

IN CRITICAL SOLIDARITY

NEWSLETTER OF AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION'S
SECTION ON LABOR AND LABOR MOVEMENTS

SUMMER 2013
VOLUME 11, NO. 3

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FROM THE CHAIR

With the ASA meetings in New York just around the corner, these are exciting times for the Labor Section! In a few weeks, I will hand the duties of section chair over to incoming Chair Steve McKay (UC Santa Cruz), and the newly-elected section officers will begin shaping the future of the section. To Chair-elect Shannon Gleeson (UC Santa Cruz), Secretary-Treasurer Paul Almeida (UC Merced), and Council member Marcos Lopez (Middlebury College): welcome, and thank you for your commitment to the section! Thanks also to the outgoing members of council – Past Chair Chris Tilly and outgoing Secretary-Treasurer Ellen Reese – for their outstanding work on behalf of the section. Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't thank outgoing newsletter editor Mike McCarthy for a job well done.

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Our section has a very strong program at ASA this year, with three sessions on Sunday, August 11. These sessions focus in turn on (1) organizing the new American work force; (2) work, power, and inequality; and (3) the neoliberal assault on the public sector. To me, these three themes speak to the breadth and scope of our section's interests. As scholars of labor and labor movements, we are of course interested in trade unions, the crisis of union membership, and the challenges of organizing new industries and new workers, and our first session deals with these issues. But we are also interested in the organization of work itself – not least because one can hardly understand the prospects for building workers' power through collective action without understanding changes in the organization of work! These themes are taken up in our second session. And finally, we are also interested in the broader political economy that shapes the fortunes of working people, and so the rise of neoliberal politics and its assault on the very idea of the public sphere – the focus of our third session of the day – is of intense interest to us.

As many of you know, the section has also co-organized (with SSSP) a dynamite miniconference, "Labor and Global Solidarity – the US, China, and Beyond." The organizing committee (incoming Chair Steve McKay, former Chair Carolina Bank-Munoz, and David Fasenfest from SSSP) has done an amazing job. The program is simply stellar, with panels on supply-chain monitoring; on organizing (both cross-nationally and in comparative context, as well as on organizing women and immigrants in the global economy); and a series of incredibly exciting panels on work and labor in China, featuring both North American and Chinese labor scholars. The program and full information are available at http://www.sssp1.org/index.cfm/m/543/Mini-Conference_on_Labor_and_Global_Solidarity/. (It's free, but please pre-register at <http://bit.ly/ZZZej4> so we can get a head-count for meals.)

US - CHINA EXCHANGE

Although the miniconference is not solely focused on China, it does have a strong China focus. This stems from the fact that it represents (in part) the second stage of a broader, three-phase US-China labor-scholar exchange taking place under the auspices of a grant from the Ford Foundation, secured by Katie Qwan, Associate Chair of the UC Berkeley Labor Center. This exchange is really quite momentous, and I want to discuss it here, because I believe it opens the door to the members of our section for some rather unprecedented opportunities for collaborative research in China.

The first part of this exchange took place this past December, when a delegation from the Labor Section (Past Chair Chris Tilly, Council Member Ian Robinson, incoming Chair

Steve McKay, and Chair of the ISA's RC-44 Research Committee on Labor Movements Jennifer Chun, accompanied by Katie Qwan) traveled to China to meet with Chinese labor scholars in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong. Some of you may have already taken a look at the summary report circulated by Chris Tilly on the section listserv a few days ago. The second stage is the Chinese contingent's participation in our miniconference; and planning is under way for the third phase – a second visit to China to build upon the links established so far.

My discussions of the December trip with the members of our section's delegation have given me a foretaste of some issues that will no doubt be hot topics at the miniconference: the explosion of labor unrest in China beginning with the strike wave of 2010; the role of labor NGOs (especially in the south) and efforts by the state to circumscribe their activities; the effects of labor shortages on students who have been pressed into factory work as part of their "internships" and who have become radicalized as a result; and, most intriguingly, some limited movement toward democratization of the official state-run trade unions in Guangzhou.

In particular, I was fascinated to learn how a 2010 wildcat strike at a Honda transmission plant led Chen Weiguang, then Chairman of the Guangdong (Provincial) Federation of Trade Unions, to intervene against repression and in favor of allowing workers to elect their shop-floor union officials. This would have been impossible – even dangerous – in Beijing or Shanghai, but Chairman Chen later wrote a book focusing largely on this episode and his rationale for the course of action he took. He told the members of our delegation that many people have told him in private that China needs to change how it handles industrial relations – but these things are not possible to say publicly; at least not yet.

The other thing that made an impression on all the members of our delegation is the extent to which Chinese scholars are both doing empirical research on labor – including participant observation and field research – and training a new generation of Chinese graduate students. As Ian Robinson said, "I came back with a bunch of papers written by [Chinese] graduate students. I think the official links established in Beijing were important, but the real connections are going to come out of new relations with graduate students in both directions. I think of them as the Chinese Burawoys – the next generation [of labor scholars], either in the factories or developing close relationships doing ethnographic work with them." Our Chinese counterparts are eager to collaborate with US scholars, and I am sure that the miniconference will provide a forum for the seeds of such collaboration. While many of us with other specializations may not ever conduct field research on labor organizing or work organization in China, our graduate students may have new opportunities to do so thanks in part to this unprecedented exchange.

See you at the meetings!

THE LABOR SECTION'S MINICONFERENCE

**“LABOR AND GLOBAL SOLIDARITY:
THE U.S., CHINA, AND BEYOND”**

When:

Monday, August 12, 2013

Where:

Joseph A. Murphy Institute for
Worker Education and Labor Studies
City University of New York
18th Floor, 25 West 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036.

This is walking distance from the ASA conference hotels.

The conference has been organized by the ASA Labor and Labor Movements Section & the Society for the Study of Social Problems and co-sponsored by Asia and Asian American Section of the ASA, the Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies at CUNY, the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education, the Manhattan College Labor Studies Program, The Center for Global Workers' Rights, Critical Sociology, the Labour and Labour Movements Research Committee of the International Sociological Association, and the China Association of Work and Labor of the Chinese Sociological Association.

The conference is FREE and open to the public, but we do need to know approximately how many people will be attending the conference. Additionally, if you would like us to order lunch for you to eat during the lunch time key note panel, please answer that question and remember to bring \$10 for your lunch. (It is really important for you to only register for lunch if you are positive you will be in attendance. We don't have a budget to pay for lunches. We will be reconfirming the lunch order two weeks before the conference).

Thanks to the Conference Organizing Committee: Carolina Bank Muñoz, Steve McKay, and David Fasenfest!

Registration for the miniconference is now CLOSED at 170 participants. Thank you to those that registered in advance!

CFP PEWS CONFERENCE

On April 10-12, 2014, the University of Pittsburgh will host the 38th Conference of the American Sociological Association's Section on Political Economy of the World-System (PEWS), which will focus on the theme of "Social Movements and Global Transformation." Organizers invite submissions on this theme from all relevant disciplines in the humanities, law, and social sciences. The Call for Papers is available at:

http://www.sociology.pitt.edu/documents/CallforPapers_001.pdf. Proposal deadline is January 21, 2014. Meals and lodging for authors of accepted papers will be provided.

CFP WAL-MART IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: STATE REGULATION, LABOR POLITICS, LOCAL CULTURES AND GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

The retail industry is proclaimed a new leader in global economic development. Wal-Mart is the largest private employer in the world and continues to dominate the press and academic debate over the conditions of employment throughout its supply chain. Yet as the company expands globally, it faces ever more complex dynamics of country specific regulation and local context. Thus, Wal-Mart confronted the South African state and trade unions determined to set conditions on its corporate merger to protect the country's developmental aims; amidst fierce opposition the Indian parliament debated whether and how to open up its economy to FDI in retail, a sector previously protected. In Chile, workers and their unions have pushed and won demands from this otherwise unbending employer. In China, too, expansion of this transnational brings questions around corporate culture and union bargaining. Across the global South, in order to negotiate the terms of its participation and growth within these different contexts, diverse actions by states, workers and unions begin to challenge a monolithic view of the dominance of a company, which has come to serve as a symbol for not only corporate interests but the very form of 21st century capital accumulation itself (see Lichtenstein 2006). It becomes imperative, then, to analyze the diversity and flexibility of its strategies and practices.

This edited volume will put together for the first time a range of empirical case studies of Wal-Mart's entry into economies in the global South. It will assess comparatively when and how regulation, culture, and politics have

served to redirect company practice and to what effect. It is organized to draw on a number of disparate contexts, retail operations and supply chain relations, across the globe. It seeks to theorize how social and political regulation embeds capital within relations which define corporate practice and collective action: regulatory context, state politics, trade union organization, and global labor solidarity emerge as vectors with very different force across place. In these case studies we understand first hand that Wal-Mart simply cannot act the same or impose the same ideologies in each country. They have to be flexible and when they are not, we see significant resistance on behalf of the state, unions and workers.

The editors of the volume, Carolina Bank Muñoz (U.S.), Bridget Kenney (South Africa), and Antonio Stecher (Chile) are looking for contributors, both academics and activists, who can address the following broad themes in relationship to Wal-Mart in the global South.

- **The State and Regulation**
- **Working Conditions
(retail, logistics, and manufacturing)**
- **Wal-Mart Culture**
- **National and Labor Cultures**
- **Labor Politics**
- **Global Labor Solidarity**

We are looking for papers that can, in general discuss Wal-Mart's entry into the local context or specifically analyze how the above themes are playing out in the local context. By local context we mean national/country level case studies. We would like all of the chapters in the volume, whether addressing the specific themes above or providing a more general analysis to include a context for Wal-Mart's entry into the specific country (when and how the transnational entered, process, etc). Abstracts will be due by August 1st 2013, and final papers will be due February 15, 2014. Please email abstracts and papers to all three editors.

Carolina Bank Muñoz, Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center.

Email: cbmunoz@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Bridget Kenny, University of Witwatersrand.

Email: bridget.kenny@wits.ac.za

Antonio Stecher, Universidad Diego Portales.

Email: Antonio.stecher@udp.cl

LABOR SECTION PANELS AT ASA NEW YORK

Sun Aug 11 2013, 10:30 to 12:10pm

Organizing the New American Workforce: Gender, Race, and Citizenship in the US Labor Movement.

Session Organizers: Ben Scully (Johns Hopkins University), Belinda C. Lum (California State University-Long Beach)

Faith, Community, and Labor: Challenges and Opportunities in the New York City Living Wage Campaign
Jeffrey Daniel Broxmeyer (City University of New York-Graduate Center), *Erin Rose Michaels (City University of New York-Graduate Center)

Integrative Organizing in Polarized Times: Toward Dync Trade Unionism in the Global North

*Daniel B. Cornfield (Vanderbilt University)

Discussants: Ben Scully/Belinda C. Lum

Sun Aug 11 2013, 12:30 to 2:10pm

Work, Power, and Inequality in the Age of Finance Capital.

Session Organizer: Steven H. Lopez (The Ohio State University)

Coalitions for Success

*Andrew W. Martin (The Ohio State University), *Marc Dixon (Dartmouth College)

Corporate Bankruptcy and Inequality at Workplace

*Soochan Kim (Korea University)

Losing membership rights: The impact of eliminating permanent job tenure on power relations in Chinese factories

*Joel D. Andreas (Johns Hopkins University)

Rawls's Vision of a Property-Owning Democracy

*Tom Malleson (University of Toronto)

Discussant: Steven H. Lopez (The Ohio State University)

Sun Aug 11 2013, 2:30 to 4:10pm

The Neoliberal Assault on the Public Sector: Processes, Responses, Implications.

Session Organizer and Presider: Vincent J. Roscigno (The Ohio State University)

Who Needs the State?: Privatization and Political Sociology

*Christopher Pieper (Baylor University)

Who Cleans Your Park? The Neoliberalization of New York City's Public Workforce

*John D. Krinsky (City University of New York-City College),

*Maud Simonet (IDHE/CNRS Paris 10 (Nanterre))

Chalkboard Coalitions: Teachers' Unions and Strategic Responses to Legislative Threats

*Amanda Pullum (University of California-Irvine)

Eminent Domain, Privatization of Law, and “Accumulation by Displacement”

Farshad A. Araghi (Florida Atlantic University), *Jeffrey Kleeger (Florida Atlantic University)

Discussant: George Wilson (University of Miami)

LABOR SECTION ROUNDTABLES

Sun Aug 11 2013, 8:30 to 9:30am

Session Organizer: Erin E. Hatton (State University of New York-Buffalo)

TABLE 01: Strikes and other Forms of Worker Protest Facing Plant Closure: Workers and their Unions in Times of Crisis

*Norene Pupo (York University), Ann Doris Duffy (Brock University), June Shirley Corman (Brock University)
Excluding Strikes Distorts Our Understanding of Protest: Evidence from Britain in the 1980s and 1990s

*Michael Biggs (University of Oxford)
Globally Neutral, Locally Hostile: International Framework Agreements and Union Organization in the USA

*Cesar F. Rosado Marzan (Illinois Institute of Technology)
Latent Dimensions of Workplace Resistance
*Christopher Shane Elliott (University of North Carolina)
Table President: Gary Wood (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University)

TABLE 02: The Labor Movement and its Future
What Americans Think About Unions and What the Labor Movement Should Do About It?

*Tom Juravich (University of Massachusetts), *Steven Davis (University of Massachusetts-Amherst)
Interrogating the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class within U.S. Labor Movement Revitalization Efforts

*Leslie A. Bunnage (Seton Hall University)
The Role of Organized Labor in Civil Society
*John Brueggemann (Skidmore College)
Table President: Tom Juravich (University of Massachusetts)

TABLE 03: Inside Labor Unions
Homogeneity or Heterogeneity in Mobilization Dynamics? Bridging and Homophily within Late Nineteenth Century US Strike Waves

*Benjamin E. Lind (Higher School of Economics)
What Makes Unions Strong? A Network Perspective on Union Bargaining Power

*Lanu Kim (University of Washington)

Union Representatives' Participation in Post-acquisition Integration Processes

*Helene Loe Colman (BI Norwegian Business School), *Eivind Falkum (AFI Work Research Institute), *Audrey Rouzies (IAE TOULOUSE)

Table President: Kathleen C. Schwartzman (University of Arizona)

TABLE 04: Emergent Unions

Students into Workers: The Birth of Graduate Student Unionism in the US

*Michael Billeaux (University of Wisconsin-Madison)
The Rise and Fall of Social Movement Unionism in Taiwan's State-owned Enterprises (1987-2012)

*Ming-sho Ho (National Taiwan University)
Table President: Sarah Christine Swider (Wayne State University)

TABLE 05: Disadvantaged Workers

Low-skill Employment of Blacks and Mexican and Central American Immigrants during the Recession

*Mariano Sana (Vanderbilt University), Donald Blake Sisk (Vanderbilt University)

Women's Labor Market Experiences two decades after The Fall of Communism

*Nihal Celik (University of Maryland-College Park)
Bringing Workers Back In: Native Place Networks, Solidarity, and Labor Standards

*Enying Zheng (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
Table President: Erin E. Hatton (State University of New York-Buffalo)

RECENT PUBLICATIONS BY SECTION MEMBERS

BOOK ANNOUNCEMENTS

Frederic Deyo. 2012. *Reforming Asian Labor Systems: Economic Tensions and Worker Dissent*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Elizabeth A. Hoffmann. 2012. *Co-operative Workplace Dispute Resolution: Organizational Structure, Ownership, and Ideology*. Surrey: Ashgate/Gower.

Penny Lewis. 2013. *Hardhats, Hippies and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Cynthia Negrey. 2012. *Work Time: Conflict, Control, and Change*. Cambridge: Polity.

Nancy Plankey-Videla. 2012. *We Are in This Dance Together: Gender, Power, and Globalization at a Mexican Garment Firm*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Richard Roman & Edur Velasco Arregui. 2013. *Continental Crucible: Big Business, Workers and Unions in the Transformation of North America*. Black Point: Fernwood Publishers.

Robert P. Wolensky. 2013. *Anthracite Labor Wars: Tenancy, Italians, and Organized Crime in the Northern Coalfield of Northeastern Pennsylvania, 1897-1959*. Easton: Canal History & Technology Press.

ARTICLE ANNOUNCEMENTS

Volume 2 (2013) of the journal *Rethinking Development & Inequality* is a special issue on labor as a democratizing force. The issue was edited by Jennifer Jihye Chun and Michelle Williams and includes contributions on South Africa, India, Mexico and the U.S. by a number of labor scholars, including our own Chris Tilly.

Issue 47 (2013), the latest from the journal *Interventions économiques / Papers in Political Economy*, is another special issue focusing on the links between employment and social inequality.

Ron Aminzade. 2013. "The Dialectic of Nation-Building in Post-Colonial Tanzania." *The Sociological Quarterly* 54: 335-366.

Phillip A. Hough 2012. "A Race to the Bottom?: Globalization, Labor Repression, and Development by Dispossession in Latin America's Banana Industry." *Global Labour Journal* 3,2: 237-264.

Marcel Paret. 2013. "Precarious Labor Politics: Unions and the Struggles of the Insecure Working Class in the USA and South Africa." *Critical Sociology*, forthcoming. (currently available online).

Mangala Subramaniam, Robert Perrucci, and David Whitlock. 2012. "Intellectual Closure: A Theoretical Framework Linking Knowledge, Power, and the Corporate University." *Critical Sociology*, forthcoming. (currently available online).

Matt Vidal. 2012. "On the Persistence of Labor Market Insecurity and Slow Growth in the US: Reckoning with the Waltonist Growth Regime." *New Political Economy* 17,5: 543-564.

MEXICAN WORKERS WIN OWNERSHIP OF TIRE PLANT WITH THREE-YEAR STRIKE

JANE SLAUGHTER

"If the owners don't want it, let's run it ourselves." When a factory closes, the idea of turning it into a worker-owned co-operative sometimes comes up—and usually dies.

The hurdles to buying a plant, even a failing plant, are huge, and once in business, the new worker-owners face all the pressures that helped the company go bankrupt in the first place. Most worker-owned co-ops are small, such as a taxi collective in Madison or a bakery in San Francisco.

But in Mexico a giant-sized worker cooperative has been building tires since 2005. The factory competes on the world market, employs 1,050 co-owners, and pays the best wages and pensions of any Mexican tire plant.



Aware that this unusual victory is virtually unknown in the U.S., friends in Guadalajara urged me to come down and see how the TRADOC cooperative is working.

Its president—who was union president when the plant was owned by Continental Tire—spoke in a workshop at the 2010 Labor Notes Conference. Jesus "Chuy" Torres is one of the more impressive unionists I've met—though he's no longer officially a unionist. Still, "our class is the working class," he told me.

Far from indulging in a "we've got ours" mentality, the TRADOC workers are intent on maintaining solidarity with workers still cursed with a boss.

It's hard to decide which is more remarkable—how the Continental workers turned a plant closing into worker ownership through a determined 1,141-day campaign, or how they've managed to survive and thrive since then.

In any case, we need to celebrate such victories. I'll tell the tale in two parts.

OPENING THE FACTORY'S CLOSED GATES

Taking over their plant was not the workers' idea. Continental Tire proposed to sell it to them—after the union backed management into a corner so tight the owners wanted nothing more to do with it.

But to get to that point workers had to wage a three-year strike and what we in the U.S. call a “comprehensive campaign.” Workers say it was not just one tactic that won the day, but a combination of relentless pressures.

Continental Tire, based in Germany, is the fourth-largest tire manufacturer in the world. It bought a factory in El Salto, outside Guadalajara in western Mexico, in 1998, intending to produce mainly for the U.S. market. When it was first built by the Mexican company Euzkadi in 1970, this was the most advanced tire-making plant in Latin America. It was still the most modern in Mexico by the early 2000s.

But Mexican tire-making plants were dropping like flies at that time: Goodyear, Uniroyal. NAFTA had caused tire imports from abroad to triple between 1996 and 2000. At Firestone, the company-dominated union accepted a 25 percent pay cut, multi-tasking, and a seven-day week to try to prevent a closure.

Most unions in Mexico are unions in name only, government-affiliated labor bodies whose functions are to collect dues and control workers.

But the Continental plant had a different history. Workers had had an independent, “red” union since 1935, SNRTE (National Revolutionary Union of Euzkadi Workers). A history of the union proudly tells the story of when Fidel Velasquez, top official of the corrupt government union CTM, came to their assembly in 1959 and asked that contract bargaining be put in his hands. Velasquez was expelled from the meeting “for being unworthy to be present in a workers' assembly.”

Workers elected Chuy Torres and the Red Slate, which ran on a platform of resisting Continental's demands, in 2001. Management had begun aggressively cutting costs the moment it bought the company, closing a sister factory in another state. It brought in a manager with experience in union-busting, José Neto Carvalho, who'd extracted huge concessions in Portugal.

Now Carvalho sent letters to all the workers' homes, demanding seven-day production and a 12-hour day, a pay cut, speedup, job cuts, no more seniority for job bidding, and an end to the company-paid vans that brought workers to the plant.

Salvador (Chava) Hernandez, now retired, remembered, “We saw one thing and the company said the opposite. We were making 14,000 tires a day. The company said they

weren't selling, they were going bankrupt. The supervisors threatened us for months.”

But members refused to alter their contract. They didn't believe management claims that their plant was unproductive, and they were well aware of the difference between their own salaries and those of Continental workers in Germany and the U.S.: a Mexican Continental worker made about \$25 a day.

CLOSING SHOCK

The evening of December 16, 2001, boiler room workers came to the plant and found a notice on the front gate: Closed.

They called union leaders immediately. Guards were mounted to keep management from taking out the machinery. Two days later an assembly was called, with almost all the 940 workers in attendance.

Management urged workers to take their legally owed severance pay and go home. In fact, managers had recruited a group of workers to try to convince others, promising a bounty of 10,000 pesos (\$1,100) for each worker they persuaded. This group was promised they would be rehired first when the plant opened again.

When this scheme became known, it confirmed union leaders' suspicion that Continental's real plan was to get rid of the union, not the factory. It was the only independent union in the industry.

Workers voted to fight the closing, which they deemed illegal because management had acted suddenly, without following legal notification procedures and without proving the company was unprofitable. Torres later said that he really saw no way they could get Continental executives to change their mind, but he was determined to “give them a fight like they'd never imagined.”

The union officially began its strike—against a shuttered factory—a month later. Four thousand workers, families, and supporters marched nearly six miles from the El Salto city hall to hang red and black banners on the plant doors. Under Mexican law, these banners represent a strike, and nothing is allowed to be taken out of a plant during a strike. (This is one of several areas where Mexican labor law is superior to that in the U.S.)

A day earlier, Continental had brought a hundred trailers to the property, intending to remove the 70,000 tires inside. It posted armed guards on the roof, videotaping. Within a half-hour 200 workers and family members came to the plant to block the way. The slogan they painted on a banner outside was “Not a Single Screw Is Leaving.” The workers' demand was simple: that Continental honor its contract and keep the plant running.

TO THE CAPITAL

A week later, workers began a march to the national capital in Mexico City, taking a semi-circular route that led them nearly 500 miles (they used vans and buses most of the way) through seven states to locations where other workers were in struggle.

They held big public meetings with workers from GM, Nissan, General Tire, and Volkswagen, but the most emotional took place with campesinos in San Salvador Atenco, who were fighting (successfully) the government's attempt to build an airport on their ancestral land. The campesino leader presented Torres with a machete as a token of friendship.

Along the way, the union secured a meeting with President Vicente Fox, a businessman whose election in 2000 had encouraged corporations to crack down on their employees. The workers demanded that the government nationalize the tire plant, as it had recently done with a sugar mill. Fox offered to help workers get a good financial settlement out of the closing, but Torres replied that what they wanted was their jobs.

When the workers arrived in Mexico City, they had 10,000 supporters behind them in the historic Zócalo, the main square.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Meanwhile, union leaders looked abroad for aid. The Continental local of the Steelworkers in Charlotte, North Carolina, offered no help; management threatened local leaders that if they did, their plant would close. It closed anyway.

Torres said the only aid SNRTE got from the U.S. union was a slogan: that the union would last “one day longer” than Continental. In the U.S. this slogan has most often been a substitute for strategy, but in Mexico it resonated with workers who were coming at the company from so many angles.

The same happened with the German chemical workers union that represented Continental workers. The head of the Continental works council openly said that the term “international solidarity” didn't mean anything to him.

But SNRTE made other connections. Torres belonged to a socialist group with ties in Europe. Those connections helped SNRTE to meet with union leaders at tire plants and other factories in Spain. The European Parliament passed a resolution decrying human rights violations in Mexico by European multinationals, citing Continental. The union's small delegation secured a five-minute meeting with Continental's CEO, Manfred Wennemer—in which Wennemer blamed Torres for the factory's closing.

The most exciting action was the workers' visit to the Continental shareholders' meeting. Through their leftist connections they met a group called “Critical Shareholders,” which organized to protest environmental and worker rights violations at various companies. That group gave their passes into the meeting to the Mexican delegation.

“My legs were shaking when I got up to speak in front of more than a thousand shareholders,” Torres said. But afterward Wennemer said he would tell his subordinates in Mexico to negotiate with the union. “It has to be in Mexico, though,” Wennemer said, according to Torres. “There's no reason for you people to come here.”

Those negotiations were fruitless, though, and the next year the Mexicans were back in Germany. This time Wennemer felt obligated to justify the El Salto closing to the shareholders, calling the workers unproductive, with 25 percent absenteeism. Torres rebutted him with figures showing the plant was the most productive tire plant in the country.

The German minister of the economy called a meeting between the two sides, including the Mexican ambassador. A distinguished Mexican attorney explained how the closing had not complied with the law. The meeting raised the conflict's international profile and demonstrated that Mexican authorities were not finding a solution.

On the workers' third trip to Europe, in 2004, a Mexican congressman and a university labor law specialist accompanied them. The congressman asked the shareholders for a negotiated solution and that Continental respect Mexican labor law. His presence showed the shareholders that political circles in Mexico were paying attention. As it happened, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Fox would soon be meeting at a biennial Europe-Latin America summit—in Guadalajara, in the workers' backyard.

The Mexicans and their allies in European human rights groups (still no support from the unions) were also making noise about Continental's sponsorship of the upcoming World Cup in Germany. In downtown Hannover, site of Continental headquarters, the company had built a big monument with the World Cup symbol. The campaign demanded “fair play” in El Salto, promising to agitate at the World Cup itself if the conflict wasn't resolved. Some of SNRTE's 2004 delegation passed out flyers while others kicked a soccer ball around the monument.

DEMOCRACY SPREADS

Meanwhile, workers at Continental's other factory in Mexico were restive. This General Tire plant was in San Luis Potosí, 200 miles from El Salto.

They'd had a company union that was pleased to cooperate with management's plan to get rid of the union contract.

In a dramatic meeting in April 2003, members voted out their officers and voted in a leader who'd been fired for resisting the secret agreement.

In July, while Wennemer was visiting Mexico, the San Luis Potosí workers struck. Wennemer scolded the local government for not using the police against them. But he fired his director general in Mexico.

And in January 2004, two years into the El Salto strike, the government finally declared the strike legal—making Continental liable for two years' worth of back wages (another facet of Mexican law), a figure that would only grow the longer the strike lasted.

"We estimated the plant was worth \$80 million," Torres said. "And the back pay was \$40 million." This was in addition to the severance pay owed, which 587 workers had still refused to accept.

The tide was turning in favor of the workers.

FAMILIES

Workers who stuck with the struggle endured many hardships. Some went to the U.S. to work. Other families relied on wives' low wages. Local factory owners maintained a blacklist; even strikers' family members could not get jobs. A wives' group was fundamental to the struggle and spent much time locating different agencies and organizations that would donate food.

Conchita Velez de Hernandez was head of the women's group. Her family was the backbone of those who stood guard at the factory gate. When the police threatened their husbands, she says, the wives went to the secretary of public security to protest. And they invaded the factory owners' meeting to demand an end to the blacklist.

One of the more dramatic moments of the strike came in April 2002, during Holy Week, when management made one of two attempts to provoke violence by taking the tires and machinery out of the plant. The campesinos of Atenco, who were protecting their own boundaries, counseled sandbags. The campesinos journeyed to El Salto to help workers, wives, and supporters fill the bags with dirt and pile them in front of the plant.

During the whole length of the conflict, not a single screw was removed.

VICTORY

Germany is the second-biggest investor in Mexico, after the United States. Torres believes that, although the Mexican government was never an ally of their struggle, high-level

politicians on both sides came to deem it better to get it over with.

In August 2004, less than three months after President Fox and Chancellor Schroeder met in Guadalajara, Wennemer made a serious offer. The company would sell the workers a half interest in the plant, in exchange for the back pay the company owed them.

Workers would still receive their severance pay, which totaled 230 million pesos for 587 workers, about \$34,000 apiece. The plant would reopen in partnership with a Mexican company, a tire distributor, which would buy the other half from Continental. All the workers who'd held out would have their jobs back.

Torres seems as amazed by their victory as anyone. "The most important legacy of this struggle is to demonstrate to workers how a small union could beat a transnational of the capacity of Continental," he said.

On February 18, 2005, the plant, now named Corporación de Occidente, or Western Corp., was formally handed over to its new owners.

"They were betting that we would fail," Torres said.

But the workers didn't fail.

CAN WORKER-OWNERS MAKE A BIG FACTORY RUN?

A tire is not just a piece of rubber with a hole in it. I learned this when I visited the workers' cooperative that makes Cooper tires in El Salto, Mexico. A tire is a sophisticated product that comes about through a chain of chemical processes, lots of machine pounding, and still the intervention of human hands.



A fervent inspection worker pointed out that every single tire is tested under road-like conditions: “If not, it could kill people,” he noted. And, he added practically, “keeping the tires safe saves our jobs.”

These workers went without jobs for three years during the strike that ultimately led to the founding of their co-op. They’ve been building tires as worker-owners since 2005, selling them in the U.S. and Mexico and now paying themselves the highest wage in the tire industry.

How does a worker cooperative with 1,050 members function? It’s hard enough for worker ownership to succeed at any size, because any company that competes in a market is subject to the same cost-cutting rat race as a capitalist firm. Workers are impelled to hammer themselves and cut their own pay or be driven out of business. And most workers here have just a middle-school education.

Yet the TRADOC co-op—translation: Democratic Workers of the West—is thriving. Enthusiastic worker-owners have modernized their plant, increasing productivity and quality through their skilled work. Those factors together with their admittedly low prices have made it possible for them to compete on the world market.

RELUCTANT OWNERS

The strikers of Continental Tire, 2002-2005, were reluctant owners. When they fought the closing of their plant by the German multinational, all along they just asked for the owners to reopen it. At the end, Continental gave up and offered to sell half the company to the workers and half to its former distributor, Llanti Systems.

“We said to Llanti Systems: ‘You buy the plant. Just hire us as workers and pay us our back pay,’” remembers Jesus Torres, who was then president of the striking union. “For us that would have been the biggest triumph, to reopen the plant and maintain our work.

“But they said, ‘No, no, we’re not crazy, we know what you guys are capable of. We’re interested in you as owners, not as employees.’

“So we said, ‘There’s no other way out? Well, we have to try it.’”

Of the 940 workers on the payroll when Continental closed the plant in December 2001, 587 remained. The rest, driven by hardship, had accepted their severance pay.

The first one to enter the plant as an owner, in February 2005, was Salvador “Chava” Hernandez, who’d been a stalwart maintaining the union’s guards at the struck factory’s gate. He had goose bumps.

“It was our plant,” he told me. “We had been three years with nothing.”

There was no light inside, so workers cleaned away cobwebs in the dark, bumping into machines and avoiding snakes and owls. “It was a cadaver when we went in,” Torres said.

Within five months, they had the machines running again and had built their first tire. “We all ran to get our picture taken with the first tire,” Hernandez said. “It was a truck tire. And many, many people worked on that tire, each doing a little adjustment.”

One problem the new co-op had at the beginning was too many workers on the payroll—but they weren’t about to lay anyone off. They also had a new brand name, Pneustone, which the public didn’t know.

And the aid that Continental pledged never came. The company had said it would sell the co-op raw materials, buy the plant’s production, and give technical advice for a year. None of these promises were kept. Continental said it could get the tires cheaper elsewhere.

“When the company signed the papers,” said Rosendo Castillo, who’s now on the co-op council, “they said, ‘Here’s the corpse.’”

For the first four years, the new company was in the red. The first tires were sold very cheap, at a loss, to Walmart.

Co-op leaders knew the key to survival was to obtain raw materials at a good price, something only a large company could guarantee, and that it would be much better if that company distributed tires in the U.S. So they sought a new, international partner.

In 2008 Cooper Tire, based in Findlay, Ohio, injected new capital; it now owns 58 percent of the Corporación de Occidente (COOCSA), or Western Corp., with the TRADOC cooperative owning 42 percent. Cooper has four members on the board of directors and TRADOC three; decisions can be made only if 75 percent agree, or 100 percent for important decisions such as investments or asset sales. In other words, all management decisions are made by agreement between the two entities.

Western Corp. buys raw materials from Cooper, and Cooper buys 95 percent of the factory’s output, most of it for sale in the U.S.

Ironically—since they had fought their own closing so hard—the TRADOC workers were the beneficiaries of a Cooper closing in Georgia, when they bought that plant’s machinery.

BUILDING A TIRE

Making a tire is like making a cake, Torres says. There are recipes—it's really a chemical process. Different types of rubber come in from Malaysia, Guatemala, and Singapore, used for different parts of the tire: its walls, its floor. One of TRADOC's three mixers, where petroleum is added to molten rubber, is the largest in the world, two stories high.

Steel—as in “steel-belted tires”—and nylon are threaded in at a later stage. At every step, the consistency of the rubber mixture is tested by technicians, and at the end, a number of quality checks result in a discard rate of 1.8-2.5 percent.

The number of different computerized machines that knead or shape the rubber is staggering; the El Salto plant is more than half a mile long. And near the end, workers and machines work in tandem to pull the parts together. I watched a top-seniority tire-builder named Carlos, who because of his productivity makes one of the highest wages in the plant, move eye-blurringly fast to place and tug the strips of rubber, one tire at a time. This happens 15,000 times a day, 4.2 million times in 2012.

“The fact that a tire is so hard to build makes it even more impressive that we're doing this,” says Torres immodestly. Worldwide, tire-building is continually modernizing and requires steady investment.

New younger members, the “black belts,” are looking at how to improve the process. For example, they'd like to cut down on the use of solvents and thereby avoid skin problems. They will figure out a new product and how much it would cost for the whole plant, and make a presentation.

STRUCTURE OF THE CO-OP

One of the simplest gains under the new system was to do away with foremen. “It was easy,” Torres said. “Each worker knows his job, knows the quota. They don't have to be watched.” Quotas are set low enough that many workers finish a couple hours early and relax till quitting time. Nor is there a janitorial department; workers clean their own areas.

TRADOC holds a general assembly only twice a year, but that assembly holds veto power over important decisions such as selling assets, making investments, and buying machinery. For example, partnering with Cooper was approved by the assembly after an intense debate, but with an overwhelming majority. Meetings feature much debate, with successful proposals coming from the floor, not only from the leadership.

In the day-to-day running of the plant, the Administrative Council makes decisions. A plant manager who is not part

of the co-op oversees all activities, but of course can't make unilateral decisions. “And so far, this structure has worked almost perfectly,” Torres says.

TRADOC has its own internal Surveillance Council to review co-op finances; its members can also take part in company decisions that could affect the cooperative.

TRADOC is in charge of hiring—actually, recruiting new co-op members. A member can be fired only with TRADOC's agreement, which has happened only in extreme cases.

The joint venture hasn't hesitated to rehire technicians, engineers, and specialists who worked for years under the old management.

One is Gonzalo, a chemist who heads the laboratory; he was summarily fired when the plant closed.

He came back to train production workers in his skills. At the outset, he worked without pay. The TRADOC members promoted from the shop floor to take on technical jobs learned fast, he says, and he likes his job better now because he can work cooperatively with people who have their eyes on the future. “Before, you had to make reports, give out punishments,” he told me. “Now that they have responsibilities they know how to work.”

There's no question that the cooperative is all about “working smarter.” For a person who preached the evils of the “team concept” and labor-management cooperation programs throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it was jarring to see some familiar slogans resurrected under a different ownership structure.

The hallmarks of the team concept are workers monitoring each other and competing to come up with labor-saving suggestions. When one worker said, “Now we pressure each other to do it right the first time,” I had to remind myself where I was. But isn't this what team members ought to do, when we're all on the same side? Isn't the number of sides—one or two—the nub of the matter?

The team concept claims to produce worker dignity and satisfaction by soliciting workers' ideas to increase someone else's profits. When the profits are yours and your fellow workers', the dignity and satisfaction can be real. A bulletin board notice congratulated member Joel Gutierrez for his idea that saved 12-25 tires per day from the scrap heap. It's the type of notice that could be found in any plant, but here with different implications.

“Though some slogans may be similar,” Torres said, “in TRADOC, collective interest prevails.” And the collective can choose how to balance its different goals—note the high salaries and early quitting times. Rosendo Castillo of the co-op council says members want to invest in machinery that will save them from heavy labor—even though this presumably means fewer jobs in the short term.

Though it's risky to extrapolate too much from one plant tour, I found an atmosphere where no one seemed stressed, a feeling of quiet competence (though Carlos was moving mighty fast). I asked one lab tech whether he felt pressure from his co-workers to ignore bad test results in order to keep production moving. "Ignore them never," he said solemnly. "Responsibility is a way of life."

PAY, BENEFITS, CONDITIONS

The co-op began with equal salaries for all. This led to problems, Torres explained. "Some said, 'Why should I work harder if at the end of the day, I make the same money as the rest of you?'" When leaders proposed a salary scale, the assembly was nearly unanimous in favor.

Now there are seven pay levels, 2 to 8, with most workers at the 5-7 rates and very few at 2 or 3, which are mostly for new hires. Under the precept "equal work, equal pay," the monthly salary is determined by physical effort and responsibility. Seniority determines who can transfer to an open job.

In the industrial corridor where the plant is located, usual factory pay is \$192-\$384 a month. In TRADOC workers in the 5-7 range make \$240-\$375 a week. Members of the administrative council get the same as the highest-paid worker.

The plant operates under the same schedule as before the strike: three eight-hour shifts per day (including lunch), six days per week. Workers rotate through morning, evening, and midnight shifts every three weeks, and their days off rotate as well, a different day each week. This means they are only off two days in a row a third of the time (Sunday is always free). There is some overtime, though the goal is to reduce it.

In the U.S., rotating shifts are considered brutal, hard on the body as well as family life. In union plants, those with higher seniority have the privilege of choosing their shift, and those with less suffer on midnights till they've been there a while. But Torres notes that members had been used to the rotation system and adds, "We are ruled by the criterion of equal effort."

In Mexico the government pension (the equivalent of Social Security) is based on what the employer pays into the system in one's last five years worked. So TRADOC pays in at a very high rate for those five years, enough to secure every worker \$1,500 a month, nearly as much pay as when they were working. It's a muy digna retirement, very dignified, the highest in the state.

The absence of hard hats and ear plugs in the plant is noticeable. Castillo said, "The leaders have tried to tell

them, but the workers say, 'I can take care of myself, I'm the owner.'"

Not surprisingly, everyone in El Salto would like to work at the tire factory. Workers have kept the openings for their family members, including 25 daughters, the first women to work in production. I spoke to a young mother with two children, whose father got her in. She plans to stay, she said.

THE FUTURE

When the workers took over, says Torres, "we knew how to make tires, but we didn't know how to sell them." That's why they needed a capitalist partner, and still do. But they know their arrangement with Cooper may not last forever.

Cooper is an anti-worker company, after all. In 2012 it locked out its U.S. workforce, seeking deep concessions, successfully. When TRADOC sent a letter of solidarity to the union (which was never answered), management was furious.

"We have a history we're not going to deny," Torres told the Cooper managers. "Our class is the working class. We are the co-op. We have the plant. You sell the tires."

But looking down the road, TRADOC wants to be prepared to take over sales—which is where the most profits lie. The next general assembly will hear a plan to open a tire store in the nearby big city of Guadalajara.

The company has yet to pay dividends to the shareholder-workers, but it may be possible for the first time this year. If there are profits, though, leaders will be advising that some be kept back for investment.

In elections for the co-op council held every three years, there's always a right-wing and a left-wing slate. The right argues that members should pay attention only to their own plant, and ignore workers' struggles elsewhere. They also want higher pay, for the "management" positions they're seeking. Thus far the left has won handily.

So the co-op has a solidarity fund, a couple of dollars a week from each worker's pay. They publish a bimonthly paper of labor news, the Workers' Gazette, and help support locked out electrical workers and miners, fired Honda workers, campesinos imprisoned for defending their land.

"This isn't new," explains Torres. "Our union was always very solidaristic. We sent money to the Spanish Civil War" in the 1930s.

What can we learn from this ongoing story? It made a big difference that the leaders of this struggle were socialists, disinclined to sell out or give in, and mindful of the need to look for international allies. Without that leadership, this plant closing would have ended as so many others have.

But once the co-op started: it's a pleasure to relate that workers really do run a factory better than the bosses. Not only do they control the plant floor, with no need for overseers, they come up with ideas to improve production in both senses: more and better tires, less scrap—but also fewer backbreaking jobs.

With about the same workforce, the plant is producing 50 percent more tires than before it was closed. Workers have introduced new machinery to boost productivity, but so do most enterprises. Corporations also use speed-up, pay cuts, and a total disregard for the environment. Those things won't happen at this co-op.

TRADOC leaders are now in contact with Goodyear tire workers in France who also want to take over their plant as a cooperative. They are eager to share their ideas and experiences with any workers who are considering a cooperative as an option in an industrial conflict. Email Jesus Torres at j.torres@coocsa.com. This piece appeared in Labor Notes in two parts on in April 2nd and April 3rd.

STRIKING DUBAI WORKERS FACE MASS DEPORTATION

CHRIS ARSENAULT



Backed by security forces, bosses at Arabtec - a massive construction firm with interests across the oil-rich Gulf states - ended a strike on Monday, but the fallout continues as more workers are receiving deportation orders.

"Between 20-25 people just got the [deportation] letter now," Ashraf, a scaffolding installer at Arabtec, told Al Jazeera on Wednesday after receiving a phone call from a co-worker.

"When we got the news of the [first] deportations [on Monday] everyone came down shouting. When the police came, we just went back to our rooms. People were trying to be part of the group without coming to the front," he said.

Unions and strikes are illegal in Dubai and across the Gulf and rather than demonstrating or holding placards, a few thousand workers simply stayed in their accommodations last weekend and didn't show up for work.

The strike ended after management refused to accept demands for increased wages from people earning about \$200 a month to complete mega-projects in 40 degree Celsius heat. Worker demands varied from a monthly pay raise of between \$100-\$135, while others wanted free food that they say was promised to them.

Arabtec, Dubai's largest construction firm, has tens of thousands of employees and contracts to work on the city's airport, the Abu Dhabi branch of the Louvre museum, and other high-profile projects.

It's unclear how many workers downed their tools or how many received deportation orders, although it seems dozens if not hundreds will be forced to leave the country they have helped to build.

A call to Arabtec's media office rang unanswered Thursday, and an emailed request for comment was not returned.

"Arabtec has been working closely with the UAE Ministry of Labour, the Dubai Police and the concerned security authorities to resolve as soon as possible a partial workers stoppage by a limited number of Arabtec labour employees," the company said in a filing on Tuesday.

Projects will be delivered on time in spite of the strike, the company said. The Labour Ministry had said that Arabtec was paying the workers according to contracts.

POLICE PRESSURE

Dubai is an autonomous city and part of the United Arab Emirates, a federation run by an unelected emir where the press is censored and public demonstrations are illegal.

The camp where Ashraf lives with some 2,500 Arabtec employees is located in Sonapur or the "land of God", a series of dusty streets and barracks-style labour camps guarded by private security and home to about 200,000 workers.

"We live with five men to a room and 40 or 50 men share a bathroom," Syed Khaled, a concrete mixer for Arabtec, told Al Jazeera. "The company is very cruel and going on strike is a good idea."

Khaled said he earns about \$102 per month, less than what he would make in his native Bangladesh. The difference, he said, is that the work in Dubai is steady, whereas at home he might be employed one month and then have no job for the next two.



'SLAVE' STATES

Other workers, including some who supported the strike, said the money they are earning in Dubai is far better than anything they could hope for back home. "The strike ended because of pressure from higher management and police," he said.

Sharan Burrow, general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, said workers such as Khaled are "effectively living in 21st-century slave states".

"It's appalling," she told Al Jazeera of the situation in Dubai and across the Gulf. "The governments and employers must sit down and respect the rights of workers to bargain collectively. Most companies are forcing their workers to live in squalor. An unconscionable number of workers die due to unsafe conditions. These governments are using and abusing migrant workers."

Known for its Ferraris, "seven-star" hotels and other ostentatious displays of wealth, less than 20 percent of the UAE's roughly 7.9 million residents are citizens. To attain citizenship, a person must usually demonstrate a blood connection on the father's side to the Emirates' original inhabitants.

Migrant workers choose to come to Dubai on their own free will, and most locals believe labourers are offered a better life in the UAE than what's available in their home countries.

Some labourers seem to support that view. "We are happy to be here; this is not our country. We could have left anytime," Mahmoud Jamal, a labourer from Bangladesh, told Al Jazeera. "We are willing to work. We just want to stay here."

Jamal, a strike supporter, said he's now worried he won't be able to renew his residency visa as a result of the labour dispute.

Under the *kefala* system, a worker's legal status in the country is tied to his employer. Foreigners cannot change jobs without permission from their company. Supporters say these rules allow citizens to retain their rights while creating economic stability, while critics say they are a form of modern servitude.

A call to Dubai's Ministry of Labour office was put on hold for 30 minutes without a response on Thursday. An email requesting comment was also not answered.

BETTER THAN HOME COUNTRIES

A minority in what they consider their own country, the idea of independent trade unions for foreigners is unfathomable to most UAE citizens. Strikes and protests by workers are considered a security risk in a city that prides itself on being open to investment, tourism and different cultures.

Supporters of Dubai's economic model say a lack of collective bargaining rights is good for workers, as it leads to more growth and job creation. Part of the reason why countries such as France are in the economic doldrums, they say, is because the labour market is overly regulated and employees spend more time protesting than actually working.

For many residents and most citizens, the Dubai model of cheap, imported labour and no union recognition has been a boon. If hundreds of Arabtec employees are deported, there will be thousands of new recruits clamouring to take their place, leading some to argue the Dubai model is a success as workers understand their own self-interest and can vote with their feet.

Annual per capital income in the UAE is \$48,158, according to the Heritage Foundation think-tank. In the span of 20 years, the city has transformed itself into an international hub for tourism, real estate investment and financial services.

But the wage gap between Emirati citizens and Western technocrats on the one hand, and the working class on the other, is massive.

Many labourers arrive in Dubai saddled with debt, usually a result of visa fees and other charges imposed by local labour agents in their home countries. These practices are illegal in Dubai, but tracking perpetrators in Bangladesh or India is almost impossible for police forces in the UAE.

The UAE can't be held accountable for corrupt labour practices in migrant-sending countries, according to some analysts.

LOCAL CONCERNS

Most labourers seem to reserve their scorn for local bosses, unscrupulous visa agents in their home countries, and labour camp officials.

"We are sweating, working hard in the hot sun and we aren't getting benefits," Arshad Hamid, a scaffolding installer who has been with Arabtec for six years, told Al Jazeera. "The office boys are getting benefits and their salaries are higher."

Other workers complained that foremen receive regular wage increases, but they do not.

Stuart Poole-Robb, the CEO of KCS, a London-based consultancy, once worked in the UAE helping with security for a petroleum facility. He said conditions in the labour camps could pose a risk to the UAE's broader stability.

"I am stunned salaries are still at the level they are," Poole-Robb told Al Jazeera. "By treating people like this they [the Emirates] are opening themselves up to serious problems."

Agents working for Iran, a country the Gulf states fear, were stirring up trouble in the labour camps around the petroleum facility, he alleged, and bad working conditions made some workers receptive to their overtures.

"The camps could end up acting like a Trojan horse," he said. "These workers deserve a living wage like anyone else."

Dubai's backers say some companies do abuse workers, but these are isolated incidents that could happen in any society rather than structural problems. 'It won't improve'

Reports including Human Rights Watch's "Building towers, cheating workers" and a documentary from the BBC programme Panorama exposing abuses at Arabtec have irritated some Emiratis, who believe the country is unfairly targeted by Western organisations.

In response to the bad public relations stemming from the treatment of workers, the UAE has instituted some changes, including the creation of a telephone hotline through which employees can report abuse. Rights groups, however, say there has been virtually no improvement for workers in the past decade.

Earlier this year, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum, Dubai's ruler and the UAE's vice president, initiated a campaign to thank blue-collar workers for their service to the country.

But Mohamed Ashraf isn't feeling particularly appreciated. As he ponders his next move, the long-time labourer doesn't have much optimism.

"If we formed a union and we had a leader he would take our problems to management and they would just deport the leader," he said. "I don't think the situation will improve."

This article originally appeared at Al Jazeera. Names have been changed to protect the identities of workers

FACTORY PAYCHECKS TRUMP DANGER, LONG DAYS FOR BANGLADESH WOMEN

GORDON FAIRCLOUGH

KUPDHON, Bangladesh—Five weeks after Mahinur Akhter was dragged, bloody and barely conscious, from the broken concrete of the collapsed Rana Plaza garment-factory building, the teenage girl was back in her hometown, trapped between duty and fear.

In the shade of her family's mud-walled house, Ms. Akhter weighed the \$90 to \$100 a month she could earn as a seamstress against long hours, harsh supervisors and the terror she endured in the rubble.

"Many nights, I dream that I am still stuck in the debris," she said. "I think I will always be afraid."

But Ms. Akhter is under pressure to support her widowed mother and pay for her two younger brothers to attend school. The boys dropped out after their father, a night watchman at a saw mill, was killed last year in a traffic accident.

"Without my salary, I don't know how my family could survive," said Ms. Akhter, who put her age at 15 or 16. Even her mother isn't exactly sure.

For millions of young women working on the front lines of Bangladesh's industrial revolution, global demand for cheap garments provides a chance to lift their families from destitution.

Rapid expansion of the garment business has helped drive up income in a country that ranks among the world's poorest nations. The number of Bangladeshis living in poverty has dropped by more than 25% since 2000, according to the World Bank. Growth in per-capita GDP averaged about 2.7% a year in the 1990s, compared with about 4.4% annually in the 2000s.

BACK TO WORK IN BANGLADESH

Western shoppers take advantage of low-price, Bangladesh-made clothes that help fill racks at such giant retailers as Wal-Mart Stores Inc., WMT +0.66% Hennes & Mauritz AB's HM-B.SK -2.18% H&M and Inditex SA's ITX.MC -2.71% Zara.

Still, the garment factories extract a personal toll. Workers say they can spend 12 or more hours a day at sewing machines. Many live far from family and home villages, in some cases giving up school to work.

Ms. Akhter was on the fourth floor of Rana Plaza, sewing buttons on shirts, when the walls buckled on April 24. A falling machine tore a strip of flesh from her leg and sheared off part of her right foot. Concrete chunks slammed her head and back, knocking her down.

She was rescued after eight hours and spent 20 days in a hospital. More than 1,100 people perished in the building collapse.



Continued growth in Bangladesh will depend on the efforts of Ms. Akhter and other workers, whose relatively low wages help give Bangladesh an international trading advantage, despite the country's rickety transportation system, power shortages and political instability.

Questions about workplace safety after the disaster have raised fears of a mass exodus by foreign garment buyers, which could derail Bangladesh's economic push. Annual per-capita output is about \$820, compared with more than \$6,000 in China and nearly \$50,000 in the U.S.

"Bangladesh is a desperately poor country, and it still needs these jobs," said Salman Zaidi, economist in the World Bank's Dhaka office. "We need better safety, better treatment. But these are still better jobs than most of the other possibilities."

The burden falls disproportionately on the women of Bangladesh. Of the roughly 4 million people employed in garment manufacturing, more than 80% are women. Many are in their late teens and early 20s, from impoverished rural communities, who work around the capital, Dhaka, or the second-largest city, Chittagong.

"I have to work," said Ms. Akhter, a slightly built teen. "For women in Bangladesh, garments is the best choice."

She had finished second grade when her parents, deep in debt, left Kupdhon. The village is in a low-lying area near the Bay of Bengal, where most families grow rice and fish for their food. More than half the residents of the district live below the nation's poverty line.

The family moved to a traffic-choked industrial belt near Dhaka. Ms. Akhter's father, Md. Adom Ali, worked as a security guard at a market. Her mother, Sufia Begum, stayed home, tending to the children: her brothers Imran Hossain, 10 years old, and Sohail Hossain, 8, and her sister, Sima Akhter, 6.

Money was tight, even after Mr. Ali got a better-paying job at the saw mill. Ms. Akhter recalled she had one set of clothes that she washed when she bathed. At about 12 years old, Ms. Akhter said, she got a job in a garment factory, trimming threads on finished clothes. She earned about \$25 a month.

In Bangladesh, workers aged 14 to 18 are allowed non-hazardous jobs, with limited working hours. One of Ms. Akhter's relatives said he helped get government certificates stating she was more than 20 years old. With her new papers, she landed a job as an assistant in one of the five factories in Rana Plaza, carrying pieces of garments to the production line. She closely watched the seamstresses to learn their craft.

"I didn't want to be a helper my whole life," she said. "I knew I had to get up the courage to try to be an operator."

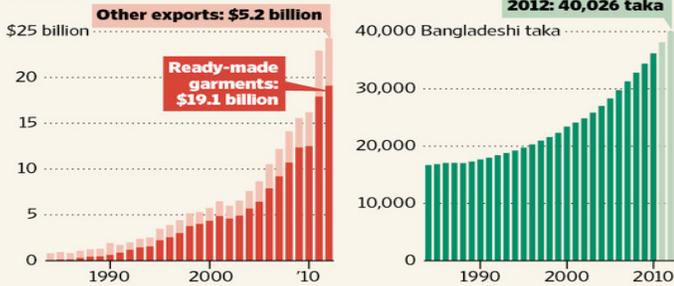
One day she persuaded a manager to let her sit at a sewing machine and try it. She was a natural, she said. Her starting salary as a seamstress was \$45 a month. With overtime, she could make much more. "I was so happy when Mahinur got that job," her mother said.

The work was hard. Most days, Ms. Akhter said, she would awake early, dress and eat a breakfast of rice and lentils, or sometimes fish. She walked 30 minutes to the factory and was ready to sew by 8 a.m. Supervisors pushed the seamstresses to work fast, she said. She was expected to stitch together pieces every 30 seconds. Ms. Akhter and other workers said they weren't allowed to use the bathroom unless they met their production quotas.

Retail Therapy

Clothing made for such stores as Wal-Mart, H&M and Zara has helped drive up income in Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest nations.

Total exports and share from ready-made garments



*2011-12 data are estimates. Note: 10,000 taka = \$128.25 at the current exchange rate
Sources: Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association; IMF (GDP)
The Wall Street Journal

When she later moved to garment finishing, Ms. Akhter said, she was expected to sew 10 buttons or more on a shirt in less than a minute, or in an hour attach buttons to the waistbands of 500 pairs of pants.

"I always had to concentrate very hard," Ms. Akhter said. "I was always worried that if I made any mistakes, they would yell at me and hit me."

Ms. Akhter and other workers at the two factories in Rana Plaza where she worked in recent years said male managers sometimes hit them and used abusive and profane language. She and others also said workers suffered sexual harassment.

Physical abuse, including hitting, took place on the factory floor and verbal abuse was common, said Sabiha Sultana Mukta, a compliance executive at the factory where Ms. Akhter worked when the building collapsed, Phantom Apparels Ltd. She said she had no direct knowledge of sexual harassment: "When the workers told me about abuses, I took it up with the production manager and line chiefs. I was told to mind my own business."

Moazzem Hossain Khan, a lawyer who represents Aminul Islam, the owner of Phantom Apparels, said Mr. Islam was "unaware of any reports of verbal or physical abuse."

Mr. Islam, along with the owners of the other factories in Rana Plaza and the building's owner, are in police custody,

as prosecutors investigate whether they had any connection with the accident, authorities said.

Mr. Khan said many people in Bangladesh lack birth records and can easily obtain papers saying they are old enough to work. "It is not the legal responsibility of factories

to verify the validity of the age on a document," he said.

Asked about sexual harassment, Mr. Khan said that the "style of dress" of some unmarried garment workers "sometimes influences their supervisors to harass them." But, he said, it doesn't happen often and complaints are investigated and perpetrators fired.

On occasion, the lawyer said, factories "must force people to work overtime" to deliver a shipment on time if national strikes disrupt production.

Ms. Akhter and the other operators said they usually worked until 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. Four or five times a month, she said, they would work until 3 a.m. or 6 a.m. to meet deadlines. She was expected to return by 8 a.m.

Her siblings were often asleep when she returned home, at the time a single room shared by six people. "At night, I was so exhausted," she said. "My whole body ached."

But the family's finances had never been better. Ms. Akhter was bringing home about 7,000 taka, or about \$90 a month, including overtime. Her father's salary was 5,000 taka a month.

They ate well. Ms. Akhter's brothers enrolled in school. And the family got its first cellphone, which Ms. Akhter used to listen to Bengali movie music.

Last year, Mr. Ali was hit by a truck while crossing a street on his way home from work and died hours later. The medical bill cost the family \$215, roughly two times Ms. Akhter's monthly income. They carried his remains back to their village.

With Ms. Akhter as the sole breadwinner, her mother and siblings returned to Kupdhon, where they could live free in her cousin's house. Ms. Akhter kept about \$25 a month, barely enough for expenses, and sent the rest of her pay home. "If I gave them any less, they wouldn't have enough food," she said. "I was always thinking about that. What I earned determined how much they could eat."

The day before Rana Plaza collapsed, word spread about cracks in the walls of the third floor. Workers were sent home. The next morning, managers pushed employees to return to work, according to workers and labor activists.

At Phantom Apparels, where Ms. Akhter worked, supervisors "were pressing us to work. They said we needed to send a shipment," Ms. Akhter said. Anyone who didn't work would lose a month's salary, she said.

In the days after the accident, Phantom managers told The Wall Street Journal that the factory was rushing to complete orders for a foreign buyer and was behind schedule because of general strikes called by political parties.

Mr. Khan, the lawyer, said inspectors summoned by the owner of Rana Plaza declared the building safe. He said Mr. Islam, the owner of Phantom, “had no knowledge” workers had been ordered back to work.

Ms. Akhter had been stitching buttons on men’s shirts for almost an hour when the factory shuddered and the concrete walls and floors gave way, trapping workers in a tangle of debris. She heard people screaming. Using light from a cellphone, she saw two lifeless bodies. Then she lost consciousness.

Ms. Akhter’s cousin, Jahangir Alam, who lived nearby, rushed over. He called Ms. Akhter’s mother. They both feared Ms. Akhter was dead.

“Mahinur’s dad died just nine months ago. If something happens to her, how will we survive?” her mother, Ms. Begum, recalled thinking. “I cried all day.” At 8 p.m., she learned her daughter had been rescued.

After her release from the hospital, Ms. Akhter returned to the two-room flat where she lived with her cousin Mr. Alam, his wife and two children. The densely populated neighborhood houses many garment workers. Goats and dogs rummage in heaps of trash that line muddy roads. There are open sewers.

Ms. Akhter’s room has a bare concrete floor and a fluorescent tube for lighting. One corner doubles as a rudimentary kitchen. The bathroom, shared with three families, is down the hall. She and a 15-year-old cousin sleep on a thin mattress, covered by a pink mosquito net.

“As soon as the pain gets better, I will go back to work,” Ms. Akhter said. “There really isn’t any other choice.” With her experience, she should easily find a seamstress job at one of the hundreds of nearby factories.

Before going back to work, she wanted to see her mother and siblings for the first time since the disaster. She was joined on the trip home by Mr. Alam, along with a reporter from the Journal, a translator and photographer. They traveled in a van rented by the paper.

Sitting on a platform bed in the front room of the family house, Ms. Akhter told her mother and brothers the story of the collapse. Her 6-year-old sister lives at a Muslim reli-

gious school in a nearby city. The boys, Imran and Sohail, listened wide-eyed, as Ms. Akhter recounted her ordeal. Her mother sobbed and prayed. “I was so scared she was dead,” Ms. Begum said.

The next day, Ms. Akhter watched her brothers play marbles in the muddy lane in front of the house. “I wish I could stay here,” she said. “People my age should be in school, not at work. But because my family is poor, I need to have a job.”

Her brothers said they would miss their sister when she returns to work. But, said Imran, “We want to go back to school. School is fun. Most of our friends go to school. But we can’t afford it right now.”

Imran said he hoped to one day be a doctor, once the dream of Ms. Akhter. Sohail said he wanted to be an army officer.

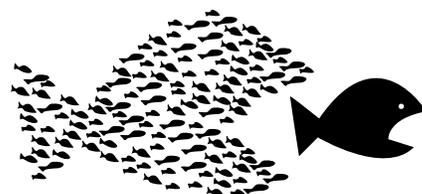
With Ms. Akhter out of work for more than a month, the family is getting by with help from Mr. Alam. “He can’t keep helping us for much longer,” said Ms. Begum. “He also has a family.”

The morning of her return to Dhaka, Sohail carried Ms. Akhter’s small suitcase on his head. Ms. Akhter and her mother followed behind, arm-in-arm. They said goodbye, surrounded by flooded rice fields. The broad waters of the Bishkali River shimmered in the distance.

“We need Mahinur to work,” Ms. Begum said. “The whole family is dependent on her. I fear for her safety. But she needs to go.”

As Ms. Akhter settled into her seat in the back of the van, her mother pulled her red-and-orange head scarf across her face to hide her tears. Ms. Akhter didn’t look back.
—Sean McLain and Syed Zain Al-Mahmood contributed to this article.

A version of this article appeared June 22, 2013, in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal.



WORKERS STRIKE ACROSS THE CITY IN THE BIGGEST FAST-FOOD STRIKE IN HISTORY

NICK PINTO



It was still dark when the fast-food workers began gathering outside the McDonald's just north of Times Square yesterday morning. Carrying signs that read "Strike for higher pay for a stronger New York," they lined up outside the restaurant, where workers from the night shift were still on the job. Some of those outside were scheduled to take over for the day shift, but they wouldn't be going in. Instead, they were taking part in the largest strike of fast-food workers in history, as roughly 400 workers from franchises across the city picketed to demand better treatment, a union, and wages of \$15 an hour.

"I'm striking because everybody's had enough," said Alterique Hall, wearing a black watchcap and jacket against the 6 a.m. cold. "We're sick and tired of being sick and tired. No person should wake up and be depressed about going to work."

Hall, who makes \$8 an hour and has no health insurance after two and a half years on the job, described bounced paychecks and the stark decisions of the working poor. "There have been times when I've been down to my last \$2.25, asking myself, 'Am I going to go to work or go to the welfare office?'" he said.

The strike was the first major action by the Fast Food Forward campaign since it first debuted with a one-day strike

in November. If that strike, composed of about 200 people,

was the campaign's first shot across the bow of fast-food chains, yesterday's strike, with roughly double the number participating, was a definite escalation.

Fast Food Forward is organized by New York Communities for Change, United NY, and the Black Institute, and backed by the Service Employees International Union.

As Josh Eidelson's excellent reporting on the campaign explains, the erosion of worker protections has changed how people organize. The shifting landscape of labor law has made many kinds of strikes illegal and dangerous for non-union workers, but the symbolic value of a strike remains strong.

Because modern U.S. strikes are often more about humiliating management than shutting down business, workers go out on strike for a single day rather than walking off the job indefinitely. And rather than waiting until a majority of workers are willing to take the risk of going on strike, organizers mount strikes with a minority of the workforce, in hopes that their courage--and their safe return to work afterward--will inspire more of their co-workers to join in the next time.

After the morning's debut action at 52nd Street and Broadway, the coordinated strikes spread to an estimated 60 locations throughout the city. Edwin Guzman joined a crowd of nearly 100 mobbing the sidewalk outside a Wendy's on the Fulton Mall in Brooklyn. Guzman, 23, had been fired from a Burger King in Sunset Park three and a half weeks earlier, after signing a union petition.

"The boss told me he felt I was disrespecting him by signing it," Guzman said. But Guzman was the one who felt disrespected. When he had asked his boss for time off so he could attend to court proceedings stemming from his inability to make rent, he was turned down. When Guzman got Fast Food Forward organizers involved, the boss reluctantly rehired him a few days later. But in recent weeks, Guzman has seen his hours cut dramatically, to the point that he's now only taking home \$75 a week. "I have to make these decisions," Guzman says. "Do I wash my clothes, do I pay my phone bill, or do I eat?"

Up on East 116th Street, a slightly smaller crowd was picketing outside a Domino's Pizza.

Roslynn Russell, a three-year Domino's veteran, said she too had her hours docked after signing a petition. Where she used to get 27 to 30 hours a week, she now only gets nine. "It's definitely punishment," she said.

If yesterday's strike was in large part a symbolic gesture to persuade workers that the campaign has momentum and that they can take part without fear of retaliation, it was also a political gesture in a city where the mayoral campaign is entering high gear. City Comptroller John Liu and Public

Advocate Bill de Blasio, both candidates for mayor, spoke at the closing rally outside a McDonald's on 125th Street yesterday evening.

"This is exactly what New York City needs," Liu told the crowd. "This growing wealth gap is a big problem for our economy as a whole."

De Blasio sounded a similar populist note. "You can't ask people to take care of their families, to take care of their children, if there's no money to take care of them with," de Blasio said. "People all over this city, people all over this country are waking up to just how unfair things have gotten."

For her part, presumed mayoral frontrunner Christine Quinn, who as City Council speaker blocked popular legislation mandating paid sick days for years before bowing to pressure and reversing herself last month, tweeted her support for the Fast Food Forward campaign.

At demonstrations throughout the day, fast-food workers carried printed signs that said "I am a man," or "I am a woman," invoking the signs carried by striking workers involved in Martin Luther King's 1968 Poor People's Campaign. Organizers selected yesterday as the strike date because it was the anniversary of King's assassination in Memphis, where he was helping striking sanitation workers protesting poverty wages.

The connection of the Fast Food Forward campaign to King's anti-poverty work was driven home eloquently by Kirsten John Foy, an aide to de Blasio and a candidate for City Council, who gave a rousing speech to the crowd.

"When Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. laid down his life, he was fighting for poor people," Foy said.

"He lost his life organizing a poor people's campaign. He was traveling the country saying we have to respect the rights of workers. We have to respect labor. We have to respect people that will put their shoulder to the plow, that will not rely on government to take care of them and their families. 45 years later, we stand on 125th Street and we are saying the same damn thing, and it is unacceptable.

In 1968, the enemy was Bull Connor, fire hoses and dogs. In 2013, the enemy is McDonald's and corporate greed, but we're here to say the same way we beat back Bull Connor, the same way we put Jim Crow in the grave, is the same way we're going to slaughter corp greed. We're going to take it to the corporate suites, and we're going to hurt them in their pockets. If they think that today is insignificant. if they think that the numbers too small, if they think that their pockets are too deep, I say to say to them their arms are too short to box with God."

This article appeared in the Village Voice, April 5, 2013.