

LOSING THE WHOLE WORLD AND FINDING EACH OTHER

Mexicans Struggle for Justice in Alcoa

By Judith Rosenberg

The day after the elections and the Republicans' victorious sweep, I went into work and encountered in the break room a colleague in despair. Eileen is a Yankee, as I am, and I enjoy her combination of book-and-street smarts and her life long interest in politics. Even so, we're not on the same page. To feel so low, she had to have had a lot at stake in the national elections. My activism however distracts me from the elections and even from the administration's insistence on war which, as I write, is not yet in full swing. I do keep an eye on the war and it does look dangerous. But I always remind myself that one purpose of the U.S. war on the Iraqis is to distract us from the administration's war on us. My commitment as an activist is to keep the war that rages at home in the forefront of my vision and work.

Since I came to Texas, I have channeled my activism through Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (ATCF) which formed three years ago out of the realization that very nearby, in Mexico, a social and economic system was proliferating based on ruthless economic and social oppression of working people; that U.S. corporations were perpetrators and beneficiaries; and that we don't know nearly enough about it.

ATCF began taking delegations to border cities to find out about this system, the maquiladora system. We went to listen to the people who work inside the maquiladoras. Media and policy makers never do that. The workers' voice is always the last voice heard. Austin Tan Cerca began working with a Mexican group called the Comité Fronterizo de Obrera/os (CFO), which organizes workers to advocate for themselves. The CFO is active in six border cities and centered in Piedras Negras, across from Eagle Pass, three and a half hours from Austin by car, closer to San Antonio. Through the CFO, we hear the workers'

voice.

We found that because of our struggle for a human relationship between our U.S. and Mexican groups, our lives and identities were changing; our own voices were different and so was our metabolism and what we dreamed a night. We have struggled to find how solidarity can work between us and find the forms of a relationship between people separated by many borders of inequality and many histories of exploitation and distrust.



In the summer of 2001, I had time off and I volunteered to work for the CFO in Piedras Negras and nearby Ciudad Acuña for four weeks. They said come to Piedras and we'll figure out how you can contribute. When I got there I sat around the table with their small staff and the volunteers who happened to be there that afternoon. Everyone who works for the CFO, as staff or volunteer, is a current or former maquiladora worker. They decided they would like me to teach English to their children and that I might accompany the organizers as they investigated the factories

that were closing at the time; that was before 9/11 but the recession had already started. Some of these factories were literally stealing off in the night, without paying owed wages or severance, and absconding with raw materials and inventories that legally belong to the workers until others debts are settled.

With Juany López, Margarita Ramírez, and Amparo Reyes, I traveled to Ciudad Acuña to attend weekly Saturday meetings of Alcoa workers—in the Alcoa "company park"; a dusty tree-shaded ground near a lagoon, posted all around with signs that said (in Spanish), "This is your park. Keep it clean." With no place to sit, people stood in a circle for

hours. When the breeze blew from the direction of the lagoon, you smelled sewage. This actually was the subject of subtle humor. When a puff of wind came by, a few wits would lean back, pull a long face, and leer at their neighbors, suggesting the smell came from them. Then a chuckle would pass around the circle, like another wind rustling, a comedy break and a comment on Alcoa's idea of a park. Alcoa is the biggest producer of aluminum in the world. Their automotive division in Mexico assembles electrical harnesses or distribution systems. Famous in Texas as the state's biggest polluter, burning lignite coal at their Rockdale smelter, Alcoa is also known for their arrogance in every community they touch. Acuña is no exception.

The gist of the discussions at those Saturday meetings was that the workers had myriad and detailed grievances that troubled them, especially since they had no grievance procedure. The previous October, with guidance from the CFO, a few hundred activists had won a 30 percent increase in compensation for Alcoa's 12,000 employees in Acuña. Each worker still had to fend for her or himself though. No unions of any kind exist in Acuña by special arrangement of city government, intending to make the place more attractive to foreign investment and deliver to it inexpensive and defenseless labor. In the past 10 years migration from the south has doubled Acuña's population. Since the maquilas pay no local taxes, the city can't provide infrastructure for the new inhabitants, a rampant case of un-development. In their meetings under the tree, Alcoa workers were struggling for a remedy to their grievances in the form of a workers' committee which local management recognized sporadically on whim. Management's unpredictability constitutes a special kind of disrespect; a particularly devious way of keeping the workers guessing about any commitment they make.

The first grievance I heard about had something to do with a supervisor accusing workers who were doing maintenance of stealing plastic garbage bags that had the Alcoa logo on it. A repeating theme, though, was harassment of women and pressure on pregnant workers. Men were the strongest speakers to this offense, even single men, like Enares who was a popular speaker and had a particular eloquence. He was so present; he seemed to find his words only as he said them. Hector Reyes was a frequent speaker, too. He always announced his name proudly, for the pleasure of it, even though everyone knew who he was. Cheerful and dapper, dressed in pleated slacks, he usually spoke with one hand in his pocket, the other gesturing.

For me, the meetings had a sacred quality. They were a form of collective searching and knowing. The workers had great pride in coming together and being with each other, a company of saints, actors in history, changing the world with their love for one another, and by their patience and determination to see and act.

I attended with the women from Piedras Negras—Juany, Amparo, Margarita—all women I had known for a few years but had never seen them dress up as they did to accompany their compañeras/os in Acuña. In their good shoes, they would tread the dust, packing along their copies of *La Ley Federal de Trabajadores*, a hefty 1,200-page red-covered paperback. I have learned reverence for this book; the workers are using it as a tool to pry loose and gain possession of their inheritance from the Mexican Revolution. Workers and campesinos died for the Revolution in staggering numbers. What they got out of it in return, as I see it, is mostly potential, the hope of realizing the many protections and reforms which are written in to the constitution and the labor law. This is their legacy which Fox, along with Salinas earlier, attack when they chip away, "modernize," or neo-liberalize Mexico's laws.

During the meetings, the organizers would huddle on the sidelines and consult one-on-one with a worker who needed legal advice. The last weekend I was there, the workers hosted a visitor, the president of the biggest labor federation in Brazil. They organized an itinerary for him that included speeches, discussions, and meals, at places more elegant than Parque Fifi, as the workers have dubbed Alcoa's park. They

Article 170 of the Mexican Federal Labor Law

The women workers will have the following rights:

I. During pregnancy, they will not do work that demands considerable force and significant danger for their health in relation to pregnancy, such as lifting, pulling or pushing heavy weights, such as work that produces vibration, or requires them to stand for long periods of time or work, or do work that can alter their physical or mental (nervous) state.

II. They will enjoy a rest of six weeks before and after the birth.

III. The rest period referred to above will be extended as necessary in cases where work is impossible because of the pregnancy or birth.

IV. In the period of lactation, they will take two extra rest periods per day, each of a half hour, to feed their children in a hygienic place set aside by the company.

V. During the period of rest referred to in section II, above, they will receive their whole salary. In extended periods of rest, mentioned in section III, they will have the right to 50% of their salary for a period of no more than 70 days.

VI. To return to the position that they were filling, no more than a year will have elapsed from the date of departure; and .

VII. Both the pre- and post-natal period will count in the calculation of their seniority.

Translation by
Judith Rosenberg

planned other stops to show, rather than tell, the labor leader the conditions of their lives and work.

Prominent on the tour was the house of Hector Reyes, one room he shared with his wife Lucía Santiago and their 8-year-old son. The room was dominated by their double bed, and Lucía lay in it. Hector had set up chairs for visitors at the foot of the bed and an electric floor fan to cool us. He served us Jamaica tea and orange soda in paper cups. He had lost his brightness. Lucía, the center of attention, was the most depressed person I have ever seen; but had agreed to see us, and Hector was eager to tell what had happened. Three days earlier, working on the night shift, Lucía had miscarried. The loss had followed months of tension between herself and her supervisor who had recently, in direct violation of the law, assigned her to a heavier work assignment. At a moment that some young couples would hold as private, Hector and Lucía wanted to give testimony and expose the harassment and the pattern of injustice. I asked Lucía for permission to take a photograph.

That was my last trip to the border that summer. Lucía was so despondent, I wondered if she would ever get out of bed again. She did. A few weeks later, a company bus hit another pregnant worker, Leona, who was walking to work, a few minutes late. Leona saved the baby, but sustained an injury to her hip and a permanent disability. No one would take financial responsibility for her injury; no insurance covered her.

For many workers, months of frustration and desperation came to a head. Leona went on a hunger strike in front of one of the Alcoa factories. In a flash, Lucía leapt from prone to upright and joined Leona in the hunger strike. So did Felipa, a worker who had no personal grievance, but who acted on principle. Inside the factory, every worker participated in controlled work stoppages; line-by-line, they stopped working for a period of time to signal their solidarity with the women outside. The protest was beginning to spread to other Alcoa factories. There are 11 of them in Acuña. Management was horrified and frantic. They rallied the mayor and the chain newspaper to their aid and denounced the workers for “destabilizing the source of employment.”

I am going to end the story here, on a note of embattled victory, in a moment of shining solidarity. It is one story out of a long history, which continues. I never saw Lucía and Hector again; I did meet Felipa, a woman with a bright and generous spirit, who helped to host our Austin Tan Cerca delegation in October that year. Following the hunger strike and the work stoppage, the police moved in to help Alcoa fire 186 workers including most of the people that we met at one time or another in Parque Fifi. They don’t meet any more; some who were part of the movement are isolated and bitter now. Some, however,

will never lose the sense they gained of losing the whole world and finding each other. They still get high talking about their rights. For them, the mobilization in Acuna did not fail and they carry the lessons and hope.

For me, witnessing their solidarity is transforming; I see an enlivening sense of connection that builds slowly then suddenly bursts out to affirm everyone it touches—



removing doubt, explaining or dismissing questions, healing wounds. Solidarity is why the people are strong and why the power of the domination system, that looks so monolithic, is, in fact, a hoax and, as Noam Chomski said when he recently visited Austin, is really quite fragile.

The focus of the struggle in Alcoa shifted then to Piedras Negras where there is a union, though a grossly ineffective one that represents the company’s interests, the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM) which has been known to negotiate lower wages and to recommend that workers accept less than legal severance pay! It is also where workers, seeking an independent voice, have managed to win two elections, one in each of Alcoa’s Piedras Negras factories. The elections placed pro-worker representatives on the CTM’s union committees. In October, Alcoa fired 20 people for organizing, among them 4 of the 5 new union reps. Not only is Alcoa the world’s biggest producer of aluminum, it’s a Fortune 100 company and its former CEO is Bush’s Secretary of the Treasury. They easily control the media and deny their attacks on workers’ rights because no one ever hears the other side of the story. They are trying to crush a democratic movement for dignity and autonomy. But look out, Alcoa...

¡La Ley Federale de Trabajadores Vive! ¡Tienen derechos!



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Alcoa Update: November 22, 2002

Texas & Mexican groups join together in San Antonio to make Alcoa feel the pressure

The Provocation: Alcoa Attacks.
On October 3rd and 4th, 2002, Alcoa fired 20 workers in Piedras Negras, Mexico, where they employ 2,000 people. With this move the US corporation signaled their intent to crush an unprecedented border democratic movement which in March had elected a union committee dedicated to representing workers but functioning within the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos. The Confederación, or CTM, usually controls elections and more or less appoints committee members who are willing to represent management. Despite the workers’ mandate, from the March election to the October firing, corrupt union officials limited the democratic committee to decisions on everyday operations and reserved for themselves the power to negotiate substantive issues. In justifying the firing, Joca San Martín, the human resources manager for Mexican operations, located in San Antonio, stated by telephone that the company based its decision on careful examination of evidence (videotapes and photos) which proved that those fired were involved in organizing. Despite San Martín’s citation of “evidence,” it is not a crime to organize or campaign for a union committee. It’s a guaranteed right. San Martín further alleges that the organizers conducted an illegal work slow down.

The Background: Power and Corruption Stack the Decks.
The Alcoa executive’s allegations are based on a double bind of historic proportions. The CTM is the prevailing union in many parts of Mexico. If it is present, no work action is legal unless the CTM leads it and the CTM never leads an action that represents the workers’ interests against the company’s. The workers’ hands are tied and they can take no action, beyond casting ballots to gain relatively powerless positions; unless, that is, they form an independent union. This is exactly what they propose to do in Piedras Negras. On May 1st they began navigating the hazardous state legal system to quit the CTM and register their union. They continue to pursue this avenue. Moreover, the firings appear not to have intimidated them. On October 18th, only two weeks after the assault, in the second Alcoa Piedras Negras plant, the independents ran the “Unity” slate against candidates that Alcoa and the CTM sponsored. The upstarts won by solid margins and continue, as of this writing, to function as union representatives but within the CTM structure.

The Protest: The Workers Respond.
Having understood the October 4th firings as a rebuke to the whole principle of worker representation, fired workers joined with the Comité Fronterizo de Obreros/os to send out a bi-national call for solidarity in support of their three demands which are:

- Reinstatement of all fired workers.
- Recognition of the independent union.
- Replacement of Paulino Vargas and José Juan Ortiz, the general and human resources managers of the Alcoa plants.

Allies on this side of the border, composed of national and local groups,

have so far organized a campaign of support in two phases. The first advocated for the workers and their demands by means of communications to Alain Belda, Alcoa’s top CEO, located in Pittsburgh. The second took to the streets to make Alcoa feel the pressure in local offices and facilities. On November 22nd, a Texas coalition targeted the San Antonio facility at the De Zavala Center, which directs operations of the Mexican subsidiary and houses functions like engineering and accounting as well as executive offices. Leading the San Antonio action were, from Austin, the American Friends Service Committee, Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera, and two Alcoa shareholders. From San Antonio, Fuerza Unida, the League of United Latin American Citizens, and the Southwest Public Workers Union led the charge. After intricate negotiations with the INS, two workers, Margarita Ramírez and Guillermo Fernández, crossed the border to join the protest.

The objectives of the action were, first, to make Alcoa feel the pressure, second, to state the workers’ case to a wide audience, and, third, to provide an opportunity for all the protesting parties to get to know each other. The pressure tactics consisted of picketing, presentations of the workers’ case through speeches and information flyers directed to the public and to Alcoa employees, and, finally, a petition that the protesters attempted to deliver to Martín. The human resources manager had locked the entrance to the executive offices. The protesters then entered the reception lobby in an adjoining building where what appeared to be an office manager and a security manager gave them a hostile reception. However the protesters politely persisted in asking to see Martín. Eventually the office manager called Martín on an interoffice phone looking for help in getting rid of the protesters. Martín refused to come out to receive the petition and he refused to listen to it over the phone. By his avoidance tactic he demonstrated the trademark Alcoa arrogance. The protesters then quietly occupied the reception area until a first police officer arrived and told them to leave, which they did, reassembling in the parking lot. Soon eight police cars arrived bring 10-12 officers, all men. They lined up before the single story glass and steel building to protect the transnational giant from a crowd that had dwindled from 40 to 30. In the ensuing confrontation between police and protesters some observers saw history repeating itself.

The protesters still stood on private property and the biggest police officer strolled over and demanded, “Whose in charge here?” One protester responded, “No one; we’re all leaders.” Changing tack temporarily he appeared to soften. He said, “OK. OK. Group hug.” As no one took him up on that, he started to lecture on what “demonstrators” usually do, that is, appoint someone to be in charge. The protesters started to spell it out for him. One said, “We’re a collective.” Another said, “We work by consensus.” And another: “If you talk to us, we will listen.” He then informed them of the law—get off private property—which they did. This is exactly what happens in Chiapas. The military come barging in and say, “Where’s Marcos?” The people answer, “Todos somos Marcos.”

