



## Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

**For the labor rights and all human  
rights of the maquiladora workers**



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Spanish Version

### Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s

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## "We'd Rather See Alcoa Go!"

### 89 Percent of Maquila's Workers Reject Givebacks

When workers at Macoelmex (Alcoa) stood firm in rejecting major benefit cuts, management brought the issue before the company's entire workforce in the Mexican border town of Piedras Negras. In a so-called "Ballot – Decision 2005," Alcoa offered two options and asked all the workers to check off their preference.

Option 1 offered a 4 percent raise in wages, in exchange for an 18-month suspension of various important employee benefits. Option 2, in the ballot's exact words, stated, "I disagree — and I'm aware that the company may make economic decisions that could affect its continuation. I prefer to risk loss of our jobs over a temporary modification of our benefits."

Basically, the entire process constituted a form of blackmail by Alcoa: "either accept the cutbacks, or the maquiladora will move to Honduras," where it has recently beefed up its operations.

The vote was carried out by secret ballot on March 15 and 16, 2005, in three Alcoa plants. Both the company and the union signed off on the results, making them an official part of their union contract. The signed documentation was deposited the next day at the government Arbitration Board. The documents verify that the entire union membership, 2785 workers, cast their ballots. In the end, 89 percent (2487) voted for Option 2, and 11 percent (298) voted for Option 1.

The frustration of both Alcoa management and the official union, the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos – Mexican Workers Federation), was enormous. Both had tried to sink the issues raised by the one-day strike on Feb. 9 (<http://cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/parodeundia.en.html>) by firing 22 workers one week later as supposed instigators (<http://cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/despidosmacoelmex.en.html>). Even so, they failed completely in their effort to push through the benefit cutbacks, which would have reduced worker compensation even more — the issue underlying the February job action.

In our 25 years of day-to-day contact with workers in Mexico's maquiladora industry, we have never witnessed the workforce respond to management with so much clarity. We asked many of the Alcoa workers what they thought was at stake in this vote. They answered us that they didn't want their jobs to disappear, but would prefer to let them go if the price of keeping them was to endure more abuse.

#### Mexicans training Honduran workers

The events of February and March were sparked by a "review" of wage levels under the union contract between Alcoa and the CTM. For months, Alcoa had been pleading business problems, due to ongoing declines in the price it was able to charge for its automotive wire harnesses to vehicle manufacturers like GM and Ford.

As part of its attempt to lower production costs, Alcoa Fujikura — the division of the company that makes wire harnesses — opened a maquiladora in Honduras at the end of 2003 (See Spanish-language company information at [http://www.alcoa.com/honduras/es/news/news\\_release/afl\\_auto\\_opens\\_operation.asp](http://www.alcoa.com/honduras/es/news/news_release/afl_auto_opens_operation.asp)). It began with fabricating the wire for the harnesses. A year later, it started to expand this plant, opening production lines to make harnesses for a new contract with a U.S. firm. Rather than handle this contract through its existing plants in Piedras Negras or Ciudad Acuña, Alcoa opted to disregard its investments in northern Mexican communities like Acuña, Monterrey, and Torreón, in order to create more jobs in Honduras. Mexican team leaders and other employees were sent to train and supervise Honduran workers.

At the moment, Alcoa is denying that it will leave entire communities — it has operations in the Mexican cities of Piedras Negras, Acuña, Torreón, Monterrey, Ciudad Juárez, and Puebla. But it also declines to rule out handling new contracts through Honduras. At the same time, it is continuing to hire workers in Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña.

Supervisors and the union leader told workers in Piedras Negras that they should accept the benefit cutbacks, pointing out that Alcoa could hire two Hondurans for the cost of one Mexican.

#### A New Maneuver: Outside Contracts

Alcoa, for its part, is pursuing efforts to reduce its costs at the expense of its workers. Apparently it hired some 30 workers for the Subaru plant of Macoelmex behind the back of the CTM, under the name "Plastic Harnesses." Workers have seen newspaper ads announcing that a "well-known firm" was hiring workers in a local hotel, rather than following the usual custom of going through the CTM hiring hall.

This may be one way the company is honoring the letter of its signed agreement with the CTM to respect the workers' choice of Option 2 — while hiring new workers under other conditions, as a way of introducing the cutbacks that it unsuccessfully sought to impose on its entire workforce.

#### Working in Spite of — and Against — the CTM

The creative campaign of resistance by the rank and file during these first months of 2005 was carried out in spite of, and against the will of, the local CTM leader, Leocadio Hernández. At each moment he pushed to vote the way that Alcoa wanted. Now that the company has seen that he is no longer useful for controlling the rank and file, he is being pushed aside. On one recent occasion, the front page of the local newspaper, *La Voz*, even ran a headline stating, "Macoelmex Ignores the CTM."

The 89 percent of Alcoa workers who voted against cuts to their benefits offers a reliable indication of the minimum percentage of workers who are opposed to the union leader. It's one more sign that the vast majority of workers reject the CTM — as indicated by a similar margin in 2002, when the orkers elected an independent slate for their plant-level leadership (sectional committee). In a related development, the International Labor Office, an arm of the United Nations, will review a complaint against the Mexican government for obstructing and denying legal registration to an independent union at Alcoa in Piedras Negras. The complaint will be heard by the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association at its session May 26 and 27 in Geneva.

#### Pressure on Workers to Resign

Working conditions at Macoelmex continue to be very poor. The last time workers received a raise was a 4 percent increase in February 2004. With no wage increases and a benefit freeze during all of 2005, workers will lose considerable purchasing power, in the face of inflation that is predicted to pass 4.5 percent this year. The amount workers take home ranges from \$50 to \$80 a week, or a little more. The constant pressure from supervisors continues.

The workers are expecting Alcoa to pressure them to resign on their own, to reduce its obligation to make severance payments. This will also help the company cut back its labor force. (For more information about current problems faced by workers, see <http://cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/puntostrabajadores.en.html>)

#### **Fired Workers Want Their Severance**

The 22 workers who were terminated on Feb. 18, 2005, were singled out by Alcoa – but not as such things usually occur. This time, those who were fired were not acting as organizers inside the plant. Many of those who lost their jobs never even opened their mouths during the strike, and were not “instigators” of the job action, as their termination letters charged. This account by some of the terminated workers is backed up by others who observed the work stoppage.

Some of the workers who were terminated were even allies of Leocadio Hernández, and a good number did not even know each other. Since management could not pick out leaders among the workers involved in the stoppage, it chose people for termination haphazardly, hoping to intimidate the entire workforce.

In response, everyone who was terminated filed complaints demanding severance payments – but not reinstatement (with the exception of a single employee). The workers know that if they were reinstated they would be exposed to ongoing harassment by their supervisors. Given the instability of the firm’s operations, they would rather receive their severance pay and forget about Alcoa for once and for all.

#### **A Lesson from Below About Labor in the Global Economy**

The terminations did not weaken the notable level of unity and determination among the workers who remain in the plant. The 89 percent vote against the company’s plans took place nearly a month after the firings.

The workers rejection of the bid by Alcoa and the CTM to cut labor costs (and thus workers’ compensation) may offer an important lesson to all workers in the global economy. Macoelmex workers have shown that they are unwilling to keep performing at world-class levels if they have to bargain for crumbs.

#### **Paty de Luna Is Seeking Reinstatement**

Ana Patricia de Luna Duarte, or Paty, worked at almost a supervisory level in Macoelmex Plant No. 2. She was one of three women in the plant who were terminated on Feb. 18. Paty was in charge of process management, coordinating and overseeing the work of 17 operators on four production lines. She has always been a responsible and skilled worker.

Paty believes her termination was unjustified and mainly reflected the animosity of a particular foreman, Manuel Almaráz. Others among the group that lost their jobs believe that their termination had nothing to do with the work stoppage, but that they were fingered by particular supervisors who wanted to get rid of them.

Paty is fighting to get her job back because one of her children is disabled. He needs corrective shoes and other assistive devices for his feet and legs. The boy, Jesús María González de Luna, or *Chuito*, who is ten years old, can only walk using a walker and other aids. Because he is still growing, his shoes and other equipment need to be replaced frequently. He also needs medical attention and intensive rehabilitation services.

Despite these challenges, *Chuito* attends school, where he receives very good grades. Paty’s husband is also a maquiladora worker. They have three other small children and obviously cannot maintain their family on a single salary.

Paty de Luna, like the other workers who lost their jobs, is challenging Alcoa to show her the videos that the company cites as proof that she was one of the “instigators” of the work stoppage on Feb. 9. As she is quite sure that the video shows nothing of the sort, she has filed a complaint demanding to be reinstated.

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