

# LABOR SOLIDARITY IN THE T-MEC ERA

## GLOBAL SOLIDARITY AT THE UCLA LABOR CENTER



# The Global Labor Solidarity Program at the UCLA Labor Center

The Global Labor Solidarity Program at the UCLA Labor Center believes that in a global economy, unions and workers must come together across borders. That is why we build strategic international partnerships between labor leaders, advocates and scholars and conduct key research and conversations to improve labor standards and working conditions across the US-Mexico border and throughout the world. Multinational corporations know no borders and can dodge labor and environmental regulations. Factory workers, garment workers, farm workers, migrant workers, and gig workers pay the price.

As part of the efforts to foster cross-border labor solidarity, the UCLA Labor Center convened over 80 labor leaders and workers from the U.S., Mexico and Canada for the “Worker Solidarity in Action: A Tri-national Labor Response to the USMCA” summit held on Feb. 9-10, 2024 in Los Angeles, California. The present report, written by noted journalist David Bacon, conveys the main objective of the event—to foster transnational labor collaboration and to create a space for strategic discussions surrounding worker rights campaigns in communities across North America.

Hosted at the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor (LA Fed), in partnership with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung- Foundation-New York Office, this event builds on the Labor Center’s 18-year history of fostering global labor solidarity initiatives that can play a vital role in facilitating worker rights across the globe.

A big takeaway from this tri-national meeting is that as the debate over immigration and drug trade heats up because of the upcoming presidential election, both in Mexico and the United States, we need to step back and remind ourselves that the fates of these two countries is more linked than never before. Mexico has become the most important trading partner for the U.S. and increasingly a good number of workers work for the same companies producing goods and services for a common North American market.

As we face global economic challenges that transcend borders, cross-border convenings like this are essential in being able to see the interconnectedness of our movements. It is important to have the space to co-learn, dialogue and develop shared strategies and vision.

As supply chains continue their post-pandemic reorientation, we’re seeing greater integration of manufacturing and services across North America. Worker-to-worker relationships will be essential to this process, and that’s what we helped nurture at the LA Fed trinational labor gathering.

The Worker Solidarity in Action: A Tri-national Labor Response to the USMCA summit included representatives from: The Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA), AFSCME United Domestic Workers of America (UDW), SEIU 2015, the California Domestic Workers Coalition (CDWC), The Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA), Nuestras Manos, the United Auto Workers (UAW), the Solidarity Center, GM Local 6625, Rideshare Drivers United, Gig Workers United, Unión Nacional de Trabajadores por Aplicación (UNTA), International Association of App-based Transport Workers (IAATW), Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar (SINACTRAHO), Liga Sindical Obrera Mexicana, and the California Domestic Workers Coalition among others.

Only by joining together around our common interests and common actions can we challenge a globalization from above to build a globalization from below. Another world is possible!

*Gaspar Rivera*

Gaspar Rivera-Salgado  
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# SOLIDARITY IN THE T-MEC ERA

In the period of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA - 1993-2020), the economies of the United States, Canada and Mexico became more integrated than ever before. Working people on both sides of the border have not only been affected by this integration. We are its object. The trade policies of the three countries seek to maximize profits and push wages and benefits to the bottom, manage the flow of people displaced as a result, roll back rights and social benefits achieved over decades, and weaken working class movements in both countries.

All this makes cooperation and solidarity more important than ever. After a quarter century in which the development of solidarity relationships was interrupted during the cold war, unions and workers are once again searching out their counterparts and finding effective and appropriate ways to support each other. The roots of the cross-border solidarity movement are very deep, going back more than a century. They are part of the labor culture of workers and unions, and have been almost since the beginning of our two labor movements.

The growth of solidarity today is taking place at a time when U.S. and Canadian penetration of Mexico is growing – economically, politically, and even militarily. The relationship between the U.S. and Mexico has special characteristics, but it is also part of a global system of production, distribution and consumption. Unions face a basic question, therefore, in the three countries — can they win the battles they face today, especially political ones, without joining their efforts together?

The debate before and after the adoption of NAFTA provoked intense discussion about the relationship between workers in Mexico and the US. Many union members responded by supporting efforts to organize independent unions in the border plants, for instance. That support has always been attacked by rightwing Mexican media, government officials and employers, who accuse Mexican workers and unions of betraying their country.

Solidarity with Mexican workers in U.S. unions was oriented towards private industry, especially during confrontations with huge corporations. It was less focused on opposition to neoliberal policies that create the political and economic environment in which labor struggles take place. Nevertheless, the passage of labor reform in Mexico in 2019, however, which was an objective of progressive Mexican unions for more than two decades, received important support from the U.S. labor movement as well.

According to Humberto Montes de Oca, secretary for external relations of the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME - Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas), "To some degree that reform was forced on the [Mexican] government by the pressure of unions in Canada and the United States, as part of the negotiation of the new free trade agreement T-MEC. Pressure was put on Mexico to make changes in union representation because the employer protection contracts were used to cheapen the labor of Mexicans. Workers in Canada and the United States were at a disadvantage. Capital investment comes to Mexico because of these more favorable conditions. It is a form of social dumping."

"In Mexico, those unions argued, workers should have greater mobility, greater ability to defend and increase their benefits and income. This reform was implemented using this logic. It requires all unions to show that they are legitimate representatives of workers, and to create legitimate collective labor contracts. These two elements are generating a new situation in our country."

Benedicto Martinez, general secretary of the Authentic Labor Front during this period, recalls, "We had to have a long-term perspective. If we had said 30 years ago that we would reform Mexico's labor law in 2019, people would have said we were crazy. But we planted the seeds for it little by little. Our approach was to make visible the reality in Mexico - the lack of freedom, the lack of democracy, the lack of rights of Mexican workers - and to get other organizations and unions to take it on. Eventually they did, even questioning these violations at the ILO."

In a strategic alliance with the United Electrical Workers, the FAT tried to use the NAFTA's labor side agreement to highlight the denial of the rights of Mexican workers in their efforts to organize against the system of corporate-friendly protection unions. "Because of the complaints under the NAFTA side agreement and another at the ILO, we began to have more influence on other unions in the U.S. At first it was just with locals of national unions like the autoworkers. But eventually we were able to exert pressure in the AFL CIO itself."

The election of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in 2018, and the implementation of the U.S., Mexico, Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA, or T-MEC by its Spanish initials), had a profound impact on the relationships between workers and unions of the three countries. It contained a Rapid Response Mechanism that produced pressure on U.S. corporations operating in Mexico to recognize and bargain with rank-and-file based unions.

However, Martinez warns, there are new threats to the movement to organize democratic unions in Mexico, and to solidarity between workers in the three T-MEC countries.

"Companies in Mexico that used to have a protection union [a company-controlled union] now think they're better off without a union at all, in style of the United States," he says. "So one lesson we have to learn is that solidarity and support doesn't just flow from the north to the south, but in both directions. The reform of the Federal Labor Law and the constitutional reform have led to the disappearance of the old labor boards and mandated free, direct and secret personal voting. Whatever comes next I think it will be difficult to reverse this, because another reform would require a 2/3 vote both the Chamber of Deputies and Senate."

"The treaty has not affected all unions or all national industry, but only those affected by the T-MEC mechanism. In terms of the country, that's quite slow. Mexico has more than 50,000,000 workers, and these complaints cover at most 20,000 - small compared to our larger class. Building democratic unionism, with class conscious workers, does not happen overnight. It requires education, which in the past came through conflicts. The new actors are ones that have obtained resources through the Solidarity Center, like La Liga Obrera Mexicana, which are completely new, or like Julia Quiñones, who has spent her life working on the border, or Hector de la Cueva and CILAS [the Center for Labor Investigation and Union Counsel]. The campaign at General Motors came from a previous struggle among a group of workers who started the movement in the Silao plant."

Robin Alexander, retired international relations director for the United Electrical Workers, adds, "During the years of our alliance, the Mexican government resolved labor issues directly or through the labor boards. That has also changed. Now the federal government says it is up to the parties to resolve labor issues, and they do not take sides. This is encouraging for the future. And, obviously, labor reform has created opportunities to organize without many of the obstacles that existed before. The organizing situation for workers now in the United States is very encouraging. There is movement, especially among young people, and we will see where it goes."

In February the UCLA Labor Center, the Solidarity Center of the AFL-CIO and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation brought together union and workplace activists from the three T-MEC countries to examine the questions of labor solidarity in their industries, in light of the changing terrain. This conference took place as a new wave of organizing is unfolding in the Mexican plants of U.S. corporations, especially the successful campaign at the General Motors assembly plant in Silao. At the conference delegates even heard from the front lines of that movement, when the secretary treasurer of the new union at the Audi plant, Edgar Romero, described the strike then taking place over demands for a significant raise in their wages.



Officers of the United Auto Workers committed support to the Audi workers, and to other future efforts in the auto industry. Delegates to the conference included organizers of key campaigns for independent unions in the maquiladoras, describing the new challenges they face under the new labor law, and the support needed from labor in the U.S. and Canada. But the conference also heard from homecare and platform, or gig, workers, who posed new questions for solidarity that are only now emerging from the active organizing taking place in their industries.

This report gives the views of the participants in these efforts, as they see and define the challenges that face them. While they examine the social context in which they are organizing, they are also practical contributions from active organizers that combine political analysis with the urgent needs and tactics of the moment.

## Organizing the maquiladoras

*Organizing among maquiladora workers, especially in the factories on the border, has gone in waves over the past four decades. In many cases, those efforts have led to the creation of cross-border relationships between unions and activists on both sides of the Mexico/U.S. border, and even to organizational structures that produced programs and actions beyond supporting individual campaigns. Because of the demographics of the maquiladora workforce, some of the most important organizers have been women.*

*Today another wave of organizing activity is growing, and with it debates about how new independent unions should be organized, and the relationship they should have to established unions in both countries. Julia Quiñones and Julieta Morales are veterans of these efforts, and in these interviews offer their visions for a new era of labor activity and solidarity.*

### Julia Quiñónez

*Julia Quiñones is the director of the Comité Fronteriza de Obreras (the Border Committee of Workers), one of the most important organizations in the long history of the efforts to organize workers in the maquiladoras on the Mexico/U.S. border. CFO began officially in '98, but Quiñones was doing basic work long before. She offers the perspective of a veteran of the border labor wars. When I interviewed her at a conference organized by the Solidarity Center and the UCLA Labor Center, she began by saying that this cross-border effort was happening "in a new era."*

We need more than yesterday's ideas. A lot of things have changed in Mexico. There is a lot of movement now at the national level and changes are taking place. In Mexico we had the 2019 labor reform, and in the United States recently there was the big autoworkers strike. We've learned a great deal from both. Now many unions and organizations in Mexico are looking for ways we can influence this movement more effectively.



This is also a cultural moment, where workers have to learn to work together because they work for the same companies. In the past the possibility of having independent unions on the border, in the maquilas, practically didn't exist. That was the situation for decades. Now I think that we are seeing the possibility of seeing real unions, if the charros don't take it away from us. I would like to be optimistic and say we still have the initiative, because the conditions are still there. But we have to deal with the history of so many years of oppression by corporate unions.

The change is not going to be easy, and the charros are defending themselves. On the other hand, we have the initiatives of many independent workers who are seeking to build new organizations, but they often lack a lot of confidence. Until recently there was a lot of apathy, and workers would say, no se puede, that things could not be changed. We have to develop new strategies and I believe that it can be done.

This is what we have been working on for 4 years. In 2019 CFO began a project to make workers aware of the labor reform. This is something that the Ministry of Labor was also doing, but at the CFO we believe that it is important to bring this information from person to person, through small group meetings, so that workers truly understand the opportunities they have now. The more they know, the more they spread the information through their social connections with co-workers.

In the last three years we have supported four organizing campaigns. In one they were able to create an independent union, and in another it barely exists yet. Workers were able to create an independent union [using the union registro of the Liga Sindical Obrera Mexicana] in a company called Delta Staff. This is a garment company that produces for brands like The Gap and Levi's. They make pants, belts and uniforms. Eighty seven percent of the workers voted for an independent union against the CTM.

Things happen by systematically accompanying the workers, by training leaders, and by promoting gender empowerment. But nothing is going to happen just because the opportunity exists. You have to do a lot of organizational work. There has been a lot of talk about the T-MEC and the labor reform. but they only create opportunity. You need to organize people.

But the workers have to make the decisions, even if there is a lot of money and many organizers. We need to help workers make a comprehensive plan, that is, by giving them training in creating a strategy, and by looking for leaders. These are steps that have to be followed before we can make changes.

Union support for campaigns is also important, especially by unions on the other side of the border, like the UAW. In the past it was much easier to organize if we could use an existing registry of another union. CFO had a relationship with the miners and they had a relationship with the United Steel Workers. [In the Delta Staff campaign CFO had the support of Workers United, which represents Levi's workers in the U.S.]



Today workers have more options. Now there are ways workers can create their own independent union. Solidarity and the work of exchanges within the independent labor movement are very important, so that workers do not feel isolated, that those who want to organize have a network, a support system.

Companies that are in Mexico have headquarters in the United States or in other countries, so we need to make connections there with unions, with shareholders, with brands. That helps to neutralize the company when they try to intervene to stop workers from organizing.

Organizations on the border have always lacked resources. Today we really want to have an impact. In the past our organization has been very small, just 8 or 10 people. Now we have to grow. We have 30 people today, but of course having them creates new challenges. How do we guarantee the work of these teams will continue?

No fight is automatic, that is, it takes 2 or 3 years to have an impact. We have to create a stable basis for this work, because things may change in the future. Ten years down the line, who knows what the situation will be? That is why it is very important to create self-sufficient, self-managing organizations, and not depend always on international solidarity to develop organizing campaigns. If there is more self-sustainability, then organizational projects can continue.

Labor reform will have an impact on the labor movement in Mexico in general, not only in the export factories. The impact is going to be general. It is going to take longer than we had expected and we truly hope that with the coming change in government this reform will be sustained and not thrown out. If the same policy continues, at least of the current President, we hope there will be no setback in what's already been achieved.

Now there is a new attitude on the part of automobile union in the United States. They really have a vision now. There's more openness and more collaboration with our movement. We need to close the gaps between us. Both domestic workers and workers in the informal sector seek strategies to guarantee their rights. We can learn a lot from them, and also from the large already established unions, such as the automobile unions or the electrical workers or others.

There is a new role for working women, and it's something we have to work on. In fact, in reforms in Mexico now require companies to have gender protocols. But is gender equality required in the union leadership under the labor reform? We have to look at that too.

## **Julieta Mónica Morales García**

*Juliet Morales today is the General Secretary of the Union League of Mexican Workers (Liga Sindical Obrera Mexicana), and worked at a garment factory, Mex Mode, that was the scene of one of the first successful battles to form an independent union in the maquiladoras. The league was formed in Atlixco, Puebla, after workers organized the union at Mex Mode, and today has gone on the help workers organize independent unions in a number of other factories.*

At Mex Mode it took courage to stand up against all the violations of our rights in the plant. There was a lot of discrimination, workplace harassment and our wages at that time were 70 pesos. That was what started our organizing.

At that time an external organizations helped us understand that we had the right to organize, and what unions were. The Solidarity Center supported the Mexican NGO, Centro de Apoyo al Trabajador [Center for Support for Workers - CAT] composed of five local organizers. We won an independent union, but we had many problems after we organized this union. A real workers union will always be in trouble with the company.

During the initial campaign in Mex Mode workers were beaten at the gate, when we were trying to organize. Then we asked for support from students in the United States and on various campuses they told the university they did not want the student stores to sell shoes and the other Nike clothing. With this pressure, Nike was forced put pressure on Mex Mode to remove the charro union and recognize the workers' independent union and negotiate a contract.

We are seeing the same possibility of using the same pressure of international solidarity to help workers in other factories. The brands we are working on right now include Carhardt, North Face, Fanatics, the Kiss, Vans, and Timberland. They are exported from Mexico to the United States, so we believe that a good alliance can be built between workers in our two countries.

The raw materials and orders are from the United States, and without them we have no more work. We want the companies to continue to exist here, and we want the brands themselves to understand that our workforce is very strong in Mexico. Let the brands give us more work. We want to prevent our own families from emigrating to the United States because when people leave it's hard on mothers who are left with their children. But we want to have better conditions. We want brands to establish codes of conduct that are truly respected. Since we work with brands that are expensive, from clothes to cars, we deserve to have better salaries, we deserve to be respected within the plant.

We don't want the brands to withdraw because we depend on them. That is our source of work. It's not just the 500 workers, since behind those 500 workers are their families. The charro union threatens people by telling them that the League has alliances with the United States. We're bad because the United States loves us, and wants to take their jobs away. But we know that we only ask that the worker be treated as a human being, as a person. And a foreign company should respect this, because they are coming to our house. And if you are welcome to our house, we are going to set the rules for you.

So we set up the Liga [the League] in 2021. The league is supported by the Solidarity Center with training and planning. At VU people also work with the organizer for CFO, Julia Quiñónez. There the workers themselves asked us if they could join the League. So now there is a strategic relationship between CFO and the League. The League and the CFO share values, that the workers are in charge, in terms of the actions they are going to take.

The League is based on workers, like the first union at Mex Mode in Atlixco. At Mex Mode we began to see that there were more companies that wanted to form their own unions. We started with VU, which became the first section of the League. We had to change our statutes to be able to support other companies when workers formed their own unions. The League grew and now it is national. We have a section in Torreón, Coahuila, our coworkers have organized another at Testar in San Luis Potosí, and another at 3M and at Goodyear. Currently a union in Aguascalientes is being formed by key workers who came from Mex Mode in Atlixco. The factory in Torreón makes jeans. 3M in San Luis Potosí handles all kinds of work, adhesive tape, caps, face masks. Goodyear make tires. They have the right of representation there now, and at 3M the negotiations are about to start.

Even though the League is national, as general secretary I can't go and make decisions in other workers' companies. The workers in each company must have the right to their own voice and the right to make their own demands. They have to prepare, to decide what corresponds to the situation they have in their own plant, and what workers should earn for the benefit of themselves and their families.

The League tries to respect the decisions of the workers, not to make decisions for them. If the workers do not make their own decisions, we are going to fall back into the charrismo of the other unions. We want to change all that. The workers' committee must decide what they do within the plant. The worker is the only one who has the right to decide what is good and what is bad for his or her coworkers, for the company, or for their union.

The League is independent, and we do not receive support from any union. We have supportive alliances. We've supported the strike at Audi, and we have the closest relations with the union at Volkswagen. We are looking for international support and alliances. There are other companies where workers are going through the same thing or worse things. So exchanging information makes us stronger, to know that we are not alone, that there are more people who are also fighting, and that united we can win.

VU was closed and would not accept the independent workers' union. They laid off all the staff, and 70 workers were left without pay. At the VU factory workers are producing for the automotive industry, so it is possible that the UAW union can put pressure through its relationships with large automobile companies.



But now the workers who worked at VU, who decided to form their own union, are not being hired in other companies. The doors are being closed to them just for demanding their right to form their own independent union. This is very unfair, but it is something that will not go away.

The companies have a database of these workers. Other companies in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, also have the database of the workers who wanted to belong to the League. If the workers go there to ask for work, their name appears on the list. The companies are saying, if you belong to an independent union, you can't work in the plant. That's how it is. That has an impact on workers. That is the fear - you will be left without a job, and your family will pay the price.

This is a reason why people are deciding to cross the border.

We feel we are being put between a rock and a hard place. Yes I want to demand my rights, yes I want to form an independent union. But if I do it, I could lose my job, and no one is going to give me another one.

When I hear the people in other industries, like domestic workers or platform workers, I am impressed by the fact that they are women. I am not saying I am a feminist, because that is not my role. My role is to say 50/50. Both men and women deserve respect and deserve rights. But these women have the courage to demand their rights. They do not work for any company, but are independent. Yet they are able to join together and fight for their rights. It does not matter if we work in a home or in the fields or drive a car. We all have rights and together we will win.

## U.S. auto workers look across the border

*More than any other industry, the T-MEC agreement was intended to impact the wages, conditions and rights of auto workers. In one of the first and most dramatic examples of that impact, workers at the huge General Motors assembly plant in Silao organized to get rid of their pro-company union, part of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), and in an election held on February 3, 2022, voted in favor of a new union, the National Independent Union for Workers in the Automotive Industry (SINTTIA). A year later, that union had negotiated a new contract, with wage and benefit increases of over 10%.*

*That election was the product of complaints filed against GM under the Rapid Response section of the T-MEC agreement, which threatened to impose tariffs on Silverados built in the factory and exported to the U.S., if the company did not abandon its support for the CTM.*

*In the following interviews, two UAW staff members discuss the way they look at support for Mexican workers. Edgar Romero, the secretary treasurer of the union for workers at the Mexican Audi plant, then appeals for support. The response to his appeal helped workers win their strike there not long after the conference ended.*

### Henry Salazar

*Henry Salazar has worked for 25 years in the small parts distribution center of the Stallantis Corp. in Ontario, California. He belongs to UAW Local 230, where he's the CAP and health and safety representative. He's now working for UAW Region Six as an organizer.*

Our local at the parts distribution center used to be the union for the old Chrysler assembly plant in Van Nuys before it closed in the early 80s. When they closed the assembly plant they opened up the parts distribution center. They transferred folks to Ontario, where we have 135 active members now, and probably about 40 retirees.

In our local we are affected by the relationship between the US and Mexico. They threaten us all the time, saying they're going to relocate the parts center and put it on the other side of the Mexican border. They try to use the labor market in Mexico against us here, especially during negotiations, but also in between when when the their deliveries aren't going well or products aren't coming the way they want them.

They'll start to make little comments, that they'll just move the facility across the border. During negotiations it's always, "we've got to be competitive with the labor market over there." But we think Mexico needs to be competitive with the United States by bringing workers there to \$35 a day.

In the past, people in the local took those threats with a grain of salt. But over the past 5-6 years, threats of work loss and moving production have been taken more seriously because we're so close to the border. The company has actually acted on it by outsourcing our jobs to third parties, supplying direct from Mexico to the dealerships, instead of products coming to our facility first.

But we don't change the way we work because they threaten us. We can only do what we can with the tools they give us. The company is real big on saying they want want, which is profits. But they are not investing that money here. Instead, they're taking their profits out of us, out of our physical bodies, and that definitely needs to change.

When they had that election at the GM plant in Silao, some of our our members followed it. They're interested in what's going on with the auto industry, but it wasn't televised news. Hearing about the strike at Audi has been very helpful. The worker from Audi said the strikers there are not going to accept what the company was offering. They're really angry about it, and they should be. We're taking that back to our members. I already started started getting phone calls last night, asking, "What can we do besides donate?"

Maybe we could go to the Audi dealerships, to notify the the customers about the strike. Already people want to do actions, to hit the dealerships and leaflet them. We have Audi dealers here, right? We could reach out and see what we could do with a leaflet. Whatever legally we can do to help out.

We're going as soon as we get it arranged, if that's something that the our region says we can do. The way the UAW has been operating in the past six months has been nothing but concrete action. So if our leadership says ok, we're committing to something physical. People are looking for concrete action, not just solidarity in spirit



We should have much greater collaboration between workers in the union here and workers in Mexico, because a lot of our parts are assembled there. So what if we could work in a coalition? Let's say there's an issue with a supplier to the Stellantis parts plant in Ontario here. We could put pressure on them here. Cross border organizing and communication is our best tool for direct action. We can talk all we want but something has to be done physically.

If a handful of UAW workers showed up in Mexico I guarantee you this would get the attention of the Mexican government and the United States government. I'd love to go if I have the opportunity. I'll go walk the picket line with them, help do what I can, organize, knock on doors, call on the mayor or whatever.

In our warehouse, we know which parts come from which plant as they come through, and where the suppliers are. Each part identifies exactly where they're coming from in Mexico. If we were able to organize it, we could start targeting locations to help workers unionize these facilities in the future. That's not hard. We could track it down, if we were aware of what was going on and let our folks on the dock know. Each plant we receive product from has a code and a number. Our clerks inside can identify them. We could say a trailer is too unsafe to unload. There's always a way to do something if we need to.

A lot of times our members think when we get involved in leadership we're just mouthpieces. But my local knows I'm not like that. As a matter of fact the CEO of Stellantis got ahold of our VP at the UAW, and said, "you need to tell your local to stop their activism out there." They were taking our dock away, and we were talking to Congress members and Senators, and they were sending letters to the CEO. But my local president and regional director told him to go pound sand. We're going to continue to do whatever is going to help everybody out. That's our new leadership.

We have a history of activism in our local, a militant history, not a violent one, but we don't take things lightly and sit on our hands. The company is afraid of our plant's activism. We have worker power because of the amount of product that comes through. Southern California is the first or second hottest markets in the United States for OEM parts and truck sales. They don't want to mess with that.

During the last strike they put paramilitary security forces into our plant. They went at it with us, and we had a six and a half hour standoff. We were holding up the trucks, making a point. Later that night, they decided to do their tactics, and they got a little violent and put hands on our people in the street. The cops came out, and we pointed out that they assaulted our people.

I sent our company director an e-mail. I said, "It is evident to me that you have now officially put property over life. You're more worried about your parts or getting something to your dealership than the value of your employees." After that day, the guards never came out of the plant again into the street.



Many of our members are Chicanos or Mexican citizens, like our membership all through Southern California. We also have a lot of immigrants. So there's a certain amount of knowledge about Mexico and some identification with Mexico among many members. Right now most talk about what they see on the news, about migration issues. But they know there is a big business connection between immigration and trade with Mexico. They hear the threat that the company will shift parts over there. But a lot depends on what leadership does, and that's our job, to get them engaged and involved.

The UAW supports workers in Mexico. It wants to help them get a good contract and hopefully open the eyes of their government officials, to stop choking change.

## Jason Wade

*Jason Wade is a top administrative assistant to UAW President Sean Fain.*

Workers at GM Silao voted in SINTTIA in 2021, and the UAW went into negotiations in 2023. I don't believe GM workers were thinking about each other across the border during that period of time, to be honest. I know Mexican workers who were the nucleus of SINTTIA, which was generating movement in the plant there, did solidarity actions with us. They were pushing them to speed up due to the 2019 strike, and they refused.

I think in a abstract way, American workers understand whip sawing, where the company pits workers against workers. We generally speak about it in terms of plant A in Illinois whipped against Plan B in Indiana, but we understand that the companies are whip sawing workers in the US against workers in Mexico or even Canada. So they in that sense, our members are aware that those workers are there.

But is that level of awareness enough to be able to build joint actions? I think we need to have cross-border worker exchanges and build. Yes, we have a a strong history in the UAW of international solidarity. But on this issue, there's going to have to be more work because of the rhetoric in the U.S. I presume that there are [nationalistic] feelings in Mexico as well, a view of other of others that may not match reality. So when workers get together they can kind of hang out and talk about their issues and the plant where they work.

Today most of the facilities are are modeled after each other. So the issues that those workers are facing are probably more similar than they think. Through exchanges and conversations, I'm sure that would be teased out. Then they could begin to understand why acting in solidarity is so important. The company uses what workers perceive as differences to leverage and make more profit, making workers afraid that if they demand too much that they'll move the plant.

I heard that in their first round of negotiations SINTTIA was told that if they asked for too much the work would go to Canada. To an American worker it sounds comical. The average worker in Silao at the time made \$1.85 in U.S. dollars and the Canadian auto worker made 30 or 32 Canadian dollars, or about \$25 U.S. There's quite a bit of slack there the company would tolerate before they decided to relocate work based on on those battles.

On the border, the big threat to move to China is probably changing at this point because of the Trump tariffs. There's been a dramatic increase of foreign direct investment in Mexico in recent years, I so I don't know who the boogeyman is now. The boss always seems to figure out a boogeyman. In our country, in the U.S., it has been race. They use other factors to divide workers as well, but it's a similar game.

Just through dialogue we can get to the point where we understand that their issues are similar to ones for American workers. We see this even in organizing new facilities in the U.S. We'll look at our big three contract language, and we can say, this is a way we've addressed a particular problem. The idea is to show that you can get language in your contract to protect you against management doing whatever whatever it wants.

Successful contract campaigns are always driven by the core issues of the workers in the plant, but the language we have in a lot of our agreements is 70 years old and I don't know how we got there. But if workers can start to develop a bargaining strategy or a critique of our language, it would at least give them a more informed approach.

I don't know if the working conditions in the plant in Silao are similar to the working conditions in a US plant. I think the equipment may look the same. I'm sure the processes might be. But a big part of GM conditions in the U.S. is worker involvement. We have a joint health and safety program and we are very involved in health and safety on the shop floor.



That would be something we could talk about, because we see union and worker involvement in health and safety as as paramount. We want our members trained to make sure everyone's going home safe every day. We're not going to trust management to do that. We have language called production standards, so that if they're overloading work, we have a way to grieve that. And I don't believe they do.

They make Silverados in Fort Wayne, Flynt, Oshawa Ontario, and Silao. And by and large, those trucks are sold within a price range, and they're not selling the the Silverados for a different price depending on where they're made. In Mexico workers are significantly underpaid, and that's the big difference. A worker in Flint, MI at the top rate now makes \$35.36 an hour versus \$1.85 in Silao. That difference is all profit. That's money that should be going to those workers.

I'm sure their line produces 55 or 60 an hour. Maybe the speed of the line is going faster in Silao, and the scope of each job may be different. But every worker doing fundamentally the same work should get the same pay regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or border.

So these kinds of exchanges aren't the whole answer, but they can help. We need exchanges about how to organize. We don't presume that we have all the answers either. We have half the final assembly facilities in the U.S. organized, but we haven't organized a new one in quite a while. In the parts sector the numbers are far worse. So we have a lot of things that we can learn from other people. Through exchange across the border, we're going to discover new ways of doing things.

Hopefully we'll build power with each other, and when we go to the negotiating table in 2028 there'll be opportunities for all workers, to push for more than we would be able to do on our own. That's not solely in auto, but across manufacturing and service. For our next contract with the Big Three we have 150,000 members lined it up with Mayday, International Workers Day 2028. We've called for a general strike. We we want a different agenda for working people.

I think international solidarity is going to help organize the union at VW in Chattanooga. Whether they do it overtly or covertly, the company is certainly telling workers that production can always be done in Mexico. VW is building a new battery facility in Canada. Audi is owned by VW, and there's a strike now in Mexico, while they're building a new facility in South Carolina. There are a lot of pieces here.

We've had the T-MEC agreement and the rapid response provision for 3 1/2 years, and there have been 19 complaints. But there should be thousands. We know what happened in Silao, with CTM stuffing the ballot box. It has to have happened elsewhere. We think it's a failure of implementation and of full support of the labor reform. In each of these cases the Mexican government had the ability to do corrective action and they failed to do so. That's why it went to the rapid response mechanism. But the rapid response mechanism shouldn't be Mexico's permanent labor enforcement mechanism. They have laws. They have people that enforce those laws. It's just that those laws aren't being fully enforced.

Trade should be beneficial and consumers should know they're buying products that weren't manufactured where workers don't have rights. The whole purpose of T-MEC and rapid response was to change the situation facing workers when they tried to organize in Mexican plants, using the tariff and the fact that the manufacturing is taking place there. The market is here, so obviously if we had a treaty that did the same thing on behalf of US workers, it wouldn't work, because we don't export trucks to Mexico.

There's something a little unequal about it. We would welcome the same economic consequences for U.S. firms denying workers rights here. We need partners in Mexico to argue that we need to be held to higher labor standards here. There is a whole industry along the southern border and a lot of parts do go back and forth, so you could make a credible threat that if we see violations here those parts would be denied preferential treatment under T-MEC. That could really jam them up. Texas has very low union density, so that could change it dramatically.

We argued for it, but we recognized that we were not going to get something through a trade agreement that we can't win through domestic law. And it wasn't like the Trump administration was going to help us, given what he was doing to erode US workers rights. The treaty served Trump's nationalist agenda.

If we had a Mexican partner arguing for things to benefit US workers it would put us in a much better position. Then we could actually build it out from there.

## Edgar Romero-Toxtle

*Edgar Romero is Secretary-Treasurer of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de AUDI (SITRAUDI), the union for workers at Audi in Mexico, which is headed by General Secretary César Orta. Audi opened its plant in central Puebla in 2016. It employs 4161 workers, who make between \$23 and \$34 per day, producing daily 750 Q5 luxury SUVs worth about \$41 million. Romero has worked at Audi for 7 years, and been on the executive board for three years. The union has 1,600 members.*

Our contract expired on January 1, and we went on strike on January 24. We started talking with the company in November, and met 17 times trying to renegotiate our wages. Audi wanted to make a multi-year offer, but we had a bad experience with multi-year agreements. There were years where inflation exceeded the salary increase.

We had to call a strike to be able to win wage increase, because the company is not willing to reach an agreement. In our workers' assembly the union got proposals for a 28% increase, including a productivity bonus. So we started with our 28% demand, and the company started with a 0% increase.

At the arbitration and conciliation center in Mexico City, we made a change to be able to work with the company. Our first proposal was 24%. Later, Audi offered a single payment of 7000 pesos and an increase of 2%. We want something fair. We have a saying during the strike - we build premium cars, and we need premium treatment.

Sixty percent of the factory's production goes to the United States, and 40% to Germany. Everything is exported, which means that solidarity with unions in other countries is very important. We currently have the emotional, social, and political support of many unions from the United States, Germany, and other countries, but our need now is for support that is more concrete.

We have already been on strike for 3 weeks, which means we've been without pay for 3 weeks. We have two picket shifts, day and night. We give them water, chairs, toilets and tents. We bring coffee and bread every day. Our picket line has 400 workers during the day and 400 at night. But our resources as a union are exhausted. We do not have insurance, funeral insurance and during the strike workers do not have benefits. We continue paying what we can, but we already have the big expense of the strike itself.

The vote yesterday on the company's latest offer was 83% who said no and 13% said yes. More than 90% of our coworkers voted. They can see this is something serious for us and we hope the company will respond. We are not happy. We are worried and we want to return to work, but we need to solve this.

We are going to fight because we deserve something fair. Everything we produce is exported. Because 60% of the factory's production is sold here in the States, we need action in the market on this side. We don't receive any salary, nothing, and we need for support from this side of the border. If financial support from unions in the U.S. can help us to keep the strike going, it would be great.

We work with expensive brands, from clothes to cars, and we deserve better salaries. We deserve to be respected. We are all workers, and if we are united we will be able to move forward.

*Several thousand dollars were collected at the conference to support the strike, and the Los Angeles Labor Federation agreed to be a channel to funnel further contributions to the Audi union. A week later, on February 16, Audi agreed to a contract with a 7% wage raise, and a 3.5% increase in benefits, and the strike ended.*





## Domestic workers in the U.S. and Mexico

*As the age of the population of the U.S., Mexico and Canada continues to rise – and millions of people with disabilities, additional needs and children need care – an insatiable demand for home healthcare and domestic workers rises as well. But years of underinvestment in the sector, and the chronic undervaluing of the important work carried out disproportionately by women of color (particularly those with an immigrant background) has left the sector in a perilous state.*

*In the 1990s, immigrant domestic workers in U.S. urban centers began to organize community-based workers' centers. In the early 2000s they joined to form statewide networks in California, New York and other states. In 2007 they formed the National Domestic Workers Coalition. A few years later it played a key role in the adoption of a landmark international labor standard for domestic workers in 2011, International Labor Organization Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, [which recognized for the first time the right to minimum working standards for domestic workers](#). Following a campaign by an alliance of trade unions and domestic worker organizations, 189 has since been ratified by 36 countries. The United States, however, isn't among them.*

*In Mexico home care workers took the path of forming a union, and pushing for a formal registro, or legal recognition. That came in 2016. The Los Angeles conference invited the participation of home care workers from all three countries. Delegates from Mexico were able to participate, but Syed Hussan, a worker organizer from Canada, was denied entry by U.S. immigration authorities.*

## Norma Palacios Trabamala

*Norma Palacios is one of the three general secretaries of the National Union of Domestic Workers, Sinatraho. Her parents were also domestic workers. She started doing home care when she was 19, and did that work until she was 50.*

Last year we celebrated eight years of being established as a union, but we went through a training process for two years before that, which included a reflection on why we had to organize and what we could achieve. About 100 women participated. We organized and established Sinatrho so that we would have a voice, through representation as a Mexican union at the national level. We complied with all the requirements and we are now functioning as a union.

In Mexico the vast majority of the women are working for private individuals. Most do household work or domestic work, and many are indigenous women. We have many strategies to organize ourselves for power, recognizing first that we are domestic workers, strong and powerful women, and then looking at how this work impacts society. Without our work, many of our employers would not be able to go to work.

Worldwide the conditions are not very different, whether there is legislation or not. Whether paid or unpaid, household work is devalued, and this has an impact on how it is seen, whether it is treated with dignity, and how household work is recognized.

We suffer from a lack of lack of labor rights, because in legislation in Mexico the value of this work is not recognized. Many of our colleagues suffer discrimination, even violence, and in the end we are left completely unprotected after having worked many years of our lives.

The main problems domestic workers have in Mexico are all due to the fact that this work is not recognized as work. By referring to it as help, it disguises the true relationships. Because we do not have a written contract, we have no agreement that establishes a fair number of hours in a day, a fair salary, or rights such as social security, vacations, housing, and to organization.

In Mexico, the majority of regular domestic workers live in the workplace, which are the employers' homes, and stay with a single employer all week. Some domestic workers have multiple employers. Placement agencies are also an issue because this is basically outsourcing. They set the wages and assign work, but without any labor protection.

Mexico has ratified Convention 189 of the International Labor Organization, which obligates it to comply with its protection of rights. This led to progress in legislation. The social security law was recently changed to give us access to mandatory social security, but they don't say when it will be implemented, or what will happen to employers who do not comply.

Workplace inspection in this sector is a big problem in Mexico. It's a problem in workplaces everywhere. If it's a problem in the automotive sector, you can imagine there's even less enforcement for us as domestic workers. That has an impact, and makes it more difficult for us to make domestic work a decent job.



There are many problems with wage theft, which is a big reason that led many domestic workers to organize. But organizing is a process that takes time. We have to go through a process of winning dignity, of recognizing ourselves, and of assuming responsibility. If we have no commitment and responsibility to our organization, and to defending our rights, we will always have bad conditions.

All of us fear that we start a dialogue with our employers, they will fire us. But that is what the union is for, to defend our rights. And despite the difficulties, we have had many success stories. Once our union was established we created an advisory program - lawyers who help us defend the workers.

Government enforcement is not enough, and apart from that, there is a lot of ignorance about our labor conditions. The workplace inspectors need to understand that household work is a job. But many people in government bodies are employers themselves, so logically they are not going to want to recognize our complaints. In Tlaxcala a coworker went before the local board and the same person who was supposed to help her told her she also had a domestic worker, and even fired her.

We still do not have a collective contract, but we are trying to promote the signing of individual contracts. Hardly any employers want to sign them, however. So we have to train our coworkers so that they know how to defend themselves, and feel able to establish that dialogue with employers.

I had the experience of having signed a written contract with an employer, but it's not common and there is a lot of ignorance. In Mexico, the majority of workers belong to the informal sector, and there is not a lot of information available about why it is important to have a written contract. In Mexico we don't precisely know how to force employers to comply and many workers are unaware that domestic workers are covered by the labor reform.



We have to start from the right to organize, because a union gives you power. It completely changes the panorama. Our coworkers have shown a lot of progress, regardless of the shortcomings in the weak legislation that exists. But in the meantime, we can't sit here doing nothing. On an international level, domestic workers need alliances. An alliance with our colleagues in the United States in our own sector would help us, no, because we are all workers.

## Patricia Santana

*Patricia Santana Bautista is a representative for the long-term care workers union, SEIU Local 2015. She is an executive board member, and represents nursing home and home care workers.*

Our local union represents the people who have lived and worked in the shadows, and were not recognized for their work as in-home care providers. We take care of family members, of friends, and even of our own children. Some take care of our husbands, mothers or grandmothers. This was used as the reason for not recognizing our work as a job. In reality, all of us care for a person who could be in a nursing home, or who has a medical condition that will last for the rest of their life. In our industry we understand that all people at some point, no matter their language or religion, eventually are going to need use home care or long-term care.

This work is very important and it gives people a life with dignity.

Our union represents more than 400,000 home care workers in California. We are the largest local in our national union. Ninety percent of us are women. We are Hispanic women and African American women. Asian women are valuable members of our union because they speak so many languages. There is such a great diversity that our union holds all its meetings in 7 languages, including English, Spanish, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Tagalog and Armenian.



Organizing has not been easy - we've put in many voluntary hours. It is a lot of work, but it is the only way to change lives. Although we negotiate on behalf of those 400,000 people, membership is voluntary, not mandatory. But in many parts of our union 80% or 90% of the workers belong, because they understand that only by joining together can we win better contracts and better benefits.

In this industry the money that pays our checks comes from the Federal government. They provide 56% of our income, the state government provides 32% and the another 12% comes from the county government. That's why we set up a fund for political action. As members we sit down with candidates, talk to them and see which ones support the values of our union. If they say yes to our fight, we support them.

Remember that more than 400,000 home care workers all vote. Generally the people we care for are American citizens. They can vote too. So can our family and friends. Every home care provider can impact 3 or 4 other people. This means we potentially have 1,500,000 or even 2,000,000 voters in California. That's enough to make a candidate win or lose. That's why we have to be organized and inspired, but above all well-informed.

Listening to the women from Mexico, I can see similar processes going on there too, because they have a federal union. It's just that in Mexico it is handled a little differently. Here we are not afraid to speak or sit down with any politician, to talk face to face. In Mexico gender violence is tremendous. If you want to talk with a politician, that can be an extremely large barrier. But today candidates are more open to dialogue, something that has not happened for the last 100 years.

Mexican homecare workers have a fighting spirit and are very inspiring. And with the union they have a real structure, a union, despite the difficulties that exist at the political level in Mexico.

We are faced with a simple reality - we all have the same problems, no matter where we live and work. Although we are in different countries, the problems are the same. We have a slogan, "Let's make the impossible possible." It's very inspiring to me. and I've heard it for 10 years. And during that time we have made the impossible possible.

This year the presidents of both our countries will be elected, something we have in common. Now is the time to ask for what we need, and to and to present our agenda. If we don't speak up now, when they are campaigning during this election period, we are not going to be able to make any changes. It's time for these legislators, senators, and presidents to listen more than anything. Every time we talk to a politician, we ask, "Once you sit in the seat of power, will you listen to us when we need you? We don't want you to get power and then forgot who we are."

A month ago Claudia Sheinbaum, the candidate for President in Mexico, was here in Los Angeles, and we were thinking about the same kind of process of making demands on her. I think Claudia Sheinbaum is someone who listens, and has a strategy to assist our fellow Mexican citizens here in the United States. There are millions of us.

There are many Mexicans in our own union, and the presidential election in Mexico is very important to us as residents here in the United States. Many of us are citizens of Mexico too, and we don't forget that our parents and our brothers and sisters still live there.

One of my sisters lost her sight, and my mother is a 75-year-old woman. I have to support them because they can't work any more. So, really, although we are here, our heart is there too. We pay our taxes here, but we have to pay bills there too. Our income has to support two families.

So we are going to mobilize all of our people, because this is an election that should matter to all of us, in the U.S. and in Mexico both.

## Vanessa Barba

*Vanessa Barba represents the California Domestic Workers Coalition. It works with the UCLA Labor Center on research that supports policy advocacy work.*

It's important to us to talk about the similarities and differences in our different countries, so that we don't have to recreate the wheel. For example, we were talking about occupational health and safety. Groups in one country can rely on work and materials that already exist in others. In Mexico, for example, they already have trainings and lots of materials we could use here, as we train workers to take care of their health.

In Mexico they don't have Federal, state or local funding to support home care. There are no home care programs or unemployment insurance. We have programs like that here, but the main difference between our situation in the US and their situation in Mexico is the issue of immigration status.

We need to learn about different ways of advocacy, and create a platform that is not so piece meal. On an international level, what is the bare minimum we want?



In the US coalitions and organizations have concentrated on legislation like the Bill of Rights. Other legislation has set up employers, and therefore set and furnished wages for at least some domestic workers. In Mexico women think the focus needs to be on organizing a union. They actually got legal recognition for a union for domestic workers in Mexico.

Here in the United States we are organizing domestic workers who don't have a way to join a union, because of citizenship and other barriers. We're scrambling to create a minimum wage, and to make sure people are getting it. Women who work in a home are advocating for a minimum wage, county by county, of about \$30.00 an hour. We think everyone should have it.

It's hard to have collective bargaining if you have individuals working for other individuals, rather than an employer who employs a whole bunch of people.

Given these differences, how do we find common ground with each other, in the U.S. and Mexico? I guess the foundation of it all is to see domestic work as real work, a legitimate job, and to see the home as a workplace.

Valuing women's reproductive labor in the home is big picture. That requires cultural change, because everything stems from this. We need to make an argument politically that people deserve rights, and that rights at work in a home can be enforced the way they can in any other workplace. But it all has to stem from seeing it as legitimate work and a legitimate workplace.

We also have to recognize the status and the rights of women as women. When we organize women, we make it really clear that we're not there to help anybody. It's each individual's responsibility to help themselves, and to empower each other by using an organizing approach rather than a service approach.

When we're advocating around things like health and safety, now we can we say people are doing things in another country. We need examples that we can say work, that what we're demanding is not that radical. We could have joint campaigns in both the U.S. and Mexico, with domestic worker groups working together on a common project. I'm not sure what it would look like, but we should try to imagine it. The Mexican group already works with the national Domestic Workers Alliance.



## Platform Workers - The new face of solidarity

*On Valentine's Day, just three days after the Los Angeles conference concluded, workers for Uber Eats, Deliveroo and other delivery apps in Great Britain went on strike, refusing to take orders and drive meals to the companies' waiting customers. Like their coworkers in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, the UK drivers are not covered by the statutory "national living wage" of 11.44 pounds. The UK supreme court last November ruled that platform workers aren't workers at all, in the face of an organizing drive by the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain that had signed up over 3000 members.*

*In an era where workers in one country can follow the actions of workers in another, in real time as they happen, the strike electrified platform workers across the Atlantic.*

### Jennifer Scott

*Jennifer Scott is a gig worker and the president of Gig Workers United in Canada. She lives and works in Toronto.*

Our union started in early 2020 with the Food Stores United Campaign, at a European company called Foodora. This was an app like Uber. Workers wanted to unionize, so we helped them. We put in the papers for the certification of their union, and 89.4% of workers in Toronto and Mississauga voted yes. So we won and that set a precedent at the labor board.

Then the pandemic began and Foodora declared bankruptcy and exited Canada completely. But because of the worker power we built, we were able to get severance pay. The Federal government has a program called the WEP, for workers whose whose employers declare bankruptcy and are not not able to pay severance. We won a settlement of \$4.1 million, allocated and divided among workers all over Canada.

After that, we had questions. Do we want to stop? Are we happy? Do we want our rights? What do we want to do? Everyone felt that obviously, we want our rights. After a few months of talking and thinking we figured out what we wanted to do. Workers came together and created Gig Workers United, saying, "Look what we have in common."

No matter what city we work in or app we work on, whether we're delivering by bike or walking or car, the problem is we don't have our rights and we want them. That's the end goal of Gig Workers United - to unionize.

The main companies in Canada are DoorDash, Uber Eats, and Skip the Dishes, now owned by Just Eat. There's also Instacart and Corner Shop, which was purchased by Uber. Our Members work on different combinations of these apps. We have a very loose definition of a gig worker, and it's easy to be a member.

In Canada they misclassify us as independent contractors. We know we're not. Our work around organizing has to challenge the misclassification of gig workers, because that's how apps get away with treating us the way they do. It's why we don't have basic rights and protections.

The debate over classification was a big part of the Foodora case and why it was precedent-setting. In Ontario, under the Employment Standards Act, independent contractors have no rights. But you also have dependent contractors, which is a form of employee. In the Foodora case we won because we were classified as dependent contractors.

At Foodora we had to certify a bargaining unit, and after that, workers voted democratically. Presumably if we filed a petition for Uber drivers, Uber would say that we're not employees and we would have to fight that whole thing all over again. But the precedent has been set. The board looked at our case and at the relationship between the platform and the workers and made the right decision. So it doesn't have to be as intimidating or feel as uncertain now as it might have in 2018.



Uber in any country always wants to control the narrative. That's why a win for us on one app or even a win in one jurisdiction is a win for all us. The companies all work together, and workers have to work together too. A victory at Foodora or the huge fight in California around AB 5, and then the Uber initiative, all affect workers in other countries.

In the UK on Friday WGB [the British gig workers' union] organized what could be the biggest strike in the history of gig work. They shut down kitchens, with workers standing outside them saying, "We're not picking up." There are videos of McDonald's with 50 or 60 orders lined up and no workers. They were declining orders.

The consequence of a work stoppage is that the algorithm pays workers more for orders. Where on average they paid £3 per order, at the end of the strike Uber was offering £71 per order. That's amazing. As workers in Canada, we look at that and we're like, "OK, let's do that here." It shows us strategies and tactics that can work.

We know that any app algorithm is sensitive to strike action. As workers we can manipulate that and have big wins. A strike like that not only sends a message to the boss. It also means that a worker who is working that night is going to get paid £71 an order. That might make me think twice about collective power. A great reason to go on strike.

I'm excited to build my family relationships with folks in in the US. Because of the pandemic and being precarious workers, it has not really been possible to travel a lot, so we don't get to see each other. Being here is really meaningful for building those relationships.

The possibility might exist at some point that an action would take place in the U.S., Mexico and Canada at the same time. Who doesn't want that to happen? But what steps would have to be taken in order to get there? Like any aspect of organizing, it's worker to worker. I talk with my coworkers, and my coworkers say, "I want to take action." That has to happen every place, and people have to coordinate it. If we've got 50 new leaders and they want to take an action, how do we do that?

Presumably we'd have to find organizations with the same set of principles in other countries. I don't think gig workers can organize in any way other than through rank and file, worker to worker organizing, whether it's locally in our communities or across borders or global action. It is all rooted in workers.

As a gig worker, every day, all day long, when I'm working I am being confronted with orders - \$3 for five kilometers, \$3 for 15 kilometers. And I'm constantly looking at things and figuring out if the orders are good for me. Apps frequently send us emails that say, "Hey, we're making a change in how the app functions and it's going to be good for you and you're going to like it." But then what we see, and what we hear from workers all over the world, is that we fucking don't like it. It's not good for us, and we know what is and isn't.

That that's the core of organizing. The people who do the work know what needs to change. When we unite together, will know how to take action together. Folks who are not workers have a role to play, an important one. But our core belief is that nobody can change your life for you. You have to do it for yourself.

There's a community of interest between people in very different industries. There are lots of reasons for us to connect together, but the most important one is that employers like Uber want to bring in regressive labor policy. That's their end goal. It isn't delivering food and it's not about ride share. They want to drastically change what we think work is.

Apps and gig work is coming for all work. Gig work is about lowering employment standards and changing minimums to something that is not tenable, that harms people, that harms our community. Maybe somebody has a good job now. Maybe they have a union job now. But with gig work that won't exist five years from now. So we have all the reasons in the world to work together.

As members of Gig Workers United we recognize that it is necessary to build relationships internationally with other gig workers. We'll keep fighting and our relationships with each other can keep us going, can give us a hand when we need one. Now is a moment to start building that, so that a year from now, two years from now, when we need each other, we're already connected.

## Nicole Moore

*Nicole Moore is a part time Lyft driver and President of Rideshare Drivers United, the organization of 20,000 drivers in California. RDU has a democratically elected Board of Driver Members, and members who pay dues of \$15/month to be eligible to vote in the election of officers, held every other year. Today RDU has chapters in Los Angeles, San Diego and the San Francisco Bay Area.*





Rideshare Drivers United started in the parking lot of LAX. When Uber started cutting our rates, we started talking to each other. Unlike other workers, we don't have a big room or a water fountain where we gather. We gather at airports to pick up people. A majority of us are people of color and immigrants, so this gig model is impacting people of color more than other communities.

We did a couple of protests over some of the cuts and brought 50 or 75 people. But we knew it wasn't enough to really make a change. We knew we had to build substantial power. So in 2018 we took signs and left our cars and organized mini strikes on the sidewalks at the terminals where passengers are getting in and out.

Then we decided we had to build bigger than just airport drivers. Not all of us work at the airport. At that time we estimated there were 400,000 to 500,000 drivers in California, so we needed to organize to scale.

One of our volunteers started helping us build an Excel list. Then we realized we could actually build our own organizing app to help us recruit through social media and other venues. We wanted to build an organization where we could really communicate with each other and build real relationships.

We decided that when we got to 2000 people in our organization, we would do our first public action as Rideshare Drivers United on January 30th, 2019, when the new Governor of California made the alarming conclusion that drivers should get together with companies to come up with a solution. Some of the larger labor unions were already trying to do this, but with no drivers in the room.

As drivers we knew the companies were getting ready to their IPO's in 2020. They were slowly squeezing drivers to get more money, to look better for the investors. We were feeling it, getting less and less. So we said no. The the governor had barely been sworn in when we protested in front of his Los Angeles office. And instead of 50 people, we had 150.

We knew our organizing model, based on connecting as humans, was working. Lawmakers in Sacramento knew that these companies were fake classifying people as indefinite contractors, and the courts agreed. They passed a law, AB 5, that incorporated the ABC test for determining who is an independent contractor. It's been used all over the country, so it's not something radical.

None of us wanted to be employees of Uber, with a 40 hour work week and having to beg the boss for a vacation. Those are the things we associate with formal employment. The companies used that to feed us a line - that we wouldn't have flexibility if we were not independent contractors.

We needed the state to help. So we threw down to support AB 5, but we expected pushback from our members. But instead they said, "Hell, yeah! These people are treating us like employees, so we might as well have the rights of of all the other folks to at a least minimum wage and unemployment insurance and workers comp."

We had two gigantic strikes that year, the second right before Uber's IPO. That one went global. We had people striking on 6 continents because everybody knew Uber was about to make a bazillion dollars. They had cut us from \$1.75 per mile to \$1.20 per mile to \$0.90 per mile to \$0.60 per mile.

It was getting worse and five thousand of us filed wage claims because we often weren't even making minimum wage. But if minimum wage is just based on when I have a passenger in the car, there's no minimum wage at all. If there are 10,000 drivers in Korea Town trying to pick up two passengers, everybody's gonna make two cents. You have to look at all of the value of our time, wait time included. The state then ruled that they owed us \$1.3 billion. That was huge.

When I hear people from the rideshare union in Mexico, or the platform workers as they call them, I think it's wonderful that they're they're in the same struggles that we're in. It's so great not to be alone.

They have a legal system that does say they are workers with rights. But they also are fighting against unions that are trying to trade their rights for money and power. We have very similar fights here, so it's very exciting to talk with them. We have an international alliance of platform based transport workers and and have not been able to find a partner in Mexico. Now we have a union we feel we can work with.

Our deactivation report showed the violence, discrimination and and abuse drivers receive, and then we're we're fired or temporarily suspended by AI. We tell the company, "I wasn't drunk. The guy told me he was going to get me fired and get a free ride, so I shouldn't be fired. I haven't had a drink in 30 years." But we're arguing with the chat bot. There's no human in this process. Meanwhile we can't pay our rent or feed our kids. The woman driver from Mexico was talking about the same thing.

We're looking at global strategies to create standards for this industry. The ILO is doing that, but we want to make sure that drivers like us are in the room when those standards are set.

We're fighting global organizations, global capital, that are working to destroy labor rights for everyone. And they're going at it very deliberately and powerfully. It's no joke. All of us will be deployed through AI or some kind of platform in the future for our work. For the last hundred years, since the industrial revolution, we've tried to build workers rights. If we start at zero with the AI revolution, we're going to be in hell, a 21st century industrial revolution.

## **Shaira Garduño Tovar**

*Shaira Garduño Tovar is the secretary for gender of the National Union of Application Workers in México. The union includes drivers for Uber, bicycle workers, and motorcycles that deliver food at home, as well as people who deliver products for Amazon and Mercado Libre.*

I have worked in these jobs and been paid badly. We do not have any benefits or rights. The applications have sold us the idea that we are our own bosses, that we are freelance partners, but in reality they don't want to recognize us as workers, particularly as workers on digital platforms.

Mexican law regarding workers does cover people who work with transnational companies, but digital platforms do not recognize us as workers and do not give us the legal benefits that this requires. The Federal Labor Law, although it talks about workers, does not consider us as workers either. The bad thing about this is that they are transnational companies that come to our country, set up shop, and don't even give benefits to the workers.

In Mexico there is no law that defines us as workers or non-workers. Federal labor law doesn't recognize or deny us worker status. Outsourcing has supposedly been made illegal and disappeared, so digital platform companies are going against the law because outsourcing no longer exists. So we are demanding a reform saying that digital platform workers are recognized as workers.

This is a very masculine sector and women are only 10% of the workforce, but these 10% worldwide suffer a lot of gender violence. Sometimes you arrive at an address and you don't know what will happen on the street because you are a woman. As Secretary of Gender, in October we had a meeting with women working on digital platforms on an international level. Colleagues came from Spain, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and other countries. We all wrote a letter to the ILO, asking for a report specifically on workers on digital platforms.

We have been a registered union for 3 years at the federal level. We also have sections in the States of Mexico and Colima, and in the city of León. In Tijuana, we are close to organizing a new one. We have an organizing committee there, and sent a delegation from Mexico City to help. We want to start ones in Monterrey and Guadalajara, which are two of the largest cities.



But although we have recognition under the law, we do not have the right to bargain collectively. And since the companies do not recognize us as workers, we cannot force them to sign a collective agreement. Our most important demand is that those companies sit down to negotiate with us, and that the Government of Mexico requires them to do this.

The most important thing for us is to reach 30% membership, to be able to make a demand on these companies and represent the majority of the workers. The most important is Uber because it has a super dirty, anti-union history. This was discovered by prosecutors in the Panama Papers.

Although we have 30% of the workers, which is the normal legal requirement, who knows if they are going to comply. We thought when our membership hit 30%, that Uber and other companies might create white unions. Then we could fight this by organizing to remove those unions, as other colleagues have done. At Audi there was a protection union, but the workers all got together and got it out. So we can do that if we have to. But we have to come together as workers to fight them.

Companies are looking for a special organization that is not a union, they call Decalogue. And this decalogue says that we are not workers, that we are service providers, that they pay us fees, that our job is at their mercy, and that we are only protected from accidents during delivery time. Obviously that would be terrible. The companies hold these organizations' money. But many people are waking up and saying "No, I am a worker, I work 12 hours, I provide the motorcycle, the car, the bicycle, so I need them to give me benefits."

We tell them, first of all, that they have to recognize themselves as workers. As a platform worker, we ask, "Do you have accidents? No one protects you if you die. No company is going to be responsible for you. You provide the money for spare parts and gasoline. Don't you think we have rights as workers?" Then you say, "Well, if I provide everything, I deserve the rights of a worker."

There is another union, but we call it a yellow union, one that is with the company. They pretend they are on the side of workers, but in truth they are charros.

Some of the people who work on digital platforms are migrants in Mexico. Today we have a humanitarian problem of Haitian migrants, and many of these Haitians are working on digital platforms. Recently in the news a young Haitian who was hired by a construction contractor died and the company did nothing. We want to make this stop. Our fellow migrants are vulnerable, far from their country.

There are also a good portion of LGBT women and some gay men as well. They are victims of homophobia and discrimination.

We have relationships with similar groups of platform workers in other countries. We coordinate with groups in Argentina, Spain, Colombia, Uruguay and Brazil. We also work with groups from other unions.

# Muhammad Ejaz Butt

*Muhammad Ejaz Butt is the general secretary of the I-Taxi Worker Association of Toronto, and President of the Toronto Limo Driver Association. He is also secretary of the 20-country International Alliance of App-Based Transport Workers.*

We have filed a complaint against Uber and those unions that have made under the table agreements, first in UK, then in US, and now in Canada. In any country, unions must recognize the drivers, the gig workers, not just deal with the companies. Any organization of Uber workers should be an organization run by the drivers themselves, 100%.

Uber used to terminate any account for a driver at any time. Now, if a driver has lost his position he can contact with the UFCW without being a member of that union. Then they will arbitrate the case. However, last year fewer than 1000 people registered as members under that agreement. The union doesn't show clearly the advantages and disadvantages of that agreement. That is why I resigned from UFCW.

In our organization, there are four points to our program. First, drivers need a minimum wage, so we would accept employee status if it gave us opportunities and rights like regular employees, including union rights. Second, we need a minimum shift of nine hours that includes waiting time. Sometimes Uber will give a driver only 3 hours. The minimum wage should apply to all nine hours.

Third, Uber has to stop deactivating the accounts of drivers for small complaints. Sometime a customer is not right or he's drunk. So we want fairness in deactivations. Last, and most critical, Uber must be transparent. If I pick up customer and drive from A to to B, Uber will only show me what I get. They never show me how much they charge. The Uber agreement says they charge me 25%, but maybe they are charging 40% or 45%.

One day soon they will come to the table and agree with us.



Canada has already decided that by 2030 vehicle emissions must be zero and the vehicles must be electric. That will be a big expense for drivers like us. Auto workers and drivers need to talk together about this, and here we've been able to start.

## Crystal Romero

*Crystal Romero is the press secretary at the LA County Federation of Labor. She formerly worked as an organizer with the port truckers campaign of the Teamsters Union.*

Organizing port truck drivers at the ports of LA and Long Beach has always been an uphill battle, because they have been classified as independent contractors, rather than being recognized properly as employees. Unfortunately, the majority of the trucking industry seems to believe that truck drivers are independent contractors, despite the law and numerous cases before the NLRB and other tribunals, which have stated that drivers are employees.

The ABC test established the criteria for determining what constitutes an independent contractor, and what constitutes an employee. But there's disagreement even among the drivers. We need a lot of education to prove to the drivers themselves that they actually are misclassified employees. Even among the drivers it's always been an uphill battle to get them to recognize that their employers are taking advantage of them.

Employers often just choose to ignore AB 5, so we're still seeing active misclassification at the ports, which makes organizing a battle. A trucking company will claim, "no, no, no, these guys are not employees." So you have to fight out the employee issue, and ask for an NLRB union election.

Drivers make abysmally low rates. They've got to do multiple loads a day in order to break even. Some truck drivers actually make a negative income, and owe the company money. They are responsible for purchasing the trucks themselves. Each costs a quarter of a million dollars, and the drivers have to pay the taxes and insurance. Maintenance, tires, gasoline, all of that comes out of their own pockets. Essentially drivers are paying to work for multi-billion dollar global companies like Amazon.

A lot of positive changes have taken place, however the transition deadline to zero emission vehicles is going to be a huge barrier for a lot of misclassified truck drivers. How can we expect a low wage worker to finance a half-million dollar electric truck? A lot of the problems of the past are going to come back to haunt us if we don't address misclassification now.

I talked about the combination of passing laws and legal actions with Mexican gig workers. Gig workers there know that they're getting the short end of the stick, despite a few saying they're good with what Uber is doing. A big difference is the willingness of a lot of app drivers to recognize the problems and confront them head on.

Here we've had 30 or 40 years of deregulation, and the ideology of the independent contractor has really taken hold in the trucking industry. That is not as present in the app-based drivers today, so that's certainly a difference. But in all of these cases the problem is to get workers to establish their own agency, and get people to say, "Yeah. I'm a misclassified employee. I do have rights."

Legal action and political action could be an answer for the situation in Mexico, or one of the answers. Still, even here we've passed a wonderful law, but we still have billion-dollar corporations that skirt it. There are no real mechanisms of enforcement, or ways to keep these companies accountable that actually affects them in their pocketbooks. That's an issue that we see across the labor movement. So it's not the full strategy. I think it's just two prongs in a multiple prong approach.

In Mexico they are looking at organizing unions specifically for gig workers. Independent unions are part of the solution for them - rideshare and driver unions that can cater to the needs of these workers in a much better way than a very large union representing many different industries.

There's value in everything though. When you align with a very powerful union, like the Teamsters, you know you have more political clout. But I think one of the wonderful things that we've learned here is that we're all doing similar work. We all have very similar demands, and we're all fighting these battles in our respective jurisdictions. So how much more powerful could we be when we start really joining forces?

And Uber continues to be enemy number one to workers everywhere.



# Authorship

This report was written, the interviews conducted, and the photographs taken by David Bacon.

David Bacon is a writer and photographer, former factory worker and union organizer. His latest books are *More Than a Wall/Mas que un muro* (Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2023), and *In the Fields of the North/En los campos del norte* (University of California/Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2017), which document border communities and farmworkers in photographs and oral histories. He is co-chair of Guild Freelancers, the freelance unit of the Pacific Media Workers Guild, CWA Local 39521, AFL-CIO. His previous reports for the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung include *Displaced, Unequal and Criminalized* (2011), *Building a Culture of Cross-Border Solidarity* (2011), *Trinational Perspective on the Future of Labor* (2013), "your liberation is linked to ours" (2015) and *Building Worker to Worker Solidarity* (2016). His photographic project, *More Than a Wall*, was exhibited at the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung exhibition space in Berlin in 2017.





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