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AFL-CIO Asks Mexico for Permit to Establish Mexico City Office

by Carlos Navarro

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In late August, the US labor organization AFL-CIO applied to the Labor Secretariat (Secretaria de Trabajo y Prevision Social, STPS) for a permit to open an office in Mexico City. So far, the STPS has not responded to the request, which was submitted by Larry Doherty, the AFL-CIO's secretary for foreign affairs.

Doherty told La Jornada daily newspaper that the function of the proposed AFL-CIO office in Mexico City would be primarily to receive and investigate complaints about labor violations by US companies operating in Mexico.

Mexico's top labor leader opposes move

The AFL-CIO leader said the move is supported by some of the labor unions belonging to the Workers Congress (Congreso del Trabajo, CT), but opposed by Fidel Velazquez, the long-time leader of the Mexican Workers Confederation (Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico, CTM), a union closely affiliated with the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

Velazquez is reportedly concerned that the AFL-CIO will use the office to "place obstacles" to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which CTM leaders strongly supported. The support from CT-affiliated unions for an AFL-CIO office in Mexico City, however, is not universal. For example Cuauhtemoc Paleta, leader of the CT-affiliated Regional Labor Confederation (Confederacion Regional de Trabajadores de Mexico, CROM), said the establishment of the office raised the question of jurisdiction. He said an AFL-CIO office would pretend to have greater power than the Mexican government to enforce its own labor laws.

For his part, Francisco Hernandez Juarez, leader of the Telephone Workers Union (Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana, STRM), also a CT affiliate, said he told Doherty that Mexican labor unions themselves are capable of conducting the monitoring process to ensure that labor laws are followed. On the other hand, La Jornada news columnist Arturo Alcalde questioned the furor over the AFL-CIO's request to establish an office in Mexico City. Alcalde said that, regardless of whether the AFL-CIO or any international union ultimately supports the goals of the Mexican government, there is no legal basis to oppose the establishment of the office.

"Denying permission to the largest US labor organization to open an office in Mexico would be the same as if we denied Ford Motor Co. the opportunity to establish an operation here," Alcalde said. He pointed out that several international labor organizations have operated in Mexico, including the Inter-American Regional Labor Organization (Organizacion Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores, ORIT), and the Latin American representative of the International Confederation of Free Unions (Confederacion Internacional de Organizaciones de Sindicatos Libres, CIOSL).
Alcalde suggested that the NAFTA parallel agreement on labor created a common forum among the US, Mexico, and Canada, to discuss principles and norms of labor. As an example, he pointed out that complaints against Honeywell, General Electric, and Sony are being considered by the US Department of Labor's National Administrative Office (NAO).

**A NAFTA recourse**

According to Alcalde, the parallel agreement on labor provides two recourses for US labor groups. Under one recourse, labor can file complaints under the NAO. In the second case, the US government provides special assistance to workers displaced by job transfers. During debate over NAFTA, US unions had opposed the agreement because of the possibility that US companies would be encouraged to transfer a large number of factories to Mexico. According to US President Bill Clinton's administration, about 8,200 US jobs have been lost directly because of the enactment of the NAFTA.

At the same time, the US Commerce Department suggested that NAFTA would create about 100,000 jobs in the US through expansion of the export market. But in a recent interview with the New York Times, David Johnson, a leader of the United Electrical Workers (UEW) union, suggested that the Clinton administration's statistics are misleading, since they do not take into account the fact that companies are choosing to expand their operations in Mexico rather than in the US.

Meantime, at a hearing in Washington in early September, UEW and Teamsters union officials took the opportunity to publicly air their complaints against Honeywell and General Electric for blocking efforts by workers at their facilities in Chihuahua state to organize into unions affiliated with the independent Authentic Workers Front (Frente Autentico de Trabajadores, FAT). The Teamsters and UEW allege that workers at the Honeywell plant in Chihuahua city and the General Electric facility in Ciudad Juarez were fired for attempting to organize unions affiliated with FAT.

Teamsters president Ron Carey and UEW general secretary Amy Newell said Honeywell and General Electric officials repeated their request that the NAO hold public hearings at locations near the US-Mexico border to expose the abuses of the two companies and bring attention to the lack of labor enforcement in Mexico. Neither company officials nor representatives from President Carlos Salinas de Gortari’s administration were present at the hearing.

On a related matter, the Journal of Commerce reported that unions in several transportation-related sectors in Mexico are having to fight for survival, as a direct result of the government's program to turn over to the private sector management of such functions as port administrations and support services for the railroad Ferrocarriles Nacionales (FERRONALES). Nineteen of Mexico’s 22 largest ports have already been turned over to private administrators. As part of the privatization, the government is requiring waterfront unions to register as private companies in order to qualify to do business at the ports. Government officials say this move is intended to spur competition at the ports and boost efficiency. Unions at ports such as Manzanillo, Colima state, and Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan state, have been forced to reduce the size of their work crews and adhere to a more strict definition of duties.
According to the Journal of Commerce, Manzanillo and Lazaro Cardenas have the greatest potential for growth of container shipping traffic. Meantime, the move to privatize such support services as maintenance of locomotives and rail cars also has forced FERRONALES unions to negotiate directly with Mexican, US, and other private engineering companies, which are more concerned with reducing costs.

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