

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.”