

Tamayo explains that the weakness or simple non-existence of unions in *maquiladora* industries is one of their main characteristics. "The unions that do exist in the sector do not defend worker's rights, but rather actually serve to increase their exploitation. They are distorted in that way." Thus, he adds, it is important for workers to unite to organize and struggle for better working conditions in the *maquiladoras*.

Much of this goes on because the legislation regarding *maquiladoras* makes it easy for management to rotate the work force. A new worker in a *maquiladora* does not become "permanent" until she or he has worked in the plant for 90 days. Thus, it is possible to fire workers during this period without having to pay severance pay. Tamayo claims that this phenomenon is related to pressures from the United States that hope to use the northern part of Mexico as a platform for exports and to validate the presence of the U.S. productive plant in Mexican territory. "The *maquiladoras* are an extension of U.S. manufacturing activities; they absorb the ups and downs in the U.S. economy," he says.

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TOWARD THE FUTURE

For Jesús Tamayo, the *maquiladora* industries present the following characteristics now and into the future:

- * by the year 2000, Mexico will be saturated with *maquiladoras*;
- * there are no training programs for workers in these industries;
- * its growth is related to totally exogenous-external factors, and there is no internal strategy to control those factors adequately.
- * they receive "liberal," exceptional treatment; and labor laws are adapted to the demands of the industry.

As a result, Tamayo believes that there will be profound changes in the class structure of the northern border area, specifically in Sonora, Northern Baja California and Chihuahua. As a part of the same analysis, Tamayo states that pollution will also increase dramatically in the region since many of the U.S. businesses that leave their country to set up shop in Mexico do so to avoid the rigors of modern legislation that reflect a higher degree of consciousness regarding the importance of environmental protection.★

Adriana de la Mora

Minimum Wages no Longer Satisfactory

With the current inflation rate, "survival" is no longer an abstract concept but a day-to-day reality for working-class Mexicans.

The new minimum wage which will be in force at least until next December, was decreed last June 1st. Current legislation on the matter defines this wage as

"The minimum amount that a worker should receive in cash for services rendered during a day's work," and also that "it should suffice to cover a family wage-earner's normal material, social and cultural needs, including mandatory education for his children."

This was the spirit of the law present in wage negotiations since 1965, the year when minimum wages were first enacted in response to demands made by the labor movement. At the time, Mexico wasn't plagued by its present-day economic and financial troubles. The minimum wage climbed steadily over the next ten years, the only period in history during which Mexican worker's basic income, and real purchasing power, actually increased.

The trend was reversed in 1976, and by 1982 the deteriorating purchasing

power of wages became the central problem the Mexican working class faced. By the first quarter of 1986 the real value of the minimum wage had fallen to its lowest level in 21 years, and an 80% wage-increase would have been necessary to recover the purchasing power worker's had in 1977.

The falling value of wages led the National Minimum Wage Commission, which gathers worker, employer and government representatives, to begin meeting on a yearly basis instead of every two years as had been the case. As of 1985 the Commission meets every six months to analyze the situation and set the mandatory increase in the minimum wage.

Thus, the minimum wage increased 32% on the first of the year, and in June it climbed an additional 25%, meaning that workers who



Despite the slogans, the worst of the recession is not yet over.

Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz; Imagen Latina.

earn this minimum currently receive about 61,000 pesos a month, approximately \$90.

The basic expenditures of an average six-member working class family with this level of income are on food and lodging, and to a lesser extent on clothing, recreation, health and education. The state covers some of these needs, education for example, to a certain extent.

no longer afford them. Fish and meat, for example, are substituted with pasta soup and eggs, milk is replaced by coffee or tea. This, of course, is detrimental to their nutrition.

The 5 million-member Confederation of Mexican Workers, the CTM, believes that one important measure to reactivate the economy is to increase the real value of

power falls, important areas of the internal market shrink, and this in turn affects investment." In other words: nobody will be interested in producing if there are no consumers.

Fidel Velazquez, the CTM's main leader, believes companies should increase their volume of production and sales instead of resorting to higher prices for reduced sales volumes. This, of course, on the premise that a satisfactory wage will be granted.

A high percentage of Mexican workers are not organized, and this limits their ability to develop alternative protective mechanisms. Some even have a hard time getting employers to pay the mandatory minimum wage. Organized workers, on the other hand, often negotiate wages above the minimum and obtain additional services in housing and transportation, low-priced basic goods and severance pay and pensions that are higher than the law requires. These conditions are worked out

between employers and the union, and are written up in a Collective Bargaining Pact.

Yet the minimum wage is still the basis for measuring the quality of life for Mexican workers in general. The Mexican people's struggle in defense of our country's sovereignty and independence, is complemented by the struggle to increase the worker's welfare.

Mexico will have the capacity to meet its foreign debt payments only if it reactivates its economy without losing sight of the social aspects of development. If these terms are not met, the country will be forced to adopt unilateral measures, and will have labor's firm support if this is the case.

Further reductions in their real wages are unacceptable to Mexican workers. "The weight of the crisis must be equitably borne," say their leaders.★

Ariel Rivera



Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz; Imagen Latina.

Who can buy at these prices?

Others, such as housing and health services, are covered with resources provided by workers, employers and the government on a joint basis. Most of this type of agreements have been set up under pressure from the workers.

Nonetheless, over the last years prolonged economic recession and high inflation have meant the loss of Social Security coverage for many workers, something which under previous conditions allowed them a certain leeway in their family budgets. Constant increases in the price of basic goods, mainly of food, have further aggravated the situation. Minimum wage-earning families currently spend close to 70% of their income on food, and have lately reached the point where they have to substitute certain items because they can

wages. This, they add, must be accompanied by effective price-controls and other measures that protect the purchasing power of the majority of the population. While the unions continue to insist on a series of demands, they have also developed some original ways of protecting wages and worker's consumer patterns. Such is the case of worker-operated firms that produce and distribute basic goods.

The Mexican working class largest organization is the Labor Congress, CT, composed of 33 representative union organizations, including the CTM. The CT's position is that it's impossible to recover economic growth by keeping wages down. CT President Rafael Riva Palacio reasons that "if worker's real wages fall, meaning their purchasing

Jesse Helms's Politics of Confrontation

The ultra-right Senator from North Carolina goes after Mexico's head, and relations between the two countries hit an all-time low.

As recently as February 1985, tension ran so high between Mexico and the United States that the Mexican government referred to the state of relations as being "hypercritical." And now, little over a year later, voices were again raised on either side of the border, and a new clash has occurred in the complex relationship between two truly distant neighbors.

The hearings held by Senator Jesse Helms in the Western Hemisphere Affairs Sub-Committee, featuring Reagan administration officials, were originally scheduled for April.