

HOW I LEARNED ABOUT NAFTA - A PERSONAL ESSAY

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During the early 1990s I became involved in the national debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) then in the final stages of negotiation between Canada, Mexico and the United States. Twenty years later, it's clear that NAFTA, the creation of a North American common market of sorts, was a watershed event, but I have to admit I had not really been paying much attention to it until I got a phone call in November 1990. On the basis of a book I had written on Mexican unions, *The Crisis of Mexican Labor* (1988), Pharis Harvey of the International Labor Rights Education and Research Fund (ILRERF) contacted me to ask me if I wanted to go to Mexico on a job for him. I hung up thinking it was a crank call, but he called back and asked if I would be willing to go to Mexico to undertake a study of the state of workers' rights there in order to help inform the Congressional debate on NAFTA.

I was warned that this would have to be a low budget operation, that it would have to begin immediately, and that the investigation and report would have to be produced quickly. Enticed by the idea of returning to Mexico where I had worked as a reporter a few years before, I took a quarter-long break from the Ph.D. program I was enrolled in the History Department at the University of Cincinnati and, with the blessings of my pregnant wife Sherry, headed for Mexico where I conducted research from December of 1990 through February of 1991.

In the 1990s Mexican President Carlos Salinas, Canadian Premier Brian Mulroney, and U.S. presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton were arguing that NAFTA would be a boon to all three nations. International investment would bring improvements to all, commerce would expand, business would boom, and while some workers might be adversely affected by increasing competition, there would be new and better-paying jobs in industries exporting their products abroad. Conservative, independent presidential candidate Ross Perrot, however, said he heard a "giant sucking sound," the sound of American jobs being sucked away to Mexico. Many U.S. workers were waiting for the ground to open up beneath their feet.

American workers, Clinton told the U.S. labor movement, should not be afraid of competition with lower-paid Mexican workers, because even as American workers found new and better paying jobs, Mexican workers' fortunes would also be improving. Mexican workers would find new jobs at higher wages in their home country, making them less competitive while immigration to the U.S. would also decline. On signing the agreement Clinton predicted "more growth, more equality, better preservation of the environment, and a greater possibility of world peace." The labor and environmental side agreements, Clinton said, also made the trade treaty "a force for social progress as well as economic growth." Well, I was going to look into one aspect of all of this. I was going to find out what chance Mexican workers would have to exert their rights once NAFTA went into effect.

When I arrived in Mexico, I contacted my friend Ricardo Pascoe, who was then a Congressman of the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), and asked for his advice. He said I should meet two of his friends and took me over to their house and introduced me. They were Arturo Alcalde, one of the country's preeminent labor lawyers and a leader of the National Association of Democratic Attorneys (ANAD), and his wife Berta Lujan, a leader of the Authentic Labor Front (FAT), an independent labor federation. Arturo, handing me several typed pages, suggested that I get in touch with the list of ANAD attorneys at their offices in various states and cities in Mexico. He also went to his office and brought me an arm load of books on Mexican labor law, telling me to return them when I was done.

Berta gave me contacts in the FAT and said she would let people know I was coming. With that, I was on my way.

Taking buses and riding the trains—there was still passenger service then in Mexico—I traveled to a number of cities and towns throughout the country visiting the labor attorneys' offices. I remember that when I arrived in Chihuahua it was snowing, an eventuality for which I was unprepared having come north from warm Central Mexico. Every door I knocked on opened to an attorney willing to help, leading me to the waiting room where workers' of all descriptions were happy to tell me the myriad ways in which their rights had been violated. They had been fired for attempting to organize a union, for trying to make their unions more democratic, for fighting for a better contract, for speaking out on the job. Some had not only been fired, they had also been threatened and beaten. The FAT leaders I met with, like Manuel Urrutia, explained the structure of various industries and the nature of their unions, from mining to fishing. One of the names on my list was a Catholic worker priest, Father Pantoja, who served a working class parish in the steel town of Monclova. He introduced me to steelworkers there who were dealing with the crisis of plant shutdowns.

Though farmers and peasants had been among the hardest hit by Carlos Salinas's neoliberal transformation of Mexico, I felt that given the time available and my areas of expertise it would be impossible for me to look into the conditions of rural workers. Still their situation was at the forefront of the NAFTA discussions in Mexico and the United States. In order to join NAFTA, Mexico had passed Constitutional amendments and laws that changed the nature of the *ejido*, the state land held in perpetuity by indigenous and rural communities.

Historically the land while held collectively, was worked individually. Members of the *ejidos* could not sell or lease the land because it belonged to the community, not to the individual who farmed it. Farmers had long found it difficult to make a living on the land because of the lack of state support for loans, marketing, irrigation, and fertilizers. The amendments and laws passed by the Mexican Legislature at the urging of Salinas permitted farmers to sell their land, and they began doing so at once. Later, after NAFTA took effect, tens of thousands of farmers sold their land or simply abandoned it and went to find work in the industrial cities of Mexico or in the United States.

Traveling around Mexico I found in many small cities and *pueblos* newly poured concrete slabs with at each end a basketball backboard. The basketball courts had been built by President Salinas's PRONASOL community social welfare program. The backboard hoops had no baskets, the original nets having soon deteriorated. The courts stood empty. The families that lived in the *pueblos* couldn't afford to buy basketballs, so one didn't hear the characteristic bang-and-ping of the ball bouncing on the court. In any case, Mexicans, depending on what state you were in, played soccer or baseball; no one played basketball. The vacant courts, monuments to bureaucratic planning, stood as symbols of the emptiness of the Salinas era which had not only stripped Mexico of many of its small farmers and rural communities, but also in the process had laid waste to much its traditional culture.

When I returned to Mexico City, now staying in Ricardo's house, I continued to interview union leaders and dissident activists as well as rank-and-file workers from major unions, small independent unions, and opposition caucuses. I interviewed Fidel Velasquez, the powerful leader of the official unions, and met with Ford workers from the Cuautitlán plant who had seen one of their fellow workers murdered in the plant during the suppression of a rank-and-file movement. Two women activists I met, Elaine Burns and Mary McGinn introduced me to leaders and activists at the intersection of feminism and independent unionism. PRT members whom I knew introduced me to workers active in caucuses in the telephone and electrical workers unions.

Arturo and Berta told me about a service called Prodata that clipped all the Mexican newspapers. The staff provided me with a chronological collection of clips from the major papers on the country's

principal labor unions and conflicts. (You have to remember this was before the era of the internet.) The ten or so bound volumes that Prodata produced for me provided me with the basic narrative of the series of atrocities committed against both official and independent unions during the presidency of Carlos Salinas.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s Salinas had sent the police with bazookas to blow the doors off the oil workers' union and to arrest their leaders on trumped up charges. He also sent the army to occupy the town of Cananea, birthplace of Mexican unionism, in order to prevent the union and the miners from protesting when the mine was declared bankrupt and sold to new owners. The government crushed several independent union struggles. Everywhere workers raised their heads, they were bludgeoned into submission, and yet they continued to fight for their rights.

I returned to Cincinnati just in time for the birth of our son Reed on Feb. 16. I then spent a few weeks writing my preliminary report documenting the lack of workers' rights in Mexico. The preliminary report was circulated to the U.S. Congress in an attempt to provide some education on the deplorable situation of Mexican workers. During the next few months I banged out the complete report, kindly edited by Matt Witt of the American Labor Education Center, which was published jointly by ILRERF and South End Press of Boston in 1992 as *Mask of Democracy: Labor Suppression in Mexico Today*.

At the request of Pharis Harvey, former Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall wrote the introduction to the book. Marshall argued that U.S. trade policy should be used to pressure other countries to protect workers' rights. I saw my book in part as an exercise in international labor solidarity, explaining to Americans how Mexican workers suffered under a political system that denied them their basic workers' rights.

To my surprise the Cincinnati AFL-CIO labor council invited me to speak to a labor meeting about NAFTA. I spoke in the Laborers' union hall to the assembled union officials and workers and told them about conditions in Mexico, but I found that many of those in the audience, and at other labor events I attended in that period, looked down on Mexican workers as racial inferiors and unfair competitors. Union officials and workers were so concerned about the threat to their own wages, benefits, and conditions posed by NAFTA, that they had little interest in the conditions of Mexican workers, and it had not yet dawned on them that it might take unions on both sides of the border to stand together against their governments and the corporations which had foisted the trade agreement upon them.

While the *Mask of Democracy* was published almost 22 years ago, I believe that it is still useful to those interested in the recent history of the Mexican labor movement. Ironically on this twentieth anniversary of NAFTA, Mexican workers still cannot exercise their basic rights, and the recently passed Labor Reform weakens some of their rights even more. Marshall's hope that U.S. trade policy might be used to strength workers' rights abroad never came to pass, and on the contrary U.S. trade policy has resulted in the weakening of workers' rights everywhere including here at home in the United States.

On January 1, 1994, the day that NAFTA was to go into effect, a small guerilla group called the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) led an uprising of mostly Mayan peoples, seizing two towns and the city of San Cristobal de las Casas. *Subcomandante* Marcos of the EZLN and his followers called for the overthrow of the nefarious Salinas government and for a constituent assembly to write a new constitution, while some of the rebels said they were fighting for socialism.

The EZLN hoped through their propaganda of the deed to ignite a revolution in Mexico, but their hopes faded as they were attacked and surrounded by the Mexican Army. Tens of thousands

throughout Mexico went to their town and city plazas and called upon President Zedillo to stop the army's attack, expressing sympathy with the Indians' long experience of racist oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation, but the citizenry also called on the Zapatistas to lay down their arms. The Mexican Revolution in its violent phase from 1910 to 1920 had taken one million lives and led a million Mexicans to emigrate from their homeland to the United States and few of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren willing to repeat that experience.

Perhaps in part because of *Mask of Democracy* as well as some pamphlets I had quickly written about the Chiapas rebellion, the Zapatistas invited me to their convention in the jungle in August of 1994. This was shortly before the 1994 election that pitted Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) against Ernesto Zedillo of the PRI. So after the EZLN convention I stayed on to learn more about the PRD, observe the election, have a firsthand encounter with the civil society movement, and interview activists in the women's movement, as well as to take a look at the struggles of the maquiladora workers on the northern border. That experience led to another book, *Democracy in Mexico: Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform* also published by South End Press in 1995.

By 1994 I had become immersed in thinking and writing about Mexico. That year I sought and received a Fulbright as well as another fellowship that allowed me to spend 1994-1997 living in Mexico and doing research on my dissertation about the *slackers*, American war resisters who became involved in the organization of the Industrial Workers of the World, the Communist Party of Mexico, and the creation of feminist organizations during the era of the Mexican Revolution and World War I. My two years in Mexico from 1995 to 1997, while Sherry worked at the Environmental Center of the Pan-American Health Organization in Toluca, allowed me to learn more about the FAT and about RMALC, the Mexican Network on the Free Trade Agreement.

I attended the RMALC meetings pretty regularly, giving me an opportunity to see how Mexican labor unionists, environmentalists, feminists, and others were assessing the impact of NAFTA on their society. I also participated in a Labor Notes conference on cross-border organizing held in Ciudad Juárez and it was there that I met Robin Alexander of the United Electrical Workers (UE), which had a strategic organizing agreement with the FAT. Robin invited me to produce a kind of newsletter about the Mexican labor movement written in English for labor unionists and others who wanted to engage in solidarity with Mexican workers. Thus began *Mexican Labor News and Analysis* which she and I have been producing now for 17 years.

Life in Mexico from 1994 to 1997 was difficult. The promises of NAFTA were not fulfilled. Ernesto Zedillo's term had begun with the collapse of the Mexican peso and a national recession that saw high unemployment and a surge in poverty. Crime increased dramatically, not the extreme violence of the drug cartels of the 2000s, but serious crime: break-ins, armed robberies, automobile hi-jacking. I remember a gathering at the home of one of my wife's colleagues, a well-to-do family, where about fifteen of us sat around talking about the issue of crime. Everyone present had had experienced some incident and several had been robbed at gunpoint. Working class people experienced crime of that sort in their neighborhoods too. When I went to the FAT office for the RMALC meetings in a working class *barrio*, I was warned to be careful and sometimes walked to the Metro or to my car by a couple of union members.

The Chiapas Rebellion that had occurred in 1994 continued to have a tremendous impact on the Mexican people and on others around the world throughout the decade of the 1990s. It was sometimes described as the first electronic or internet rebellion because its organizers had used the internet to inform people around the world about their movement and its goals. As a result it had quickly attracted wide support from people in the United States and in Europe. The EZLN transformed itself within a year or two of the uprising from a typical guerrilla organization striving

to seize state power into an indigenous organization that called upon its members to “lead by obeying” and seemed to offer a new model of revolution

John Holloway in his book *Zapatista: Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (1998) offered something very like an anarchist interpretation of Chiapas Rebellion and the EZLN. He pointed out that the Zapatistas did not talk about taking state power, but about creating a new kind of democratically run society. The Zapatista leaders I met at meetings of the Zapatista Front in Mexico City and in Tijuana in the 1990s, however, were controlling and sectarian. The EZLN wanted to create a new labor movement, but because they didn't believe in union structure or in elections, they wouldn't let their followers participate in labor unions. That doomed their experiment to failure. Some believed the Zapatistas had become anarchists, but I had the impression that at their core they remained the classical leftist guerrilla group they had been back in the 1980s.

Holloway's interpretation, however, had a powerful impact. It was seized upon by activists of the new Global Justice Movement that had appeared in the late 1990s and exploded in the Battle of Seattle in 1999 where steelworkers, teamsters and longshoremen joined environmentalists in shutting down the city through civil disobedience in an attempt to stop the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting. Activists who had successfully stopped the Multilateral Agreement on Investment—a kind of global NAFTA—feared that the WTO would be taking further steps to support the global neoliberalism and the corporations. Many also strongly opposed the admission of China to the WTO.

I was working at Global Exchange at the time which was deeply involved in organizing the Seattle protests. I and my crew, however, worked on organizing the *Globalifóbicos: Cry of the Excluded Ones*, a binational conference of a few hundred activists from Mexico and the United States held in Tijuana in October of 2000 to discuss strategies for resisting the globalization movement. The term *globalifóbicos* or “global-phobics” had been coined by Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo as a way of ridiculing and dismissing the critics of corporate neoliberal globalization. We adopted the term as a badge of honor, while we also embraced the “cry of the excluded ones,” the slogan of the Theology of Liberation movement which criticized global capitalism for its exclusion of the poor.

The Battle of Seattle and the Global Justice Movement seemed to auger the beginning of a new era of mass struggles such as we had seen around the world in the 1960s and early 1970s. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists on the Twin Towers in New York and the U.S. Pentagon, however, resulted in a sudden change in government policies and in the national mood. A new Secretary of Homeland Security was created and an entire new police force established overnight to examine airline travelers and to watch railroad yards, bridges and water supplies. At the same time a wave of super-patriotism spread over the nation as the country went to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, while left movements just as suddenly seemed to disappear, victims of the new nationalist fervor. It would take a decade before we once again recovered with the initiation of the Occupy Wall Street movement of September 17, 2011 in Zuccotti Park.

Today, twenty years later, the forces of global capitalism have grown stronger while the strength of organized labor has weakened. Yet social movements continue to arise from Spain's *indignados*, to those who fought for democracy in the Arab Spring, to the Occupy Wall Street movement that swept the United States. History teaches us that no economic, social, or political system lasts forever, that rebellions from below continue to bubble up like unstoppable geysers, and that the recurring crises create revolutionaries who learn from their defeats—and one day win. No advance is permanent, but neither is any setback. NAFTA is twenty—the struggle continues.

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