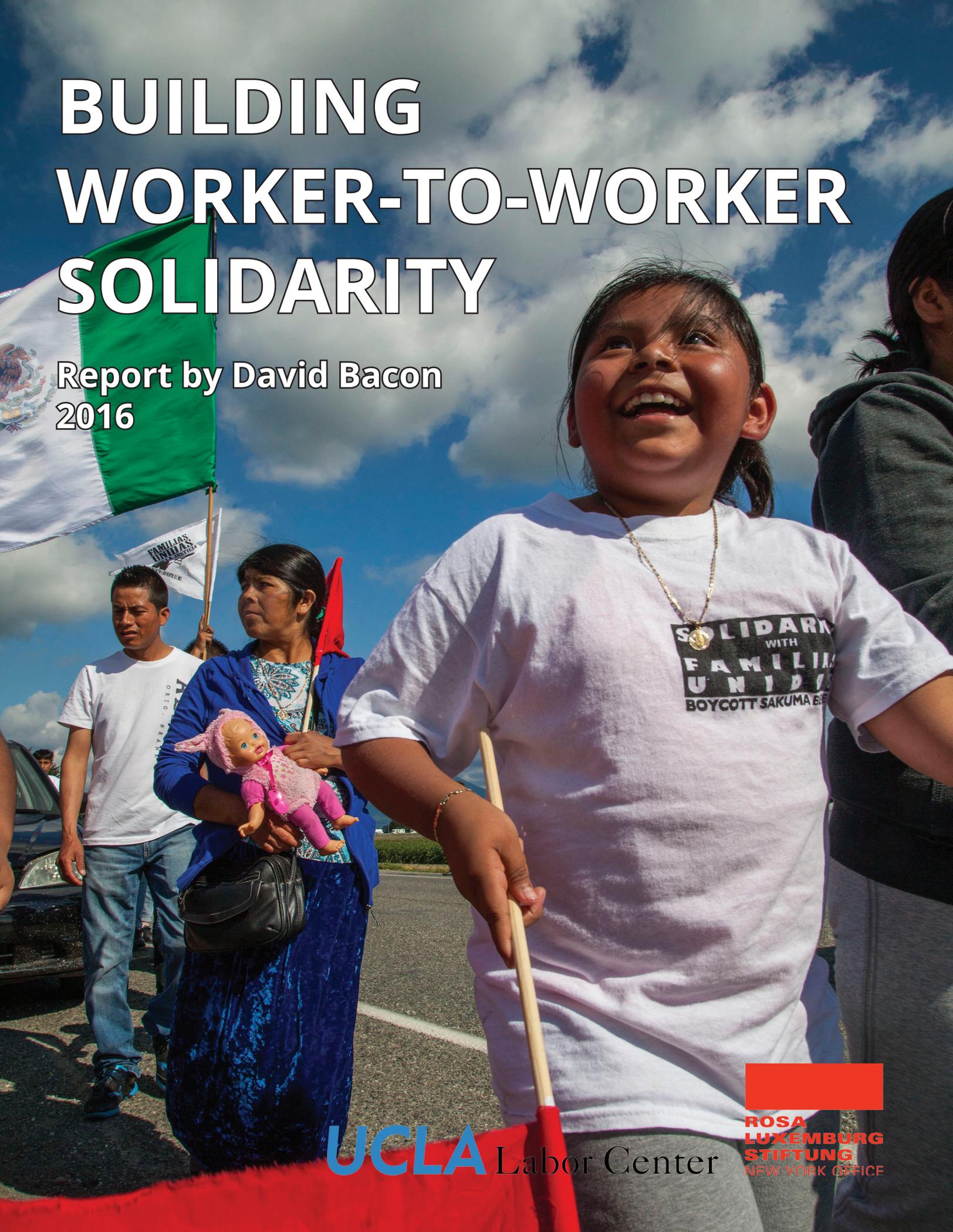
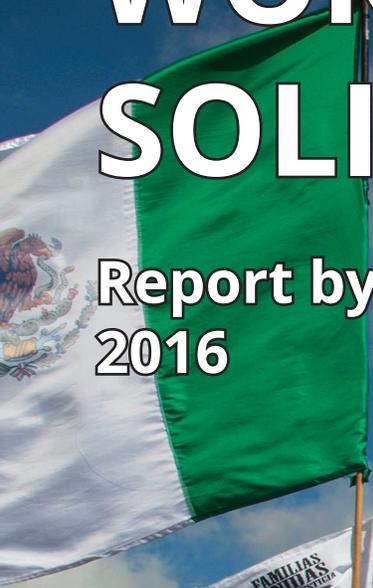


BUILDING WORKER-TO-WORKER SOLIDARITY

Report by David Bacon
2016



UCLA Labor Center

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the UCLA Labor Center's Global Solidarity project, the Institute for Transnational Social Change (ITSC) provides academic resources and a unique strategic space for discussion to transnational leaders and their organizations involved in cross-border labor, worker and immigrant rights action. The overarching goal of ITSC is to promote solidarity among worker-led transnational organizations in Mexico, the U.S. and Canada. The Institute organizes annual gatherings for labor leaders and grassroots organizers to think critically and creatively building the human and social assets necessary to strengthen the transnational worker organizing movement. The Institute works in close collaboration with strategic partners in Mexico, the U.S. and Canada representing labor unions, worker centers, grassroots advocacy organizations, and academic institutions.

The idea to organize labor delegations and encourage worker-to-worker solidarity in support of key campaigns that exemplified the importance of global solidarity emerged during our December 2014 meeting in Los Angeles. Participants of that tri-national meeting discussed the need to practice international labor solidarity from the grassroots level. Following that meeting, delegations were organized to Ciudad Acuña in support of the campaign by the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras at the PKC plant; to Mexico City supporting the campaign by the United Food and Commercial Workers at the El Super supermarkets in Southern California; and to Skagit County in Washington State, supporting the farm workers union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia.

The experience of those delegations was discussed and assessed at the tri-national conference in Los Angeles in December 2015. At that conference, striking miners from Sección 65 of the Mexican miners union, and representatives of communities from the Sonora River valley, the Frente Río Sonora, asked that a delegation be organized to investigate the impact of the long strike and the toxic spill from the mine in August 2014. Further activity in support of the El Super campaign was requested, as well as support for the boycott of Driscoll's berries by Familias Unidas por la Justicia and the farm workers movement in Baja California. Those delegations and activities took place between December 2015 and August 2016. In addition, new organizing activity took place in California in the same indigenous migrant farm labor workforce. Organizations involved in ITSC activities responded to the jailing of teacher leaders in Mexico, and then the massacre of teachers and supporters in Oaxaca.

The present report, therefore, highlights these campaigns where international labor solidarity has played a critical role in shaping the course of the conflict. The main goal in documenting these experiences is not only to

learn about the truly remarkable campaigns undertaken by workers at the local level facing global companies, but also to highlight the fact that international workers alliances can play a key role in their support. The report describes and analyzes the political and economic context in which these struggles are taking place, and contains as well the analysis of the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras of the importance of cross border solidarity and its relation to labor rights under trade agreements.

These struggles all illustrate that international solidarity is not an extra burden for workers and organizers. Rather, cross-border ties are positive, and part and parcel of local struggles. The report illustrates that international labor solidarity is not experienced as labor unions from rich countries extending a helping hand to their brothers and sisters in need in other parts of the world, but rather consists of struggles that are bound to each other. As the Zapatistas use to say about solidarity, paraphrasing aboriginal activist Lila Watson: "Do not come here to help us, we do not need your help. But if your liberation is linked to ours, let's fight together."

This report was written by David Bacon, and was published in Los Angeles and New York in September 2016. The report and conferences are supported by the New York office of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education affiliated with Germany's "Die Linke" (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation is committed to the analysis of social processes and developments worldwide. In cooperation with organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development, conflict prevention, and peaceful conflict resolution. Its international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programs, and projects conducted together with partner institutions. In order to be able to mentor and coordinate these various projects, the foundation has established 17 regional offices around the world. The RLS was granted special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2013.

The foundation's New York Office, located at 275 Madison Avenue, opened its doors in 2012. It serves two major tasks: to work on issues concerning the United Nations, including collaboration with people and political representatives from the Global South; and to work with North American (U.S. and Canadian) progressives in universities, unions, social movements, progressive institutions, and think tanks. The office's Co-Directors are Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg.

DEFENDING MINERS IN CANANEA AND RESIDENTS OF THE TOWNS ALONG THE RIO SONORA

In the afternoon of August 6, 2014, the water in the Bacanuchi River turned yellow. At Tahuichopa, where the Bacanuchi flows into the larger Sonora River, Martha Agupira was one of the first to see it. “We had no warning,” she remembers. “We just saw the river change color-yellow, with a really terrible smell, like copper or chemicals. All the fish died. A bull drinking in the river died right away. Other animals died, too.”

Tahuichopa is a small Mexican town of about 200 people, situated where the foothills of La Elenita mountain begin to flatten out into the high plain of the Sonora Desert, about 60 miles south of the Arizona border. The town’s cornfields line the banks of both rivers. “So people had to go through the river to get to them. The people were contaminated too,” she says.

From Tahuichopa, the Sonora River flows southwest through wide green valleys separated by narrow canyons. The yellow water arrived next at Banamichi, then Baviacora, and then Ures. Two days after Martha Agupira saw the fish die, Luz Apodaca was visiting San Felipe de Jesus, the next town downstream. Like many valley residents, she liked going along the riverbank to collect watercress. “I went into the water,” she laments. “That day, the river was dark brown, like chocolate. But I didn’t pay much attention because we’re used to going in and bathing there.”

By evening her face began to swell. “Over the next two days, my skin began to break out, and ever since I’ve had sores on my face and arms and legs. My fingernails all fell off. For many days I couldn’t sleep because of the pain in my face, and my knees and bones and nerves all hurt.”

What the two women experienced, along with the other 20,000 inhabitants of the Sonora and Bacanuchi River valleys, was one of the worst toxic spills in the history of mining in Mexico. In her report on the incident, Dr. Reina Castro, a professor at the University of Sonora, said, “A failure in the exit pipe from a holding pond at the mine led to the spill of approximately 40,000 cubic meters of leached material, including acidified copper sulfate.” On August 9, the Mexican agency overseeing water quality, CONAGUA, found elevated levels of heavy metals in the water, including aluminum, arsenic, cadmium, copper, chromium, iron, manganese, nickel, and mercury.

The contamination did more than harm the health of river residents. It undermined the economic survival of their communities, and damaged the ecology of the valleys in ways that could be permanent. But the spill also created a political movement of townspeople in response, in alliance

with miners involved in one of the longest strikes in Mexico’s history. That alliance is bringing to light the impact that corporate giants on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border have on the people of this binational region.

By the time of the spill, the mine’s workers had been on strike for nearly seven years, since July 2007. Since 2010, the mine has been operated by strikebreakers hired by the mine’s owner, Grupo México, a global mining corporation. Some workers are hired directly by the subsidiary that runs Cananea’s mine operations, Buenavista del Cobre. Others work for contractors.

In a press statement issued September 1, 2014, three weeks after the spill, Grupo México blamed a contractor for causing it. “We recognize that, among other factors, a relevant cause was a construction defect in the seal of a pipe in the Tinajas 1 system ... [which had been] contracted to a specialized company in the region, TECOVIFESA.” Grupo México announced it was sending workers to clean up the river, and later agreed with the Mexican government to set up a fund, or Fideicomiso, to compensate residents for damage from the spill.

Hiring contractors to replace the mine’s skilled workforce, however, has been going on for many years, according to the miners’ union, Section 65 of the National Union of Mine, Metal, Steel and Allied Workers. The Cananea mine contains 13 ponds holding millions of gallons of liquid left over from leaching metal from the rock. The work of maintaining them was originally performed by members of the union, before the company contracted it out. The use of contractors is one of the principle reasons for the strike.

Grupo México today owns mines in Mexico, Peru, and the United States. In the first quarter of 2016, the corporation earned profits of \$406 million, on revenue of \$1.9 billion. Even with the recent decline in China’s vast appetite for metal and raw materials, the company is still one of the most profitable in the mining industry.

In an open-pit mine, huge chunks of rock are blown out of the mountain, loaded onto giant trucks, and taken to a crusher. There, the ore is ground down into fine particles, and laid out on huge “benches.” The crushed rock is then sprayed with acid that leaches out the metal, which is collected below in ponds. Big electrodes pull the metal from the solution, and the leftover liquid is channeled into those 13 ponds. The 2014 spill originated in one of them.

Today, benches of tailings tower over miners’ homes in Cananea. Part of the old town now lies buried beneath them. On a hot windy day, dust from pulverized rock blows into doorways, and miners’ families breathe the minerals the wind carries. On Cananea’s outskirts, the giant ponds line the southbound highway, parallel to the Sonora River.

The corporation’s board of directors has interlocking ties with many Mexican banks and media companies, and with U.S. corporations as well. Director Claudio X.

González Laporte, for instance, is board chair of Kimberley Clark de México, the Mexican subsidiary of the U.S. paper giant. González Laporte is a past director of General Electric, Kellogg, Home Depot, and the Mexican media giant Televisa, and was special adviser to the Mexican president. In 1999 Grupo México bought ASARCO, its former parent, for \$1.18 billion, gaining ownership of mines and smelters in the United States.

In 1998, Cananea miners struck over company demands to trim its directly employed labor force by 1,000 jobs, while hiring non-union workers at lower wages through contractors. Threatened with military occupation of the mine, miners ended their strike, but more than 800 were not rehired. The miners were fighting a rearguard

When Grupo México announced it was terminating 135 workers who maintained the tailings ponds, miner Rene Enriquez Leon warned that a spill could reach the headwaters of the Sonora River and the farming region downstream. “It would be an ecological disaster,” he predicted.

In 2006, an explosion in Grupo México’s Pasta de Conchos coal mine in Nueva Rosita, Coahuila, trapped 65 miners underground. After six days, the company and government authorities called off rescue attempts. The head of the union, Napoléon Gómez Urrutia, accused those responsible of “industrial homicide.” In response, the government charged him with fraud. Gómez had to leave Mexico and was given sanctuary in Canada, where he’s lived with the



The mine in Cananea.

battle to keep the wages and conditions they’d won over decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, Mexican miners had better protective laws than miners in the United States, controlling exposure to the silica dust produced by crushing ore. They made good wages and lived in homes built with government loans.

After the miners lost the 1998 strike, however, Grupo México disconnected exhaust ventilation pipes on the roof of its main ore concentrator building. Dust in work areas reached knee-high levels. Grupo México also closed the Hospital Ronquillo, which had provided health care to miners’ families. For 80 years, the mine had been responsible for providing water service to the town. After the strike, Grupo México said the town had to fend for itself.

assistance of the United Steelworkers (the union for U.S. copper miners). After years of appeals, Mexican courts threw out the charges against him. Nevertheless, Gómez continues to stay in Canada, since the government won’t guarantee his safety and freedom if he returns.

Antonio Navarette, who began working in Cananea in 1985, says that by the mid-2000s the lack of safety was producing “a psychosis of fear. Once you went in, you didn’t know if you’d come back out again.” The machinery wasn’t given preventative maintenance, he charges, including collectors for evacuating dust.

Accidents grew more frequent; workers lost hands and fingers. The accelerating problems, he believes, “made it clear that the company was pushing us to go on strike. But we decided things couldn’t continue, because otherwise we were going to die there.”

For the first three years of the strike, Mexican labor law kept the company from legally operating the facility. Then the government declared the strike illegal, and in 2010, federal soldiers and police occupied the town and reopened the Cananea mine. Despite that, Sección 65 continues to organize strike activity. The union also continued to monitor safety issues. In 2009, the miners’ strike committee warned Eduardo Bours, governor of Sonora, that “a spill

could have very serious consequences, since on April 14 the company withdrew its emergency personnel and with them the union workforce responsible for maintaining the tailings dam, which could put the population below the dam in danger.” The committee got no answer.

Five years later, the predicted spill finally occurred. At one in the morning, Navarette, a leader of the striking union, saw an appeal for help on Facebook from a doctor in Bacanuchi, the first town on the Bacanuchi River below the mine. “We went there right away,” he remembers. “The townspeople, even the children, were all crying. No one knew what could be done. Even Gila monster lizards and coyotes were fleeing from the danger.”

The strikers became the primary source of information for the affected towns, he says. “We always worried conditions in the mine could affect the communities. We began to help them organize, because we needed to join forces to get the company to listen.” That was the beginning of the Frente Rio Sonora—the Sonora River Front.

Today, the Front is headed by Marco Antonio Garcia, a farmer and former union miner from Baviacora. Garcia, whose deeply lined face shows the impact of a life working in the high desert, farms 75 acres—more than most local farmers, who cultivate just a few. When the farmers had to throw away their crops because of the contamination, he lost \$33,000. It wasn’t just personal loss that pushed him into action. “If we don’t win, we’re lost,” he says, “and the most important thing people on the Rio Sonora will lose is their dignity.

“The Frente was organized at the urging of Sección 65 in Cananea,” he continues. “They began visiting all the towns along the river. They had their problem with the scrapping of their union contract, and we had our problem with the river. At first, some people said the miners spent all their time fighting. But in reality, they’re involved in a big struggle. And so are we, if we want to have a future for the people of the Rio Sonora. The contamination of the river is going to last a lifetime.”

Protests first broke out in Ures, a month after the spill. “We started marching and blocking the highway,” recalls Lupita Poom, who now heads the Frente there. “These were all peaceful demonstrations, and hundreds of people took part. That’s when we began to meet the leaders from other towns on the river.” And as Navarette and other miners from Sección 65 helped local groups get started, a bigger plan took shape. “We decided to do another plantón [an organized encampment, like Occupy Wall Street], but this one directed at the mine,” Poom says.

On March 18 of last year, buses and cars caravanned up the river. Bypassing federal and state police guarding the mine gates, the buses instead unloaded hundreds of farmers and striking miners at the plant outside of town that pumps water to the mine. For several months,

their plantón cut the supply of fresh water to the mine, leading to a substantial reduction in its operation.

“We stayed there for a long time,” Poom recalls. Her husband remained in Ures to take care of their children, while she and other women formed the backbone of the occupation. Poom even got a big tattoo on her back with the symbol of the striking union surrounded by a banner with the Frente’s name. “The miners brought us three meals a day and materials for making our tents, so that we could have some shelter,” she says. “We weren’t afraid. To me, fear means sitting with my arms folded doing nothing. At the plantón, we were raising our voices, making people listen to us.”

While she was in Cananea, her five-year-old daughter defended her at school back in Ures. Her teacher organized an outing to the river, but her daughter refused to go, saying her mother was in Cananea fighting to clean up the contamination. The teacher later complained to Poom, who replied, “At five years old, she’s the one trying to protect you. I’ve been telling her that the water could cause us harm. So it was good that my daughter was telling you.” I was very happy my daughter had done this. But it also hurt me that she’s only five years old. She should be playing in the water, running and jumping—happy. She shouldn’t be worried that if she’s washing up she can’t get the water in her eyes.”

A group of U.S. health professionals and environmental and labor activists visited the river towns in April 2016, in response to a request made by Sección 65 and the Frente Rio Sonora at the December 2015 meeting of the Institute for Transnational Social Change in Los Angeles. They found that the impact of the spill was still present. The group handed out a thousand health surveys, and got over 500 replies. Cadelba Lomeli-Loibl, a nurse from Oakland, California, said at a press conference in Hermosillo that “we found children between four and ten years old who have painful rashes that haven’t healed in over a year, and older people with liver and kidney problems.”

According to Lomeli-Loibl and her coworkers, Olivia deBree and Garrett Brown, 76 percent of those surveyed had skin problems and 78 percent had problems with their eyes. Many had headaches and joint pains, or said their hair was falling out. The group pointed to the need for a complete epidemiological study of the people of the river towns. Many residents they interviewed said that various people from the government and local universities had taken blood and water samples since the spill, but had not reported the results to them.

Following the delegation’s visit, the surveys were analyzed. Meanwhile the cases of some respondents were highlighted by the group on its return to the U.S. One interviewee in Baviacora told deBree that her 13-year-old grandson had gone into the water after the spill, when it was still yellow. Later, he developed a lesion on his face that began to

be eaten up from the inside. Tests in Mexico City found lead and cadmium in his blood. He now has chronic sinusitis and a tumor in his face. “At that point in the interview, she just started crying,” deBree says.

Interviewed at the Cananea plantón last year, Reyna Valenzuela of Ures explained, “Our kids had problems because, in the first place, we were all drinking the water, and then because we used it to bathe. Our water comes from the well and the wells are contaminated. As the doctors said, whether you drink or bathe in it, you’re exposed from your head to your feet.” Her 11-year-old son still has rashes on his legs, ears, neck, trunk, hands, feet, between his buttocks, and on his penis. “Doctors said it was because they were exposed to heavy metals.”

The river towns get their drinking water from wells, which were almost all close to the river. They too were contaminated. At first, trucks brought in bottled water, while new wells were drilled farther away.

In Baviacora, Jesus Cordoba, a local farmer, recalled, “After the spill they brought water in big barrels at first. But now we have to buy it. A container of 20 liters (5 gallons) costs 13 pesos. We use six of them in a week, just my wife and myself. I don’t believe the river will ever go back to what it was before. They say contamination goes down 5 meters [15 feet]. How will they clean up five meters down, on all that land? “In negotiations after the spill, Grupo México agreed to provide funding for a clinic in Ures. Some residents reported getting treatment there, but others said they did not trust it.

Brooke Anderson, a climate justice advocate from Oakland who accompanied the nurses, says residents told her they’d lost half their annual income because they were not able to plant or irrigate their crops, or because of the loss of tourist income in the towns.

“The people who came here before to buy the garlic don’t come now, because they believe it’s contaminated,” Martha Agupira explains. “When we brought our beans to Hermosillo, no one wanted to buy them either. Families now go hungry because they have no income.”

Problems multiplied in the month after the spill, when Hurricane Odile hit western Mexico. “When the river rose, it flooded the cornfields,” Agupira recalls. “That brought the contamination into a much larger area on both sides of the river. The rains didn’t clean the river, the way Grupo México claimed. It spread the contamination. If you dig down into the earth, you find the yellow stain from the chemicals. The fields are drying up, and are full of this yellow dirt.”

As she sat in Tahuichopa’s health clinic—a room in the small community center, bare except for a table and a small cabinet with a few bottles of pills—she twisted the hair that frames her oval face and falls below her shoulders. “I used to have lots of hair,” she said sadly. “Now it’s falling out.”

Economic problems are leading to an exodus from the river towns. “People have left to try to find work elsewhere, so the majority of the people here now are seniors,” Agupira says. “My father stays here because he loves the land. But we’re struggling to make it.”

While some people from the river towns used to get jobs in the Cananea mine, both strikers and river residents now say that the company no longer hires local people because it believes they would be sympathetic to the strikers. Meanwhile, some strikers have gone to the United States to earn money to send home to their families. One striker, who asked to keep his name confidential when he was interviewed at the plantón, said, “I’m blacklisted here, and on the other side, I’m just another illegal. It’s hard to keep your humanity, but I’m surviving, and there’s no other way.”

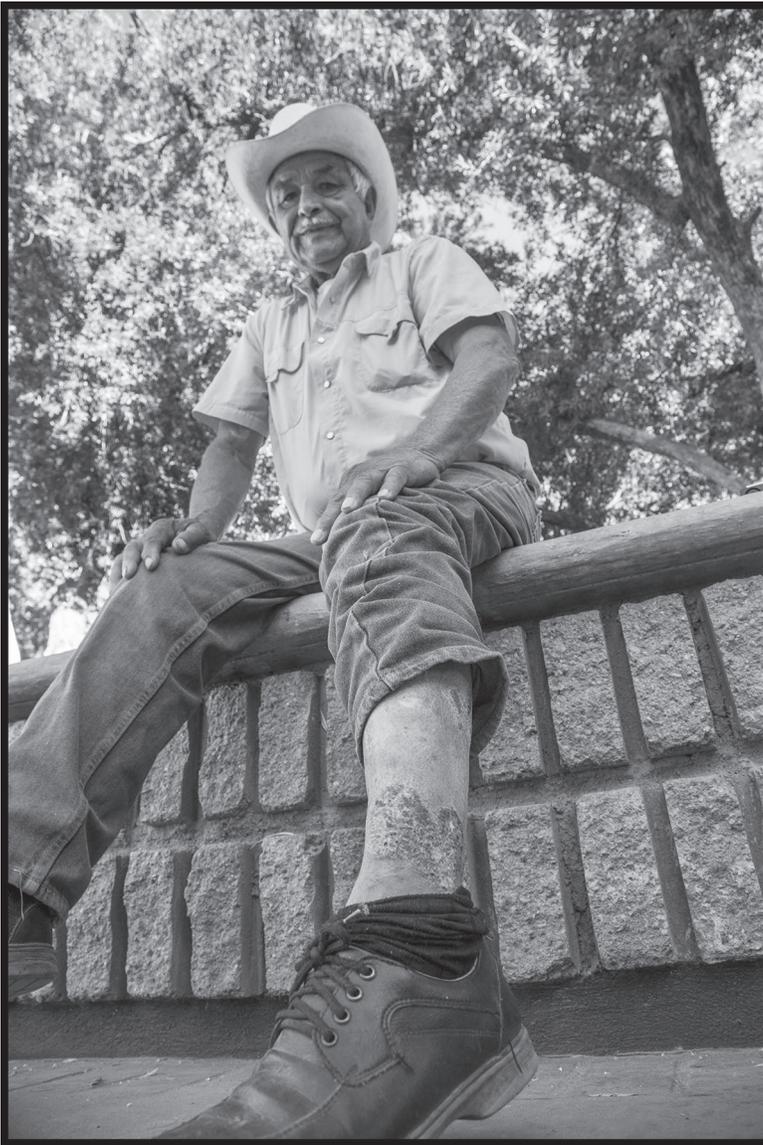
Cananea’s impact crosses the border in other ways too. The San Pedro River flows from Sonora into Arizona, where it meets the Gila River and eventually the Colorado. It is the last major free-flowing desert river in the United States and hosts migratory birds, jaguars, coatimundi, and other endangered species.

The river is already stressed by pumps that supply water to Sierra Vista and Fort Huachuca, Arizona, which take 6,100 acre-feet more water annually than is replenished by rainfall. But its main problem is that its water comes from the Las Nutrias and El Sauz Rivers, which start near Cananea.

In 1979, a mine spill flowed into the San Pedro, killing fish and animals for 60 miles, according to a report by Arizona State University. Both the Sonora and the San Pedro Rivers are threatened by the expansion of tailing ponds at the mine, according to a report by Dick Kamp and Laurie Silvan of E-Tech International, who visited the mine after the 2014 spill. E-Tech International is a nonprofit organization that provides communities with technical support on the environmental impact of large development projects. “A new tailings dam and a large catchment area are being constructed,” their report said. “The existing tailings, coupled with older acidic discharges to ground and surface water, were suspected as sources of the contamination found downstream of the mine in the past.”

E-Tech International and other groups have urged more systematic monitoring of the Sonora and San Pedro Rivers for contaminants, but “the contract for Fideicomiso funds prohibits technical studies that address long-term monitoring,” the pair reported. Nevertheless, since the spill, 27 sites have been monitored by the Sonora-based Research Center in Food and Development. But many river residents say the only person they’ve seen consistently collecting water samples has been Dr. Reina Castro.

Water flow in both rivers is also affected by pumping from the mine. Grupo México has 120 wells in the desert around Cananea. By contrast, the city itself only has 14. As production has increased, the mine’s consumption of water has increased with it. Castro estimates that “in the



Jesus Maria Cordoba Piri, a rancher near Baviacora, shows the rashes on his leg

decade of the 2000s, the mine consumed 23 million cubic meters of water a year, or 729 liters [almost 200 gallons] per second, from the sources of the San Pedro and Sonora Rivers.” According to the Nature Conservancy, parts of the San Pedro no longer flow year-round.

“But the water belongs to the nation,” declares Antonio Garcia. “We all have a right to it.”

The Frente’s immediate demands include a complete clean-up of the Sonora River, extensive health monitoring and treatment for river residents, and compensation from Grupo México for lost crops and income. While the corporation budgeted \$110 million for the clean-up fund and compensation, residents charge that much of it went to large farmers and businesses, while workers and small businesses received little or nothing.

The union in Cananea wants to return its members to their jobs. But many strikers doubt the company is

willing to operate the mine safely, even if they go back to work. At the beginning of May, two workers and a supervisor died when their pickup was crushed by a huge dump truck in the mine. Another worker lost his life a few months earlier in an accident. One possible reason for increased accidents is that workers in the mine have been working 12-hour days since it was reopened in 2010, instead of the eight hours mandated in the old union contract.

On June 30, the Permanent Commission of the Mexican Congress accused Grupo México of lengthening the workday to 12 hours, and passed a measure demanding that the company account for its failure to remediate the damage done to the Sonora River by the toxic spill, and for the fatal May accident at the mine.

Cecilia Soto González, a deputy representing Sonora in the Congress, from the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution, told *La Jornada* newspaper, “The families of the victims and the inhabitants of Cananea are deeply angry because, as always, Grupo México has washed its hands [of responsibility—and the authorities don’t act impartially to determine the responsibility for the lack of safety and super-exploitation at Buenavista de Cobre [the Cananea mine—, where the workday has been increased from eight to twelve hours a day.”

Together, the Mexican miners’ union and the Frente Rio Sonora have filed a complaint with Mexico’s Human Rights Commission over the spill and the strike. United Steelworkers has supported them. When the Cananea strike started in 2007, the USW representative Manny Armenta brought food and money to the miners, and the union later put political pressure on the Obama Administration to intercede with the Mexican government.

Both unions say they intend eventually to merge into one organization. The USW now negotiates with Grupo México, since the company owns the ASARCO mines in the United States. But until now, the company has been unwilling to agree on a new contract, and threatens to close a smelter in Hayden, Arizona, which would cost 211 USW members their jobs.

Armenta and USW District 12 Director Bob LaVenture were both at the plantón when it started last year. Together, the U.S. and Mexican unions filed a complaint with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, accusing Grupo México and ASARCO of violating workers’ rights on both sides of the border. “Companies like Grupo México, and other multinational conglomerates that attempt to silence workers, are precisely the reason why international solidarity among labor unions is so important,” said Leo Gerard, president of the United Steelworkers.

As far as Grupo México is concerned, the clean-up of the Rio Sonora is over. On October 9, 2014, two months

after the spill, it said it had put 1,200 people to work on it, and declared: “As a result of the work controlling the acidity and cleanup of the Sonora and Bacanuchi Rivers ... the company has completed its surface cleanup work on 98.3% of the 250.4 kilometers it treated.”

And on July 8, the Mexico daily *El Universal* reported that the UVEAS clinic funded by the \$110 million had closed. The Federal Commission for Protection Against Health Risks said that the clinic, after 1,160 medical consultations, had only identified 360 people as having had health impacts from the spill. One of them, Patricia Velarde Ortega, who suffers from complications including frequent nosebleeds, filed a complaint with Mexico’s Human Rights Commission after finding that the clinic’s phone had been disconnected, and that she was no longer able to get treatment.

Dr. Reina Castro called Grupo México’s declaration irresponsible. “The spill of heavy metals into the Sonora River caused by Buenavista del Cobre is a problem that has not been resolved,” her report concluded. “We should not accept this position. ... It’s necessary to apply existing environmental and labor laws with all their strength.”

At its August 2016, Executive Council meeting, the AFL-CIO passed a resolution written by Jerry Acosta, a member of the delegation that visited the Rio Sonora Communities. Acosta first introduced it into his own union, the Utility Workers Union of America, and it was then passed by the United Steel Workers. Together the two unions brought it to the AFL-CIO itself.

The whole resolution reflects official support by the labor movement, and two key parts of the resolution say “that the National AFL-CIO will support efforts to organize to bring substantial material aid to the miners in Cananea and the towns along the Sonora River, because of the danger of widespread hunger and suffering” and “that the National AFL-CIO will support efforts by any and all Labor Councils and State Federations to take similar action.”

Combined with the work being done with the surveys, and by the health and environmental groups in Arizona and Sonora, the resolution will result in substantial pressure on the Mexican government, and therefore on Grupo México.

FACING BULLETS AND PRISON, MEXICAN TEACHERS STAND UP TO EDUCATION REFORMS

Since the killing of nine demonstrators at a street blockade in the Oaxacan town of Nochixtlan on June 19, Mexico has been in an uproar over the use of force against teachers resisting corporate education reform. As the Mexican school year started again on August 22, teachers and supporters in four states refused to return to classes until there is a negotiated agreement to change the government’s program, and until the perpetrators of the Nochixtlan massacre are held responsible.

The government says it will not negotiate over this. Mexico’s corporate leaders are demanding the government use force to suppress teachers and reopen schools. The danger of further bloody confrontation is greater than ever.

Resisting teachers are concentrated in a highly-organized network, the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE), within the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), the largest union in Latin America. The CNTE now controls the union in four states—Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas and Michoacán. In other states, especially Mexico City, it has a large base of support. Teachers in assemblies in those four states voted on August 18 not to start classes on the 22nd.

Nationally, the CNTE is an important base of the Mexican left, one of the most powerful opponents of the government’s embrace of free-market and free-trade policies. Weakening the union and the role of teachers in politics is an important political goal for Mexico’s corporate elite, as well as the national political parties moving the country to the right.

The reforms teachers oppose are largely the product of Mexico’s corporate elite. Mexican business interests began proposing changes to Mexico’s education system over a decade ago, as part of a series of economic reforms that have privatized much of the country’s economy and rolled back rights and protections that workers and farmers won decades ago.

Supported by education reform groups in the U.S. and by the U.S. Agency for International Development, these corporate reforms concentrate on standardized testing for students, and especially teachers. Testing is then used to eliminate educators’ job security and punish militant resistance.

“The real goal is privatizing education,” according to Tranquilino Lavariega, a classroom teacher and general secretary of his union chapter in Santa Cruz Ocotlan, in Oaxaca. “These corporations see education as a business. And because our union has been part of the opposition to

their growing power in Mexico, they see us as a political threat.”

Heading the push for corporate education reform is Claudio X. González, scion of one of Mexico’s wealthiest and most powerful families. He heads Mexicanos Primero (or Mexicans First), the voice of the country’s right-wing education reform lobby. When Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto appointed him to head his transition team on education after his election, González demanded that Peña Nieto “end the power of the union over hiring, promotion, pay and benefits for teachers.” Mexicanos Primero’s program for reform was pushed through the Chamber of Deputies two years ago.

Last year, as the government began implementing the tests, thousands of teachers refused to take them. In limited job actions, many refused to report to classes. When resistance mounted, the government began arresting CNTE leaders. The bank accounts of CNTE Sections and even of its officers were frozen, to try to paralyze the union. On May 19 Education Secretary Aurelio Nuño Mayer announced that he was firing 4,100 teachers from the CNTE stronghold states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas and Michoacán for not taking the tests. The CNTE then stopped work in those states, and set up tent encampments in city centers, and blockades across streets and highways.

Adding fuel to the indignation were demands by González that the teacher training schools, or “normales,” be abolished and replaced with private institutions. Fresh in the memory of Mexicans is the disappearance, and probable murder, of 43 students at a “normal” training school in Ayotzinapa two years ago. Recently a commission of international experts criticized the Mexican government for refusing to cooperate in efforts to identify the fate of the students, and pointed to the possible involvement of officials at very high levels in their disappearance.

On March 22 Nuño Mayer proposed a measure that

would eventually eliminate the normales. “The students in these schools come from poor families,” Lavariega explains, “so of course they are very critical toward the government and want to fight for their rights. That’s why the government wants them to disappear—those students are a threat too. Nuño Mayer went to private schools. He thinks any professional can teach—that there’s no need for a school to teach anyone to do it.”

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has also called for abolishing the normal schools, and urged President Enrique Peña Nieto to fire teachers who get bad test results and exclude them from teaching. Similar measures have been advocated by a Wash-



Teachers from Oaxaca march with independent trade unions in protest to Mexico City’s main square, the Zocalo

ington think tank, the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas, a project of the Inter-American Dialogue with funding from USAID.

Finally, in early June, Rubén Núñez—head of Oaxaca’s teachers’ union, Sección 22, and a national leader of CNTE—was arrested as he left a meeting in Mexico City. He was flown a thousand miles north to Hermosillo, Sonora, to a high-security federal lockup. The same thing happened to Francisco Villalobos, the union’s second-highest officer. Both joined Aciel Sibaja, Sección 22’s financial secretary, imprisoned in the same penitentiary since April. Five other union leaders had been imprisoned since the previous October.

Union officers were accused of accepting dues given voluntarily by teachers across Oaxaca. Sección 22 has had to collect dues in cash for the last year, since federal authorities froze the bank accounts. The government called dues so collected “funds from illicit sources.” Luis Hernández Navarro, a former teacher and now opinion editor for the Mexico City daily *La Jornada*, called them hostages. “Their detention is simultaneously a warning of what can happen to other teachers who continue to reject the [federal government’s] ‘education reform,’ and a payback to force the movement to demobilize,” he says.

After Nuñez and Villalobos were arrested, police fired on demonstrators at the blockade in Nochixtlan. Eight people were killed and dozens more wounded. Oaxaca and Mexico reacted with outrage. A protest march in Mexico City, organized by the left-wing MORENA party (National Regeneration Movement) headed by former mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador, drew over 100,000 participants. More streets were blockaded, especially (but not only) in the four states, and plantóns (or occupy-style encampments) sprang up in commercial centers targeting big enterprises like Wal-Mart, Bimbo and Coca-Cola.

On the U.S. side of the border, teachers and unions joined in demanding that the government release Nuñez, Villalobos and other imprisoned teachers. Teachers and others picketed the Mexican consulates in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. A statement read by Lita Blanc, president of United Educators of San Francisco, announced a campaign to convince the U.S. Congress to suspend military aid to Mexico “until the Mexican government stops these massive abuses of labor and human rights.” United Teachers Los Angeles sent a representative to the consulate picket there. In Chicago demonstrating members of the Chicago Teachers Union made a video in which they chanted, “We are all Oaxaca!”

Formal protests and calls for freeing the imprisoned teachers also came from Josh Pechthalt, president of the California Federation of Teachers, Eric Heins, president of the California Teachers Association, and Dr. Lorretta Johnson, secretary treasurer of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Pechthalt asked all the union’s local chapters in California to join the demonstrations and write to Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto.

“We are all facing the same attacks,” he told them. “The same corporate interests in both of our countries seek to privatise public education, undermine our ability to function as professional and socially-responsible educators, and end our right to unions and collective bargaining and action.”

In her letter to the Mexican ambassador to the U.S. the AFT’s Johnson said, “While recent dialogues between CNTE and the Secretariat of the Interior are promising, their legitimacy is lessened as long as these leaders remain in prison.”

In Mexico trains were blocked leading to Michoacán’s main port of Lázaro Cárdenas, and the state’s governor then met with the CNTE. Highways in and out of Chiapas’ capital Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Guerrero’s capital Chilpancingo, and Tabasco’s capital Villahermosa were blocked as well. During a national day of protest on July 16, Secciones 7 and 40 of the CNTE in Chiapas occupied radio and television stations to inform the public of their reasons for opposing the federal education reform, and to condemn the shootings in Nochixtlan. Marches on the same national day of protest took place in Puebla, Jalisco, Hidalgo, and Mexico states.

On July 10 the Secretariat of Public Education announced it would not proceed further with the firing of thousands of teachers. And on August 13 Nuñez and Villalobos finally walked out of prison on bail, the last of nine prisoners held in federal custody (other teachers remain in jail in different states, however).

While the Peña Nieto Administration was forced into negotiations with the CNTE, however, it continued to say that changes in its education reform program weren’t up for discussion. Enrique Enríquez Ibarra, head of the Mexico City CNTE union, responded that teachers would not back down and would keep developing an alternative democratic education plan.

Teachers have not simply gone on strike, or organized demonstrations and street actions. They have recognized that Mexico’s schools do need change, and have proposed a series of reforms of their own, called “democratic education.” The most advanced of these proposals, the Plan for the Transformation of Education in Oaxaca (PTEO), was actually implemented in Oaxaca in the first years of the administration of its current governor.

The PTEO concentrated on respecting indigenous culture and forging alliances between teachers, students, parents, and their communities. Its most important principle was diversity—Oaxaca’s indigenous population speaks 16 languages. Another was equity. “Schools in the heart of the city should be equal to those in marginalized communities,” asserts Lavariega, who participated in formulating the plan. The PTEO formed collectives among teachers, parents, students and community leaders. Each collective decided on an educational project, implemented it, and held everyone accountable.

Similar plans have also been developed in Guerrero, Chiapas, and Michoacán. After the insurrection of 2006, Sección 22 became the backbone of the left’s effort to defeat the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and in 2010 Oaxacans for the first time elected a non-PRI governor, Gabino Cué. Owing his election to the teachers, Cué agreed to begin implementing their reform instead of the federal one.

In 2012, however, the PRI regained control of the federal government. Under its pressure, Cué reneged on

his commitment to Oaxaca's teachers and announced that he would implement the federal reforms instead. Protests started immediately, and have escalated since then. With the left in Oaxaca badly divided, the PRI regained control of the state government as well in voting on June 6. The arrests of the two top leaders of Sección 22 followed in less than a week.

While Cue eventually gave way to federal government pressure to scrap the PTEO and implement the corporate reform, the experience of parents with this more community-driven reform still plays an important role in their support for the dissident teachers.

In Mexico City, however, Claudio X. González admits no possibility of changing the government's testing program. He warned Peña Nieto the weekend before the start of the school year that he would take any agreement made with the CNTE to court and have it overturned, if it changed the reform program he has sponsored. He also called on Peña Nieto to use force to open the schools. "If it is determined that this is what has to be done in defense of the right of children and other affected citizens, then it must be done," he told the media.

González was backed up by the Business Coordination Council, which called the CNTE teachers "a minority group impeding the daily life of millions of Mexicans." Enrique Solana Senties, president of the National Confederation of Chambers of Commerce, filed suit against the CNTE, accusing it of "acts that have violated human rights, principally in denying the right to education of children." He is seeking a court order to force the Federal government to uproot the blockades, which he says have cost businesses 7.5 billion pesos. Corporations themselves organized a "business strike" against the teachers on August 8.

Renato Sales Heredia, head of the federal police, announced the government would use force, which Peña Nieto called "a last resort [...] to regain social harmony."

In Oaxaca, especially after the Nochixtlan shootings, "many parents have supported the strike," says Ezequiel Rosales Carreño, Oaxaca director of the Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations. In 2006 Rosales was head of Section 22 during the strike and insurrection that paralyzed the state for weeks. "Despite what the Constitution requires, education is not free in Mexico any more. The government and media are trying to demonize teachers and promote hatred, but most parents know this will not resolve their problems. Unfortunately, though, they are creating a lot of polarization, and there will be confrontations in a lot of schools."

The week before the schools were set to open, that polarization erupted in one small Oaxacan town, La Luz Tenexcalco, San Miguel Ahuehuetlán. Supporters of the PRI (Mexico's governing Party of the Institutionalized Revolution) came to a meeting about the schools and demanded

that the town expel striking teachers and bring in strike-breakers willing to teach, Rosales recounts. When heated arguments escalated, gunfire broke out. Teodulo Pavia Guzman was killed, and Miguel Herrera Perez was taken to the hospital in critical condition.

Using force to open Oaxaca's schools will replicate shootings like this and Nochixtlan. "The main responsibility in this conflict is the government's," declared Lopez Obrador. "Just remember the policy that caused it."

FARM WORKERS ARE IN MOTION FROM WASHINGTON STATE TO BAJA CALIFORNIA

Three years ago several hundred Mixtec and Triqui strawberry pickers went on strike at one of Washington State's largest berry growers, Sakuma Farms, and organized their own independent union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia (Families United for Justice). Sakuma Brothers Farms sells its berries through Driscoll's, the world's largest berry distributor. Driscoll's also markets berries from BerryMex and MoraMex in the San Quintín Valley of Baja California. Workers struck there for higher wages in 2015, and organized an independent union there as well.

The 2013 picking season in Sakuma's Burlington fields was marked by a succession of short strikes over wages, the conditions in the company's labor camp and the firing of a worker leader. The workers are Mixtec and Triqui migrants—people from indigenous communities in southern Mexico. Sakuma then brought in about 70 guest workers under the H2-A program, and limited wages for everyone to those it was paying contract laborers. The following year it applied for hundreds more—enough to replace his entire workforce.

The next spring Sakuma sent strikers form letters saying they'd been fired for not working, and then told the U.S. Department of Labor that it couldn't find any local workers. It applied for 468 H2A guest workers, enough to replace its previous workforce. Strikers all signed letters to DoL saying they were willing to work, and Sakuma eventually had to withdraw its application.

While Sakuma Farms gave up its plans for bringing in contract labor, for the moment, agricultural employers in Washington have increased the number of H2A guest workers drastically. The Washington Farm Labor Association, according to Alex Galarza of the Northwest Justice Project, in 2006 brought in less than 2000 workers. In 2013, the year FUJ was formed, that number rose to 4000. Last year the number exploded to 11,000, and may reach 16,000 in 2016.

"Driscoll's is the biggest berry distributor in the world. It has the power to bring Sakuma to the negotiating table," declared FUJ President Ramon Torres. An international delegation of union leaders and activists gathered in Burlington last year to announce support, and officially launch a boycott of Driscoll's berries.

According to FUJ Vice-President Felimon Pineda, however, wages and conditions for pickers in the summer and fall of 2015 didn't improve, and Sakuma still refused to negotiate a contract. "Everything is still the same," he charged. "It's worse than 2013—people can't get what they got then."

According to Sakuma's pay scale, workers had to pick 40 pounds of blueberries to earn \$10/hour. The company website says workers can make up to \$40/hour, but that rate requires 100 pounds per hour. "The boycott will continue until we get a union contract," Pineda declared. "We are part of a movement of indigenous people, and they abuse the indigenous workers more than any others. What we want is respect for everyone. No matter if you're from Guatemala or Honduras, Chiapas or Guerrero. The right to be human is for everyone."

The strawberries, blackberries, and blueberries sold everyday in U.S. supermarkets are largely picked by indigenous families, whether laboring in Washington State or Baja California. Their communities are very closely connected, all along the two-thousand mile chain of agricultural valleys that line the Pacific Coast. These migrants come from the same region of southern Mexico, often from the same towns. They speak the same languages, and increasingly talk back and forth across the border about their desire for change, sharing tactics, and developing a common strategy.

In 2015 indigenous Mixteco and Triqui migrants from Oaxaca also took job action in Baja California, organizing a strike of 60,000 workers. Once the strike began in San Quintín, members and leaders of the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales mobilized to support it in Baja California itself, and on the U.S. side in California.

In a final negotiation session between the organization of the striking workers, the Alianza of National, State and Municipal Organizations for Social Justice, and the Baja California government, authorities announced a new minimum wage in San Quintín of 120, 150 or 180 pesos a day, depending on the size of the employer. Further, they promised they would enforce the collection of employer contributions for social security, housing and other benefits.

While this did not meet the workers demands, the berry harvest season was over. In the months that followed, the Alianza won a registro (legal status) from the government for a new independent union, along with another rival group of farm workers. Then, when the picking began in the spring of 2016, the Alianza-initiated union organized a march to the U.S./Mexico border, where it reemphasized its commitment to a boycott of Driscoll's berries.

A statement released by the Alianza said, This march is to commemorate the first year of the start of the strike in San Quintín, to publicize after a year the historic work stoppage where thousands of workers left the camps and took to the streets, demanding better working conditions. Employers have not listened in good will to our demands and established measures to ensure our labor and human rights are respected in accordance with the law. On the contrary, we have been harshly repressed by forces from the three levels of the government in complicity with busi-

nessmen. We were imprisoned, injured, we have suffered reprisals, mass dismissals, constant threats in the fields, increased workload for the same salary, and are obligated to join corporate unions that have never represented us, in exchange for keeping our jobs, among other labor abuses.”

The march from San Quintín was met at the border by groups who traveled from San Diego and elsewhere in California, carrying in front of their march a banner urging, “Dump Trump!” After Border Patrol agents threatened to arrest participants if they approached the border fence, they used a powerful bullhorn to speak with the San Quintín farmworkers on the other side of the wall.



A delegation including Brown Berets and Washington State Labor Federation leader Jeff Johnson went into the Sakuma Farms facility and attempted to meet with the company, leaving them a written message when managers refused to talk with them.

A month later, farm workers in Washington State organized a caravan moving south to the border as well, with the same purpose—bringing pressure to bear on Driscoll’s Berries. The caravan, organized by Familias Unidas por la Justicia, had a goal of establishing local boycott committees all along the Pacific Coast.

The road tour began in Portland, Oregon, on March 18th. Throughout the tour FUJ members and supporters picketed the local Whole Foods Market or Costco in almost every area. Many organizations cooperated in mounting picketlines, and then setting up local boycott committees to plan further activities. In Portland, the responsibility was shouldered by Portland Jobs with Justice.

The farm worker caravan moved on to Eugene, and

then to Medford, where it was hosted by Unete at Medford’s Congregational United Church of Christ, and the Northwest Seasonal Workers Association.

In California, the tour began by talking to farm workers in Crescent City, uniting local struggles with those of the struggle in Washington. “The conditions and experiences are the same—that’s why we unite,” said FUJ President Ramon Torres. Torres and Sakuma worker Lázaro Matamoros visited a local school where the majority of students speak Mixteco, English, and Spanish, reflecting the growing community of indigenous migrants.

The group traveled on to Eureka for an event at

the Eureka Labor Temple, where a new boycott committee was formed, and then arrived in Oakland. Visiting with Food First and the Oakland Workers Collective, another boycott committee was formed, and a picket line mounted at the Richmond Costco.

Torres explained to Bay Area supporters that “Farm workers and their supporters will march and demonstrate in front of Costco, demanding that the chain stop selling Driscoll’s Berries, because they are produced under sweatshop conditions at Sakuma Farms in Washington State and in the San Quintín

Valley in Baja California. We are demanding that the company bargain a contract with our union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia and with the Alianza, the union in San Quintín. We’ve organized a boycott of Driscoll’s, the giant berry distributor, and accuse it of being responsible for the violation of labor rights at Sakuma and San Quintín, since the company buys the berries the we pick.”

The FUJ caravan then marched in the annual César Chávez March in Sacramento, together with the Watsonville Brown Berets. On Easter Sunday they met with local supporters for a workshop discussion, followed by an Easter action at Whole Foods. “They didn’t want to talk to us so we started educating people about the boycott inside the store,” one supporter laughed.

At the Latino Center for Research and Policy at UC Berkeley, a standing room only crowd greeted the FUJ members, who began the day with a radio interview on KPFA. Afterwards supporters descended on Berkeley's Whole Foods Market to talk to consumers and management. Not long before the tour arrived, Professor Ivonne del Valle and student Luiz Resendiz met with the purchasing manager at UC Berkeley about not purchasing from Driscoll's berries. The university agreed to not sell or serve them on the campus.

Later on March 29th Familias Unidas met with

and experience as a farm worker in Baja California. She called on supporters to join the movement to Boycott Driscoll's. "I myself was a child worker and I saw thousands of children working. We ask justice for them!" she cried out.

On March 31st, César Chávez's birthday, the FUJ tour descended on Driscoll's headquarters in Watsonville, to demand that they take responsibility for negotiating a union contract for both farmworker unions in Burlington, WA, and San Quintín, Mexico. Torres, Matamoros, and Gracida all demanded that Driscoll's get their suppliers to negotiate union contracts with the respective independent

unions in the area, and told them that the consumer boycott of the Driscoll's label will continue until this demand is met. They were joined by boycott supporters from all over California.

On the same day the Raging Grannies of Palo Alto, CA, educated Whole Foods management about the boycott of Driscoll's berries by singing and talking to customers. Torres and Gracida were both invited to speak at the Labor Notes Conference in Chicago, about the cross-border organizing of farm workers. Meanwhile Matamoros spoke at the Salinas Cesar Chavez



The children of migrant farm workers and their supporters march to the processing plant at Sakuma Brothers Farms, a large berry grower in northern Washington State.

recycling workers belonging to Local 6 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, telling the story of the first strike back in 2013 and how FUJ formed a union. Afterwards the ILWU's Latino recycling workers joined the San Francisco Labor Council for an action at a Whole Foods Market.

In Santa Cruz the caravan met with MEChA students at UC Santa Cruz, who are working to kick Driscoll's off campus, and ended their day at Barrios Unidos with a panel discussion and fundraiser. Santa Cruz now has its own Support Committee for the Driscoll's Boycott, while more support came from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Food Not Bombs, the Resource Center for Non Violence, and the Center for Creative Ecologies.

Gloria Gracida, teacher and spokesperson for the new farm worker union in San Quintín, shared her story

march and later at the César Chávez march in Merced.

The FUJ tour arrived in Los Angeles at California State University Northridge for a presentation with the Center for the Study of the Peoples of the Américas (CES-PA). In San Diego it was hosted by the National Latino Research Center, North County Immigration Taskforce, Farmworker CARE Coalition, UURISE, MEChA, the San Diego Dream Team at the University of California San Marcos, and Palomar Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. The FUJ West Coast Farmworker tour joined the Zapata March in San Diego, CA. Simultaneous actions took place at the Whole Foods Market in Oakland and at Safeway in Watsonville.

The tour returned to Washington State, where the leadership of Familias Unidas por la Justicia and community members met at the Sakuma Bros. Berry Farm processing

plant in Mt. Vernon. In the monthlong tour, an additional 20 boycott committees were formed along the West Coast, making a total of 40 nationwide. Statements of support and endorsements were gathered from over 50 local and national labor, church, community, and consumer groups.

On the day of the return, management once again refused to speak with its own workers, but the tour had a big impact. As preparations mounted for the annual march in Burlington on the anniversary of the 2013 strike, Sakuma Farms manager Danny Weedin told an intermediary that the company might be willing to work out a process for recognizing the union and negotiating a contract. Sakuma spokesman Roger van Oosten told the media that if a majority voted to be represented by FUJ, “We’ll sit down and work out a contract with the workers.”

While making statements like this in public, however, in meetings with FUJ leaders the company delayed agreeing to the conditions necessary for fair negotiations and an end to the boycott. “Despite Sakuma’s attempt to unilaterally impose an election process, FUJ has been and is ready to meet and negotiate a fair process for the workers to choose their union representatives without intimidation or coercion,” said FUJ President Torres. “We at Familias Unidas Por la Justicia are certainly encouraged that Sakuma Brothers Farms has relented to the pressure of the boycott, at least to some degree.”

“I wouldn’t say (the boycott) is threatening the survival of the farm. I would say it’s an annoyance,” van Oosten claimed. But the company this year also had to retroactively pay \$87,160 to pickers who worked in 2014 after the Supreme Court ruled piece-rate workers must be paid separately for 10-minute rest breaks. And in a 2013 class-action lawsuit brought by two Sakuma workers alleging pay violations, Sakuma settled out of court by paying 408 workers \$500,000 and their lawyers \$350,000.

Meanwhile, conflict continued in the fields over low piece rates. On August 9, 120 FUJ members at Sakuma’s blueberry fields in Burlington walked out once again, protesting the offered wage of 56 cents per pound. A day earlier, workers explained, management was paying 60 cents per pound, and then lowered the price to 56 cents. In a nearby field workers were being paid 77 cents for the same berries.

Workers decided to go work in the company’s blackberry fields, where they are paid per box and can earn more. Company owner Ryan Sakuma attempted to physically block some from going into those fields, and even threatened to call police on the company’s own workers. When Sakuma tried to fire a member of the worker organizing committee, workers loudly objected. Over 40 members of FUJ’s field organizing committee met with Sakuma and manager Danny Weedin, and finally won a raise to 65 cents per pound. They then agreed to return to work.

“We don’t walk out of the field just because we feel

like it,” said committee member Tomás Ramón. “This is the only way that Sakuma will listen to our demands for pay that is fair for our labor. That is why we need a union contract, so we can work and not have to call work stoppages to get a fair wage.”

Finally, on September 4 FUJ leaders Torres and Pineda announced that “we have officially agreed to an election and negotiation process for a collective bargaining agreement with Sakuma Bros Berry Farm ... entering into this next phase of our union’s development with hope and determination. At this time we are calling for an end of the boycott, and all boycott activities.”

And in the union election held on September 12, as this report was going to press, workers voted 195 to 58 in favor of Familias Unidas. FUJ leaders were confident that negotiations with the company would follow rapidly.

In May the upsurge among indigenous farm workers erupted in California as well. Over 400 farm workers in McFarland, in the San Joaquin Valley, walked out of the fields protesting low wages and company abuse. “The majority of the people here are from Oaxaca—Mixtecos and Zapotecos,” explained Paulino Morelos, who comes from Putla, a city in Oaxaca.

“The foreman humiliates them,” he said. “He makes fun of them and says they work like turtles. Even if someone is slow, we’re working on piece rate, not by the hour, so you only get paid for the work you do. But he’s always pushing them to work faster. Carmela, another foreman, says Oaxacos are no good.” “Oaxaco” and “Oaxaquito” are derogatory terms for indigenous people from Oaxaca, which Morelos says he hears a lot.

The workers at Klein Management, this large blueberry grower, weren’t inspired to go on strike by strikes elsewhere, but by the brutal economic facts facing indigenous farm workers in California. Of all the state’s agricultural laborers, indigenous people, because they’re the most recent arrivals, are paid the least. According to the Indigenous Farm Worker Study, carried out by demographer Rick Mines, the median family income in 2008 was \$13,750 for an indigenous family and \$22,500 for a mestizo (non-indigenous) farm worker family. Neither is a living wage, but the differential reflects structural discrimination against indigenous people.

Mines found that a third of the indigenous workers he surveyed earned above the minimum wage, a third reported earning exactly the minimum and a third reported earning below the minimum—an illegal wage. Low wages in turn have a dramatic effect on living conditions. Most indigenous families live crowded in apartments, motel rooms, garages and trailers. In some valleys people live outside in shacks, tents or even under trees or in the fields themselves.

Conflict about the piece rate led to the workers’ rebellion at Klein Management. At the beginning of the

blueberry picking season in April, the company was paying pickers 95¢ per pound. By mid-May, the price had dropped to 70¢, and then 65¢. Finally the company announced it was dropping it again to 60¢. Workers refused to go in to pick.

In a dramatic confrontation filmed by workers on their cellphones, labor contractor Rigoberto Solorio told a crowd at the edge of the field, “What I can say is this, boys. We can not raise the price. We gave the price we could. We’re not going to raise it. If you want to stay, stay.” He was then interrupted by shouts of “Vamernos!”—“Let’s go!” In another crew, Morelos says, “Carmela told us, ‘If you don’t want to work, get out.’ I saw cars leaving the field, so I told her, ‘We’re leaving too.’ One foreman said, ‘You can take the people out, but don’t come back.’ We left anyway.”

Jessica Ruiz, who led the first group of workers out of the fields, charged, “They didn’t even let us take Mother’s Day off. My son is only 6 months old, and this was my first Mother’s Day. They told me, if you don’t work Sunday, you can’t come to work on Monday.” Despite the recent court decision won in Washington State, holding that even piece rate workers must be given paid breaks, the first paid break in the Klein fields came after workers went on strike.

After leaving the fields, workers approached the United Farm Workers, which filed a petition for a union election to gain the right to negotiate changes. California’s Agricultural Labor Relations Act mandates quick elections during a strike, and six days after the walkout hundreds of workers lined up in two long rows in the pre-dawn darkness, ready to vote. So many were wearing red tee-shirts emblazoned with the black eagle of the United Farm Workers that the few people without them stood out conspicuously.

As the sun came up, the lines slowly moved toward the ballot boxes, and by eleven o’clock it was over. Blueberry pickers in their red tee-shirts poured out of the rows of bushes, and then gathered in a semicircle to watch an agent of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board make the count. As he announced it, 347 to 68 in favor of the union, the cheering started.

Aquiles Hernández, one of several UFW organizers helping the McFarland workers, is also a Oaxacan migrant. His family left Santa María Tindú, and brought him to work as a child in the sugar cane fields of Veracruz. Later he became a teacher in Mexico City, and belonged to the left-wing caucus in the Mexican teachers’ union, the CNTE. “We had a plantón [occupy-style encampment] outside the Secretary of Education,” he recalls. “Three of us were fired—they took away our classes because we were active in the protests, and I was in prison for 72 days.”

Concepción García, a Mixtec immigrant from Coatecas, Oaxaca, was sent in by the UFW when the McFarland strike started. She understood the pressure on the strikers because she experienced the same history. “I worked in Sinaloa when I was a kid, starting when I was

nine years old,” she remembered. “I’ve seen a lot of kids in the fields, a lot of need and suffering. So I love teaching our people about their rights. We’re not in Mexico now, and we’re not living in those times.

“I’ve seen a lot of humiliation and discrimination against indigenous people,” she adds. “My whole family works in the fields in Madera, and I’ve seen a lot of injustice. People get hurt, and go to work anyway. If you have no papers, the foreman threatens to fire you if you don’t do as he wants.”

In the days before the election, Klein management hired a labor consultant and a well-known anti-union lawyer, Tony Raimundo. Several years ago Raimundo was accused of turning a worker over to the immigration authorities, after he’d filed a complaint against his employer.

At Klein Management, however, fear of firings and immigration raids did not derail the walkout or union election. Jessica Ruiz explained: “We work in the sun all day, and we work hard. I have no problem with the work. My problem is with the things they do to us. I’ve been waiting for this for a long time. I’m very proud of my people and what we’ve done. One of the owners said they’d send me to jail when I took the people out. But they’re not going to stop us.”

EL SUPER WORKERS FIGHT FOR JUSTICE IN STORES IN BOTH MEXICO AND THE U.S.

With information provided by the UFCW

In a major victory for the long campaign for justice by workers at El Super and Chedraui markets, on Friday, August 7, 2015, El Super supermarkets entered into a settlement agreement with the U.S. National Labor Relations Board. As a result of a rarely issued 10j injunction ordered by the Federal Court, Fermín Rodríguez returned to his position at El Super #13. The company fired Rodríguez in January 2015 for exercising his federally protected right to support his union. He was granted back-pay from El Super as part of the NLRB settlement.

Southern California United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Union locals 324, 770, 1428 and 1167 represent approximately 600 El Super workers employed at seven locations. These low-wage, predominantly Latino workers were covered under a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with El Super that expired on September 27, 2013. While the unions and the worker bargaining team sought to bargain to improve their working conditions, on December 12, 2014 El Super workers voted resoundingly to re-certify the union and demanded the company return to the bargaining table.

After more than a year of operating without a union contract, El Super employees and the UFCW launched a boycott that December to protest poverty pay, widespread violations of workers' rights—including the termination of Rodríguez—and the company's refusal to bargain with the union. Seven California cities have passed resolutions in support of the workers and their boycott. In addition, eighteen neighborhood councils in the city of Los Angeles have passed boycott resolutions as well.

After the NLRB decision, on October 28, more than a dozen El Super workers, labor, community, and clergy leaders, along with more than five hundred people from the community, participated in the first nonviolent civil disobedience demonstration in the long struggle to win the company's respect. The store and company headquarters remained closed for hours in response, and the supporters marched to El Super's corporate headquarters. Fifteen protesters, including Store #17 cashier, Flora Castaneda, sat down in the intersection of Lakewood and Paramount Place, until ordered to disperse.

"Change demands that people like me must stand up," said Castaneda, a cashier for over 11 years and a mother of three. "This is my first time engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience. But if we don't take a stand everything stays the same." On the day before Thanksgiving, El Super workers at seven unionized locations in Southern California struck the company over Unfair Labor Practices. Picket lines were established at 4 am asking consumers to do their Thanksgiving shopping elsewhere.



Participants in the 2016 Western Regional Summer Institute on Union Women (SIUW), hosted by UCLA, joined El Super grocery workers by bus to picket the company's Inglewood, CA store

El Super employs mostly Latino workers, paying them low wages. On July 2 last year, California's Division of Labor Standards Enforcement (DLSE) cited the company for multiple wage theft violations, with assessments and penalties totaling \$180,668. The investigation revealed that El Super had denied rest and meal periods, and failed to pay

overtime wages for 20 workers at 10 Los Angeles markets. Some store employees worked an average of 55 hours per week, but were paid for only 40 hours. Workers were forced to clock out for meal breaks but ordered to return to work without taking their full meal period. In some cases, workers were not allowed to take rest breaks at all.

As a result of the boycott, sales at El Super turned negative for the first time since 2012. David Velasco Chedraui, an elected official and family member in the Mexican state of Veracruz, told reporters in April that the boycott had resulted in a 5% sales decline.

El Super is managed by the Paramount, CA, based Bodega Latina Corporation. It owns 46 stores in California, 5 in Arizona, 3 in Nevada, 2 in Texas, and 1 in New Mexico. The stores focus on first, second, and third-generation Mexican consumers. Bodega Latina Corp is 83.36% owned by Mexico-based Grupo Comercial Chedraui, which operates 224 markets in Mexico with over 35,000 employees. Chedraui's 2015 net sales were approximately \$78.6 billion pesos (\$4.32 billion, U.S.) and its gross profit was over \$15.6 billion pesos (\$860 million, U.S.)

Chedraui says that the U.S. market represents a significant growth opportunity. "We continue to bet on growth in the U.S. market and we have no intention of decelerating the rate of [new store] openings," a company official said in mid-March 2016. But Chedraui has masked the dramatic slowdown of U.S. sales growth rate by obscuring the impact of a relatively stronger dollar and the steep decline in the peso's value. At the same time, its rate of store openings has actually fallen.

A multinational coalition filed complaints Nov. 12 with the U.S. federal government, alleging that Chedraui is violating the North American Free Trade Agreement and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) guidelines by engaging in alleged "workers' rights abuses" in the U.S. and Mexico. The NAFTA-related complaint was filed by a coalition of unions and civil society organizations in the U.S. and Mexico, including the United Food and Commercial Workers in California, Frente Auténtico del Trabajo in Mexico, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy in California, and the Project on Organizing, Development, Education and Research, a Mexico and U.S.-based NGO focused on Latin America.

The two separate international labor rights complaints against Chedraui constitute the first time charges about a company's international labor abuses have been simultaneously submitted under both the OECD and NAFTA mechanisms.

The NAFTA complaint alleged that Chedraui has cultivated dozens of sham unions in Mexico through so-called "protection contracts" that represent the interests of management, not workers, and prevent the formation of independent unions. Under NAFTA's parallel labor side agreement, the U.S. Department of Labor can investigate

whether the government of Mexico failed to uphold its own labor laws. The U.S. government accepted this case for review in January 2016, and issued a report in July, discussing the department's concerns regarding issues raised in the submission. These concerns include, protection contracts and the primary factors that facilitate them, such as structural bias in the Conciliation and Arbitration Boards that administer labor justice in Mexico.

The report noted that some constitutional and legislative reforms pending in Mexico's Congress would go a long way towards addressing these concerns (these were not part of the labor reform the Mexican administration pushed through against fierce labor opposition). The department urges passage of reforms reining in protection contracts, and says it will engage with the Mexican government on these and other issues in the submission.

In its 2014 report to the Mexican stock exchange, Chedraui disclosed that 47% of its employees were represented by unions, and stated, "Our associates in Mexico are affiliated with 28 different unions and labor relations with each one of these are governed by 233 collective bargaining agreements, which are negotiated independently with each union." These are "protection" unions selected by management, not chosen by employees. Employees at Chedraui stores in Mexico report that they have no union representation and have never seen a union contract. Some unions registered as representing Chedraui stores are well-known in the world of protection contracts.

To compound Chedraui's troubles, spoiled products were found in its stores across Mexico City, as a growing campaign in Mexico brought increased scrutiny to Chedraui's operations south of the U.S.-Mexico border. In August, a Mexican civil society organization, PODER, released a report documenting expired products and unsanitary food labeling practices at company stores.

PODER presented 100 examples of expired products offered for sale at Chedraui stores in Mexico City to the Mexican Consumer Affairs Office, PROFECO. A PROFECO official confirmed that an investigation was ongoing and that the agency had found instances of expired products at Chedraui stores. The director of the Mexican Federal Commission for the Protection against Sanitary Risk, COFEPRIS, also confirmed his agency was conducting an investigation.

Key findings of the study include that sixty-seven percent of Chedraui stores surveyed sold products after the "fecha de consumo preferente" (preferred consumption date) or "fecha de caducidad" (expiration date) had passed. In 18 of 19 Chedraui stores surveyed, all meat, fish, and poultry were mislabeled through the erroneous use of "fecha de consumo preferente" instead of "fecha de caducidad." In the 19th store, some of the meats were mislabeled.

Eighty-nine percent of Chedraui stores surveyed sold products without any expiration date indicated on the packaging. In sixty-seven percent of Chedraui stores

surveyed, the company sold products labeled as “frozen”—which include a frozen product expiration date—that were actually only refrigerated. In three of Chedraui’s four premium Selecto stores, the same product was found with the expiration date label removed—suggesting that the stickers were removed prior to distribution to the store for sale.

In the wake of the Chedraui stores investigation, a coalition including Chedraui’s Mexico City consumers and members of the Tri-national Alliance of Solidarity submitted more than one hundred examples of evidence of expired products sold at Chedraui supermarkets to PROFECO, who agreed to follow up and conduct its own investigation of Chedraui markets.

During 2015, coverage of the El Super dispute skyrocketed in both the U.S. and in Mexico. In Mexico alone, there were over two hundred print, online, and television stories focused on various aspects of the escalating dispute.

This past April 4, El Super grocery workers represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union marched together with more than 1,000 supporters through the streets of South Los Angeles, to demand respect and a fair contract. The march coincided with El Super’s parent company—Grupo Comercial Chedraui’s—annual meeting of its Board of Directors in Xalapa, Mexico.

“We need a fair contract so we can take care of ourselves and our families,” said Lydia Flores, an El Super cashier. “Sometimes, my coworkers have to work two jobs to get by. I have a son who is ill. I can’t do that because I have to take care of him as well. We need fair pay and enough paid sick days so we can take care of our families.”

Finally, on July 14 the U.S. State Department issued a report finding that allegations of labor rights violations at El Super are “material and substantiated.” The report came in response to the November 2015 complaint filed by Mexican and U.S. labor groups with the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development’s National Contact Point in the United States, based in the State Department. The State Department has offered to mediate an ongoing labor dispute between El Super and the UFCW, which represents workers at seven of El Super’s California locations, if current efforts to resolve an ongoing contract dispute fail.

The Frente Auténtico del Trabajo in Mexico, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy and the Project on Organizing, Development, Education, and Research co-filed the complaint with the UFCW. It was filed under the Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises of the 34-nation OECD, which require good faith collective bargaining, respect for workers’ organizing rights, and fair pay and conditions.

THE CFO PROMOTES CROSS-BORDER LINKS TO BUILD SOLIDARITY AND UNDERSTAND GLOBALIZATION FROM THE BOTTOM UP

By Julia Quiñones

While most of the recent news coverage about Mexico has focused on the issue of narcotrafficking and related violence “spilling over the border into the U.S.,” the Border Workers’ Committee (CFO, Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s) believes that solidarity tours to the border are an effective counterweight to the hysteria they generate. They open up a possibility for our compañer@s and for workers to let others know about what is happening on the border with thousands of workers. Participants get a more global vision of what is happening, not just in Mexico and the United States, but in the world. With sister grassroots organizations and other activists we have strengthened our ties of solidarity, and on many occasions the relations of solidarity continue.

A great variety of groups and people are involved, from international unions to undocumented day laborers, as well as NGOs, churches, academics, and volunteers. Over the years we’ve included Mexican participants as well, like the Center for Worker Support (CAT -Centro de Apoyo al Trabajador), from Puebla; the Authentic Labor Front (FAT -Frente Auténtico del Trabajo); Innovation and Intervention in the Social Sciences (IICSA -Innovación e Intervención en las Ciencias Sociales); the Project for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ProDESC -Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales); and Development and Peace Service (SEDEPAC, Servicio Desarrollo y Paz), from Coahuila.

By seeing the actual situation of maquiladora workers on the ground, we create the opportunity to address the current impacts of the global economic crisis and to seek out common points for the defense of labor rights. A constant theme has been the negative impact of the global economic crisis on employment, wages, unionization, and grassroots organizing in both countries, and in the situation of immigrants in the United States. Some union activists feel that within the unions themselves there is not yet a consensus about how to organize undocumented workers. While in the past, especially during the Cold War, unions were not interested in including those immigrants, today the importance of this group for the future of the union movement in the United States is clear.

When Mexican visitors have a chance to see and interact with the alliances which have been formed of unions and the AFL-CIO with community organizations and worker centers, they can see that the communities have achieved

an understanding of the importance of unionization. This can inspire visitors to think about the how Mexican unions should do their job, and also about the need to pressure governments in both countries to avoid the exploitation of Mexican workers everywhere.

We need to have more direct conversations between organizations across the U.S. and Mexico borders. The right to form unions and collectively bargain is under attack in both countries, albeit in different forms. However, the same economic forces that drive down wages in one country are also driving down wages in the other. The more workers speak to each other about what they are facing and how

to Mexico's president by several maquiladora workers, the outcome of a discussion on NAFTA held by forty Mexican workers from five border cities at a meeting of the CFO in Nuevo Laredo.

Workers addressed the current economic crisis, focusing on its impacts on U.S. automakers and their auto parts manufacturers in Mexico. Maquiladora workers know how the globalization of the economy actually operates, since they produce auto parts a year before they are needed. The maquiladora industry is heavily dependent on auto production, and workers know what it is coming before the Wall Street Journal gets the news.



Julia Quiñones talks with a group of maquiladora workers and members of a solidarity delegation

Workers shared reflections and agreed on recommendations for action. They have seen that most border towns have had a big influx of migrants in the last few decades from central and southern Mexico. In the last 20 years more than half of the border's workforce moved from the interior of the country to northern Mexico looking for a maquiladora job. Obviously NAFTA failed to create employment in their original communities. But only a minority thought their economic situation today was better today as a

they organize to defend their rights, the closer working people will become.

Among the most important discussions that take place on delegations are those about trade agreements, especially NAFTA. Because it's become such a hotly debated subject in all three countries, it's important for us to develop our own independent understanding. Seeing the situation of maquiladora workers on the border is an instant education in who is paying the price of globalization and these agreements.

According to one worker, Teresa Hernández, a worker in Matamoros, "NAFTA was a swindle. It didn't keep its promise of more and better jobs, but rather the contrary. Now everything is more expensive: food, school supplies, transportation, everything." In her 50s, Teresa has worked most of her life in a maquiladora factory.

Teresa's quote was included in an open letter sent

result.

In their letter to the president, one worker said: "In 1993, even with a single salary and two children in school, I could buy more. It used to provide enough to send your children to school and eat better. Now I have to take in other people's washing, and I am still only half way to meeting expenses." Other workers sell lunches at the factory, or tacos or cosmetics on the weekends. Many cross over every week to U.S. border towns to sell their blood plasma.

"Wages have lost half their value since 30 years ago," the letter said. "We are making half what our parents made. It is an established fact that more than two full-time salaries are needed for one household's minimal expenses. That's why most maquiladora workers have two jobs, or send the entire family out to work."

NAFTA worsened the wages and living conditions of maquiladora workers, leading a race to the bot-

tom throughout the manufacturing sector in Mexico. The agreement proved even more devastating for Mexico's small farmers. The combined failure in both rural and urban areas forced the migration of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans across all economic sectors to the U.S.

It is estimated that 2 million small farmers in Mexico were displaced from their land as a result of NAFTA. To make matters worse, thousands of the approximately half a million manufacturing jobs created in Mexico since 1994 are now vanishing, mainly as a consequence of the U.S. recession. Even before the economic downturn, the meager job creation attributed to NAFTA failed to keep pace with the 1.2 million young people entering the workforce every year.

The maquiladora workers said, "One cannot speak of the success of NAFTA when its so-called success only exists on charts and graphs showing the increase of trade between the United States and Mexico. Contrary to what the government has said, free trade does not create benefits for all. The growth of Mexico's international trade has not been reflected in the economy of those of us who make this commercial activity possible."

In an interview, David Bacon asked me, "If that's the case, do you think that there is any form of labor protection that can be incorporated into agreements like NAFTA that would guarantee workers rights, or do you think that workers have to guarantee their labor rights in some other way?"

I think both possibilities can be if there is a re-negotiation of the NAFTA agreement. The possibility of an obligatory means of enforcing workers' rights, holding transnational corporations accountable to complying with the law, would be helpful for workers. At the same time, even if you have such trade agreements, organizing workers at the grassroots level is vital. Otherwise, we can't enforce any rights recognized by trade agreements.

Free trade was supposed to benefit everybody, but the reality is that we are poorer than we were before. We used to earn good wages, but now they're falling. Working conditions are not like they were before. You used to become permanent after working for a month. Now companies give us month-to-month contracts, so that we can never earn seniority or health benefits. Our other benefits are disappearing. In the cities our jobs are disappearing, and there's no work in the countryside, either. None of the benefits of free trade have materialized for us—in jobs, in wages, or anywhere else.

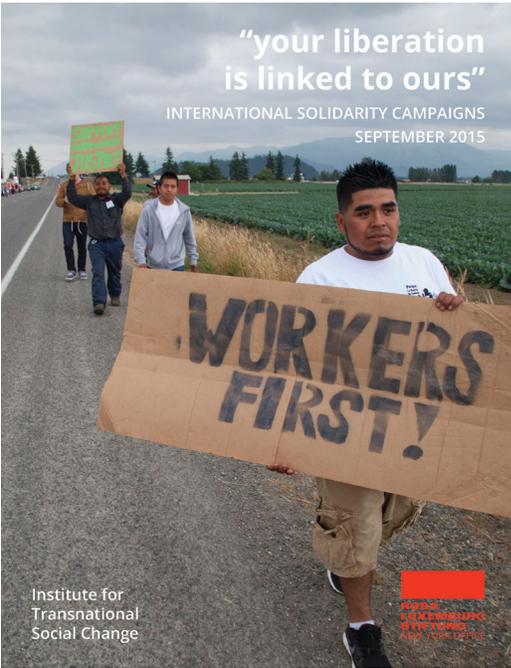
During another CFO meeting to share experiences about NAFTA, workers had the following comments:

- Before the pay was fairer, at Carrizo's three plants as well as at TennMex and Dimmit. All those plants closed, and now we can't get by on what we earn.
- What happened to the 10 percent raise we used to get? We're worse off now.

- Ten years ago I could save a little. Now I have to spend every dime I make. Even so, I can't buy fruit or vegetables.
- We're not living from month to month, or from week to week. We're living from day to day.
- Before stores would give you the price for a kilo of ham or a kilo of beef. Now they give their prices in a half-kilo or a quarter-kilo.
- It seems like a kilo now weighs less than 1000 grams. Staple goods come in smaller packages. They cost the same or even more, but there's less in the package. There are fewer cookies now in a bag of cookies.

We've seen that NAFTA is a failed model, a model that just doesn't work. After ten years, you can look at workers' pay stubs and see that they were earning more before than they are now. Maquiladora workers who make electronic products or auto parts don't earn enough to buy what they make. Communities that house global companies like Alcoa, Delphi, or GE should be enjoying good economic conditions. Instead, they don't even have basic services like running water, sewage, electricity, or paved roads. Squatters keep opening up new land because there isn't enough housing.

NAFTA is a story of extremes: benefits and progress for the few, and poverty and decline for the many. NAFTA should be renegotiated to promote fair trade relations among Mexico, the United States, and Canada. A new treaty should assure just treatment for workers and full enforcement of the labor laws of each country. Mexico's labor code should be fully enforced, and the government's labor authorities as well as unions should defend the authentic interests of workers.



Check out last year's solidarity labor report:

“your liberation is linked to ours” INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGNS

By David Bacon
September 2015

Previous labor solidarity reports by David Bacon:

“Trinational Perspectives on the Future of Labor: The State of Labor 20 Years after NAFTA” (2013)

“Displaced, Unequal and Criminalized: Fighting for the Rights of Migrants in the United States” (2011)

“Building a Culture of Cross-Border Solidarity” (2011)