burgueno pointed to one well-known labor lawyer who became the target of constant threats and harassment. Burgueno also cited the case of an activist worker who was followed home by management personnel. “This could be symbolic,” he added. “We know where you live, where you are.”

For Burgueno, the present juncture in Juarez is a critical one for not only workers, but the city as whole.

“It’s important that the workers are becoming conscious of their rights, and it could result in the creation of a social actor who improves conditions for everybody. It’s important to strengthen these groups,” he said.

The two maquiladora veterans interviewed by FNS said they are working with a newer women’s collective in analyzing the socio-economic conditions and the Mexican government’s latest political and economic reforms to strategize a path forward for women workers.

“Our objective is to generate an organic process of women workers for social and economic development,” one of the women said. “We are barely constituting ourselves as a non-profit organization, and will have a diagnosis of the social situation, of how violence impacted the city, and of the structural reforms and how they impact women.”

As FNS was going to press, the Ciudad Juarez daily Norte reported that a group of 70 Lexmark workers began staging a protest early Monday morning, November 2 at the maquiladora's plant entrance. According to the newspaper, the demonstration was called to protest the firings of two workers, including one who had previously spoken out on television in favor of a union. "We demand an independent union" read one placard carried by a protester.

Meanwhile, Veronica Rodriguez and other ex-Commscope workers continue with their protest outside the company's Juarez plant. A hearing on the workers' complaint before the federal Labor Arbitration and Conciliation Board originally scheduled for October 30 was postponed to November 19, Rodriguez said.

"We are surviving by donations, and with the little bit that the workers have left," she said. The Juarez labor activist said the public response to the workers' protest was "good," with people stopping by the encampment to give protesters burritos, water and other supplies. Former Commscope workers are also meeting with workers from other companies to discuss forging a bigger movement, she said.

"A union would be the biggest gain we could get, and to get our jobs back" Rodriguez told FNS.

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