

# 6 years since wildcat strike in Matamoros: Unite US, Mexican and Canadian workers to defend jobs and living standards!

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Each passing day brings with it new threats of trade war by the Trump administration, against not only “enemies” like China but also against Mexico and Canada, America’s largest trading partners.

The claim, promoted by union bureaucrats like United Auto Workers president Shawn Fain, that tariffs will save “American” jobs is a lie. The truth is that the most powerful weapon workers have is their unity across national lines.

The potential for a movement uniting workers across North America was shown six years ago, when 70,000 *maquiladora* factory workers conducted a wave of explosive wildcat strikes in Matamoros, Mexico, located across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas. The strikes, which took place at auto parts, electrical and appliance factories owned by US and other transnational corporations, began on January 12 and evolved into a mass movement that lasted into late February and early March 2019.

The *World Socialist Web Site* was the only news outlet that covered the strike extensively, and advanced a program to unite US and Canadian workers with their brothers and sisters in Mexico for a common fight against the transnational corporations. In light of the constant threat of trade war measures and denunciations of Mexican autoworkers by both Trump and the UAW, it is critical that workers study in detail the Matamoros rebellion of 2019. [Links to the WSWS coverage can be found at the bottom of this article].

The militant strikes were fueled by brutal conditions and poverty wages, including workweeks of sixty hours or more and pay as little as 75 cents an hour. The strikers’ main demand was “20-32,” i.e., a 20 percent wage increase and a 32,000-peso (\$1,700) bonus. The strike took the form of an open revolt against the corrupt unions affiliated with the Confederation of Mexican Workers or CTM. Highlighting this fact, marching workers held a banner during one demonstration, declaring, “The union and company kill the working class.”

Defying threats by management, union bureaucrats and police, strikers held popular assemblies attracting hundreds if not thousands of workers, passed resolutions calling for a general strike in the city and marched to other factories to spread the strike. In a major development, expressing the desire of Mexican workers to unite with their class brothers in the United States, they marched to the border crossing, chanting “Gringos [Americans], wake up!”

The strikes hit auto suppliers Fisher Dynamics, Autoliv, Inteva, Joysun Safety Systems, APTIV, Parker and others. This led to parts shortages at Ford, GM, Fiat Chrysler and Nissan plants in the US and Canada and production slowdowns.

The strike coincided with the announcement by General Motors that it was shutting down four plants in the United States and Canada, which was threatening to wipe out as many 15,000 jobs. Far from proposing a united

struggle by autoworkers across North America in defense of the jobs, wages and conditions of all workers, the United Auto Workers and Unifor bureaucracies did everything to conceal news of the Matamoros strike from their members.

By contrast, the *World Socialist Web Site* did everything possible to break the news blackout by the union bureaucracy and corporate media and the Steering Committee of the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committees established direct lines of communication between the Matamoros and US and Canadian autoworkers. On February 9, 2019, the committee held a demonstration in front of GM’s headquarters in Detroit, which called for the unity of US, Mexican and Canadian workers to fight the plant closures.

Strikers at the Fisher Dynamics plant sent a video message to workers and young people participating in the demonstration. They said, “We are here to support our friends in Michigan for you to continue your struggle, just like we are here in Matamoros...The workers of Matamoros, Tamaulipas show our solidarity with our brothers in Detroit in their struggle against mass layoffs. Stand firm and we will continue to stand together! Matamoros and the workers are united in support of the workers of the United States.”

Referring to the strikes in Mexico, a young Ford worker in the Detroit area told the WSWS, “They have been exploited way too long, and it is good they are fighting back...All over the world workers working for these transnational companies are saying they are not going to take it anymore. You have seen strikes in Europe and the yellow vest protests in France. I support everyone who wants a better life.”

The US and other foreign-owned corporations, along with the Mexican ruling class, responded to the Matamoros strike with a campaign of collective punishment, subjecting the courageous workers to mass layoffs, physical attacks and blacklisting. By mid-March at least 4,000 workers were fired, and another 50,000 layoffs had been threatened by Mexico’s main business organization, the Business Coordinating Council.

On March 12, the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, published a statement, titled, “For joint action of US, Canadian and Mexican workers. Defend the Matamoros workers!” The statement warned if the reprisals were not stopped, tens of thousands of workers and their families would be “hurled into destitution and raw material for super-exploitation for years to come.”

It called for workers across the US and Canada to demand an end to the reprisals in Mexico and the rehiring of all victimized workers, with full back pay. It further urged them to inform their co-workers about the situation in Matamoros, popularize their struggle widely on social media, and reach out to their brothers and sisters across the border.

“Preparations should be made for strike action and mass demonstrations, including at the US and Canadian locations of the companies which are

exploiting and victimizing the Matamoros workers.”

In making this call, the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* pointed to the strategic character of the strike and its global significance:

While workers have become increasingly connected with each other across national borders, the gulf between their interests and those of the global corporations and the super-rich has reached unprecedented proportions. Whether in Oshawa, Detroit, Lordstown, Chongqing, China, or Matamoros, the same ruthless enemy—the capitalist ruling class—seeks to squeeze every ounce of profit from workers and then shutter plants and throw tens of thousands into joblessness as it continually searches for cheaper labor and better rates of return.

It continued:

The transnational corporations have for decades relied on the trade unions, whether in Mexico, the US or Canada, in order to maintain “labor peace”—that is, the suppression of strikes and any other forms of struggle by workers. The unions’ corrupt “labor-management partnerships” have gone hand-in-hand with their endless promotion of nationalism, a poisonous divide-and-conquer strategy used to block an internationally unified struggle of workers.

By rebelling against the unions and beginning to form new organizations of the rank and file, the Matamoros workers provided a demonstration of the colossal power workers have when they begin to take independent action. This initiative had to be expanded, the statement concluded, through the expansion of rank-and-file committees across North America.

The months-long strike movement was only wound down through corporate and state repression and the collusion of the new “independent unions,” which were brought in to replace the discredited CTM. Backed by the UAW, AFL-CIO and the US State Department, these unions and their supporters in the pseudo-left Morena Party acted quickly to shut down the strikes and promote illusions in the “labor reforms” by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).

But the strike wave in the global auto industry that began in Mexico in 2019 would soon spread to the United States later that year. In September, 48,000 General Motors workers began what would be a 40-day strike, the longest national auto walkout in half a century. The US strike led to production slowdowns and layoffs in Canada and Mexico, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the global industry and international working class.

The GM strike was also a rebellion, this time against the corporatist UAW bureaucracy that had been colluding with corporate management and successive capitalist governments for decades to slash the jobs, living standards and work conditions of autoworkers. The “culture of corruption” in the UAW apparatus would soon come to light with the arrest of a near dozen top UAW officials, including two past UAW presidents, for embezzling union dues and accepting corporate bribes for signing sweetheart contracts, which halved the wages of new hires and eliminated pensions and other hard-fought gains.

Again, the workers in Mexico strove to unite with their co-workers north of the border. In the days before the expiration of the GM contract in the United States, workers at GM’s plant in Silao—who produce GM’s top-selling pickup trucks for less than \$3 an hour on 12-hour shifts—held a popular assembly and voted to reject management demands to increase

their output to make up for the company’s lost production due to the US strike.

GM responded by firing five militants. The *WSWS* and the autoworker rank-and-file committees immediately launched a campaign to inform striking GM workers of the victimizations and to add the demand for their rehiring, with full back pay, to their strike demands.

Once again, the UAW bureaucracy sought to impose a blackout on any news about the Silao workers. That is because the heroic stand taken by the Silao workers cut across their lying narrative that Mexican workers are the enemies of workers in the US and Canada who, the union bureaucrats claim, are only too happy to work for poverty wages in order to “steal” the jobs of American and Canadian workers.

On the picket lines in Flint and Detroit, Michigan, however, GM workers who learned about the stand of the Silao workers denounced the firings and expressed solidarity with their Mexican brothers.

The UAW bureaucracy never raised the issue of the Mexican workers and after forty days pushed through another sellout deal, which sanctioned the closure of the Lordstown, Ohio assembly plant and other factories, the continuation of the hated two-tier wage and benefit system and expansion of low-paid temporary positions.

A year later, the Unifor in Canada, which relentlessly promoted racist slanders against Mexican workers, gave up remaining defined benefit and hybrid pensions in exchange for GM’s promise to restart operations in the Oshawa plant, albeit with a workforce of largely low-paid second- and third-tier workers.

This struggle took place during the first Trump administration, and like now, the UAW promoted his trade war policies and kept silent on his vicious attacks on immigrant workers. In January 2020, the UAW and other unions hailed Trump’s new US-Mexico-Canada-Trade Agreement, which like 1992 NAFTA agreement before it, was aimed at strengthening the position of American corporations, in this case, against China.

Recognizing the importance of the “independent unions” to contain the opposition of Mexican workers to US-based transnational corporations, Trump agreed to include in the USMCA pact \$240 million in funding for US Department of Labor to “support the implementation of Mexico’s labor reform” and for “educating and training Mexican workers.” But the new unions, hailed by Labor Notes, the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left outfits, have proven to be just another chain around the necks of Mexican workers.

In a similar fashion, Washington engineered a facelift of the UAW bureaucracy. In 2023, Shawn Fain, a long time cog in the union’s bureaucratic machine, was installed as UAW president in a rigged election in which the union apparatus disenfranchised 90 percent of the membership, by refusing to adequately publicize the vote or update members’ mailing addresses so they could receive ballots.

Despite this, socialist Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman won the votes of nearly 5,000 workers running on the program of transferring power from the UAW apparatus to workers on the shop floor and unifying workers across borders under the direction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Fain sold out the 2023 contract battle by 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers, giving the global automakers the green light to destroy thousands of jobs. After his failed attempt to get Harris and the pro-corporate and pro-war Democrats elected, he quickly switched sides and is now colluding with the fascist president against workers in the US and internationally.

## **UAW backs Trump’s tariffs**

On February 3, Fain stated, “The UAW supports aggressive tariff action to protect American manufacturing jobs as a good first step to undoing decades of anti-worker trade policy.” Fain urged Trump not to frame his trade war as a “fight over immigrant and drug policy.” Instead, Fain said, “We are willing to support the Trump Administration’s use of tariffs to stop plant closures and curb the power of corporations that pit US workers against workers in other countries.”

This is a fraud. Trump’s mass deportations of immigrants and trade wars measures are cut out of the same reactionary political cloth. Both are aimed at dividing the working class, strengthening the position of US-based capitalists against their global competitors, and preparing for world war.

How can American workers win the support of Mexican and Canadian workers for a fight against the transnational corporations if they support trade tariffs that would toss thousands of these workers onto the unemployment lines?

The reality is workers in North and South America, Asia, Europe and Africa are connected in a single process of world production. The average “American” vehicle, for example, has as estimated 30,000 individual parts, most of which crisscross the borders of the US, Canada and Mexico at least eight times.

Analysts from Barclays say the 25 percent tariffs on imported parts and assembled vehicles “could effectively wipe out all profits” of the Detroit Three automakers. The added costs for the automakers, which have only been temporarily delayed, would be passed onto consumers and lead to a wave of plant closures and mass layoffs. This would mean the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs in Mexico and Canada, and an estimated 400,000 in the US.

American-First nationalism is based on the reactionary fantasy that the global economy, with its highly complex division of labor, supply chains and production facilities developed over decades, can be stuffed back within the confines of the national economy.

History, from the Nazi’s program of national autarchy to the passage of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act by the US Congress in 1930, has proven that trade war is the first step towards world war. This is why Trump’s trade war measures go hand-in-hand with his pledges to seize the Panama Canal and annex Greenland, Gaza and even Canada.

### **Build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees**

The watchword of autoworkers must not be America First, it must be workers of the world, unite! The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is fighting to unify the working class throughout North America and the world to defend the jobs, living standards and working conditions of all workers.

The IWA-RFC urges workers in the US to expand the network of autoworker rank-and-file committees into every factory and establish lines of communication and coordinated action with their brothers and sisters in Mexico, Canada and other countries to fight the global attack on jobs and conditions by the transnational corporations.

The IWA-RFC has proven to be the only means through which workers can oppose the sabotage of the union bureaucracies, coordinate their struggles across national boundaries, and connect the fight against capitalist exploitation with the fight against Trump’s attack on immigrants and the destruction of the social and democratic rights of the entire working class.

A study of the lessons of the Matamoros struggle is critical for an understanding of the global character of the class struggle and the

development of a politically conscious movement of the working class to put an end to the rule of the capitalist oligarchy, abolish the outmoded nation-state system, and reorganize the global economy under the control of the working class to meet human needs and put an end to poverty, dictatorship and war forever.



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