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Mexico

Mexico: a victorious general strike in 92 maquiladoras

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Long live the victorious strikes of Matamoros!

An unprecedented event in the history of social struggles in Mexico occurred last January and surprised everyone: a general strike in the maquiladora industry of the city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Some 96 companies, affiliated with the formerly official Confederation of Workers of Mexico (CTM), with about 60,000 workers, went on strike to claim a 20% wage increase and an annual bonus of 32,000 pesos (\$1,670) indexed to wage increases. The “20 (%) - 32 (000 pesos)” movement won in 92 maquiladoras, with four strikes remaining to be won in addition to the strike at the Coca Cola plant. The strike wave hit powerful supermarkets such as Wall-Mart, Soriana and Chedraui, although it did not fully achieve its goals there.

The movement began when the employers tried to evade a 100% increase in the minimum wage, decreed by Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's new government throughout the border area, thereby trying to curb the migration of Mexican workers and workers and to fulfil the wage enhancement commitments included in the NAFTA renegotiation between Mexico, the United States and Canada. The employer's manoeuvre resided in the fact that in exchange for yielding this salary increase they tried to suppress other benefits included in the employment contracts, including the annual bonus. The bosses explained, through their docile union representatives, that the “culprit” in this measure was Lopez Obrador with his “irresponsible” policy.

In the face of the employers' attack and the betrayal of the yellow CTM union federation, headed by Juan Villafuerte, the workers, justifiably indignant, made this known on social networks and in protest meetings inside the companies and sought the advice of a well-known employment lawyer, Susana Prieto Terrazas, to defend their rights. The lawyer, who lives in Ciudad Juarez, decided to move to Matamoros to come and advise them. Upon arrival, she was greeted by thousands of workers who, spontaneously, had already started some work stoppages and planned to extend them to the entire maquiladoras industry. They had even tried to occupy the headquarters of the union. Faced with the risk of being overwhelmed by their bases, the yellow trade unionists had no choice but to file a call for a general strike for Friday, January 25, 2019.

The unusual and combative response of the workers (let us remember that in Mexico we had not seen a reaction of this kind since the 1930s) put the employer class on a red alert. The bosses hypocritically declared that they “could not afford to make such an increase” and threatened to leave the country. Mexico's daily minimum wages are among the lowest in the world: as of 1 January, 102.68 pesos (\$ 5.34) at the national level and 176.72 pesos (\$ 9.20) in the free zone of the northern border. Even with the 100% increase, voracious maquiladoras companies pay ten times less in Mexico than they pay in their home countries.

For its part, the government of Lopez Obrador (*El Sol de Mexico*, March 13, 2019) renewed its call to the unions to hold back the strikes and reminded them that “yes, we will realize the increases, but slowly because otherwise we can break the national economy ... You have to talk with the workers, tell them that we cannot recover overnight all the wages that were lost during the neoliberal period, salaries will improve, will go up, but we must do it in a gradual way, because otherwise we will ruin the companies, we will ruin the economy, we must take care of the sources of work”.

There is no doubt that it is impossible to recover all at once a loss of 80.08% of the purchasing power of wages accumulated during the neoliberal period, but there can be no denying the fact that large global firms are broadly able to offer better wages without endangering the “national economy”. We, the workers, must demand that the current government stop all intrusion into negotiations between workers of the companies and the bosses so that they

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determine freely among themselves the wage increases that are best suited in each case. If business leaders claim that they cannot afford to meet the demands of workers, let them open the account books and demonstrate it!

It is undeniable that the victorious strikes of Matamoros, as well as the electoral defeat of the PRI apparatus of domination, favour the recovery of the confidence of the working class in its own strength to improve its standard of living and to democratize its trade union organizations. This was reflected in the strikes of university workers (Chapingo, Metropolitana, Oaxaca among others), in the growing unrest in other regions of the northern border, in the development of a new trade union insurgency in the oil sector, social security and primary education, and the reorganization of independent trade unionism.

It would be desirable for independent trade union federations - the New Federation of Workers (NCT), the National Union of Workers (UNT), the new International Confederation of Workers (CIT, led by the miners' union) and the National Co-ordination of Workers in Education (CNTE) to agree to push a minimum program of struggle that takes into account the following objectives:

Supporting the ongoing strikes with the greatest solidarity, demanding a reform of the employment code that guarantees freedom of association and the prevalence of justice, limiting tertiarization and eliminating the anti-worker reforms of 2012, union control of pension funds and the revival of their solidaristic character, a program to recover the historic loss of wages of workers, the 35 hour working week, an audit of the public debt and refusal to pay the illegitimate debt.

We, Coordinara Socialista Révolucionnaria, from our modest trench, affirm our total and unconditional solidarity with the struggle of the working class.

Mexico City, March 16, 2019

Coordinara Socialista Révolucionnaria (Revolutionary Socialist Coordination, sympathising organisation of the Fourth International in Mexico)