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The Search for Counterparts

A labor-community agenda must cross borders as well

■ *David Brooks*

"Why, all of a sudden, are you calling us 'brothers'? Is it because today you realize you need us, because you are about to lose your jobs—even perhaps your unions—and because you think we stand to gain from your loss? Where have you been for the past 40 years, when many times we were in need of you?" These frank questions were posed by a leader of one of Mexico's major trade unions to his American counterpart at an initial meeting which recently took place between the trade unions.

Mexico has been discovered by individuals and organizations in the U.S. and Canada for the first time as a result of the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA is presented by the Bush, Salinas and Mulroney administrations as an initiative to formalize the economic integration process between the three countries. They see the deal as only the first step in constructing Bush's proposed "Enterprise for the Americas" initiative which intends to create a "new order" for capital from Anchorage to Tierra del Fuego.

Ever since news of the proposed NAFTA leaked in February 1990, an expanding number of labor unions, family farm and farm-

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worker organizations, environmental groups, immigrant rights organizations, and other grass roots organizations in North America have come together, recognizing the common challenge to forge a cooperative response to economic integration. They see the trade agreement as going far beyond formalizing trade relations: it is a blueprint to liberalize the mobility of capital and alter the conditions for investment and production throughout the Western Hemisphere. They conclude that one way towards ensuring economic and social justice would be to build alliances between a multi-sectoral movement not only within each country—but across borders as well.

LABOR FACES ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

The contours of labors' response to North American economic integration are still taking shape. Though the trade union response is essentially protectionist—a resounding “no” to trade liberalization—this initial response has been tempered by the realization that the economic integration process will continue with or without a formal trade agreement. There is clear evidence that labor has been grappling for a decade with the effects of economic integration: immigration policy, runaway plants to the U.S.-Mexican border, and the impact of Latin America's and Mexico's debt crises on reducing demand for U.S. exports.

U.S. and Canadian labor leaders, committed to defending their members' jobs, are slowly acknowledging that rejecting the deal will not, in the long run, solve the problem. Although still tinged at times with Mexico-bashing rhetoric, most unions now call for “fair trade” that will benefit workers both North and South. Warning that the proposed NAFTA would promote a downward spiral of wages and living standards for all workers, they propose the opposite: harmonize upwards.

But how? Two major problems face U.S. and Canadian labor organizations: how to create a labor strategy for integration and, secondly, how to create the space for a cooperative trinational approach given that many official counterparts in Mexico do not share the position of total opposition to the NAFTA.

Publicly, most labor organizations and rank and file in Mexico support the signing of a NAFTA, although this position shifts depending on the political dynamics. Mexican unionists point out that in their country which has suffered an economic crisis for the last decade where real wages fell by over 50%, and where one million new job-seekers enter the market each year, the promise of jobs is a powerful one. Just as in the U.S. and Canada, no matter

how conscious one is about the negative long-term implications of certain economic policies, rejecting a job is a luxury no one can afford.

THE SEARCH FOR COUNTERPARTS

Despite differences, a new form of solidarity is emerging between unions in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. They are beginning to meet as equal partners, basing their relations on the concrete interests and legitimate rights of each labor organization. The search for ways of working together among international labor in this context has opened new spaces and provoked new dialogues around organizing and bargaining strategies.

There is growing recognition that U.S. labor's strategic response to economic integration must be forged in consort with labor counterparts in Mexico and Canada. The Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union is one of the few unions that fully embraces this strategy—and extends the search for counterparts to all countries in Central and South America.

Economist Ron Blackwell, assistant to the president of ACTWU, explains: "Traditionally, we have had a commitment to international labor solidarity. But now it is no longer simply a question of traditions or morals. It's a matter of immediate self-interest. Workers in high-wage countries will not be able to defend their living standards without struggling together with workers in the other countries of the Western Hemisphere to raise their living conditions."

"We have to recognize that we live in an integrated international economy," Velazquez points out. "Corporations make deals across borders. Why shouldn't unions do the same?"

Efforts to identify and engage counterparts are still new. Despite the extensive interrelations among the three North American countries, the links between labor organizations, especially in the case of Mexico, are few. But never before has there been such an urgent need to seek out counterparts as many trade unionists recognize that the development of effective organizing and bargaining strategies in the future will depend on creating tri-national, and ultimately hemispheric, alliances.



Baldemar Velazquez is joined by his Mexican counterparts at the recent FLOC convention.

"What's so difficult about identifying your counterparts?" asks Baldemar Velazquez, leader of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), when told that labor unions were having a difficult time finding whom to talk with in Mexico. "They are the workers in your same sector, or work for the same transnational corporation, just on the other side of the border."

FLOC's search for its counterparts began in 1985, when Campbell's Soups sought to diversify its supply base by contracting with a farmworkers' union in northern Mexico. FLOC made direct contacts with its counterparts and Velazquez conducted a series of meetings with the Mexican workers in which they devised a common strategy for negotiating with Campbell's. The result of the unions' cooperative binational approach: the Mexican workers obtained their best contract ever and FLOC curtailed Campbell's ability to effect the wage rates of its membership in Ohio.

"We have to recognize that we live in an integrated international economy," Velazquez points out. "Corporations make deals across borders. Why shouldn't unions do the same? We have to go back to the belief that wherever there are workers, we will organize. The only way that we're really going to gain better conditions is through organizing workers—and cooperating with other unions that are threatened by the same corporations."

The telecommunication workers unions of Mexico, the U.S., and Canada are moving in the same direction as the farmworkers. Although the unions openly disagree on the NAFTA (the Mexican

union conditions its support), they recognize the need to open a trilateral space to find ways to support each other as they face the international changes within the telecommunications industry. In February 1992, the Communications Workers of America, the Communications Workers of Canada, and the Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana signed a formal "alliance" at the Executive Council meeting of the AFL-CIO. The three unions agreed "to work together to defend union workers' rights in North America . . . We will work to expand coordinated collective bargaining and organizing through other alliances and the appropriate international bodies."

A precedence for this formal alliance was set in October 1991 when eleven unions from eight countries announced an alliance against the anti-union activities of Northern Telecom, a Canadian-based telecommunications equipment maker. Their action plan addresses increased job security, an end to plant closings, and a pledge to assist unorganized workers who seek union recognition.

The effort is a joint labor response to the dramatic reduction of Northern Telecom's unionized workforce. While the corporation's employment has soared, its unionized workforce has decreased by half—from 41% to 21% over the last decade. Northern Telecom achieved this reduction through a global anti-union strategy, especially by moving jobs out of Canada to lower-wage, nonunion countries (including the U.S. where union membership has dropped by two thirds). The campaign is a key international labor initiative. As Joe Hannafin, national representative of the Communications Workers of Canada says, "This is a global problem, so it requires a global approach."

On-going conversations among national leaders are also taking place between the National Education Association and the SNTE (the largest union in Latin America), and the UE and the independent Frente Autentico del Trabajo (FAT). FAT also has an on-going relationship with the Confederacion de Sindicatos Nacionales of Quebec, Canada. Exploratory discussions between national officials from a number of other sectors such as electrical, textiles and apparel, auto, and health are also taking place.

Worker Exchanges

As the search for counterparts continues, there has been a number of worker exchanges and meetings among the rank and file. Worker exchanges are sometimes provoked by moments of crisis; other times by unions and grassroots organizations taking a long-term view.

As labor efforts at the local level have intensified, they have also

brought the trilateral discussion to the top. Much of the interest by trade union leadership at the national level is a direct result of the local rank and file initiatives; it is a bottom-up movement within national unions. These first meetings between counterparts are the beginnings of engagements to create the basis for long-term cooperation and nourish the nascent dialogue between labor in North America.

The first contacts immediately shatter stereotypes on both sides. U.S. unionists, unaware of the rich history of Mexico's labor movement, are shocked by the high level of working class consciousness among Mexican workers. On the other hand, their Mexican counterparts are surprised to learn that low wage workers exist in the wealthiest country on earth.

"I am astounded, this is a union shop in the richest city on earth, but they work in worse conditions than we do in Mexico City," exclaimed a visiting representative of Mexico's independent September 19 Seamstresses Union after an ILGWU organizer led her through the Chinese garment sweatshops in New York City.

The dialogue was conducted in Spanish, English and Chinese. "But we understood each other very clearly," noted the Mexican unionist.

During the Ford workers strike at a plant at the outskirts of Mexico City two years ago, a number of UAW locals along with other labor groups in the U.S. and Canada organized a solidarity campaign. Ford workers in Minnesota, St. Louis, Texas and others, organized speaking tours and forums with Mexican Ford union members, arranged to visit them in Mexico, developed a material assistance campaign, and brought pressure on Ford and government officials in the U.S. and Mexico. Ford workers in the three countries wore black armbands in memory of Cleto Nigmo, who was killed during the labor struggle at Ford. The struggle against the same transnational corporation provided a bridge for unknown counterparts to find each other.

Several exchanges have taken place between women workers in Tennessee and their counterparts of the *Comite Fronterizo de Obreras* (Border Committee of Women Workers) based in Matamoros and Reynosa, Mexico (see box). In February 1991, several Mexican women workers visited Tennessee, speaking to community and worker gatherings about the living and working conditions in the maquiladora towns. Then in July, factory workers sponsored by the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (a FIRR affiliate) and ACTWU travelled to Mexico to meet workers, witness living conditions, and share stories. "Because thousands of factory jobs have moved from Tennessee to Mexico, workers have a vital

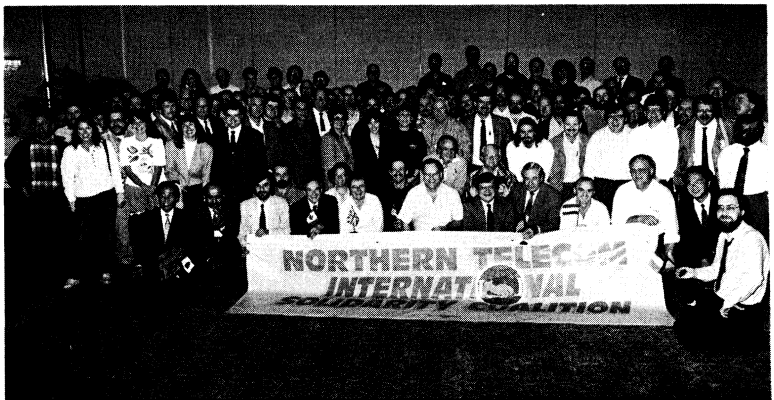
interest in what is going on there. The trips broke down the barriers that divide us, and we shared our homes and lives with each other," says Susan Williams, staffperson for TIRN.

Workers' first reactions to being put in jeopardy by the tri-national corporate strategy are often anti-Mexican and tinged with xenophobia and even racism. But as exchanges take place, workers quickly realize that the enemy is not the Mexican worker, but corporate strategies and government economic policies.

International labor bodies

On another level, there have been several exchanges through international labor forums. One of the most advanced initiatives is promoted by ACTWU with its Latin American counterparts. "No Economic Integration Without Labor Participation," has been adopted as the slogan of the "integrationist agenda" developed at the first summit of the Textile and Apparel Unions of the Americas (FITTVCC/ORI) held in Caracas last September.

Courtesy Canadian Auto Workers and CWA.



The shape of organizing to come? Eleven international unions agreed to take on the anti-union telecommunications giant, Northern Telecom.

Northern Telecom's Major Worldwide Facilities



At that meeting, union leaders throughout the hemisphere agreed that economic integration is fundamentally transforming the economic and political context for their unions. They concluded that without adequate attention to the social and environmental dimensions of this integration, "workers of all countries will suffer and unions throughout the region will be weakened." The textile and apparel unions agreed to foment an "integrationist approach" as a response and demand that "trade unions in each of the countries in the hemisphere must enjoy the broadest participation" in all negotiations and agreements.

This effort contributed to a subsequent meeting of the ICFTU/ORIT in Costa Rica (October 30-November 3, 1991) which represents the central bodies of trade unions from 22 countries in the hemisphere, including the AFL-CIO, CTM, and Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). The unions discussed economic integration and development and agreed on the need for labor to actively participate in the process. They concluded that "integration agreements, of whatever form, will in the long run fail to establish a basis for popular support if they do not contain a full role for trade unions." The trade unions in the Western Hemisphere agreed to refuse support for any trade agreements that neglect labor's agenda.

FANCY MEETING YOU HERE

As a result of responding to NAFTA negotiations, labor has found itself working with an assortment of sometimes unconventional allies: environmental, farmer, consumer, human rights, Latino community based groups, and other grass roots organizations. This relatively new arena has tremendous potential for strengthening a cross-sectoral alliance within the U.S. as well as offering a bridge to similar multi-sectoral networks in both Mexico and Canada.

The January 15, 1991 Congressional Forum sponsored by dozens of national labor, environmental, farmer, consumer, and human rights groups launched a formidable movement that directly altered the three governments' free trade program. The U.S. administration and business supporters of NAFTA found themselves confronted by a broad front questioning their agenda and the "fast tracking" of the negotiations.

From this movement emerged various coalition efforts. First focusing on the fight to derail "fast track", they moved into a long-term political and educational effort on trade issues. Relations were established with citizen group networks working in both Canada and Mexico so that the popular response to the "corporate

LRR FOCUS: "We Need to Get Together More"

Luvernel Clark is shop steward of ACTWU Local 1742 in Knoxville, Tennessee and chairperson of the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network's Maquiladora Committee which participated in a worker exchange to Mexico in the summer of 1991. She works at Allied Signal, in a plant that had 3000 employees in 1971, but today has less than 400. The jobs were sent by Allied first to a non-union "greenfield" location in Greenville, Alabama in 1982, and from there to Agua Prieta, Mexico. Fran Ansley, associate professor at the University of Tennessee College of Law and member of the TIRN delegation, interviewed Clark for *Labor Research Review*:



When we met with the women from the CFO, I felt like they were strong people, to have to deal with what they have to deal with, and to get out and try to organize the people out there.

They were really what a union ought to be—they were like grouped together. And they were pulling their strength from each other. A lot of times, I know we have our ups and downs where we all disagree, and I guess they do too, but it seemed to me that they were all working with one accord. Trying hard as they can to build these unions up in their shops. Really taking time and patience to listen to their workers, to the ones they were trying to help get organized.

They were taking this a slow step at a time, which I understood why. And I thought that was good, if that's the way it has to be worked. And I think they were doing a good job at it.

And listening to the workers, I don't know, it just felt like listening to us.

One girl was standing up for the people that didn't know their rights, was trying to teach them what their rights were, and trying to tell them what the company was going to do to them. . . . That whole meeting was just such a moving meeting, because they said it with so much feeling. I mean, you could tell it was coming from their hearts.

They are grateful to have jobs. But they want to be treated like human beings. Like human beings, they want to make a decent wage where they can have a decent living. I think they are proud to have jobs. And I think they kind of fear, too, that we have the attitude that they're taking our jobs away. And I guess most Americans do! I'd say the majority of them, to be honest. The Mexican workers have that fear. But all in all, I think they'd like

to unite and be a coalition, and do something about the standards.

I think Teresa and Olga really enjoyed coming here and seeing what the factories and stuff were all about. And that gave them a bright idea on things that they could go back and tell the people in Mexico.

I really think that they were, they could be, if they could get a lot more people involved, one of the strongest unions there is. Really. If they could get everyone taught. But you know, I never think that'll be possible. I really don't. Because of the way the government is, and these American companies. And then they hire these people like their supervisors and stuff to keep a threat over these people who need jobs so bad. And these people are so frightened of them, that things may never change. But I think it's our duty to try to help make that change.

The main thing, I think, that I got out of this whole trip, is seeing what I fight for right here in the U.S. day after day after day, trying to make things better for my kids and my grandkids, or *somebody's* children that have to work in these factories. And then go down there and think that the U.S. thinks that those people are not human. That's what gets me. It's the gall, that the stuff we fight to get out of our plants, they put somewhere else! With no standards whatsoever. I fought a long time and testified at that Right-to-Know hearing. And then to see that they're taking this stuff across the border to these people that they think are not human the same as we are. And let them work in it. That's what galls me.



ERNESTO MORA



The sight of where we went in Colonia Roma (a workers' neighborhood) will always stick in my head, if nothing else ever does. I see shacks, sitting in muddy water. No sewers. Trash. One person on our trip said that they should put up a sign in Colonia Roma which says "American Made."

We need to try to get the Free Trade Agreement right, where it would help both sides. Because there is going to be some trade. We can just forget it to say that there will not be. Cause there will. But make sure that they have the same rights on both sides, their wages are with our wages.

I mean, don't give the companies access to move here, yonder, and everywhere, because they hang the same threat over those Mexican worker's heads as they do our heads. "We're moving to Mexico." Well, they'll tell them they're moving somewhere else if they bring the union in, so it's just the same. There's no difference. There's not.

We need a chance for people from the U.S. and Mexico to get together more. (Laughing) Well, not Bush and Salinas. But rank and file union members, I think they should have more, closer relationships. And that way our voice will be stronger on both sides.

Another trip in the future where people who work for the same company, now that would be great. Because the worker exchange I think is going to be very important, that we keep this up. Because I believe if we let our guard down, then they'll just run away with it. They're going to anyway, if they can, but this way they know that we're right on top of them.



PAT BARRY

Wherever NAFTA negotiators meet, a rainbow of union and citizen groups meet too. This rally took place in August 1991, in Seattle.

agenda'' is increasingly trilateral.

Coalitions and networks in Washington D.C., such as the Mobilization on Development, Trade, Labor and the Environment and Citizens' Trade Watch along with the national efforts of the Fair Trade Campaign have nourished the emergence of regional multi-sectoral coalitions in Seattle, northern California, Texas, and Missouri, among other places. Dozens of local and national labor, religious, community and environmental organizations also participate in the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras.

These coalitions and campaigns organize conferences; participate in local, regional, and national forums; present testimony; develop educational materials; and stage actions and press events. They have been so effective that within a few months, they have forced policy-makers and the media to view them as legitimate participants in the national debate. At a trilateral level, an on-going effort by the networks is the organizing of "citizen" meetings parallel to, and in the same place as, the ministerial meetings on the free trade negotiations. In Toronto, Seattle, Zacatecas, Washington, D.C., and back to Canada, the official government representatives have been followed and directly confronted by representatives of citizen networks from the three

nations. Through these efforts, citizen groups continue to provide a thorough critique of the free trade agenda, develop the premises for an alternative trade and development plan, and expand the political debate beyond the confines of the official discussions.

Labor, which in many cases provides the core support for both the national and local/regional coalitions, now has the opportunity to forge alliances with other social sectors on developing long-term strategies beyond the immediate trade agenda.

The potential for these alliances is extensive and has been demonstrated through the organization of local and national level efforts, whether it be a local action in Texas or a national forum, or lobbying Congress. Recognition that the international economic policies of the administration are affecting the concerns of not only labor, but farmers, consumer groups, environmentalists, and women among others allows for the consolidation of a multi-front response. In effect, the multi-sectoral approach releases each of these constituencies from being pegged as a "single" or "special interest" group and expands labor's role in the public policy debate throughout the country and in the international arena as well.

DEVELOPMENT AS A DOMESTIC ISSUE

These labor efforts, along with the budding new coalitions and the expanding trinational dialogue, are provoking another area of discussion: alternative trade and development proposals.

In February 1991, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, leader of the democratic opposition movement in Mexico, presented his "Continental Development and Trade Initiative," a counterproposal to the NAFTA. Cardenas's initiative is based on the premise that North American integration must not come at the cost of working people in any of the three countries. He shifts the debate from simply "trade" to development. Trade should be viewed "an instrument of development, not an end in itself," Cardenas says.

Canadian labor, in coalition with dozens of other social organizations who together make up the Action Canada Network, helped to spark the growing popular debate on trade and development in the U.S. and Mexico. As they demand abrogation of their free trade agreement, they have also had to propose alternatives.

Bruce Campbell, a former research analyst for the CLC, writes that "a different arrangement would have to attach primacy to the rights of national development over the rights of transnational corporations. It would have to foster upward convergence of social and environmental standards instead of a . . . dynamic which pits worker against worker, community against community. . . ."

CONCLUSION

Working people in North America are facing an unprecedented challenge: the integration of the first and third world. For the first time ever, a developing nation is directly affecting the domestic body politic of the United States. Will we effectively meet this challenge?

Three general areas of action must be strengthened. We must continue to incorporate a trilateral perspective into local and regional cooperative efforts among labor. That requires identifying counterparts, organizing efforts based on a "common ground", and ensuring trilateral participation in our initiatives. Secondly, we must continue to promote cross-sectoral coalitions with other affected constituencies at both local, national and international levels. Finally, we must use existing international channels to promote a labor response that is based on the collective interests of all workers.

This is an extraordinary moment in history: as our governments have opened trilateral negotiations from "above," they inadvertently opened a space "below"—a space that scarcely existed before.

The challenge is a long-term one. The response to a NAFTA is only a beginning. Indeed, it has been a catalyst. But the question before labor is much bigger than that; the question has to do with labor's participation in defining a new hemispheric relationship. A response based on the interests of working people poses several challenges: can labor develop cooperative working relations with its counterparts across borders? What are the elements for developing an international bargaining strategy shared by labor organizations in North America? What is the best way to develop the potential for an on-going alliance among organizations from various social constituencies within this country and their counterparts both north and south?

To think about our local work on economic integration issues in a trilateral dimension, to build coalitions and to form an international space for labor that leads to its full participation in the hemispheric economic and social debate will nourish a fundamental need: the creation of an alternative framework for hemispheric cooperation and development based on the interests of working people.

The "corporate agenda" has been unveiled. The beginning of an unprecedented response by working people is now in the making. *Para los pueblos no hay fronteras.* ■

RESOURCES

ORGANIZATIONS

Canada:

Canadian Centre for
Policy Alternatives
251 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 804
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5J6

Common Frontiers
11 Madison Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M5R 2F2

United States:

Fair Trade Campaign
220 South State Street, Suite 71
Chicago, IL 60604

Mobilization on Development,
Trade, Labor and the Environment
Box 74, 100 Maryland Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20002

Citizens Trade Watch
215 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20003

American Friends Service Committee,
Mexico-U.S. Border Program
1501 Cherry Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Coalition for Justice in the
Maquiladoras
475 Riverside Drive, Room 566
New York, NY 10115

Mexico-U.S. Dialogos
870 President Street
Brooklyn, NY 11215

Mexico:

Red Mexicana de Accion Frente
El Libre Comercio
c/o FAT
Godard 20
Colonia Guadalupe Victoria
Mexico, DF 07790

Mexico-U.S. Dialogos
(see above)

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K1P 5J6

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145 Ninth Street
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New York, NY 10003

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