

# CROSS-BOARDER TRADE WITH MEXICO AND THE PROSPECT FOR WORKER SOLIDARITY: THE CASE OF MEXICO

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## *Abstract*

While auto labor in North America remains fragmented and local, the auto companies have been reorganizing on a continental basis, building a modern, export-oriented production base in Mexico. This paper addresses the question of whether and how the diverse labor movements of Mexico, the U.S. and Canada can overcome the competitive dynamic of free trade and establish a regional union movement based on cross-border solidarity. A review of the salient events of the last 30 years indicates that, despite the widespread assumption that Mexican autoworkers must be benefiting from globalization to the same degree that U.S. and Canadian workers are losing, the actual outcomes are mixed on both sides of the border. Jobs are up in most years, but real wages are stagnant or falling, bargaining leverage is weakened, and de-unionization is growing across the continent. At the same time, the North American integration of production has established a common "occupational idiom" (and accompanying grievances) centered on lean production, outsourcing, and competitive "whipsawing" of plants making the same product. On this basis alone, proponents of cross-border solidarity can find potential allies from Puebla to Oshawa. Mobilizing that potential is difficult, however, when there are so few links between the labor movements of North America. Historical divisions rooted in the Mexican revolution and the Cold War are now diminished, but barriers of language and culture remain. A further barrier is the heightened job insecurity felt in many corners of the auto industry. Shifting market shares, global mergers, and periodic downsizing all contribute to this anxious state, which continental whipsawing makes all the more intense, continuous, and potentially divisive for any cross-border union movement. The paper ends with an assessment of current initiatives that point towards a possible North American movement of autoworkers.

In many ways, the Ford assembly plants in Hermosillo, Sonora, and Wayne, Michigan, are remarkably similar. Both build the same car—the Escort until 1999, now the Focus. Both use nearly identical plant and equipment, featuring Kawasaki robots and Komatsu stamping presses. Both borrow selectively from a "lean production" model that includes work teams and just-in-time inventory. In both factories, union workers produce cars with competitive ratings for quality and cost. (Babson, 2000)

But there is one visible difference between the two plants that speaks directly to what U.S. and Canadian autoworkers fear most about globalization: the employee parking lots.

At Wayne, they are full of late-model Ford, Chrysler, and GM products, most of them bigger, more expensive models than the sub-compacts

produced at the plant. At Hermosillo, on the other hand, the hourly lot is small and there is not a single Focus behind the fence. As the best-paid factory workers in the state, Hermosillo's Ford employees earned between \$2 and \$3 an hour in 2000 (Contrato Colectivo de Trabajo, 2000: 28)—more than double the rate in many of Sonora's border factories, but one-tenth the straight-time wages of Michigan's Ford workers. With the Focus selling for \$17,000 in Mexico, even this sub-compact is a luxury item for most Mexicans. Consequently, Ford exports 95 percent of the Hermosillo plant's cars northward (Producción Mensual), leaving the parking lot to a fleet of white busses that every morning pick up workers who build cars for foreign customers.

These workers are not reconciled to their low wages, nor do they welcome their role as low-cost competitors of U.S. and Canadian autoworkers. Nevertheless, that is the role forced upon them in the global arena of free trade. A corresponding question is forced upon autoworkers across the continent: can the diverse labor movements of Mexico, the U.S. and Canada overcome the competitive dynamic of free trade and establish a regional union movement based on cross-border solidarity? The answer to this question requires the posing of another: what is the economic and social-political terrain of cross-border trade, as it helps or hurts cross-border solidarity?

### *North American Auto*

While auto labor in the new millennium remains fragmented and local, the auto companies are reorganizing on a continental basis. This dramatic shift in corporate strategy is highlighted by the contrasting dynamics in the UAW-GM strikes of 1970 and 1998.

In 1970, Mexico was an irrelevant footnote in the UAW's national strike against GM over issues of pay and retirement benefits. The company had just two factories in Mexico employing a total of 4,300 workers: an aging truck plant in the Federal District, dating from the 1930s, and an engine plant in Toluca, opened in 1965. Both factories produced for Mexico's tiny domestic market, delivering a wide variety of models in relatively low volumes with little automation. It could be no other way—high tariffs and local-content requirements imposed by the country's nationalist government prevented GM from importing vehicles. (Morris: 115–116; Middlebrook: 231; García and Lara: 207–203) At a time when production totaled just 165,000 units in 1969 (less than two percent of the U.S. total), Mexico hardly mattered to the strike antagonists in the year that followed.

In 1998, however, GM's Mexican operations were a flash point in local strikes that shut down the company's North American operations. This was especially evident at Delphi's Flint East plant, the second of two factories in Flint, Michigan, where local strikes over work intensity and job security gradually starved GM's assembly plants of parts. Over the preceding twenty years, the Flint East workforce had fallen from 13,000 to fewer than 6,000 as the company installed new technology and expanded its Mexican production of instrument clusters and other small parts. "They just crated the equipment, hoisted it onto a tractor trailer, and sent it away to Mexico," as one local leader told the *New York Times*. "There's hardly anybody at this plant who hasn't seen machinery moving out in a crate with an address on it says 'Mexico.'" (Dillon)

Since the late 1970s, GM has been unloading these crates in Matamoros, Reynosa, Ciudad Juárez, and other factory towns on Mexico's northern border, a region known for its low wages and low levels of unionization. By 1998, GM's Delphi parts division had grown to 50 border factories employing 58,000 Mexican workers, nearly matching the 64,000 union members at its U.S. and Canadian parts plants. (Delphi Automotive) In the meantime, GM was also opening new assembly plants in north and central Mexico, where workers produced 315,000 Cavaliers, Silverados, and Suburbans in 1998—two-thirds for export. (Lira)

In the scale and scope of its commitment to Mexico, GM has been at the cutting edge of wider changes transforming the southern tier of the North American auto industry. At each step in this transforming process, government policy on both sides of the border has provided the blueprint and the incentives for change. In this sense, "globalization" is not the spontaneous expression of market forces so often invoked by free-trade proponents, but is rather a product of public policy aligned—more often than not—with corporate planning. At the same time, globalization is not wholly determined by the policy goals of the corporate interests that profit by it. Certainly, U.S. corporations have reaped the bottom-line harvest of Mexico's low wages, but, ironically, it was the political success of the U.S. labor movement in 1965 that unintentionally opened the door for GM-Delphi.

In that year the AFL-CIO and the farmworkers union won repeal of the "Bracero" program, a World War II era policy that gave Mexican farmworkers temporary visas to travel north and work for U.S. agribusiness. Since this transient workforce undermined the organizing efforts of the farmworkers union, the labor movement lobbied the Johnson administration for repeal. Success created a new problem for Mexico,

however, since it left the unemployed farmworkers stranded along the border. In response, the Mexican government implemented a “Border Industrialization Program” that would attract corporate investment to the northernmost edge of the country. Companies that built “maquiladora” plants, as these border factories were called, could import parts duty-free and pay taxes only on the value added, *so long as* the plant exported 100 percent of its output back to the United States. (Macarthur: 37; Kopinak: 7–8)

The goal was to attract jobs to the economically depressed north without otherwise amending the policies of economic nationalism that dated back to the Mexican revolution of 1911–1917. That upheaval had been sparked by popular resentment of the Díaz dictatorship’s close alliance with U.S. corporations and foreign landowners, who together owned 25 percent of the country’s land and dominated Mexico’s economy. (Hart: 276–326) To dismantle this original “free trade” regime, the revolution’s leaders eventually (in the 1930s) nationalized key industries like oil and electricity, while protecting Mexican business against foreign competition. The maquiladoras were to be the exception to rules that still opposed “Yankee imperialism” with high tariffs, local content requirements, and restrictions on foreign ownership. (Morris: 115–117)

In the 1970s, however, the government began to open additional loopholes for maquiladora employers, including a growing list of exemptions from federal labor law. By 1974 there were already 455 maquila factories along the border employing 75,000 workers, most of them underpaid women rather than the male farmworkers originally targeted by the program. Investment accelerated yet again in the 1980s, when Mexico experienced a severe debt crisis and the government—at the urging of U.S. creditors and the International Monetary Fund—abandoned its previous strategy of economic nationalism. To pay its dollar-denominated debts, the Mexican government not only widened the incentives for U.S. corporations to build maquiladora plants in the north and the interior, but also began to open domestic markets to investment and trade. By the mid-1980s, currency devaluations had driven the dollar-cost of Mexican labor below levels paid in South Korea and Taiwan, making Mexico all the more attractive to foreign capital. (BLS, 1999) In this sense, the “maquilazation” of the Mexican economy was already well advanced by 1993, when NAFTA codified these changes in treaty law. (See Carrillo; Kopinak: 8–17; Morris)

By the turn of the century, Mexico’s output of cars and light trucks had soared to 1.5 million units, a growth of 900 percent compared to 1970 and double the 755,000 units built in 1990. (*EIU*: 292) The five

largest manufacturers—Volkswagen, GM, Daimler-Chrysler, Ford, and Nissan—accounted for 99 percent of total production, with GM alone planning to double output to more than 600,000 units by 2007. (Karoub, Lira) A dramatic shift towards production for export was also gaining momentum. In 1970, Mexican vehicle exports were effectively zero; by 1986, they had inched upwards to 72,000 cars and light trucks, or 21 percent of total production; by 1999, exports had climbed to nearly 1.1 million vehicles, representing 72 percent of total production. Domestic sales of cars and light trucks meanwhile lagged at 666,000 in 1999—10,000 less than the record year of 1992. (*EIU*: 265; Lira) This shift towards export production entailed numerous changes in Mexican assembly plants, including a reduction in the number of models produced, a corresponding acceleration of production as model mix was simplified, an increase in automation, a shift towards certain lean production methods, and dramatic improvements in productivity and quality as these changes were implemented.

The growth in maquiladora factories continued as well. As of March 2000, the industry magazine *Twin Plant News* counted 3,384 maquila plants employing 1.2 million workers—a 1500 percent growth in employment since 1974. The fastest growing sector was auto parts, with 228 plants employing 214,000 workers (*Twin Plant News*), the majority of them driven northward by rural poverty and farm mechanization. By the mid-1990s, Mexico's total employment in parts making (maquila as well as domestic firms) was already 2.5 times greater than Canada's and 45 percent of U.S. levels, with average hourly pay and benefits totaling just \$3.32 an hour. (Weintraub: 235–237) In maquila plants on the northern border, total labor costs were lower still, estimated at \$1.75 an hour in 1999. (Macarthur: 332)

### *Downward Convergence*

There is growing public awareness that Mexico's low wages and troubled unions are the fulcrum for downward pressure on pay and working conditions north of the border. While thousands of U.S. autoworkers have lost their jobs because the employer transferred operations to Mexico, the far larger number who remain have experienced a more pervasive form of "whipsawing"—the *threat* of transfer to Mexico or elsewhere unless workers moderate their wage demands and amend their work rules. What is less well known is that many Mexican autoworkers have also been victimized by whipsawing. In fact, the "southern strategy" of corporations moving to cheaper labor sites in the United

States (and beyond) has been matched by an identical “northern strategy” in Mexico. (Bensusán and Bayón: 119–120)

The whipsawing of U.S. workers occurs during organizing drives and contract negotiations, as the following examples demonstrate:

*ITT Automotive.* When workers at ITT Automotive in Michigan tried to organize a union and bargain for improvements in wages and working conditions, the company responded with a fear campaign focused on Mexico, as described by this report to the NAFTA labor commission:

... the company parked thirteen flat-bed tractor-trailers loaded with shrink-wrapped production equipment in front of the plant for the duration of the campaign with large hot-pink signs posted on the side which read “Mexico transfer job.” The equipment came from a production line they had closed down over the weekend without warning. The same company also flew employees from their Mexican facility to videotape Michigan workers on a production line which supervisors claimed they were “considering moving to Mexico.” (Bronfenbrenner: 11)

This same report indicated that, following passage of NAFTA, employers were more likely to threaten to move production to avoid unionization, with 65 percent of manufacturing companies using this tactic against union organizing drives surveyed between 1993 and 1995. In 10 percent of the more than 500 campaigns surveyed, union organizers reported that companies like ITT openly threatened to move to Mexico, while in many others the threat was veiled or delivered in one-on-one meetings with supervisors. (Bronfenbrenner: 9–13)

*GM Delphi-Packard Electric.* This company’s Warren, Ohio, factory employed 13,500 workers in 1973 making the wire harnesses that distribute electrical signals throughout the car. GM began to move the most labor-intensive tasks south in the mid-1970s, first to Mississippi, then to Mexico. By 1998, virtually all of the assembly work was in northern Mexico and the Warren plant employed fewer than 6,000. To stem the continuing job loss, the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) agreed to cut wages in half for new hires and postpone their movement to full pay until senior workers retired. “Every discussion or complaint,” as one worker said of her interactions with management, met the same response: “We can always move your job to Mexico.” (Helper: 303–324) Such movement puts special pressure on the auto industry’s most labor-intensive segments. While inflation-adjusted wages fell just 2 percent between 1988 and 1998 in U.S. assembly operations (pulled down by non-union transplants), they fell 9 percent in the auto parts sector and 13 percent in engine electrical equipment. (Herzenberg: 6)

Table 1  
Cross-Border Vehicle Sourcing by the Big Three, 1998

<i>Company &amp; Models</i>	<i>Mexican Plant</i>	<i>U.S.-Canadian Plant</i>
<i>Daimler-Chrysler</i>		
Neon	Toluca	Belvedere
Cirrus, Stratus, Ply. Breeze	Toluca	Sterling Heights
Sebring, Avenger	Toluca	Bloomington*
Dodge Ram	Saltillo	St. Louis #2
	Lago Alberto	Warren Truck
<i>General Motors</i>		
Cavalier, Sunbird	Ramos Arizpe	Lordstown, Lansing
Suburban, Silverado, Tahoe, Yukon, Sierra, Chevrolet Pickup	Silao#	Janesville, Arlington#, Oshawa, Fort Wayne, Flint Truck
<i>Ford</i>		
Escort, Tracer	Hermosillo	Wayne
Contour, Mystique	Cuautitlán	Kansas City
Ford F-Series	Cuautitlán	Kansas City, Kentucky Truck, Ontario, Norfolk

\* Mitsubishi, formerly jointly owned with Chrysler.

# Trucks and SUVs

Source: Compiled from *Automotive Industries*, "North America 2000 Vehicle Production" (October 1999), pullout; *The Harbour Report 1999*, 29–31.

Wage indexes don't tell the whole story, since they fail to capture the effects of a pervasive downward pressure on work rules that is spreading to the assembly plant sector. The potential for this kind of whipsawing grows as the companies build more car and truck models on both sides of the border, as indicated in Table 1. Lower-cost compact cars, in particular, are more likely to find Mexican customers, and when they do not—as in the mid-1990s—they can be sent north in even greater numbers. (*EIU*: 270, 292) Equally important, Mexican factories establish a low-cost benchmark for work organization and labor relations, and with it, a heightened potential for whipsawing U.S./Canadian plants. With the aging of the J-car models produced in Ohio and Ramos Arizpe, for example, GM proposed that the next-generation Delta model be assembled in a new "modular" factory next to the old Lordstown plant—a move that would require outsourcing hundreds of jobs to lower-wage suppliers. Local bargaining over the required work-rule revisions

began in 1998 amid headlines announcing that “GM Weighs Scrapping Ohio plant, Building in Mexico” (sic). (*Detroit Free Press*) Based on company documents leaked to the media, these reports put additional pressure on local union leaders to meet at least some of the company’s demands, or risk losing the new model. Bargaining only ended when the UAW’s national leadership stepped in and suspended local negotiations, pending national contract talks in 1999. In the meantime, GM postponed introduction of the Delta models (citing market forecasts and the shift to light trucks), (Pryweller) but proceeded with development of its modular plant—in Ramos Arizpe, where assembly of the Pontiac Aztek began in a new factory based on the same principals of outsourcing and radical downsizing of the workforce. “The Mexican plant,” reported *Automotive News*, “provides the closest look at where GM wants to go with its new and renovated assembly plants in the United States.” (Miller)

As it happens, Ramos Arizpe also shows where the companies want to go with their new assembly plants in *Mexico*. In this case, the Aztek factory and other northern plants built since 1980 are the fulcrum for whipsawing that points southward, towards Mexican autoworkers in the older manufacturing centers around Mexico City and the Federal District. In fact, GM’s initial move northward to Ramos Arizpe, where it broke ground for new assembly and engine plants in 1980, marked the opening round in the corporate campaign to renovate Mexican automaking. GM’s target was the militant local union in the Federal District plant, where workers had conducted six strikes between 1965 and 1979, winning work rules and wages that put them in the forefront of Mexican auto unions. In 1980, however, GM refused to submit to contract terms granting bargaining jurisdiction to the Federal District union for any new GM plants in Mexico. The 106 day strike that followed ended in defeat for the Federal District union, leaving GM free to open the first Ramos Arizpe plant under contract with a rival labor organization. (Bayón: 90; Middlebrook: 270, 273) Thereafter, the lower wages and weaker union traditions north of Mexico City attracted additional investment in assembly and engine plants: Chrysler Saltillo (engines and trucks), Ford Chihuahua (engines), Ford Hermosillo (cars), Nissan Aguascalientes (engines and cars), GM Silao (trucks), and Ramos Arizpe again (SUVs). (Bayón: 62–65; Middlebrook: 271–272) At the same time, Ford closed two plants in the Mexico City area and humbled the union at a third—Cuautitlán—in a series of bitter strikes and violent confrontations between 1987 and 1991. In 1995, GM capped its “northern” strategy by shut-



ting the Federal District plant and shifting truck making to Silao, a greenfield plant with a fledgling union. Volkswagen—the only major company that did not to move northward—otherwise conformed to events in 1992, firing the entire workforce to break a strike and enforce its model of lean production. (Bayón: 93–96; Juárez: 173–205)

For many of Mexico's unionized autoworkers, the outcome of this process has been no less disastrous than it has been for UAW and CAW members victimized by whipsawing. While jobs have grown in the north and central regions, they have fallen in the south, where wages are higher and union traditions stronger. The mechanism for ratcheting pay downwards was the same as in Ohio, with the polarities reversed: workers at Ford's Cuautitlán assembly plant near Mexico City were told in 1987 that, because their high wages made them uncompetitive, the company would not match the 23 percent raise it had already agreed to at Hermosillo. To end the union's 61 day strike protesting this ultimatum, Ford fired the entire Cuautitlán workforce, annulled the contract (paying a legally required severance), and selectively rehired 80 percent of the workforce under amended work rules and wages. (García and Hills: 146–150)

While whipsawing is primarily a north-south phenomenon in the assembly and engine-making sectors of Mexico's auto industry, it covers all points of the compass in the maquila sector, where employers can plausibly threaten to move labor-intensive operations to whatever location offers the cheapest labor. Even in Nogales, a border city with relatively low wages, non-union auto-parts workers report that complaints to supervisors elicit this all-too-common response: "they answered that we could complain all we wanted but that there was no other law than the maquila law and that no one can tell them anything, because if they do the plants will leave." (Kopinak: 142)

These constraints are wound all the tighter by government policies that hold wages below inflation, while suppressing independent unions. Designed to attract further investment, this growth strategy has put Mexican autoworkers on a wildly careening rollercoaster since the late 1970s, with real wages falling dramatically during three crisis periods—the late 1970s to early 1980s, the mid 1980s, and the mid 1990s—and rising slowly, if at all, during subsequent booms. By the late 1990s, real wages in the auto sector were still lower than they had been two decades before. (Ramírez de la O: 72–73)

*Potential Allies*

While many autoworkers in the U.S. and Canada assume that Mexicans must be benefiting from globalization to the same degree that northern workers are losing, the actual outcomes are mixed on both sides of the border. Jobs are up in most years, but real wages are stagnant or falling, bargaining leverage is weakened, and de-unionization is growing across the continent. On this basis alone, proponents of cross-border solidarity can find potential allies from Puebla to Oshawa.

Mobilizing that potential is difficult, however, when there are so few links between the labor movements of North America. Until the 1970s, U.S. labor generally favored policies that opened foreign markets to union-made exports, and so long as import competition remained weak, this free-trade alliance with U.S. corporations went largely unopposed in union circles. When corporate America began to export jobs rather than goods, the initial response was protectionist, with most unions favoring "Buy American" campaigns that stressed patriotic feeling over cross-border solidarity. Efforts to find allies in foreign countries were also hampered by Cold War politics, which narrowed the range of acceptable allies to official, anti-communist organizations like the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). (Nissen: 44–45; Cowie: 3–32)

For its part, the CTM has generally shunned cross-border links through most of its history. As the largest federation of Mexican unions, the CTM and its state and local affiliates first aligned themselves with the Mexican government and the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) in the 1930s, when President Lázaro Cárdenas was nationalizing U.S. oil companies and favoring Mexico's struggling unions. The newly organized CTM, as it mobilized support for Cárdenas' economic nationalism, soon gained official status in the PRI's "labor sector." Subsequent presidential regimes were rarely so populist or labor-friendly, but PRI governments still delivered a widening stream of welfare benefits and social programs, including (in 1943) a national healthcare system organized under the Mexican Institute for Social Security (IMSS). As the dominant organizations in the PRI's official labor sector, the CTM's affiliated unions automatically counted their constituents as party members; the PRI, in turn, routinely appointed CTM leaders to the tripartite councils (labor, management, and government) of the IMSS and the Boards of Conciliation and Arbitration—the latter regulating union formation and labor relations. By the 1960s, the CTM's "official" status as the ruling party's labor arm had thoroughly politicized labor relations in auto and elsewhere, with collective bargaining often reduced to

top-down deal-making between corporate and political elites. (La Botz, 1992: 64–74; Middlebrook: 89–106)

This would change in the 1970s in ways that still define the labor relations system in auto, especially in the assembly sector. Until that decade, most autoworkers were subordinated to leaders appointed by the CTM's state federations. Many local unions had no regular elections, only occasional meetings, and no printed contracts. The CTM's political leverage meant that federal and local Boards of Conciliation and Arbitration favored the federation over rival unions, and the "exclusion clause" in most contracts required the companies to fire any member—dissidents especially—expelled from the union. As the auto industry grew, however, these paternalistic structures came under increasing pressure from members protesting the lack of representation, and with President Echeverría's equivocal support in the early 1970s, a movement to democratize union governance gained the upper hand. In addition to establishing regular elections and general assemblies in many local auto unions, movement leaders initiated an escalating strike wave that saw the number of walkouts jump from just two during the 1960s to at least 25 between 1972 and 1979. By the end of the 1970s, many unions in the assembly sector had won higher wages and improved work rules governing work intensity, seniority rights, transfers, promotions, and use of temporary workers. (Middlebrook: 222–254; Tuman: 148–178)

As we have seen, events in the 1980s and 1990s reversed this trend with a series of union defeats at GM, Ford, and Volkswagen. Yet even as assembly-plant locals had to accept flexible contracts with diminished work rules, some retained the democratic reforms of the 1970s and some—in the north—adopted their own democratic by-laws. (Babson, 2000; Middlebrook: 273–274) At the same time, the CTM's national leaders were endorsing (sometimes reluctantly) the PRI government's turn towards free trade (Bayón: 36–37, 57), while corrupt leaders sold sweetheart "protection contracts" to companies as low-cost insurance against unrest. (LaBotz, 1992: 53–55) The result has been a continuing tension between local protests and official condemnation, as plant-based unions have contested low wages and diluted profit sharing, while national leaders have supported government wage ceilings and productivity campaigns. This widening gap between union members and national leaders was underlined in 1996, when the national CTM canceled its traditional May Day march to forestall popular protests, and hundreds of thousands of workers poured into the streets anyway. The CTM's dominant position eroded further after 1997, when several major unions joined with the Authentic Workers Front (FAT) to establish the National

Workers Union (UNT) as an independent federation. (Brooks and Cason)

With John Sweeney's election to the AFL-CIO presidency in 1995, the U.S. labor movement began to reach beyond its continuing ties to the CTM and establish parallel links with these new formations. In the eyes of some CTM leaders, this simply confirmed their claim that U.S. and Canadian unionists were "foreign destabilizers" and protectionists in league with local dissidents. For independent unions and democratic currents within the CTM, on the other hand, the support of North American unionists was a welcome boost to the widening ferment in Mexico's labor movement. Even with the PRI's defeat in the presidential elections of 2000, however, the prospects for union growth and revitalization remain mixed. The pro-business National Action Party (PAN) won the election on a promise of reform and democratization, but local PAN governments in northern Mexico have been uniformly hostile to independent unions in the maquiladora plants. Local and federal Boards of Conciliation and Arbitration are still dominated by old-guard appointees linked to local elites, and will likely continue to rule against plant-based dissidents and independent unions. Protection contracts barring independent organization are still in place across the maquiladora zone, and extra-legal arrest and official violence remain as the final bulwarks of the status quo. (La Botz, 2000)

What clearly has changed in recent years is the dramatic widening of dialogue and debate, both within Mexico's labor movement, and between union activists on all sides of the border. In assessing what this means for the North American auto industry, it's important to recognize that the presumption of a CTM monolith—however relevant in the past—no longer holds. The underlying structure of labor relations in the Mexican auto industry has always been decentralized and fragmented, a fact obscured by government efforts to rule by decree, and by the national CTM's periodic interventions in local bargaining. Otherwise, there is far less uniformity in labor relations than is the case in the United States and Canada. While plant-by-plant variations have grown in all three countries, there are still national auto unions in the U.S. and Canada, with pattern agreements on wages, benefits, and other matters applying across assembly, powertrain, and Big 3 parts making (the latter dwindling). In Mexico, on the other hand, there is no national autoworkers union and, consequently, no industry-wide pattern. For that matter, there is no company-wide collective bargaining in any sector of the industry. Each assembly plant negotiates separately, with links to state and regional CTM federations usually outweighing the connection to national bodies. (Bayón: 53, 72–73) In the maquiladora/supplier

sector, variation is equally evident, encompassing democratic movements within the CTM and independent unions fighting for recognition, as well as the more numerous company unions and protection contracts. Consequently, strategies for building cross-border solidarity will have to vary according to local conditions, as these disparate examples suggest:

*Nogales.* This production center on the Sonora-Arizona border is known for the lower level of unionization and the higher proportion of men in its maquiladora factories. "The only unions here," as one U.S. plant manager has observed, "are ones which the company pays the dues for, and the workers don't even know they belong." (Kopinak: 169)

*Matamoros.* At the eastern end of the border, workers at least know they belong to a union. More than any other CTM affiliate in the maquila economy, the Union of Industrial Workers and Day Laborers (SJOI) has a reputation for contesting the terms and conditions of work, winning higher wages and shorter work hours. However, SJOI's capacity to win these improvements declined after a bruising confrontation in 1992, when the union's aging leader, Agapito González, threatened to strike if employers didn't agree to a 30 percent raise. On the eve of the walkout, federal police arrested González and removed him to Mexico City, where he was placed under house arrest in the Hospital Los Angeles. The chastened union called off the strike and settled for a smaller raise. (Adler: 277–284)

*Ford Hemosillo.* Democratic ferment in this plant is measured by the number of caucuses—six—that contest its union elections. The CTM organized a national committee of Ford workers in the 1970s, but there is no company-wide bargaining since Ford closed its Federal District plants in the mid-1980s. In this context, the local has adopted a widening repertoire of collective actions to press for higher wages and profit sharing, including formal strikes, unofficial walkouts, plant-gate sitdowns, "collective absences," and slowdowns. (Babson, 2000)

*GM Silao.* There is no national bargaining for GM plants and, unlike Ford, no national CTM committee. Workers at the Silao truck plant are members of the Union of Workers in the Metal Working and Auto Industry (SITIMM), a regional CTM affiliate with 36 locals and 14,000 members. Since GM Silao opened in 1995, SITIMM's plant union has developed a vigorous internal democracy, with the 2000 elections going to a militant slate demanding—and winning—wage increases well above the government benchmark.<sup>1</sup>

*Chrysler Toluca.* The democracy movement failed here. A former production manager served as the union's general secretary between 1970 and 1993, initially appointed by the regional CTM and thereafter running

unopposed in ritualistic elections. In the 1970s he defeated emerging democracy movements by invoking the exclusion clause against his opponents. Upon retiring in 1993, he appointed his son to replace him as general secretary. (Tuman: 157–158)

*VW Puebla.* The largest plant union in Mexico's auto industry also has the most complicated organizational history. Workers voted in 1972 to leave the CTM and affiliate with the Unidad Obrera Independiente (UOI); in 1981 they voted to leave the UOI and remain independent; in 1992, following defeat in the strike and lockout of that year, they affiliated with the Federation of Goods and Services Unions (FESEBES); in 1997, when FESEBES helped found the new national labor federation, the UNT, the VW union became one of its largest affiliates. (Vanderbush: 254–260) In August of 2000, the union struck VW for a 35 percent wage increase. When the government declared the strike illegal and urged acceptance of the company's 9 percent offer, union members returned to work and launched a campaign of work-to-rule, refusal of overtime, plant-gate sit-ins, marches, rallies, and highway blockings that finally forced the company to agree to an 18 percent wage increase.

### *Cross Border Solidarity*

Even in the highly varied terrain of Mexico's auto industry, there are some common features that help and hurt the prospects for mobilization.

On the positive side, the North American integration of production has established a common "occupational idiom" familiar to autoworkers across the continent. Especially in assembly and first-tier supplier plants, where workers now build the same parts and finished vehicles for the same continental market, automation and work organization are converging around a common menu of computer-controlled processes and lean production practices. Implementation varies according to the unique histories of each location, but the general terms (and the accompanying grievances) are becoming commonplace: "elimination of waste" (eroding workers' rest time), "quality in station" (adding responsibility without authority), "just-in-time inventory" (intensifying work stress), and "teamwork" (promoting production-only goals). Whipsawing, as we have seen, victimizes workers in Mexico as well as the U.S. and Canada, accompanied by a second dynamic that most UAW and CAW members would not expect to find in Mexico: "outsourcing"—a word sometimes used without translation—is increasingly on the minds of Mexican workers in the assembly sector, where companies bid out seats, instrument panels, and other components to lower-wage suppliers.

At the same time, there are many barriers that stand in the way of a wider mobilization, none more obvious than the language barrier between Spanish- and English-speaking peoples. So long as this barrier blocks the way, so will routine communication depend on specialists and translation media, rather than the worker-to-worker interaction that builds a wider movement. This hurdle can be lowered: more people are learning a second language, simultaneous translation is becoming more available, and translation software makes written exchanges more feasible. But these remedies only go so far. Learning a second language is not for everyone, and translation services are not easily deployed beyond conferences and written communications. Many of these solutions also require up-front funding for classes, translators, and computers.

A second barrier is the heightened job insecurity felt in many corners of the auto industry. Shifting market shares, global mergers, and periodic downsizing all contribute to this anxious state, which continental whipsawing makes all the more intense, continuous, and potentially divisive for any cross-border union movement. Particularly in assembly and first-tier supplier plants where pay and working conditions tend to be higher, union members and leaders in Mexico as well as the U.S. and Canada naturally rally to the defense of their livelihood. Whipsawing may inspire some of them to acts of solidarity, but in the absence of countervailing union strategies, it can easily inspire a plant-based patriotism and a backlash against all competitors. The temptation to fall back on jingoistic or racist sloganeering is especially powerful when “the others” competing for jobs are foreign and remote—cast in stereotypical form as “gringo protectionists” or “wetbacks who work for nothing.”

This chauvinistic potential can only be countered with campaigns that unite rather than divide workers. The shift from “Buy American” to “Buy Union” is a step in the right direction, as is any rallying cry that directs attention to the need for an *upward* convergence of pay and working conditions. The problem with Hermosillo, then, is not that Ford is investing in Mexican production, but that Ford is investing in Mexican production without *also* investing in Mexican consumption. Mexico’s auto-workers (like their U.S. and Canadian counterparts) need good-paying jobs, with real wages that are not only “good” compared to Mexico’s falling standards, but “good” compared to their rising productivity. According to mainstream economists, this improvement in real earnings can only happen gradually—ignoring the fact that it did not happen *at all* through most of the 1980s and 1990s, while in our own history it has happened rather suddenly: in 1914, for example, when Henry Ford doubled wages in one stroke of the pen, and in 1946–1948, when the

UAW and GM agreed to sizeable wage increases protected by a cost-of-living escalator. In a context where Mexican workers need substantial and steady improvements in purchasing power to become customers for their own product, these remedies can find support among autoworkers on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The movement for such an upward convergence cannot be sustained, however, if collaboration is limited to the occasional summit meeting of top leaders. Important as these are, cross-border solidarity must also become a focal point of union-wide initiatives that counter the potential for a xenophobic backlash. Efforts in this direction have gained some momentum in recent years, and this accumulating experience suggests the possible future of a North American movement of autoworkers. Its elements would include:

*Local-to-Local meetings.* The entry-level basis for cross-border solidarity is the face-to-face encounter between workers making the same product or working for the same company. Local-to-local meetings can begin with information exchanges that increase understanding and deepen the commitment to continued communication, and proceed from there to more focused collaboration as opportunities arise.

*Worker-to-Worker meetings.* Plant-based union meetings are not always possible, particularly in the maquiladora parts sector where union organization is sparse or is corrupted by protection contracts and company unions. On the U.S. and Canadian side, the initiative may lie with city-wide or regional bodies prepared to support the work of volunteers drawn from a variety of locals. UAW Region 1A on Detroit's west side has sponsored an International Labor Solidarity Network that periodically sends delegations to maquila cities and Big Three assembly plants in Mexico, with follow-up reports to regional and local meetings after they return. ILSN has also sponsored visits to Detroit by maquiladora workers reporting on their efforts to organize. Such initiatives have only a limited impact if divorced from a wider commitment to building a cross-border movement, but they are a necessary first step towards changing workers' perceptions. In 1998, the Central Labor Council of Northeast Indiana sent a mixed delegation to Reynosa that included workers from United Steering—a plant losing jobs to Mexico. "It's amazing that people survive under these circumstances," the President of Paperworkers Local 7452 later told his members at United Steering, reporting on the endemic poverty in Reynosa. "It sure helped us realize that the problem is not Mexican workers taking our jobs; it's corporate America and our own government." (Resource Center for the Americas, 1998a) This kind of collective experience can spur unionists to more concrete action.



*Solidarity funds.* Hosting cross-border delegations and worker-to-worker meetings can be expensive, especially for the cash-starved groups that support maquiladora organizing. Organizations like the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM) or the Border Committee of Women Workers (CFO) depend on dues and limited contributions from religious, environmental, labor, and women's groups on both sides of the border. To support their efforts, a growing (but still small) number of unions have established "Solidarity Funds" to help staff workers' centers and support the cost of organizers. The CAW's Social Justice fund is the largest of these, generating about \$2.5 million annually through contract language obligating employers (about 100 in all) to pay a per capita amount into the fund—three cents an hour in the case of Big Three contracts, down to one cent an hour for smaller firms.<sup>2</sup> Several other unions have established a payroll check-off (\$1 per pay period in the case of UE contracts) to support cross-border initiatives.<sup>3</sup> (Wells) In the case of the Northeast Indiana Central Labor Council, local unions have pledged to support the CLC's solidarity fund with contributions and plant-gate collections, the money earmarked for a CFO organizer in Reynosa. (Resource Center for the Americas, 1998a)

*Health and safety training.* Because there is no national auto union in Mexico, and because bargaining has so often been subordinated to political deal making, there is a corresponding underdevelopment of the technical skills and training that supports broad-based union organization. Cross-border initiatives that help address this lack of infrastructure are especially visible in the area of workplace health and safety, with both union and activist groups like the Maquiladora Health and Safety Network providing training on hazard recognition and control. The Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras significantly expanded its training program in 2000 with regional meetings in Ciudad Juárez, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo, drawing local organizers and plant workers to train-the-trainer workshops conducted by UAW and CAW staff.<sup>4</sup> (Coalition for Justice In the Maquiladoras; Kourous)

*Crisis Support.* The crucial role of cross-border solidarity has been underlined in the prolonged struggle to win recognition for the independent union at Han Young, a Korean-owned supplier of truck frames located in Tijuana. With the first strike in 1997 over low wages and dangerous shop conditions, community-based activists and unionists in the U.S. and Canada supported the Han Young workers against company firings and government suppression. A boycott of Hyundai—Han Young's customer—and picketing of showrooms, loading docks, and Mexican consulates in 20 cities generated substantial publicity that helped

restrain government suppression of the independents. (Campaign for Labor Rights; Resource Center for the Americas, 1998b, 1999c) Cross-border solidarity has also played a visible role in the case of Custom Trim, a former Canadian-based company that moved production of steering wheels to northern Mexico in the mid-1990s. Here too, a series of strikes and protests beginning in 1997 over wages and workplace safety led to illegal firings and official repression, countered by the solidarity efforts of U.S. and Canadian unions. This support grew out of previous cross-border links and information-sharing focused on chemical exposures. "The workers in Canada at first told us, 'we can't talk about solidarity when we're losing our jobs,'" recalled organizer Marta Ojeda. "But we said, 'You are going to lose your jobs anyway, at least lose them with dignity.'" The Canadian Steelworkers subsequently sponsored a speaking tour for the fired Mexican workers, generating substantial publicity. (*Borderlines*; Resource Center for the Americas, 1999a)

*NAO submissions.* Under NAFTA's labor side accords, citizen organizations can file "submissions" before the National Administrative Offices (NAOs) in Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. alleging that any one of these governments has failed to enforce its own labor laws. Even as a bureaucratic dead-end with no enforcement power, the NAO process promotes cross-border solidarity by stipulating that citizens cannot file NAO complaints against their own government—the filing must be initiated in a second country. Consequently, labor and support groups have formed cross-border coalitions to submit cases that highlight illegal suppression of union organization in the U.S. and Canada, as well as Mexico. Of two dozen submissions in NAFTA's first seven years, three have focused on auto plants: Han Young, Custom Trim, and Echlin-Dana, the latter a brake factory where FAT supporters contesting CTM control were beaten and fired. The submission process has helped bring together a widening coalition of unions and community-based groups, but as expected, the practical outcomes have been limited. (Bognanno and Lu) The official response to the NAO findings against Han Young and Echlin-Dana was to convene an informational meeting in Mexico in the summer of 2000, where government administrators reminded official union leaders of the legal rights protecting workers and dissidents. When independent unionists from Han Young marched into the meeting, they were physically attacked by the official union leaders. (Bacon)

*Union Councils.* The Echlin-Dana NAO submission was the outgrowth of the first formal effort among auto unions to coordinate their efforts on a continental basis. Beginning as the Echlin Workers' Alliance in 1997 and continuing as the Dana Workers' Alliance after a change in

plant ownership, the coalition eventually brought together every union representing Dana's organized factories in North America, including the UAW, CAW, FAT, UE, IUE, Teamsters, Steelworkers, Machinists, and Paperworkers. In April, 1999, these unions organized a public rally in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and conducted plant-based leafleting of Dana workers across the continent, calling for the rehiring of workers illegally fired from the company's Mexican plant.<sup>5</sup>

The initiatives described above—delegations, solidarity funds, training, crisis support, NAO submissions, union councils—represent the emerging elements of a North American movement of auto workers. Cross-border solidarity has even demonstrated its capacity to alter the balance of power in collective bargaining, though the chief example concerns Canada rather Mexico. During the Flint GM strikes of 1998, when the company moved crucial stamping dies out of a struck location, CAW President Buzz Hargrove announced that union members at GM's Oshawa plant would not accept the "runaway" stampings—even though such refusal was illegal under Canadian labor law. Recalling the UAW's support in 1996 when the Canadian union struck GM, Hargrove pledged "to repay that same kind of solidarity." (Akre)

It is important to stress, however, that these initiatives have not yet coalesced into additional union councils, much less a North American federation of auto unions. The case of the Dana Workers Alliance is telling: as the first formal council of auto unions, it is also the only such council, with little recent activity. The UE-FAT "Strategic Alliance" initiated in 1992 is still the only case where two unions have merged their cross-border activities to coordinate organizing and bargaining on a continental basis. Of special interest is their insistence that solidarity is a two-way street, with UE delegations traveling south to support organizing drives and a Workers Center in Ciudad Juárez, and FAT organizers traveling north to help UE organize Mexican-American workers. (Alexander)

The UE-FAT culture of organizing is not easily reproduced across the larger scale and scope of union organization in North America. UE and FAT are relatively small unions with a combined membership of less than 100,000 and a long history of bottom-up organizing—the latter a survival mechanism during years of repression and (in the case of UE) past Red Scares. In this unique environment, the exceptional skills and personal ties of individual leaders can shape union strategy in ways that are not easily reproduced in larger, more diverse organizations, where proper channels are more deliberate and internal politics more complicated. There has been a widening recognition in recent years that

worker-to-worker mobilization is a necessary survival mechanism for all unions in an era of official strike breaking and whipsawing. But application is uneven and uncertain, especially in a coalition effort like the Dana Workers' Alliance, where one or several unions can veto initiatives or withdraw support.

While these organizational dynamics can slow and even fracture cross-border solidarity, there is a political overlay to continental trade that also widens the field for coalition building. Cross-border trade is created and defined by government policy, and there is little doubt that union campaigns opposing NAFTA and blocking its extension have linked labor with a wider movement of students, environmentalists, and border-based community groups. In all likelihood, future campaigns will present a far more united labor front than in 1993, when Mexico's official unions endorsed NAFTA and only FAT and a handful of others opposed it. Since then, support for unfettered free trade has fallen dramatically in Mexico, with the UNT now publicly joining the AFL-CIO in calling for "a fundamental revision of NAFTA." (Resource Center for the Americas, 1999d) Public opinion in the United States has also swung behind the call for international labor rights, a shift demonstrated in 1999 and 2000 by the diversity of groups protesting the WTO in Seattle and the China trade bill in Washington. Following these demonstrations, a national *Business Week*/Harris poll indicated that two-thirds of those surveyed believed free trade benefited consumers, but 69 percent also believed that trade agreements with low-wage countries undermined U.S. wages. Survey respondents placed the highest priority for future trade agreements on preserving the environment, avoiding job loss, and protecting workers' rights, and expressed less concern for expanding exports or keeping prices low. Only 10 percent called themselves "free traders," compared to 51 percent who described themselves as "fair traders" and 37 percent who said they were "protectionist." (*Business Week*)

This sea change in public opinion bodes well for a labor movement still struggling to find its legs in the global economy. The organizational and political barriers to cross-border collaboration remain formidable, but the mental revolution that must precede programmatic change is underway. If nothing else, there is a growing recognition of the unique histories that define each nation's labor movement, and the common grievances that link them all. The latter was demonstrated in the AFL-CIO's recent accords with Mexico's UNT and CTM, both of which call for measures protecting the workplace rights of millions of Mexicans

working in the United States. (Resource Center for the Americas, 1999b, 1999d) Recognition that these immigrant workers come from a nation with a long and continuing history of workplace struggle has also gained ground in recent years, slowly supplanting the image of helpless victims deserving only sympathy or scorn. Mexican labor law, it turns out, is in many ways superior to labor law in the U.S. and Canada, since many workplace rights are enshrined in the Constitution of 1917—a legacy of the Mexican revolution. “The problem is that these rights aren’t enforced in Mexico; they are not even enforced in this country,” as UAW President Stephen Yokich observed in 2000. His remarks represented a significant advance over the protectionism of years past.

“I wish we had the Mexican Constitution as far as workers’ rights,” he added. “It was born under a revolution, but I think it’s dying under capitalism.” (*Ward’s*)

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#### Notes

1. Interviews with leadership of SITIMM, 21–24 May 2000.
2. Phone interview with Ken Luckhart of the CAW’s International Affairs department, 14 August 2000.
3. Phone interview with UE International Affairs Director Robin Alexander, 11 August 2000.
4. Interview with Frank Meirer and Pamela Vossenias, UAW Health and Safety Dept., 11 August 2000.
5. Interview with Brad Markell, UAW Research Department, 11 August 2000.

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- . 1999b. "AFL, CTM Agree to Cooperate," *Working Together* (January-February).
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