

INTERNATIONALIST LABOR COMMUNICATION
BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO IN THE
PERIOD PRECEDING AND FOLLOWING THE PASSAGE OF NAFTA

by

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OVERVIEW

The globalization of capital, along with new communication technologies--computers and communication satellites--which have made this globalization possible, have changed the distribution of labor globally and in many instances the nature of work itself.¹ "Global assembly lines" have become a reality, where word processing may be done in Singapore or the Bahamas, and regular wage employment can be replaced by casual labor, making the distribution of and remuneration for such labor decreasingly under organized union control.² The new technologies enable corporations to have widely centralized production facilities, and to relocate resources and these facilities with relative ease, while maintaining centralized decision-making control. In the United States, the struggle to organize workers collectively will decreasingly take place at the factory gate within national boundaries, and will increasingly have to occur across national borders among and between workers and labor organizations globally.

The recent passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is an example of regionalization, if not globalization, of capital, and provides a window of opportunity to examine the nature of international labor communication between the U.S. and Mexico. Using Waterman's model of "internationalist communication" as a yardstick, this research paper examines international labor communication between unions and labor activists in Mexico and in the United States in the period leading to and since the passage of NAFTA. The examination includes communication between international union leaders in the two countries, as well as internationalist communication between rank-and-file activists and local unions in Mexico and the U.S., including organizing efforts in place or anticipated. This research paper also examines the use of new or alternative media. The research was conducted in the context of international labor communications that occurred over a two-year period prior to the passage of NAFTA, and analyzes the extent to which such communication has formed the

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basis for ongoing work. Material was gathered through interviews with labor leaders and staff of three international unions, interviews with rank-and-file leaders and labor activists, written newsletters, popular researched reports and periodicals, audiovisuals, and electronic communication, such as available through LaborNet.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Peter Waterman, who has written extensively on international labor communication, has offered a communications model, which he calls "internationalist communication," defined as "the creation of transterritorial solidarity relations which enrich and empower popular and democratic communities or collectivities by exchanging, sharing, diversifying, and synthesizing their ideas, skills, and arts."³ In support of the necessity for this model, Waterman asserts that neither mainstream communications media nor traditional international labor communication meet the communication needs of working people. In the mainstream media:

Labor news must not only pass the criteria for newsworthiness quasi-universal in the bourgeois press. It is also subject to systematic anti-labor bias, to a hostile interpretive framework, to handling with a delegitimising vocabulary, and to stress on its activities primarily in terms of disruption and negation.⁴

Traditional international communications media for workers, Waterman maintains, replicates that of the international media in its hierarchical structure and control by a professional or political elite.

In contrast, he argues that the new media--including academic journals, newsletters, popular researched reports and periodicals, audiovisuals--are horizontal in nature, and the producers are:

1) closer to the ground level than those of the old, and 2) motivated toward facilitating shop floor contacts and information flows internationally. Waterman envisions internationalist communication as a synthesis of "internationalism" and "alternative communication." He advocates four fundamental

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characteristics of alternative communication, as embodied in the writing of Fred Strangelaar, as a basis for internationalist communication, which call for the content, symbolism, and language of internationalist communication to come directly from [in the labor context] working people, who should play an active role in both the production and distribution of this communication, which has a mobilizing and organizing role, and an orientation towards social transformation.⁵

OVERVIEW OF ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK ON NAFTA DEBATE

Prior to the passage of NAFTA, policy briefing papers, popular labor-based newsletters, and periodicals were written, and organizing was undertaken in the United States around the deleterious affect that such an agreement would have on American jobs, on the U.S. economy, and on working standards and conditions in the U.S. and in Mexico.

A briefing paper by the Economic Policy Institute, in Washington, D.C., forecast that the model that North American countries choose to integrate their economies--the slow and gradual European model, committed to integration without penalizing workers, or that implied by the agreement proposed by the Bush, Salinas, and Mulroney Administrations of removing remaining barriers to the transborder flow of capital, goods, and services, leaving labor, social, and environmental regulation to the prevailing economic and political forces--would impact the course of economic development during the next several decades.⁶ The NAFTA "fast-track," assert the authors of the EPI report, is fundamentally intended to facilitate further the shift in investment to Mexico.⁷ Supporting the argument that corporate investors will seek a low-wage advantage, contrasted with a "high-skills, high-wage" path,⁸ Faux and Lee cite the flight of hundreds of Canadian companies to the United States, after the implementation of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement in 1989, where a relatively small but evidently compelling wage differential existed (about 1.17 to 1 as of early 1991).⁹ In Mexico

The rapid expansion of maquiladora production--in which goods are assembled in Mexico from imported parts and reexported to the United States, paying tariff only on the value added in Mexico--has shifted hundreds of thousands of jobs from the United States to Mexico. Currently, about 500,000 Mexican workers are employed in maquiladoras, at an average wage approximately half that prevailing in the rest of Mexico's manufacturing sector...Wages in the maquiladora section are approximately one-tenth to one-fourteenth of U.S. manufacturing wages...¹⁰

Contrary to popular conception, the maquiladoras do not produce only relatively low-skill, labor-intensive goods. In 1994, sewing garments, which may have been the main activity thirty years ago when the maquiladora zone was set, accounted for less than 10 percent of maquiladora workers; more than 40 percent of maquiladora work was in electronics and 20 percent in transportation equipment. One-third of non-oil U.S. imports from Mexico came from the maquiladora sector.¹¹ From the mid-seventies to 1994, the maquiladora program grew from 120 plants to 1,800 and from approximately 19,000 to 500,000 workers.¹² According to a 1993 Report of the AFL-CIO Task Force on Trade, the average maquiladora hourly compensation was \$1.64.¹³

In the manufacturing sector in Mexico, where the levels of multinational investment have dramatically increased since privatization began in 1983 under De la Madrid, productivity levels approach U.S. levels.¹⁴ A 1993 study by Professor Harley Shaiken of the University of California, San Diego, found that a U.S. auto factory in Mexico achieved 85 percent of the performance of its U.S. counterpart in machine yield--a measure of the productivity of technology in a capital intensive plant--after less than two years of operation, and 97 percent in the last year of production, although workers were paid a fraction of U.S. wages.¹⁵ A comparison of manufacturing wages in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico in 1990 is illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Comparison of North American Wages,* 1990

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United States	Canada	Mexico
\$14.83	\$15.94	\$1.85

*

Hourly compensation costs in U.S. dollars for production workers in manufacturing.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁶

For U.S. workers, displaced by the flow of capital seeking low wages in Mexico, experience has shown that they are "more likely to move *down* the job ladder, to lower-paying jobs, to move *off* the ladder to permanent unemployment, not *up* the ladder to better jobs than they started with."¹⁷ EPI economists have estimated that the United States would lose 550,000 high-wage jobs over the next 10 years as a result of NAFTA.¹⁸ For Mexican workers, the devaluation of the peso has sharply reduced the purchasing power of Mexican workers. During the 1980's, real wages in Mexico fell by about 40 percent.¹⁹ Despite predictions that Mexican wages would rise with the passage of NAFTA, two studies suggested that rapidly falling prices in grains--expected under free trade--would result in large population flows from Mexican rural areas, which are heavily dependent on the production of basic grains, to the cities, resulting in negative net changes in Mexican urban wages.²⁰ Large scale displacement of small basic grain farmers and agricultural workers was also expected to occur. More than one hundred thousand Mexican workers have been displaced already as a result of restructuring of newly privatized industries.²¹ Absent relief of the crushing burden of the Mexican debt, and without strict standards written into NAFTA which protect labor, the challenge facing Mexican workers will be to thwart continued economic exploitation.

NAFTA AFTERMATH - FIVE YEARS FOLLOWING THE PASSAGE OF NAFTA

In a report issued February, 1999, Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch conducted an assessment of economic performance in the course of the five years since the passage of NAFTA.^{21a} In the area of job creation and job quality in the United States, according to Public Citizen, NAFTA's performance

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resulted in a failing grade. Analyzing figures from only one government program to assess job loss under NAFTA (the NAFTA Trade Adjustment Assistance or TAA), more than 200,000 U.S. workers have been certified as NAFTA casualties.^{21b} Utilizing trade flow data to calculate job loss under NAFTA (where using the same formula, proponents of NAFTA had predicted NAFTA job creation of 200,000 jobs per year), Public Citizen's analysis indicates a net job loss of 450,000 jobs since NAFTA went into effect in 1994.^{21c}

In a competitive race to the bottom, U.S. workers have been pitted against Mexican workers, particularly maquila workers, and the result has been detrimental to workers on both sides of the border.

TABLE 2
Comparison of Wages in U.S. and Mexico,* 1990 & 1997

	United States	Mexico
1990	\$14.83	\$1.85
1997	\$18.74	\$1.51

* Hourly compensation costs in U.S. dollars for production workers in manufacturing.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.^{21d}

In contradiction to the predictions of NAFTA proponents that Mexican wages would increase with the passage of NAFTA, Mexican wages have declined since the enactment of NAFTA. As Table 2 indicates, manufacturing wages in Mexico have declined 22.5% from 1990 to 1997.

In the U.S., according to a Cornell University study, the percentage of U.S. companies following through on threats to close in response to union organizing drives tripled under NAFTA.^{21e} In the manufacturing sector, the U.S. has gone from a pre-NAFTA trade surplus of \$4.6 billion with Mexico to

a deficit of \$8.9 billion, suggesting a loss of high-paying, high-benefit manufacturing jobs in the U.S. since the implementation of NAFTA. Since NAFTA went into effect, Mexican manufacturing imports into the U.S. have increased by 129 percent.^{21f}

At the time NAFTA was enacted, 546,433 Mexican workers were employed in maquiladoras. As of April, 1998, 983,272 Mexicans were so employed. While the maquila sector is the top generator of employment in Mexico, wages in the maquiladora manufacturing sector are 16% lower than wages in the Mexican manufacturing sector as a whole.^{21g}

OVERVIEW OF WORKERS' RIGHTS AND LABOR ORGANIZATIONS IN MEXICO AND THE U.S.

There are basic internationally recognized labor rights, which generally correspond to International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions. These include:

1. the right of freedom of association (ILO convention #87, adopted in 1948);
2. the right to organize and bargain collectively (ILO convention #98, adopted in 1949);
3. prohibitions against the use of forced labor (ILO convention #105, adopted in 1957);
4. standards with relation to wages (ILO convention #131, adopted in 1970), hours (ILO convention #14, adopted in 1947 and extended in convention #106, adopted in 1957), and the safety of working conditions (ILO convention #155, adopted in 1981); and
5. a minimum age for child labor (ILO convention #138, adopted in 1973).²²

In testimony before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Commerce and Tourism, economist William E. Spriggs, from the Washington-based EPI, informed the Subcommittee that, "the body of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) does not address the vast differences among the U.S., Canada, and Mexico in the interpretation and protection of worker rights..."²³

The Mexican Constitution and legislation governing labor relations in Mexico appear comprehensive, and in some instances compare more favorably to the protections provided by more highly industrialized nations. Article 123 of the Mexican Constitution establishes rights: 1) to organize unions; 2) to strike; 3) to childbirth and maternity leave; 4) to equal pay for equal work; and 5) to a federally-mandated minimum wage.²⁴

However, factors considered to contribute to the flow of U.S. plants into Mexico are a combination of a young work force with little industrial experience, low rates of unionization in the border zones, influence exerted by the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) over the "official" unions,²⁵ as well as significant lack of enforcement [of labor laws] by an administration, "symptomatic of the Salinas administration's policy of assuring a compliant work force to attract foreign investment."²⁶

A brief examination of the Mexican labor movement will follow an overview of the U.S. labor movement. The U.S. labor movement is comprised of about 44,500 local unions, many representing workers in one establishment or company, some representing those in a particular craft, with others representing workers in the same industry working for different employers. Most local unions are small, representing perhaps a few hundred workers, although some, particularly in the public sector, represent several thousand workers. Almost all local unions are part of an "international" union, 86 of which are voluntarily affiliated with the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), constituting more than 85 percent of the total U.S. union membership. Some of the larger affiliates of the AFL-CIO include the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), United Auto Workers (UAW), United Food and Commercial Union (UFCW), United Steelworkers of America (USA), International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, and the International Association of Machinists (IAM). The National Education Association, representing more than 2 million educators, and the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) are among those unions not affiliated with the AFL-CIO.²⁷

The Mexican labor movement may be viewed as comprising three forces. The Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), affiliated with the PRI, has been the dominant union in Mexican labor for the past 50 years, representing 1.5 million of Mexico's 4 million unionized workers.²⁸ Two other major "official unions" affiliated with the PRI, under the umbrella of the Congress of Labor (CT), are the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) and the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC). From the 1940's to the 1970's, the CTM made economic gains and achieved increased benefits for an elite group of workers, who benefited from an increased standard of living and

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more job security than similar groups in other regions of the third world or in other segments of the Mexican work force.²⁹ Real incomes for these unionized Mexican workers were drastically reduced in the fifteen years since the onset of economic crisis in 1976. The decline in the buying power of the Mexican workers during the 1980's by more than 60 percent has been attributed, in part, to a wage control program accepted by the CTM and other union leaders.³⁰ Developed in the late 1980's, the Pacts for Stability and Economic Growth, or *pactos*, were developed as a mechanism through which labor, business, and the state set economic policy goals. Government-mandated minimum wages and standards for wage increases in union and non-union workplaces were established in these *pactos*. During the 1980's and early 90's, a decline in the real value of the minimum wage and a 50 percent decline in the median salary was accepted by the official unions.^{30a}

It has been asserted that at individual companies, the CTM has collaborated with management and the government to defeat independent organizing efforts by workers, i.e., independent of PRI-affiliated unions.³¹ There have been, however, reform movements within many of the official unions, an example of which is the ten-year-old National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE), which gained enough strength by April, 1989, to call a wildcat strike of nearly half a million members.³²

The second force in the Mexican labor movement, which has sought a path of modernization, is represented by the recently formed Federation of Unions in Goods and Services (Fesebes), which so far includes the telephone workers' union (STRM), electric utility workers, airline pilots, flight attendants, and two smaller unions. The million-member teachers union may consider joining as well.³³ Speaking of the telephone industry, a top aide to STRM leader Francisco Hernandez Juarez noted

Only 17 percent of Mexican families have telephones. This means there is the possibility of a great expansion of our market. But we need capital to modernize. Obviously, we must develop a culture of cooperation within the company in order to attract foreign investment...[Fesebes was

formed, because the traditional labor federations] are no longer functioning as intermediaries between the workers and the government.³⁴

The third force in Mexican labor is a loose knit collection of unions calling themselves "los democráticos," also known as the "independent unions," meaning independent of the CT and the PRI. These include several large university unions representing academic staff, and workers at the major public universities. Among the most important of the smaller independent federations is the Authentic Labor Front (Frente Auténtico del Trabajo - FAT).³⁵ This federation is comprised of Mexican labor unions, worker-owned cooperatives, as well as farm worker and community organizations.

Founded in 1960 by the Mexican Social Secretariat, a social outreach project of the Catholic Church, in conjunction with the CLASC, the Latin American Confederation of Christian Unions, the FAT has since broken ties with the church. The FAT's founding declaration enunciates five principles: 1. freedom to organize unions; 2. democracy within the unions; 3. independence from political parties; 4. autonomy from control by government or employers; and 5. constant struggle for the material and spiritual elevation of the working class. Today, the FAT represents workers in manufacturing industries, including textiles, garment, shoemaking, rubber and auto parts, and in agriculture and construction, in more than half of the states of Mexico. The FAT was a key founder and participant in RMALC, the coalition of more than 100 Mexican organizations which opposed NAFTA.^{35b}

In the course of efforts in the U.S. to defeat NAFTA, the Mexican workers and labor organizations have been characterized, not infrequently, as suppressed by the corporations and the state, with an atrocious labor relations system that is deteriorating.³⁶ In commenting on a 1992 book, Mask of Democracy: Labor Suppression in Mexico Today, by Dan La Botz, which has been circulated among U.S. unionists, David Barkin, Professor of Economics, Departamento de Producción Económica, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, in Mexico City, has written

La Botz has constructed a tale which disregards the political power that Mexican workers have exercised. By omitting from this account the history of political struggle and the resulting victories that did so much to improve labor's lot over the past half century, his book underplays the importance of political solidarity in Mexico's recent struggles as well as the potential for class and popular sector alliances to combat the current onslaught against organized workers...³⁷

Barkin offers the sage advice that forging international alliances and building international solidarity, in working towards an international economic integration that will benefit all of society

...will only work on the basis of an objective knowledge of each other's histories, our victories and their defeats. It requires a search for an understanding of their diverse social movements, and a mutual respect of their strengths and their frailties.³⁸

Signaling a new direction for Mexican labor unions and perhaps the most radical break from the official Mexican trade union structure to date occurred with the formation of the National Union of Workers (UNT), a new labor federation comprised of unions which broke away from the CTM. These unions, which assert representation of 1.5 million workers, primarily in the areas of health care, social security, and the telephone industry, suffered severe membership losses in the wake of extensive privatization of previously state-owned enterprises. The UNT was constituted in November, 1997, more than a year following the death of the powerful CTM leader Fidel "Don Fidel" Velazquez, who had controlled the CTM for the past fifty years.^{38a}

The genesis of the UNT may be traced to events which took place in 1995-1996. Concerned that labor peace might not be able to be ensured in the wake of the devastating effects of the devaluation of the peso, official labor leaders took the unprecedented step of canceling the Labor Day march on May 1, the first such cancellation in almost a century. Thousands of workers from independent unions, however, who were normally prohibited from participating in Labor Day proceedings, marched in the streets with placards proclaiming, "Labor is controlled by the party" and "Democracy now." Dissidents formed the May 1 Inter-Union Coordinating Committee, following the 1995 march.^{38b}

A forum, which came to be known as “el foro,” was also set up in 1995 to discuss “The Union Movement and the Nation,” by two union leaders with long-time political ties to the PRI, Elba Esther Gordillo and Francisco Hernandez Juarez. A few independent unions were invited, for the first time, to participate with official unions at the Foro, which according to independent estimates, was a gathering of unions representing between 2.5 and 3 million workers, including teachers, telephone workers, social security workers, state and municipal workers, electrical workers, and workers at the national university. A manifesto issued by the Foro in 1996 declared, “The basic guiding purpose is the renewal of the Mexican trade union movement.”^{38c} The rhetoric, if not the leaders, was radical, stressing democratization of decision-making within unions, calling for the direct election of union leaders, and asserting that unions should be independent and autonomous from the government, political parties, and employers.^{38d}

The UNT was launched by Hernandez Juarez’ telephone workers union and other unions that were part of the Foro, on the premise that unions would be able to create alternatives to the *pacto* and to the passive official unions which have dominated the landscape of Mexican labor relations only by breaking with the CTM-dominated structures. The AFL-CIO, Teamsters, UAW, UE, and the International Union of Electronics Workers (IUE) sent observers to the launching of the UNT. Before 8,000 delegates representing 200 unions and social organizations, Hernandez Juarez addressed the UNT’s founding convention

...our purpose is to build new forms of union organization...an initiative of workers, not of those in power, for a critical and self-critical trade unionism prepared to defend workers in a more active way.^{38e}

The first priority of the UNT, according to Antonio Rosado, leader of the social security workers and one of the three UNT presidents, is to recuperate real wage levels for Mexican workers, and calling

for a new “social pact,” to reorient social and economic policies aimed toward immediately improving the conditions of working people.^{38f}

Opportunity for organized labor in Mexico to effect economic, political, and social change may have increased with the founding of the UNT, and with the recent shift in the Mexican political landscape, with the loss of the PRI’s absolute majority in the lower chamber of the Congress and the election of opposition leader Cuauhtemoc Cardenas as mayor of Mexico City.

MODES OF INTERNATIONAL LABOR COMMUNICATION

In 1991, the American Labor Education Center (ALEC), a non-profit institution located in Washington, D.C., and established by former U.S. union staff members, wrote in a special issue of American Labor devoted to U.S.-Mexico-Canada Solidarity, "Mexican, U.S. and Canadian workers are discovering that we can protect our jobs, health, and democratic rights only by joining forces across national boundaries."³⁹ ALEC proposed the following ideas for action for U.S. unionists and others interested in improving ties with Mexico's independent unions and democratic movements within the government-dominated unions:

- * Exchange of work-related information;
- * Organize a workshop or conference about Mexico;
- * Invite Mexicans to the U.S.;
- * Send a delegation to Mexico;
- * Provide crisis support;
- * Send money and supplies;
- * Exchange articles for each other's newsletters;
- * Organize joint actions;
- * Set up a coalition;
- * Find a "sister union."⁴⁰

In the two-year period preceding the passage of NAFTA passage, a number of U.S. unions and labor activists became involved in a variety of these activities, a number of which shall be described below.

In the area of traditional international labor communication, there were virtually no bilateral relations between the AFL-CIO and the Mexican union confederations in recent years, prior to NAFTA debate.⁴¹ According to Pharis Harvey, Executive Director of International Labor Rights Education & Research Fund (ILRERF), in Washington, D.C., there had been very little contact between U.S. and Mexican rank-and-file union activists, what might be considered internationalist communication, and only pro-forma contact by U.S. unions, mainly the AFL-CIO, with the Mexican CTM.⁴² International communication between the AFL-CIO and the CTM was primarily through mutual membership in the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (IFCTU) and the International Labor Organization (ILO). It was not until the late 1980's that a series of meetings were held between the AFL-CIO and the CTM to address some problems and explore cooperative mechanisms to deal with the maquiladora issue.⁴³

ONLINE AND PRINT COMMUNICATION

In a draft of preliminary results of RAND research, Howard H. Frederick discussed the use of electronic communication, specifically computer communications in cross-border coalition building.

With the advent of new communication technologies

communication relationships are no longer restricted to space, but are distributed through space...In the last decade there has emerged a new kind of global community, one that has increasingly become a force in international relations. We speak of the emergence of *global civil society*, that part of our collective lives that is neither market nor government but is so often inundated by them.⁴⁴

A worldwide metanetwork of decentralized technologies, including technologies such as computers, fax machines, and packet data satellites has arisen, facilitating greater democratization of information flow, and a breakdown of hierarchies of power, enabling the emergence of new social movements, such as the free-trade reform movement.⁴⁵ "PeaceNet" was formed in 1984, as the joint effort of four San Francisco Bay Area organizations, which created the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), an organization specializing in the communication needs of the global NGO movements. PeaceNet is "the world's first computer network dedicated exclusively to the needs of the movements for peace, human rights, and social justice."⁴⁶ In 1987, the Institute for Global Communications (IGC) was formed to direct and support Peacenet and its sister networks EcoNet, ConflictNet, and LaborNet, the latter joining in 1992.⁴⁷ IGC is part of the world-wide APC system of networks enabling electronic mail and electronic conferencing systems--or collective mailboxes available to all users--to be set up, using small, inexpensive microcomputers.

Canadian NGOs were active in establishing cross-border links from the beginning of negotiations over the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement, and were networking by computer in 1987. In the U.S., groups which had been monitoring GATT talks since 1985 coalesced with groups formed in early 1991 to fight the NAFTA fast-track, resulting in the formation of such groups as Citizen Trade

Watch Campaign, the Fair Trade Campaign, and the Mobilization on Development, Trade, Labor, and the Environment (MODTLE, later the Alliance for Responsible Trade, ART).⁴⁸ These U.S. groups have computer networked across borders with counterparts in Mexico, perhaps the most significant of which is the Red Mexicana de Acción Frente al Libre Comercio (RMALC), known also as the Mexican Free Trade Action Network (rimalc@igc.apc.org), which is composed of labor (including the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo, FAT), women, peasants, and environmentalists from Mexico City and northern regions where the maquiladoras operate.⁴⁹ During the NAFTA debate, RMALC published a weekly English-language summary of Mexican news stories related to trade and the Mexican economy, and updates on RMALC activities, available on the *trade.strategy* conference on PeaceNet and EcoNet.⁵⁰ SIPRO (Servicios Informativos Procesados) (sipro@igc.apc.org), a Mexico City-based information center has been giving training to grass-roots groups, and channels English-language "alternative" information on Mexico to APC subscribers in its "Mexico Update" reports, found regularly in the electronic conference *carnet.mexnews*.⁵¹

During the NAFTA debates, organizations representing workers and those affiliated with labor have used online communication to: discuss and debate issues and offer local perspectives relevant to "free trade" and NAFTA; announce and present the proceedings of conferences; promote and report on cross-border exchanges; report on organizing efforts and other actions taken to bring groups and individuals together to unionize or to challenge fast-track free trade; and to issue cross-border calls for solidarity and support. A snapshot of online international labor-oriented communication was taken in March, 1994. The nature and variety of discourse is summarized below.

Labor Notes, a national monthly labor magazine in the U.S., focusing on current labor issues and progressive labor reform, has been actively online, computer networking with trade unionists in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, with the NAFTA-reform movement, and organizing a worker-to-worker network.⁵²

During the NAFTA debate, under the topic "Free Trade Labor Events/News," serving as network coordinator, Labor Notes sent quarterly electronic and print mailings and solicited information for publication on a rich assortment of events, materials, and news around issues of free trade.⁵³ A sample of such information includes: a planned demonstration in Indiana in front of companies with plants in Mexico; an announcement of a trilateral conference in Canada in May, 1992, "focusing on strengthening links between grassroots organizations to build alternatives to the corporate agenda;"⁵⁴ an offer, with commentary by MODTLE, of copies of a leaked preliminary version of the North American Free Trade Agreement, dated February 21, 1992, a comprehensive version resulting from months of closed door trilateral negotiations, and obtained by MODTLE, Fair Trade Campaign, Citizen Trade Watch, and other national citizen's coalitions; announcement of a conference of Mexican, U.S., and Canadian auto workers and labor representatives organized by the United Auto Workers Local 160; and an announcement of a strategic alliance formed between the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) and the independent Mexican labor federation Authentic Workers Front (FAT) around grass-roots organizing work in the Mexican maquiladoras.

In August, 1992, it was announced online that the Labor Notes- coordinated network had become an organization; the North American Worker-To-Worker Network (NAWWN). NAWWN was formed in Chicago, after a meeting of 14 representatives of 11 unions and community-based labor organizations, which along with several other organizations had been actively involved in the network.

Representation at this meeting included the UE; the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT); the Amalgamated Textile and Clothing Workers Union (ACTWU); La Mujer Obrera and Fuerza Unida from the Southwest; activists from the Southeast, including the Tennessee Industrial Retention and Renewal Network, and Southerners for Economic Justice; UAW Local 879 from St. Paul, Minnesota, a local active in cross-border solidarity work; Labor Notes; and the Federation for Industrial

Retention and Renewal.⁵⁵ There was agreement among the representatives that direct contact between workers "was the strongest form of education toward effective international solidarity," reflected in the mission statement⁵⁶

NAWWN is a non-exclusionary network dedicated to developing concrete practical forms of international solidarity among community organizations, workers, and unions within the United States, Canada, and Mexico.⁵⁷

Created to promote trilateral solidarity and to help prepare organized labor to confront common corporate employers in all three countries, NAWWN now finds its home base in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. NAWWN is said to differ from a number of other anti-free trade coalitions which were set-up specifically to oppose NAFTA, in that it was formed to organize "for the long haul."⁵⁸ Its quarterly publication, Free Trade Mailing, has included a calendar of events, announcing coalition meetings, transnational conferences, workshops, fora, tours, exchanges, and fundraisers; news about U.S. labor union organizing struggles and cross-border solidarity work; reports on grass-roots campaigns, events, trips and tours within labor movement and the free trade reform movement; reports on grass-roots organizing and labor issues in Mexico and in Canada; calls for transborder support and solidarity actions; and a listing of new resources available in cross-border solidarity work.

In addition to continuing free trade mailings, at its inception, NAWWN planned to directly assist cross-border labor solidarity work. Two projects of the nascent NAWWN included: helping to organize a delegation to Irapuato, Mexico, led by displaced Green Giant workers of Teamsters Local 912 in Watsonville, California; and supporting the cross-border organizing efforts of the UE-FAT Strategic Organizing Alliance. The NAWWN also planned an "adopt-an-organizer" campaign by U.S. unions to support FAT's maquiladora organizing drive, and to work "on tours and exchanges of workers from Mexico and Canada as well as other direct solidarity work."⁵⁹

The American Labor Education Center (ALEC), publisher of the magazine American Labor, has transmitted information online about NAFTA, and worker's rights in the U.S. and Mexico. For example, ALEC informed the online community about a video which it produced, entitled "\$4 A Day? No Way!: Joining Hands Across Borders."⁶⁰ The 18-minute video includes scenes of workers from Mexico, the United States, and Canada taking part in international exchanges and protests. These workers explain why they oppose NAFTA and "instead support an international movement to improve labor standards, job security, environmental protection, and public services in all three countries."⁶¹

Actively involved in the effort online to defeat fast-track NAFTA negotiations was the Mobilization on Development, Trade, Labor and the Environment (MODTLE, later ART) (laborrights@igc.apc.org), a loose coalition of approximately 200 environmental, labor, human rights, development, religious and agricultural organizations, which opposed "any effort by any of the three governments to subordinate the quality of an agreement to its political and electoral needs."⁶² During the NAFTA debate, ART published biweekly summaries of its meetings in the *trade.strategy* conference on PeaceNet and EcoNet, which were available in English and in Spanish.⁶³

The Development Group for Alternative Policies (Development GAP), a Washington-based policy advocacy group, was also actively online during the NAFTA debate. Focusing on economic issues, including trade and structural adjustment, the Development GAP sought to bring local perspectives from the South into policymaking in Washington. The Development Gap worked with labor organizations in the U.S., and closely with MODTLE, serving as the latter's liaison to similar networks in Canada (Action Canada Network) and Mexico (Red Mexicana de Acción Frente al Libre Comercio) and publishing MODTLE's bimonthly newsletter, NAFTAThoughts in the *carnet.mexnews* conference.⁶⁴ NAFTA Thoughts reported on such topics as legal challenges to NAFTA, free trade

reform conferences, issues of labor rights violations in Mexico, and briefing papers on issues such as "NAFTA and Women" and "Free Trade and Our Natural Resources."⁶⁵

Active among women's organizations which fought for NAFTA reform was the Mexico City-based *Mujer a Mujer/Woman to Woman* (MAM) (mam@igc.apc.org), which promoted strategic alliances with grassroots and feminist organizations in North America through organizing exchanges, workshops, tours, and retreats. Working with groups like *Mujeres en Acción Sindical* (MAS) (esuares@igc.org), MAM organized a Tri-National Working Women's Conference on NAFTA, posting conference reports online, during which "women shared their work in developing new forms of organizing, with a strong emphasis on the community, cultural, family and personal contexts of women workers."⁶⁶ El Paso, Texas-based *La Mujer Obrera/The Woman Worker* is an organization dedicated to improving economic, political, and social conditions of women workers in the U.S. border region, is also active online (lamujer@ipc.apc.org).⁶⁷

Founded in 1986, the International Labor Rights Education and Research Fund (ILRERF) is a non-profit organization which promotes respect for the rights of workers in all countries to reasonable working conditions and to freely exercise their rights to associate, organize and bargain collectively, in conjunction with U.S. foreign and commercial policy. ILRERF is committed to fostering a common vision of social justice among workers of all nations, and to environmentally sound development that results in broad-based economic growth and equitable distribution of wealth.⁶⁸ In March of 1991, ILRERF, which publishes a quarterly newsletter *Worker Rights News*, acquired a PeaceNet account, laborrights, and has communicated with other organizations concerned about anti-labor, anti-development problems inherent in NAFTA.⁶⁹ Reviewing a year's publication of *Worker Rights News*, from Spring 1993 through Winter 1994, of a total of seventy-one articles, thirteen concerned Mexico and labor issues, particularly NAFTA, comprising approximately thirteen pages out of a total of fifty-six

pages of text. Article topics included: workers' rights and violation of labor law in Mexico (4); NAFTA and the law, including proposed side agreements (2); action by Mexican unionists (2); opposition to organizing in Mexico by the organization of maquilas (1); opposition of the Mexican people to NAFTA (1); the negative benefits of NAFTA on the Caribbean Basin nations (1); the impact felt in India of the Chiapas uprising.⁷⁰

One example illustrating an online cross-border call for solidarity and support occurred on May 1, 1991, when a call for urgent action was sent out through LaborNet, describing the abduction of Braulio Aguilar Reyes, the brother of one of the main leaders of several thousand irregular workers of the government oil company, PEMEX.⁷¹ After the closing of "Refinería 18 de marzo" at Atcapozalco--which had been heavily polluting the environment and had been subject to public pressure--regular and irregular workers were fired. Denied legally required severance pay, the fired irregular workers protested. Braulio's brother, Gustavo Aguilar Reyes, was one of their leaders. The Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos believed that Braulio's abduction was a consequence of his brother's political activity and asked receivers of the message to send requests for urgent action to other groups and unions, using PeaceNet, GeoNet, WEB, or SoliNet, if accessible.⁷²

One U.S. local union which has been active in online communication and cross-border solidarity work around free trade has been UAW Local 879, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Local 879 has been in the vanguard of efforts by rank-and-file auto workers who are responding to a decade of reorganization and downgrading by the automobile industry. Setting up a permanent industry-wide trilateral network has been one such effort. In 1990, Local 879 Recording Secretary Tom Laney established the "MEXUSCAN" solidarity committee in his local. During one of a burgeoning number of trilateral labor conferences, auto workers from the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, planned one of the first trilateral worker demonstrations of the NAFTA period. On January 8, 1991, workers in all three countries wore

black ribbons bearing the name of Cleto Nigmo, commemorating the murder of the Mexican Ford worker in 1990. Such efforts were seen as helping union members to understand more clearly the connection between disappearing worker rights and Ford's ability to freely invest money in low wage areas, and "to consider the long-range benefit of solidarity among all Ford workers."⁷³ By July, 1992, Local 879 had established a "sister local" relationship with the Mexican Cuautitlan Ford Workers Democratic Union (FWDM),⁷⁴ and voted to "Adopt An Organizer" at Ford's Cuautitlan, Mexico Assembly Plant. Local 879 has entered into a formal contractual agreement with the FWDM to provide bargaining information, worker exchanges, broaden U.S. and Canadian contacts, and to publicize relevant labor news, such as Ford firings in Mexico and auto worker injury in the U.S. In addition, Local 879 provided \$300 a month to support one Ford organizer in Cuautitlan, funded by contributions by members, who are recognized by the Local as "cross-border solidarity organizers."⁷⁵

As Howard Frederick has noted, "despite the enormous growth of online NAFTA-reform networking on trade, it is important to recall that many key organizations are not yet connected."⁷⁶

CONFERENCES

Several trilateral conferences occurred during the period of the NAFTA debate. One such conference was held in November, 1991, by the Transnational Information Exchange (TIE), an Amsterdam-based group that for nearly fifteen years has been involved in regional and global worker networks in the auto and chocolate/cocoa industries.⁷⁷ This conference of sixty-five grass-roots auto workers, most from the Big Three plants (Chrysler, Ford, General Motors), included unprecedented Mexican representation from both the "official" CTM union and from dissident rank-and-file groups⁷⁸ Rather than an attempt to establish a trilateral organization, this conference focused on exchange of information on working conditions, wages, hazardous substances, job flexibility/working conditions, and other work and industry related issues. Due to the problem faced by U.S. and Canadian auto workers of subcontracting or "outsourcing," a subsequent trilateral conference was organized for auto-parts workers, intended to include maquila workers as well.⁷⁹

TRANSBORDER EXCHANGES

Local 879 Recording Secretary Tom Laney described a driving tour of the Mexican border region, held in July 1992, and organized by Local 879's MEXUSCAN Solidarity Committee. "The border tour was designed to acquaint us with conditions in the border maquiladora plants, make connections with labor organizers, and assess the organizing support performance of the national UAW and AFL-CIO."⁸⁰ The members of the tour included: UAW local union members; a reporter; representatives from Labor Notes; a Japanese union president; and a member of the General Motors Council, from the Canadian Auto Workers union. They met with representatives of grass-roots labor organizations in Texas, including La Mujer Obrera (The Woman Worker), and the Border Agricultural Workers Union, which were described as "renewing real labor organizing by assembling workers' power to collectively bargain,"⁸¹ and which function outside of the "official" U.S. labor movement (not

affiliated with the AFL-CIO). They also met with Fuerza Unida, "a rank and file union of former Levi workers who are organizing the Levi's boycott."⁸² In Mexico, the group toured the maquiladoras with a member of the Texas-based Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM)--a coalition effort supported and sponsored in part by the AFL-CIO.

A number of other labor organizations have organized cross-border exchanges, reported both in online and print communication, including the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE), and the Communications Workers of America (CWA), both of which will be addressed below.⁸³

INTERNATIONAL LABOR COMMUNICATION DIRECTLY FOLLOWING PASSAGE OF NAFTA

On 17 November [1993], after weeks of intense lobbying by both supporters and opponents of NAFTA, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 234 to 200 to approve the implementing legislation for the North American Free Trade Agreement. The U.S. Senate approved the accord the following Saturday by a margin of 61 to 38, and the Mexican Senate voted its approval of NAFTA the following week.⁸⁴

As Canada had already ratified the agreement, implementation could begin as scheduled on January 1, 1994.

Interviews were held during the months of April and May, 1994, with representatives from two U.S. communications-related unions, North American Worker-To-Worker Network (NAWWN), La Mujer Obrera, and the AFL-CIO, to discern the nature of international labor communication that has taken place and that which is planned since the passage of NAFTA.

Expressing the importance of international labor communication, Louis E. Moore, Director of International Affairs of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) stated

[We] need to link our strategies for workers in communication industries all over the world. Unless we have strong links, we'll never be able to bring about social change to make sure that workers receive their proper share.⁸⁵

Prior to the NAFTA debate, seeking to establish and strengthen links with the Mexican Telephone Workers Union (STRM), a sister union representing workers in the same field, the CWA leadership extended an invitation to STRM leaders to meet in Washington. In December, 1990, in the course of privatization of the Mexican state-owned telephone industry (TELMEX), CWA came to share a common corporate employer with STRM. With privatization, a number of private companies gained partial control of the Mexican telephone industry, including Southwestern Bell, a large employer of telecommunications workers represented by CWA in the U.S.⁸⁶

In 1991, STRM leader Hernandez Juarez visited CWA headquarters in Washington, D.C. In the course of subsequent meetings and discussions among the top leadership of CWA, STRM, and the Communications and Electrical Workers of Canada (CWC), a formal alliance was fashioned between the three telecommunications unions. On February 15, 1992, an alliance was signed by the three unions, which recognizes the increasing domination of the communications, electrical, and publishing industries by transnational corporations based in North American, Europe, and Asia, and calls for united action to strengthen the abilities of workers in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico to organize and bargain collectively.⁸⁷

CWC, CWA, and STRM agree to work together to defend union and workers' rights in North America, including Mexico, and throughout the world. We will work to expand coordinated collective bargaining and organizing through other alliances and the appropriate international bodies.

CWA, CWC, and STRM agree to maintain a working relationship for the permanent exchange of trade union information, knowledge and experience in reference to the respective areas in which they work.⁸⁸ [The entire text of the Alliance is in Appendix A]

At a meeting of the three telecommunications union presidents planned for the end of August, 1994, it is anticipated that guidelines may be established for developing trans-border educational materials in English and Spanish for handling grievances with the common employer, Southwestern Bell, as well as for developing similar industrial approaches and organizing strategies in the telecommunications field.⁸⁹

The CWA, CWC, STRM alliance has served as a model for other alliances between the CWA and its labor counterparts in New Zealand and Australia.⁹⁰

For many years, the UE has given a high priority to international labor relations between unions. It is at the annual convention that rank-and-file representatives elect officers, and develop and vote on political and organizing plans for the coming year. International relations with Mexican labor became of matter of significant practical importance in the late 1980's. During this period, there were substantial job losses from UE-represented plants in the U.S. to the maquiladoras in Mexico, which were increasingly involved in electronic production.⁹¹ In the city of Juarez, alone, five General Electric plants, producing five different electrical products, and employing 5,000 workers, have been identified as "runaway" plants from five U.S. cities.⁹²

Sharing cultural similarities--representing many Spanish-speaking members--as well as geographical proximity, and seeking an alternative to the low wage solution chosen by the employers, the UE sent representatives to Mexico in 1989-1990, seeking an alliance with Mexican organized labor. The UE sought a Mexican ally that was a legitimately independent union with ambitions to organize, and found that the Authentic Workers Front (FAT) met these criteria. A strategic organizing alliance was formed between the UE and FAT, with the recognition that the working conditions of U.S. workers are directly linked to those of workers in Mexico, where the ultimate goal is to organize runaway U.S. plants into a union in Mexico, eventually closing the wage chasm that currently exists, and improving

standards on both sides of the border. The UE is committed to providing logistical, financial, and political support to the FAT, in the latter's local efforts to organize runaway shops in the border region that have been identified as having left the United States. The strategic alliance [draft in Appendix B] has served as a model that the North American Worker-To-Worker Network has promoted for similar alliances between other U.S. and Mexican unions.

As of 1994, the FAT had identified and linked approximately twenty-four plants that have left the U.S. and relocated in Mexico.⁹³ There have been ongoing cross-border exchanges between UE and FAT leaders and rank-and-file members on the local level as well as at national conventions. Demand has been generated from the rank-and-file within the UE for more international efforts with Mexico.

Such efforts were forthcoming in November, 1993, in response to the firing of eleven workers employed by General Electric in Juarez, Mexico, and twenty workers employed by Honeywell in Chihuahua, for their efforts to organize a union. The firings followed a visit by UE-represented workers to the GE plant in Juarez in early November, who had gone to learn about plant conditions and to offer their support for the organizing effort at GE. Together with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), who represent Honeywell workers in the U.S., the UE launched a solidarity campaign after the firings, designed to get the fired workers reinstated.⁹⁴ The unions leafleted worksites in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico informing workers of the firings and urging grass-roots support; organized a cross-border letter-writing campaign; established a solidarity fund; sponsored a 10-day, 13-city tour in the U.S. by three Mexican trade unionists who had been fired; and filed perhaps the first complaints under the NAFTA side agreement (North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation) charging that G.E. and Honeywell violated NAFTA by violating workers' right to organize. Two complaints were filed on February 14, 1994, one each by the UE and the IBT, with the U.S. National Administrative Office,

which has been set up in the Department of Labor to handle complaints under NAFTA [Appendix C].⁹⁵ (Each nation has its own National Administrative Office to respond to complaints filed under NAFTA.)

Since 1994, organizing drives by the FAT in the maquiladoras proved more difficult than expected. The Mexican state government supported the efforts of GE to prevent unionization, and lacking a union culture in the border region, the level of local support for these organizing efforts was limited. Consequently, with the support of the UE, the FAT began to focus its organizing energy in the interior of Mexico.^{95a}

Since launching a campaign against NAFTA, including organizing an international protest in the middle of the bridge between Juarez and its home base of El Paso, the grass-roots labor and community organization La Mujer Obrera continues to organize garment workers in El Paso, and looks toward the prospect of closer contact with grass-roots activists in the maquiladoras in Juarez.⁹⁶ For its part, the AFL-CIO plans to continue a series of cooperative activities, sponsored by the labor ministries, around the NAFTA labor side agreements, and anticipates fostering relationships with the independent unions, including the FAT, as well as with the CTM.⁹⁷

INTERNATIONAL LABOR COMMUNICATION FIVE YEARS FOLLOWING THE PASSAGE OF NAFTA

Interviews were held during the month of February, 1999, with representatives from the AFL-CIO, a U.S. communications-related union, the Campaign for Labor Rights, and the community-based Peace and Justice Center, to discern the nature of international labor communication that has taken place in the five years since the passage of NAFTA.

ONLINE COMMUNICATION

A significant amount of cross-border communication is being conducted through the internet. Most recently, U.S. labor support has been elicited by the UE, among others, through a widespread e-

mail outreach effort on behalf of five leaders of the Mexican teacher's union, who were arrested in the course of a major strike.^{97c6}

Letters of international support were solicited electronically in early 1999 on behalf of auto parts workers who went on strike since May, 1997, and were fired for their efforts to unionize their company, Custom Trim, a maquiladora in Valle Hermoso, Mexico.^{97c7}

Published on the 2nd and the 16th of every month by the UE with Dan LaBotz, the Mexican Labor News and Analysis only exists electronically, available through: <<http://www.igc.apc.org/unitedelect/>> and <103144.2651@compuserv.com>.^{97d} First published on January 1, 1996, the Mexican Labor News and Analysis has published numerous articles regarding the effort of workers at the Han Young maquiladora in Tijuana to organize an independent union, the subject of a case study which follows.

The Campaign for Labor Rights (CLR), a grassroots organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., organizes local support in the United States and Canada for the rights of working people internationally and in the U.S. Utilizing a model that calls for every campaign to have a partner organization that communicates with workers in Mexico, the CLR has worked extensively with the Support Committee for the Maquiladora Workers in San Diego, California, and with the UE. Most of their organizing work is done online. With an e-mail list of 3,200 subscribers, and with reposting, they communicate through an electronic newsletter and "action packets" with tens of thousands of individuals and with organizations in 525 communities in the United States, and in 60 countries. The organization endeavors to provide easy access to local organizations and activists to make their voice heard.^{97e} Their website, which issues ongoing alerts about various campaigns is found on: <www.summersault.com/~agj/clar>.

Continuing their work to promote respect for the rights of workers in all countries, the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF, formerly ILREF), out of Washington, D.C., receives and electronically posts letters of protest and solidarity from workers' organizations, human rights groups and trade unions from around the world on their website, <www.laborrights.org>, which are updated weekly.^{97f}

LabourNet, a subgroup of GreenNet (a non-profit organization providing access to computer communications), which is part of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), promotes computer communications as a medium for strengthening and building organized labor. LabourNet works closely with the US based APC affiliate LaborNet, promoting international labor communications inside and outside of the APC, through conferences, lists, and their web site.

Globalisation of production and distribution by employers has brought new problems for trade unionists throughout the world. It has become increasingly impossible to advance our position or even to defend it within the boundaries of single nation states. International co-operation and solidarity has become totally essential.

Computer communications has been a crucial component of the globalisation process for the employers. We cannot confront the power of the transnationals without ourselves making full use of this technology. The labour movement has been built on traditions of organisation and solidarity. LabourNet aims to carry these traditions into the computer age.^{97g}

A Canadian network promoting solidarity with groups in Mexico, Central America, and Asia which are organizing to improve conditions and win a living wage in maquiladora factories and export processing zones is the Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN). The MSN endeavors to build international solidarity through: corporate campaigns; government lobbying; popular education; and international links. With more than 400 individuals and organizations across Canada involved with the network, the MSN acts as the secretariat and outreach office for the Labour Behind the Label Coalition, a Toronto-based coalition of labor, community, religious and international solidarity organizations promoting

decent wages and working conditions in the apparel industry internationally. The MSN communicates internationally by computer, with campaign information, action alerts, a resource center, and links with other organizations and individuals.^{97h}

CROSS-BORDER LABOR COMMUNICATION

International labor communications between the national AFL-CIO in the U.S. and trade unions in Mexico took a significant symbolic turn in January 1998, with the historic visit of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney to Mexico City. The first time a national AFL-CIO President had traveled to Mexico to meet with the Mexican labor movement in more than thirty years, Sweeney met with a broad spectrum of labor organizations, including leaders of the FAT and the UNT, and highlighted the priority and importance of international labor communication between the two countries.^{97a} In a speech delivered during this visit, Sweeney discussed internationalism, without raising specific proposals

We want to work with our brothers and sisters in all parts of the Mexican labor movement and with friends and allies, democrats and freedom lovers throughout Mexican society. We seek to develop coordinated, cross-border organizing and bargaining strategies.^{97a1}

Since Sweeney's visit to Mexico, the breadth and intensity of top-level international labor communication has increased. In early September 1998, a full-time "high profile" office of the AFL-CIO was opened in Mexico City to further communication and build international relationships, which have been cultivated not only with Mexico's CTM, but also with the other, independent organizations with whom the AFL-CIO had previously had minimal contact, such as the FAT and the UNT.^{97b} Building and strengthening cross-border international union communications and relationships between the AFL-CIO and Mexican trade unions is not without complications. Stanley Gacek, AFL-CIO international affairs official responsible for Latin American issues explained

The problem of moving from mere diplomatic relations with unions internationally to really forging a concrete solidarity is not something that is just a problem with us and Mexico, but it's

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worldwide. [With Mexico] there had been this absence, on both sides of the border in terms of really developing a kind of cooperation that will be practical, sectoral, and concrete and will build trade union structures and strengthen trade unionism and worker rights on both sides of the border.^{97b1}

Unions in the U.S. and Mexico, nonetheless Gacek maintains, have no choice but to build and strengthen cross-border communication and cooperation, in order to avoid an economic race to the bottom in both countries.

Since the passage of NAFTA, the UE has continued its commitment to and fostered major increases in cross-border labor communications and relations with Mexican trade unions. At the 63rd National Convention of the UE, held in August, 1998, in a resolution on International Labor Solidarity the Convention

1. Reaffirms UE support for the Strategic Organizing Alliance with the FAT and for the Dana Workers Alliance;
3. Encourages UE at all levels to support the international solidarity struggles of other unions both here in the U.S. and around the world, by supporting the work of the National Labor Committee, the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, and others^{97b2}

Such international labor communication has transpired through a variety of channels, such as: delegations, speaking tours, and training sessions and workshops held in the U.S. and in Mexico involving activists in the UE and those within their strategic partner, the FAT; cross-border strategic organizing projects; cultural exchanges; and dissemination of information and calls for support action, through print and electronically.^{97c}

In Spring of 1997, at a gathering in Chicago, unions from the U.S. and Canada which represent workers at unionized plants of Echlin, a transnational auto parts manufacturer, and representatives of the FAT's metalworkers' union pledged their mutual support in negotiations and organizing, as part of a tri-national alliance to support workers' rights at Echlin.^{97c1}

During 1997, the UE and the FAT continued to host worker-to-worker exchanges, emphasizing participation of women. FAT representatives made three trips to the U.S., to Oregon, Ohio and Pennsylvania, and to the Northeast, with a focus on Boston. Three groups of UE workers also traveled to Mexico, to familiarize themselves with the work of the FAT in the interior and in Ciudad Juarez.^{97c2} Cross-border worker-to-worker exchanges continued in 1998, including the participation of six rank-and-file members and organizers from the FAT in the UE's Milwaukee organizers' school.^{97c2a}

In addition to supporting each others' organizing campaigns, and cross-border exchanges, the UE and the FAT have a number of joint projects, one of which is the Centro de Estudios y Taller Laboral, A.C. (CETLAC), which opened in September, 1996, in Juarez, with the support of the FAT in Mexico, the UE and the Teamsters in the U.S., two foundations--the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock and the Funding Exchanges--and small contributions from numerous trade unions and activists. With full-time staff and volunteers, CETLAC educates maquiladora workers about their labor rights, represents them in labor-related legal cases, strives to promote an alternative vision of how trade unions should operate and organize.^{97c3} Plans are underway to offer classes in practical areas such as nutrition and community organization. Through their support of the CETLAC, the FAT is determined not to abandon the workers in the maquiladora section, despite the challenges that such support entails, and is attempting to foster the development of a new pro-worker culture in the region.^{97c4}

In cross-border cultural exchanges, labor muralist Mike Alewitz from New Jersey and community muralist Daniel Manrique Arias from Mexico City produced murals in Mexico City and Chicago with a common theme of cross-border labor solidarity.^{97c5}

Other U.S. unions have begun communicating and exploring relationships with the FAT, included among them are the Teamsters, the United Steel Workers Canadian branch, UNITE (formerly ACTWU), the CWA, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, and the United Auto Workers. Many of

this cross-border communication has involved organizing and support for organizing in the maquiladoras along the U.S-Mexico border.^{97c5a}

In California, at the 21st Convention of the California Labor Federation (AFL-CIO), in July, 1996, delegates unanimously adopted a resolution a resolution on global unionism, calling for a conference for the purpose of bringing together unionists and activists from throughout the Western Hemisphere in a common struggle against NAFTA and privatizations.⁹⁸

The initial proposal for this conference was issued the previous March, at an International Conference Against Privatizations held in Mexico City, sponsored jointly by SUTAUR-100 bus drivers' union and the Workers' International Liaison Committee (ILC), attended by approximately 150 trade union delegates from 14 countries.⁹⁹ Following the gathering in Mexico City, the San Francisco chapter of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), which had coordinated support efforts for the Mexican bus drivers, brought the proposal for a Western Hemisphere conference to the statewide leadership meeting of LCLAA. The San Francisco Labor Council, AFL-CIO, submitted the proposal for such a conference, in the form of a resolution, to the 21st Convention of the California Labor Federation.¹⁰⁰

The Western Hemisphere Workers' Conference Against NAFTA & Privatizations was held November 14-16, 1997 in San Francisco, California. The goals of the Conference were three-fold:

- 1) to promote an exchange of information about the negative effects of NAFTA and other regional trade agreements on the labor movement, in particular, and on working and poor people in general;
- 2) to provide a forum for exchange of information about the status of current labor efforts to oppose these attacks; and 3) to initiate a discussion about how to mobilize successfully against the international globalization of capitol.¹⁰¹

More than 400 labor and community leaders and activists from 20 countries participated in the Western Hemisphere Conference, reporting on the effects of “free trade” on workers and their respective communities. A declaration was issued, calling for demonstrations in mid-April 1998 against NAFTA-style trade agreements and NAFTA expansion, to coincide with a planned meeting of government and corporate representatives, to be held in Chile, to explore the creation of a Free Trade Area of the Americas.

We are leaders and activists in trade unions and other workers organizations from throughout the Western Hemisphere. Together, our organizations represent tens of millions of working people. We have gathered in San Francisco, California (United States), on November 14, 15, and 16 to give testimony to the deleterious effects the transnational corporate agenda has had on working people throughout the hemisphere and to improve our capacity for mutual support and solidarity in our responses to this assault upon living and working conditions and democratic rights...

We have listened to the testimony of unionists and activists from countries throughout the Americas, who have told how capital’s global agenda has wreaked havoc through deregulation, privatization, and destruction of public services, degradation of the environment, attacks on collective bargaining, working conditions, and labor codes, and a frontal assault on the right of working people to be represented by trade unions independent of governments and the employers...

We now call upon workers, activists, and labor and other peoples’ organizations throughout the hemisphere and the world--particularly the organizations of women, the doubly and triply oppressed--to expand and strengthen our communication, cooperation, and capacity for common action.

We propose a common day of action against the extension of NAFTA, against the continued privatization and destruction of our public services, and against the continued attacks on our rights and gains.¹⁰²

The Conference also voted to form a Continuations Committee that would operate out of the San Francisco Labor Council.¹⁰³

CASE STUDY - HAN YOUNG DE MEXICO - TIJUANA, MEXICO

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Han Young de Mexico is a maquiladora located in Tijuana, Mexico, which in 1997 produced chassis and platforms for tractor-trailer trucks for Hyundai Precision America, and which employed 125 workers. At that time, a large contract involved production of trucks for the U.S. Marines. In 1997, workers at Han Young, who produced about 26 chassis daily, each of which sold for \$1800, earned a weekly wage of 280-360 pesos (\$33-\$46).¹⁰⁴

On June 2, 1997, to demonstrate their unified demand for recognition of an independent union, workers at Han Young refused to enter the plant. Like many maquiladoras, Han Young has a “contract” with the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC), one of the official unions, although workers had not seen a copy of the “contract” with the company, nor participated in any of the “union” meetings.” According to José Angel Peñaflor, an attorney representing the FAT union, about 700 of the 890 maquiladoras in Tijuana have such “protection contracts,” utilized to institutionalize a system of low wages and as a mean to attract foreign investment.^{104a}

In addition to demanding recognition of the union, Han Young workers sought corrections of health and safety problems at the plant. For example, welders were not provided appropriate face shields, gloves, coveralls or safety shoes. It was reported that some workers were losing their vision, others experienced burning in their eyes, attributed to continual exposure to lead fumes, and others had burns on their hands, chests, arms, and clothing. An additional concern was the company’s failure to pay *utilidades*, a profit-sharing bonus of two percent (2%) required under Mexican labor law.¹⁰⁵ The strike lasted for two days. Following the strike, Han Young fired eight workers.^{105a}

Five days following the work stoppage at Han Young, the Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers issued an online appeal for cross-border support for the striking maquiladora workers, requesting that letters be written to the Mexican government, to Hyundai and to Han Young, on the premise that international pressure could play a key role, both on the Mexican government’s decision to

recognize the independent union and on the company's willingness to negotiate a contract with this union.¹⁰⁶

The campaign for the recognition of an independent union at Han Young is of significance because, should it succeed, it would be the first such union in the entire maquiladora sector in Mexico, offering the possibility of a precedent for the future.

Cross-border communications between Mexican, U.S., and Canadian trade unions concerning support of the Han Young workers continued. On October 1, 1997, an urgent online cross-border appeal was made for international observers fluent in Spanish to observe a union election, which four months following the June strike, had been scheduled for October 6 at the Han Young plant. The Support Committee for Maquiladora workers reasoned, "if a free and fair election proceeds as scheduled, the workers are likely to vote overwhelmingly for an independent union."¹⁰⁷

At the election on October 6, in the presence of company representatives and those from the CROC, workers were required to declare publicly their support for the official union or for STIMAHCS. Despite the possible jeopardy to their jobs posed by such a public declaration, 55 workers voted in favor of the independent Union of Metal, Steel, Iron and Allied Workers (STIMAHCS), a FAT affiliate, and 7 voted for the official union. Mexican and U.S. observers reported that the Tijuana office of the National Conciliation and Arbitration Board (CAB) allowed a new group of Han Young employees to vote although the voting process was completed. Including the questionable votes from these additional workers, the final vote was 55 to 32 in favor of the independent union.¹⁰⁸

A week after the election, Mary Tong from the San Diego-based Support Committee for the Maquiladoras, who had been an election observer, was informed by Mexican National Immigration representative Delgado Cruz that she could no longer attend any legal proceeding, press conference, or other activity that the government considered political. "He told me that if I showed up at any event like

this, even if I didn't say anything, I would be deported," said Tong.^{108a} Delgado also implied that the eighteen representatives from U.S. community and labor organizations who observed the election could be prosecuted.

Following continued postponement of the certification of the union election by the CAB, on October 27 a formal complaint was filed with the U.S. Department of Labor's National Administrative Office (NAO) under the NAFTA labor side agreement by the Support Committee for the Maquiladoras, with support from the AFL-CIO, alleging violation of Mexican labor law by the Tijuana Labor Board.¹⁰⁹

In a decision issued on November 10, despite a majority vote of the Han Young workers on October 6 in favor of the independent union, the CAB denied the union certification, based upon the assertion that STIMAHCS does not have the legal authority to provide union representation of the October 6 election, and upon the premise that a vote of the majority of the workers in favor of the union at a single point in time did not necessarily indicate that a majority of workers continued to support the independent union.¹¹⁰ In the month following the election, Han Young fired four leaders of the independent union.

Following the Tijuana Labor Board's decision, an online transmission reported that the Campaign for Labor Rights and the Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers was coordinating a boycott of Hyundai Motors.¹¹¹ Online, the Toronto-based Maquila Solidarity Network requested letters be sent to the Mexican Embassy and to the president of Hyundai, urging that the democratically held vote for the independent union be recognized and upheld.¹¹² American church groups and labor unions began leafleting in front of Hyundai auto dealerships, calling on the automaker to respect the results of the union election.¹¹³

CONCLUSION

The prospect of the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement spawned widespread international communication within and between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, including international labor communication. Through online and print communication, international workshops, fora, and exchanges, a broad-based debate was generated, which brought together in coalitions and alliances environmental, consumer, community, religious, and labor groups in the three countries. Burgeoning online communication enabled the exchange and sharing of ideas and strategies around free trade, environmental and worker rights, and possible alternatives. The solidarity work and alliances between unions and labor activists, such as the UE and the FAT, and UAW Local 879 in the U.S. and the FWDM in Mexico, appear to have created "transterritorial solidarity relations which enrich and empower popular and democratic communities," and meet Waterman's definition of internationalist communication.

It is perhaps too early to assess, since the passage of NAFTA, what the lasting effects may be of the groundwork that has been laid in internationalist labor communication. A number of coalitions, formed for the purpose of defeating NAFTA, are no longer active. Organizations like the North American Worker-To-Worker Network hold promise for building on the foundation for a fair trade future. In its strategic alliance, the CWA has recognized the need for broader-based coalitions. The challenge for labor, in responding to the globalization of capital and the global factory and in seeking economic justice, seems to be as the coalition Jobs With Justice suggests; to expand

The commitment to strengthen labor's alliances with environmental, civil rights, women's, consumer, community and religious organizations...¹¹⁴

It is perhaps through the strength of such coalitions, as Waterman suggests, and through long term alliances at the local, national and international levels, employing internationalist communication, that economic and social justice may be attainable.

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