

Can a Woman Worker Become Mayor of Juarez, Mexico?

Antonia Hinojos Hernandez is in a race against time. Known to her friends as “Tonita,” the Ciudad Juarez mayoral hopeful has until March 7 to gather nearly 30,000 signatures from eligible voters so her name can appear on the June ballot as an independent candidate.



A former line worker at a border assembly plant, or maquiladora, Hinojos does not have the infrastructure of a political party, lacks money to pay signature collectors and is missing the endorsements of influential people and media outlets.

What Tonita does have is a small but committed cadre of pre-campaign volunteers, a dedication to a larger cause and the conviction that activism can make a difference, whether it yields an election victory or not.

A woman with a commanding but friendly voice and a generous mane of red-streaked hair, Hinojos paused from a busy day of signature gathering to talk to FNS about her pioneering run for the top political post of an important Mexican border city.

“We’re a little behind. There’s a lot of (pre-campaign) work. We’re workers, and all of us are fired,” the 45-year-old pre-candidate said. “We’re warriors going around all day long.”

Originally from Camargo, Chihuahua, Hinojos said she moved to Juarez decades ago, accumulating 20 years worth of experience

as a factory worker while rearing two children and two grandchildren. For many years, the struggling mom was among the hundreds of thousands of invisible Juarez factory hands who silently produce every gadget imaginable for the U.S. and global consumer markets.

All that has changed.

Last fall, Hinojos got involved in the new labor movement for living wages, improved working conditions and independent unions in Juarez, an ongoing fight she said cost her a job making electrical fuses at an Eaton company plant.

"We're demanding the return of our jobs. It was an abuse. We are workers and have rights," Hinojos said. Like employees from other companies who have become involved in the labor struggle, Hinojos rattled off specific grievances at Eaton that included not getting paid for holiday work, the constant surveillance of a Big Brother-type surveillance of the labor force by security cameras and an exaggerated supervisory monitoring of employee bathroom use.

Hinojos recalled earning 125 pesos a day, or about nine bucks, when she was dismissed after three years of employment with Eaton. Although the Juarez resident had ample experience, she said her job was contingent on the completion of three-month work contracts with strict provisions. "If you don't comply, you're fired," she added. "They get rid of us the day they want to do it."

The obligatory question: "How does a family provider make ends meet in an expensive border city with such low pay?" "We are children of God. We live by a miracle. We are good (budget) administrators," the worker turned political activist said with a big laugh. She underscored that low wage workers get by purchasing second-hand clothing and the like. "That's how we stretch the peso like gum."

So how does a working-class single mom with day-to-day

survival worries transform into a political contender? Determining that their demands were not being met, worker activists decided to use the upcoming municipal and state elections as a platform to publicize their cause. And Tonita was their choice for municipal president.

Bursting with energy, Hinojos relies on a core of equally passionate activists from left, human rights and anti-gender violence movements. Among her enthusiastic supporters is Julian Contreras, who regards Tonita's pre-campaign as a historic milestone for Juarez.

"The candidacy of a maquiladora worker has no precedence. In the 50 year history of the maquiladoras here there never has been a candidacy of a worker," Contreras told FNS. "(Workers) are the only ones who can stop the chaos in which we are submerged." Tonita's movement has national significance for Mexico, he said.

FNS spent a good part of a weekend afternoon in February tagging along with the mayoral aspirant, Contreras and the rest of the crew on a mission of signature collecting in Juarez's Bellavista and adjoining neighborhoods. Reaching the people proved both a formidable physical and existential challenge.

Located directly across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas, Bellavista is a working-class and low-income section of the city with a long history of drug dealing and consumption. During the Great Violence of 2008-2012, Bellavista, which means "Beautiful View" in English, was the scene of numerous killings.

Paved and dirt streets wind past cement, brick and adobe homes, some well-maintained but others literally crumbling to pieces in abandonment. Graffiti adorns walls, and dry palm trees droop in the sun. An art gallery displaying colorful paintings, bouncing children and religious ministries project

another side of the neighborhood.

Displayed and fluttering in the breeze in front of residents' homes or on walls, second-hand clothing from the U.S. for sale is ubiquitous.

Although Bellavista's streets are mapped out, this reporter joked to a driver escorting Tonita and a band of about 20 supporters that the abrupt dead-end streets and outlets blocked by street repairs and neighborhood get-togethers don't appear on the map. To meet the people, the working class activists sometimes had to brave big dogs and locked metal doors.

Tonita's foray into Bellavista resembled more of a social movement than a typical jab at political office. Attired in red t-shirts and clutching bullhorns, supporters rode around in a truck waving pictures of Tonita. A mobile sound system emitted jingles and the taped voice of their prospective working class mayor.

"Hi, I'm Antonia Hinojos... show us the poor can govern," boomed one message.

Dashing from street-to-street, Tonita wielded a stack of small flyers in one hand finessed with painted fingernails.

"We have a project for a worker of the maquiladora industry to achieve an independent candidacy," the flyer read in part. "We are tired of the political parties. We do not want more of the same. For a government by the poor and for the poor!"

If nothing else, the novice pre-campaign of a woman factory worker was mastering the political ground game. "It's our way of making ourselves known in the city since we don't have television or the mass media," Hinojos explained.

At one home an older woman peeked her head out of a door to tell Hinojos she was sympathetic to the message of change, but

hinted she was supporting another hopeful in the crowded field for the mayor's seat.

A man walking across the street in the direction of Tonita's team was invited to sign but declined with a curt, "What For?" He had just left a home topped with a flag of the ruling PRI party.

Asked about her specific proposals for Juarez, Tonita responded that the movement possessed concrete plans for changes in the city but could not publicly reveal them now because doing so would risk her disqualification for violating an election law that strictly distinguishes between the pre-campaign, or primary phase, and the shortened general election campaign that begins after March 7.

Simultaneous to the Bella Vista canvassing, another group of Hinojos' supporters, including former Lexmark plant workers who have maintained a months' long protest encampment outside the company's Juarez facility, staffed a downtown table at Avenida Juarez and Avenida 16 de Septiembre, an intersection which is once again among the favored destinations of the Juarez masses.

As rock-n-roll songs from live bands lilted into the air, passing crowds packed nearby restaurants, surged around the human statue of a soldier, and halted for cell-phone snapshots in front of the two rows of the painted (and aesthetically controversial) horse statues that might be mistaken for giant sculptures of tutti-frutti candy. Some of the passerby signed their names for Tonita, table staffers reported.

Tonita and her friends were on the streets a few days after Pope Francisco's historic visit to Juarez, where the Pontiff sympathetically addressed many of the issues at the forefront of the labor movement which gave birth to a history-making run for the mayor's office-poverty, inequality and the dignity of the worker.

Acknowledging that she did not see the Pope in person, Hinojos said the February 16 visit was viewed by many locals as a "hopeful" event. "It's good he is aware of the necessities that we have here in Juarez and other places," she added.

Though people are signing her petitions, Hinojos recognized the challenges of Juarez political culture. "Some people are skeptical. They say, 'I am apolitical.' But I say it is time to wake ourselves up as workers," she continued. "It's time to support the working class. We want to arouse the consciousness of the people."

Susana Prieto, Juarez labor lawyer and Hinojos' pre-campaign advisor, criticized hurdles that make it "impossible for a common citizen to become a candidate." The Chihuahua State Electoral Institute's rule that to get in the general election independent mayoral contenders in Juarez must obtain valid signatures equivalent to three percent of the voter role, or about 1,000 signatures a day, is a burdensome requirement, Prieto insisted.

The activist attorney calculated that one million pesos, or nearly \$50,000, is needed to cover expenses to reach the 30,000 signature mark. The numerical threshold, she contended, favors wealthy individuals like the pre-candidate who is reportedly paying signature collectors 1500 pesos a week (approximately \$85) plus 10 pesos a signature. The purported pay is much better than the average maquiladora worker earns for a week's sweat on the shop floor.

"We're undertaking a superhuman effort," Prieto said.

Under reformed election law, for the first time independents like Hinojos can contest political power in Juarez and the state of Chihuahua. But Tonita is only one of seven pre-candidates attempting to make it on the mayor's ballot. The political bets are that some of the hopefuls- or even most- will fail to strike the magic 30,000.

With the clock ticking, Prieto said she was recently approached by two other pre-candidates who were interested in discussing a coalition of sorts behind a single candidacy, but doubted whether the new election regulations would allow such a fusion at this late stage in the primary game.

Prieto's husband, Raul Pena, insisted that Tonita's bid was an all-volunteer initiative, with the necessary gasoline, water, food and paper paid for from supporters' own pockets. Added to the neighborhood canvassing, which has covered at least one-third of the city, Pena said supporters were reaching out to workers outside industrial plants and distributing petitions to friends and family members 'like a chain.'

Even if Hinojos does not make it to the general election, Pena judges the political experience a positive one that establishes a precedent for future people's campaigns which could bear fruit.

As for the pre-candidate herself, Hinojos speaks clearly about her roots and her vision. "This came from the workers' movement, to ask for better working conditions. We want to awaken people to fight for their rights."

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