Trinational Perspectives on the Future of Labor:

The State of Labor Twenty Years after NAFTA

By David Bacon

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
NEW YORK OFFICE

UCLA LABOR CENTER

Institute for Transnational Social Change

The Institute for Transnational Social Change (ITSC) is a project of the UCLA Labor Center. ITSC serves as a hub for cross-border collaboration among independent unions, worker centers, NGOs, and academic research centers in Mexico and the United States. Our main goals are to address the needs of a low-wage workforce that is often hard to reach, like migrant workers, women in the garment industry, farm workers, miners, and other workers who are subject to the complexities of industries dominated by highly mobile, and often ubiquitous transnational corporations. ITSC's activities aim to increase opportunities for cross-border collaboration and access to projects and programs that promote leadership development, conduct health and safety trainings, and build organizational capacity. ITSC is spearheaded by Gaspar Rivera-Salgado and coordinated by Veronica Wilson. This project is made possible in part by the generous support of the Ford Foundation.

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Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung is an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education affiliated with Germany's "Die Linke" (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation has been committed to the analysis of social processes and developments worldwide. In cooperation with organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development, conflict prevention, and peaceful conflict resolution. Its international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programs, and projects conducted together with partner institutions. In order to be able to mentor and coordinate these various projects, the foundation has established 17 regional offices around the world. The RLS has been granted special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2013.

The foundation's New York Office, located at 275 Madison Avenue, opened its doors in 2012. It serves two major tasks: to work on issues concerning the United Nations, including collaboration with people and political representatives from the Global South, and to work with North American (U.S. and Canadian) progressives in universities, unions, social movements, progressive institutions, and think tanks. The office's Co-Directors are Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg. The New York Office is part of the global network of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

Introduction and Political Context

Almost twenty years after the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, a group of union leaders, academics, and independent journalists met in Los Angeles on December 2–3, 2013, to assess the development of international solidarity between workers in Mexico, the United States, and Canada during that period. One of the features of this three-country solidarity movement has been the creation of trinational networks, and the conference looked at their development in several sectors. These included the Trinational Solidarity Alliance, the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education, the Trinational Telecommunications Alliance, and the Trinational Energy Workers Network.

The four goals of this convening were to:

1. better understand the lessons of trinational networks to guide future actions;

2. analyze new trinational initiatives and campaigns that build on a culture of transnational labor solidarity between Canada, Mexico, and the United States;

3. develop a collective understanding of labor at the transnational level and the opportunities and obstacles for workers' struggles; and

4. promote the exchange of ideas and strategies between participants to strengthen the culture of solidarity among trade unionists from the three countries.

Noting that the gathering was taking place in Los Angeles, María Elena Durazo, executive secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, emphasized that international solidarity was not only a relationship between unions and worker organizations but also a movement of people. She drew a connection between the displacement and dislocation caused by the North American Free Trade Agreement and the flow of migrants from Mexico to the United States and Canada: "We're still paying the price for NAFTA and for the fact that we got out of the gate late in opposing it. This meeting is about strategies for dealing with the impact and creating the opportunities to build coalitions. We've had losses and as unions, we've been forced to reach out."

Durazo said building labor movements in all three countries is the key to fighting trade agreements that do not benefit workers. Yet, she warned, "Some top labor leaders don't get it. The immigrants' rights movement is changing [the United States]. Immigrants built the US labor movement, and will rebuild it, and we will fight within the AFL-CIO on this very issue."

Benedicto Martinez, copresident of the Authentic Labor Front (FAT) recalled: "Twenty years ago, the conditions were very different. The proposal for NAFTA was still on the table, and many promises were made about its benefits, none of which were fulfilled." The past twelve years of right-wing governments in Mexico have produced huge increases in social inequality, the weakening of labor laws, and deteriorating working conditions.

In 2011, Forbes's billionaires list included eleven Mexicans, some of whom, like German Larrea Mota Velasco ($16 billion), president of Grupo Mexico, is one of the world's most antilabor employers. Carlos Slim, who bought the former national phone company, was worth $74 billion two years ago. According to secret US diplomatic cables unearthed by WikiLeaks, "The net wealth of the 10 richest people in Mexico represents roughly 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product." At the same time, 44 percent of Mexico's people live in poverty, and the number in extreme poverty grew from 13.8 million in 2009 to 18.2 million in 2010 alone.

In the United States the growing polarization between rich and poor was accelerated by NAFTA and free market policies as well. The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) estimates that the trade

María Elena Durazo

deficits it caused, along with the movement of production, led to the direct loss of 682,900 jobs by 2010. "Contrary to official predictions, NAFTA led to growing U.S. trade deficits with Canada and Mexico, not trade surpluses," an EPI report noted. "More jobs were created in Mexico (30,400) by the growth of net exports of autos and auto parts to the United States in 2010 than were created in the entire U.S. auto industry in the same period."

Further, workers in Canada suffered as a result of massive cutbacks in government spending at the provincial and national levels that arose when conservative Canadian governments touting the need to maintain "competitiveness" used North American economic integration to begin a race to the bottom in government spending and taxation."

According to Martinez, "the Mexican labor movement, in spite of its struggles, has not been able to win better conditions throughout the country. On the contrary, they've grown worse. Studies show that 90-95% of all labor contracts are protection agreements—signed behind the backs of workers in order to prevent them from organizing real unions and signing genuine agreements. Mexico has implemented new practices, especially through the Mediation and Arbitration Boards, that have rendered workers virtually defenseless."

Martinez pointed to the adoption of labor law reform, only now beginning to show its dramatic effects on workers' rights. At the same time, the conditions of workers are deteriorating, firings are increasing, and the conditions of fired workers especially is now affecting all other workers: "In general, the law has accommodated the interests of the largest businesses. There is movement and resistance, but it is not strong enough to stop these developments."

Teachers at the conference contributed to a fuller picture. Larry Kuehn, of the British Colombia Federation of Teachers, warned that the large-scale changes taking place were structural, not just matters of policy: "Each one has a ratcheting effect once it's implemented it not only sets the stage for the next, but you can't go backwards." Maria de la Luz Arriaga, professor at Mexico's National Autonomous University and leader of the trinational education alliance, cautioned, however, that "I don't believe the reform has really passed yet. We're in a critical moment in Mexico. If the education and energy (oil) reforms pass, the teachers have already decided they will not obey them, and may be able to prevent their implementation."

Combining the perspectives of participants from all three countries and from both unions and research centers represented a challenge, said Victor Enrique Fabela Rocha, of the Mexican Telephone Workers Union (STRM), "because we have different histories and ways of looking at things. The challenge is not just to share ideas, but also to develop practices we can use to fight the processes we're discussing, and defend our social rights. And that challenge will continue after this conference—to keep our momentum and commitment to following through on the work we're talking about."

Kent Wong

Trinational Solidarity Alliance (TNSA)

Robin Alexander, director for international affairs for the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) recounted the history of the Trinational Solidarity Alliance, the oldest of the trinational solidarity networks: "The TNSA brings people together based on the conviction that struggling in isolation won´t work." The network originally came together in a meeting in Toronto, where unions were concerned about the escalation of attacks on unions in Mexico. At the time it was formed, it consisted of eight unions and three global federations.

"Since then, on paper, virtually all US, Canadian, and Mexican unions of significance have agreed that it is important to work together," Alexander said. "We agreed that our focus is the right to organize, so we promote freedom of association and focus on particular struggles. The basic idea is that we all face common problems; the details might be different, but we need to struggle together."

Before the TNSA was created, other networks preceded it. The oldest is the strategic alliance formed by the UE and the FAT in 1992. That relationship still exists. "We needed an alliance so that we could organize workers in the same company, working on both sides of the border," said Martinez. "From the beginning, we've had the principle that FAT makes the decisions about what we do in Mexico, and the UE supports them. It is a practical alliance, with an emphasis on work and avoiding long discussions."

A lot of the work of the UE/FAT alliance depended on understanding the terrain for labor in Mexico—not just the laws, but how they're actually applied. At the same time, the FAT had to learn about the situation of workers in the US, through exchanges among rank-and-file members and other activities. Other alliances were formed as well, like that between the United Steel Workers in the United States, and the Mexican Mining and Metallurgical Union. The ability of miners in Cananea to strike for five years against Grupo Mexico and the harboring of the head of the Mexican union in Canada when he fled arrest in Mexico, were both products of that developing alliance.

"Our plan was not to replace existing relationships," Alexander explained. "The TNSA would be a broader body building on the existing relations and coordinating work among unions in the three countries. We've had a pragmatic approach concentrating on getting work done." Martinez added, "We could see from our own relationship between FAT and the UE that it was impossible to respond to all the demands. So in 2010, we welcomed the call from the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME) and others to launch an international campaign."

One achievement was the organization (with the international IndustriALL federation) of a powerful display of international solidarity, when trade unions in over forty countries on five continents took action demanding trade union rights in Mexico February 14-19, 2011. The demands of that action included:

• Hold employer and government officials accountable for the Pasta de Conchos mine explosion that killed 65 miners on February 19, 2006.

• Abolish systemic violations of workers' freedom of association, including employer-dominated "protection contracts" and interference in union elections.

• End the use of force by the state or private parties to repress workers' legitimate demands for democratic unions, better wages and working conditions, and good health and safety conditions.

• End the campaign of political persecution against the Mexican Miners' Union (Los Mineros) and the Mexican Electrical Workers' Union (SME).

In addition to the days of action, the alliance organized speaking tours for Mexican unionists in the United States, and a tribunal on trade union freedom. "It's important to note that solidarity also flows north," Alexander emphasized. "Unions in the US and Canada are much more under attack in recent years, so our vision is that solidarity flows in various directions." She announced a proposal for a multisectoral event focused on NAFTA and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), "to build on what we've learned, to come together to oppose this new agreement."

Humberto Montes de Oca, international relations secretary for the SME, emphasized that the formation of the TNSA included not just the FAT and UE but also the SME, STRM, USW, miners, and others. "What brought us together were the attacks by [Mexican President] Felipe Calderon on the workers in the SME, but it's necessary to reach much more broadly than just one union and struggle, and to find forms of struggle in each of our three countries."

Protesters, Mexico City, January 2014.

Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education (TNCDPE)

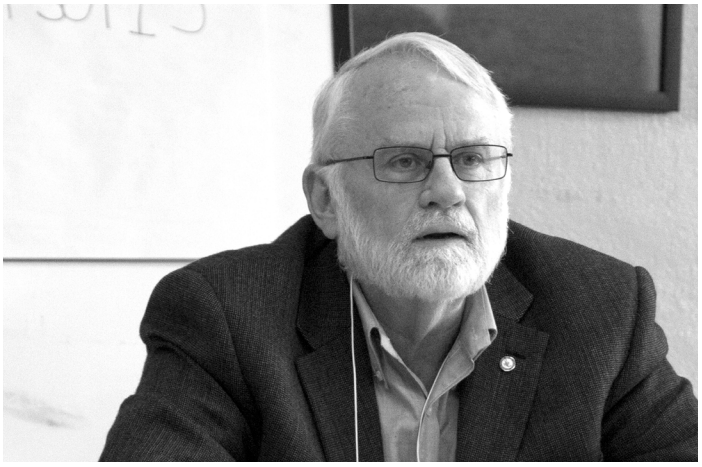
Participants in this convening were all well aware of the enormous upsurge in strikes among Mexican teachers through the fall of 2013, when many schools didn't open as they demonstrated against passage of the government's education reform program. The three previous similar binational gatherings (Los Angeles 2009, Mexico City 2010, Los Angeles 2012) organized by the Institute for Transnational Social Change had not included teachers. This year's trinational conference, however, included active members of the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education, who presented an analysis of the basis of neoliberal education reform as well as a history of teachers' efforts in all three countries to fight it.

Larry Kuehn of the British Colombia Teachers Federation explained that the TNCDPE was organized at a conference in Olympia, Washington, in 1993, the year before NAFTA took effect. "The labor center there invited people from the three countries to discuss the treaty's impact and how to organize around it," he recalled. "But our discussion goes back to 1988, and the Canada-US trade agreement. In it we saw a key, new element —the inclusion of services. This created an impetus for commodifying, or privatizing, education as a service. It reinforced a privatizing trend that already existed. Our aim is to defend public education as a cornerstone of democracy."

"Over time we built a coalition," said Arriaga, "based on the idea of a solidarity network extended from south to north, breaking with the idea that solidarity means people from the US and Canada supporting their compañeros in Mexico. It has to go both ways. And it's not just a coalition of unions, because activists, teachers, and researchers also participate, along with parents and students. Each conference we hold issues a declaration based on our work, our analysis, and our proposals for actions." The alliance is now planning the eleventh conference in defense of public education in Chicago, taking place in 2014.

The TNCDPE has focused on two organizations: a private publishing corporation, Pearson Education PLC, and an international body, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Each plays an important role in the privatization of education as part of a larger neoliberal agenda. "Pearson used to produce textbooks," Kuehn explained, "but it changed focus. Its new corporate model includes digital textbooks, focusing on emerging markets, as well as certification tests."

OECD, an international organization dominated by corporate interests in wealthy countries, produces the certification test called the Pisa exam. That test is used to create an alarmist hysteria in many countries, especially Mexico, over low test scores, which it attributes to the inadequacies of teachers. Pearson has the contract for the OECD Pisa exam. "We haven´t anticipated the development of technology," Kuehn charged, "or the role of the OECD, which developed the Pisa tests and which then gave it a huge influence over education policies."



Larry Kuehn

"The talk of being against bad teachers is a strategy of dividing teachers," charged Fred Glass, communications director for the California Federation of Teachers, "especially old teachers versus young teachers. In reality, it´s not the teachers who determine school results, but [in the US] the zip code. We need to see that technology is a means to an end; it is not an end in itself. If the end is quality education, we need to see how to reach that end and how technology can be used for it, not the other way round." Glass also pointed to the critical role of funding for education and described the campaign by the California Labor Federation to pass a ballot initiative increasing it.

One of the key strategic questions about solidarity among progressive teachers is, which organizations should be involved. In Mexico the National Union of Education Workers, the largest union in Latin America, has historically had very corrupt leadership and has been a political pillar of support for the country's governing party. When corporate education reform proposals were first made (coming from the US Agency for International Development and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, through the corporate lobby group Mexicanos Primero), SNTE President Esther Gordillo supported them. The movement to oppose the reforms has been organized by a powerful caucus within the union that has existed for many years, the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE). The CNTE controls the local federations in several Mexican states, where the fight against reforms is the heaviest.

"In Michoacan teachers have organized about eighty alternative "integral schools," explained Arriaga. "In Guerrero they have the Altamiranista schools, especially in indigenous communities." In Oaxaca the CNTE-affiliated teachers' union helped to knock the state's old ruling party from power and as a result, was able to get the new governor to approve implementation of an alternative education reform program designed by teachers and parents, the Project for the Transformation of Education in Oaxaca.

Until recently, most participation in the TNCDPE came from teachers both in and out of the CNTE in Mexico and from progressive unions in Canada. The British Colombia Federation of Teachers, for instance, collects $600,000 a year, 5 percent of its total dues, for international solidarity projects, including ones with Mexico. "There has always been a very strong solidarity tradition in our union, which goes back to the 1920s," Kuehn said, "so we were operating with values that already existed and just institutionalized it." Solidarity is also part of a larger progressive, militant tradition. In 2005 the BC Federation went on a two-week "illegal" strike and after a judge declared the union couldn't spend any of its funds to support them, Mexican teachers in the TNCDPE created a website the strikers could use when the courts stopped the union from using its own communications media.

María de la Luz Arriaga

"There's been very little participation by US unions until recently, however," Kuehn says. "With Mexico I think it's difficult to identify with whom to work, since supporting Mexican teachers shouldn't mean working with the SNTE." Participants in the conference were critical of the lack of solidarity and support that came from the US when the huge teacher strikes were sweeping across Mexico.

"In reality the coalition until 2008 was really binational, not trinational, with participation from Canada and Mexico. Perhaps people in the US didn't feel as affected by the same processes. But since 2008, there's been much more involvement from the US, and we are now a clearly trinational organization. And of course we're all looking at what happened with the teachers in Chicago."

"We take very seriously the differences, the unequal development," Arriaga explained. "We are not a union front, we are individual teachers and students. This forced us to have a different, flexible way of working—we use consensus decision making for instance; we don't vote. In 1993 we saw we had to be careful about our relationship with union federations and not compete with continental education organizations. We had to find our own way forward in defending public education. Some representatives in the Trinational change every two years, and sometimes when leadership leaves, we lose progress."

Rosemary Lee, a longtime Los Angeles activist teacher, emphasized, "We have similar issues: questions of technology and testing; labor law reform in Mexico; charter schools in the US. We can exchange information about these common issues. And our state teachers union here, the California Federation of Teachers, has given us essential support, raising money to send delegates to conferences and welcoming teachers from the CNTE to our conventions. We really need to look at alternative, positive education and the concept of transformation. Public education has never been perfect, and we need to look forward, not backward."

Protesters, Mexico City, January 2014.

Trinational Telecommunications Alliance

In the US and Mexico, the telecommunications industry has been substantially deregulated and in the case of Mexico, denationalized during and prior to the NAFTA period. At the same time, technological change has transformed the industry. "We saw the tech change coming," explained Victor Enrique Fabela of the STRM. "It has become an important factor of globalization, creating a new international division of labor. In Mexico, Teléfonos de México began as a private company, was then nationalized, and now has been taken private again. At the same time, recent administrations have favored cable and television monopolies over the traditional phone companies."

John Dugan

Victor Enrique Fabela

Fabela referred to recent laws that state that no entity can own more than 50 percent of phone lines, for instance, which would force TelMex to sell off part of its operations. That would have a severe impact on the union at TelMex, since there's no guarantee that any new owner would continue to employ the existing workforce or bargain with the STRM. At the same time, new owners would have no interest in providing service to rural or marginal communities and would leave low-profit operations with TelMex or unserviced entirely. These factors create the possibility of organizing an alliance between the existing telephone workforce and customers, at the same time requiring TelMex to invest in better service, and to keep employing the existing workers. "We couldn't do that the last time [TelMex was privatized]," said Fabela, "but that's part of our strategy now." When conference

participants noted that he seemed to be allying the union with TelMex's owner Carlos Slim, one of the world's richest men, Fabela responded, "We're not defending Carlos Slim; we're defending our jobs."

The Trinational Communications Alliance, in reality, has no functions, Fabela declared. At the same time, however, the STRM and the Communications Workers of America (CWA) have had a close binational relationship. The leadership of the Canadian union has changed a lot, he added, and the relationship, therefore, has not been as deep. Nevertheless, he said the STRM was committed to strengthening trinational cooperation.

John Dugan from the CWA responded that his union has faced similar changes in the deregulation of telecommunications, with greater competition and new industrial actors. It has been a challenge to the union to organize and grow in these new companies, and he admitted, "We have actually had more failures than successes."

He outlined several campaigns in which large telecommunications companies, like MCI and Sprint, waged a virtual war against their own employees when they tried to organize and join CWA, including closing work sites and call centers at considerable cost. "We've been successful, however, in convincing our members to support including organizing rights in bargaining proposals, like neutrality and card check at new facilities. We were able to do this even in right-to-work states, as we did with AT&T Mobility. That resulted in a gain of 40,000 members." Similar efforts with Verizon, however, only succeeded in organizing 51 of the company's 55,000 workers, because the corporation refused to abide by the negotiated neutrality provisions.

The cable industry has grown up virtually non-union, after unions were decertified there in the early 1980s, as has the semiconductor and electronics equipment industry in the United States with almost no exceptions. Now a process of consolidation and monopolization is taking place in the US telecommunications industry.

CWA's response to the fierce anti-union barrage in this industry has been to fight for the democratic rights of all workers. CWA was one of the main supporters of the Employee Free Choice Act, which would have reformed US labor law but which was abandoned by the Obama administration in the period when Democrats controlled Congress as well as the White House. The union has also developed a working relationship with the German union Ver.di in the course of its effort to organize workers at T-Mobile. German locals have adopted US locals, organized job actions in Germany, and leafleted board meetings.

Both panelists agreed that consumer/worker partnerships were a key to protecting jobs and services and organizing non-union employers. Kent Wong, director of the UCLA Labor Center, emphasized that both unions face the same challenges, like deregulation, new technology, and operating in a global economy with great capital mobility.

CWA member and independent journalist David Bacon suggested that telecommunications unions should also consider the situation of workers who produce the content, especially for newspapers, radio, television and the internet, in addition to those who maintain the infrastructure. "Many don't have a formal employment relationship," he said, "but instead are contingent and freelance workers. There's a huge transformation of the workforce, away from traditional employment towards contract or precarious employment. In addition, our unions still concern themselves mostly with 'pure and simple' trade union issues and don't do much to educate workers or members. Since content producers have a critical and powerful role in affecting consciousness and the ideas people are exposed to, we should be trying to affect the way our own members think and understand the world. Content creators could be a resource for our whole movement if we could organize them and talk about the content of the work they do."

Trinational Energy Workers Network

The impetus for forming the Trinational Energy Workers Network came in part from previous conferences of the Institute for Transnational Social Change. As the violent attack on the Mexican Electrical Workers Union was unfolding in 2010, the head of the union, Martin Esparza, spoke before a conference in Mexico City. Subsequently, conference participant Peter Olney, organizing director of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, with assistance from David Bacon, organized a series of meetings with US unionists, including leaders of the Utility Workers Union of America and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

At the Mexico City conference there was some discussion as well of one of the obstacles to increased cooperation—the fact that US unions and the SME were affiliated with different international labor organizations during the Cold War. Even though the Cold War was over, earlier efforts to organize US solidarity with Mexican campaigns against electrical privatization were impeded by these old Cold War divisions. The Mexico City conference, and subsequent meetings between SME leaders and U.S. leaders in the power generation and distribution industry, helped to identify their common interests, especially in fighting utility privatization and deregulation.

These meetings led to a conference in Los Angeles of the Trinational Energy Workers Network in January 2011, in which unions from the United States, Canada and Mexico participated. The meeting included representatives of the Mexican Miner's Union, which has also been under sustained assault by the Mexican government and the Grupo Mexico monopoly. The network was set up in 2008 "to promote democratic energy policies in North America as well as solidarity with the independent Mexican labor movement."

At the ITSC meeting in Los Angeles, Humberto Montes de Oca reviewed the history of the attack on the SME, the dissolution by government decree of the Power and Light Company of Central

Humberto Montes de Oca

Sage Aaron

Mexico, and the firing of 44,000 SME members. He emphasized that while 28,000 accepted the government's severance offer in exchange for renouncing their jobs, 16,000 are still in resistance. In September of 2012, a Mexican court upheld the SME's right to continue to exist and operate, but the country's Supreme Court overturned the decision, leaving the union in legal limbo and uncertainty.

The union has responded with three strategies: rejecting the Supreme Court decision, bringing a case before the Interamerican Court for Human Rights, and rejecting the dissolution of the SME while demanding the rehiring of its members. At the same time, the union has continued its long fight against the government's proposal for reform of the energy industry, which would lead to the privatization of both electrical power and oil extraction. Within days of the 2013 conference, in fact, the Mexican Senate and the Chamber of Deputies approved the government's energy reform, which would denationalize the industries if the state legislatures of twenty states approve it.

"Already 39 percent of the electricity distributed by the Federal Electrical Commission is generated by private corporations," Montes de Oca noted. "Our defense is based on asserting that energy is a human right which is being placed in danger by these market policies, because the poorest sectors of society will not be able to pay the cost of access." The SME is working with the National Assembly of Utility Users, which the union helped get started after the attack of 2009. There have been rate-payer strikes provoked by a constant rise in utility rates in the area of central Mexico formerly serviced by the Power and Light Company. Only three of every ten customers are paying for electricity, some of whom are participating in the organized strike, and others simply do not have the money. "This is a good tactic for all of us," Montes de Oca emphasized, "the alliance between workers in public services and those who benefit from those services. This is strategic, and we can use it in education and public transportation as well. But unions have to break out of their shell—mobilize and make alliances. In the case of the energy trinational, we've been in limbo, and today we've taken some of the first steps to end our lack of coordination."

Sage Aaron of the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union (COPE) said that in all three countries, in particular Canada, there is a general attack on public services and the workers who provide them: "We have to put on the agenda of the government and of society in general the importance that public services have for our country. One of the most important challenges unions face is organizing effective actions to empower workers so that they can effectively defend public services for the whole society. We have to protect the rights of both consumers and workers."

Aaron said her union had been the beneficiary of the expertise of others in the trinational energy conferences, which helped them during regulatory hearings. "We've learned from unions who have dealt with technological change that will come to our province and learned about industry trends, management shifts and other issues our members may be facing in their industry." In 2010 her union's president, Andy Ross, visited with hunger strikers and union leaders from the SME at their plantón in the Mexican city of Zócalo and then met with the Canadian Ambassador to Mexico to press for

workers' rights and recognition of the concerns of the SME and Mexican Miners' Union.

Carl Wood, representing the Utility Workers Union of America and a former member of the California State Public Utilities Commission, explained that the US utility industry promotes a free market energy policy: "Yet this generated enormous problems, not just for consumers, but for workers and unions as well." We don't agree that energy policy should be left exclusively in the hands of private owners, and we're organizing against this offensive. One of the most important questions we face in doing that is creating solidarity and a common front of struggle among unions against privatization, although the reality and political conditions in each country are different."

"In the United States," Wood continued, "we don't talk about the electricity industry as a patrimony of our republic, as people do in Mexico, but we do talk about the right of Americans to safe, affordable, reliable electricity, which should be accessible to everyone. People today don't remember that this is the legacy of the New Deal under President Roosevelt, but in fact this is part of our history in the US. If we make this knowledge part of an alliance between labor and consumers in the United States, it can be a very powerful tool."

Benedicto Martinez and Robin Alexander, Mexico City, January 2014.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Carl Wood

NAFTA at Twenty Years

Convening participants agreed that after twenty years of NAFTA, it is time "to put out our vision of fighting neoliberal policies," as one put it. Robin Alexander described the challenge: "We need to combat neoliberal policies on a more global and general level. But at the same time, we have to support the folks engaged in particular, individual struggles. So let's take advantage of the twentieth anniversary of NAFTA to plan activities that focus both on the larger struggle and on the concrete, individual fights that are taking place."

Kuehn suggested that "we should put NAFTA on trial as way to focus the critique and to form alliances, to talk about the impact on education over twenty years." The OECD should be a target for exposure as well, Arriaga added. "It is the principal actor in the attack on the public sector, above all in education. We have to unmask its policies and show that we have alternatives. But we have to join forces with other affected organizations to defend public energy, pensions, health care, and other services."

"We need to do more than evaluate the agreement," she cautioned. Let's put the policies of the treaty on trial and show the harm they've caused to the economy, social rights, and to human beings in general. We're not just against NAFTA. If we move forward questioning NAFTA, we are questioning predatory capitalism." Montes de Oca agreed: "We shouldn't see everything as an effect of the trade agreement. What we're facing is a deeper problem. Everywhere in the world, workers are being attacked by neoliberal policies and by the crisis caused by finance capital. We should call things by their real names and call for a resistance to the attacks on union freedom of association, to collective bargaining, and to labor rights. The way financial, environmental, energy, migratory, social, and political crises all combine threatens the future of all human beings."

Peter Olney

Carl Wood, however, warned that "issues of privatization and deregulation—the overarching issues—are the same. But the mechanisms used to implement them are different. We have to rename and broaden the focus so that in addition to talking about NAFTA, we also make the point that deregulation, privatization, and liberalization are the same thing." Keuhn added, "The OECD is global capital trying to restructure education." But from the Canadian point of view it is not used as a means for blaming teachers as it is in Mexico and the US.

"We have to take into account the fact that we are working in three countries with different levels of class awareness," Bacon said. "In Mexico you can use the term neoliberal. In the US, people don't understand what it means. NAFTA is shorthand for loss of control by working people and increasing corporate control. But NAFTA isn't the problem; it's the context. In our unions, we need to convince our members of the problem, and this is an opportunity to teach our members how the system works. How did NAFTA lead to migration, for instance? Take this opportunity to mark the anniversary to explain that the treaty is part of a larger system, what it means for us, and why it requires radical change."

Alexander and Martinez, speaking for the Trinational Solidarity Alliance, announced that the network was about to issue a call for a series of activities at the end of January focused on the trade agreement, starting with several forums organized according to sectors. The forums would conclude with a press conference for political leaders to announce their conclusions about NAFTA's effects over the past twenty years. Aaron suggested including the stories of individual workers and people, to provide a human face for understanding the impact more deeply. Other networks are already involved, including the Mexican Action Network Opposing Free Trade (REMALC), Common Frontiers, and Public Citizen.

Participants agreed that events organized around NAFTA should also highlight the current negotiations over the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). "There's already an international network of unions campaigning against it," Aaron noted, "many more than here. One common denominator of this opposition is the opacity with which governments discuss this agreement. Information is given to companies but not to the public. We have no information. Everything's hidden. At the same time, different countries have different interests."

The Teachers' Movement in Mexico

One of the accomplishments of the huge wave of strikes and demonstrations by teachers against the government education reform proposal was that the teachers' movement became much more visible internationally. "Our coalition," stated Arriaga, "helped develop relationships with unions in other countries that before had only seen the official SNTE as a correspondent." She noted that the CNTE was only part of the teachers' movement, which also includes educators in Veracruz, university workers, and progressive education activists. "Because this movement is talking about basic democratic rights, it is posing questions that go beyond workers in the education sector. It needs much broader alliances with other parts of society. We have to put in the center of our agenda the defense of the public sector against privatization, the defense of labor rights, of collective bargaining, and the defense of unions."

Steve Teixeira, another teacher in Los Angeles active in Mexican education solidarity, cautioned that while politically aware people see the need for solidarity, it is less obvious to students and grassroots educators. "Part of the problem is our own narrative—people don't link global capitalism and broader developments to the concrete problems they deal with every day." The teachers' strike in Chicago, however, showed that it's possible for ordinary teachers in the United States to stand

up as well and was a catalyst that will make other movements possible.

According to Bacon, however, teachers' unions are not developing alliances and relationships across borders as unions have in other sectors, and there was much less active support for the Mexican teachers' strike this fall than expected, given that they were fighting the same education reform proposals that teachers oppose in the United States and Canada. "This is our fourth meeting like this," he observed, "and yet it's the first where we've talked about teachers. We have to look at concrete problems of solidarity. In relation to Mexico, one is clearly that we need U.S. unions to act in solidarity, not with a union but with a caucus within a union. That wouldn't fly easily at the American Federation of Teachers [AFT] or the AFL-CIO. The National Education Association, even larger than the AFT, has largely been outside our discussions."

Rosemary Lee proposed subjects for discussion in future meetings, including the role of Pearson Publishing, getting members involved in solidarity activity, exchanging visions of alternative education, and research on precarious employment in education. "But who should be at these meetings?" Arriaga asked. "The democratic teachers' movement has to be present. It's not clear that the CNTE could have come to this meeting, but we have to make sure they're there in future ones."

The Trinational Coalition for the Defense of Public Education is planning its next meeting in Chicago in May 2014.

Rosemary Lee

Plans for Working Together

"Meeting each other here was about discovery," said Maria de la Luz Arriaga at the convening's conclusion. "We had knowledge about each other's work, but it wasn't very deep. Here we acknowledged common elements and became aware of the potential for complementing each other. The work we've done already influences each other, and this has given us a place where we can talk about ideas like the January 30, 2014, anti-NAFTA event in Mexico City, which could be very important for us all. We need a chance for reflection, as we've had here. Then each of our networks needs to bring the discussion to a much larger audience."

Olney reviewed the history of the four convenings so far held by the Institute for Transnational Social Change. "I believe these meetings have a value in themselves, even without a direct action orientation. We have seen the value of these gatherings in the social interaction they've made possible. By having the meetings in different countries, we get to know about struggles in environments other than the ones we work in day to day." Olney pointed to the problem of funding the convenings, which have been supported by foundations, including the present one by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. "We'd like to see more come

from unions, but many of us at the table are not the decision makers. Discussions organized by sectors are useful in that case because the utility of the sessions is more obvious to unions directly."

Representing one union committed to this process, Alexander noted that "a useful part of these meetings is bringing us together in a context where we actually have time for broader discussions of strategy and alliances." But because each has been quite different with different participants, the content also changes. She suggested better planning in advance.

Bacon, who participated in the previous convenings also responded that "We are not an organization. We cannot plan campaigns. This can be done by the networks or individual unions participating in these meetings. What we can contribute are ideas. We can discuss problems and possible strategies. What unites us is our shared politics. That gives us the flexibility to bring people to the table who are not part of existing solidarity structures. We can also talk about other sectors, such as agriculture, or new questions, such as the migration of people. We need to concentrate on what distinguishes our formation from other, existing, ones. What can we do that other formations cannot or do not do?"

A number of participants suggested holding future discussions organized around specific subjects, especially migration, saying the flow of people is a resource for labor movements in the countries to which they go, in this case the United States and Canada, while migration has profound consequences for countries of origin, like Mexico. Human beings can be the carriers of international solidarity, not just organizations. "What does solidarity mean in a world in which we have millions of people from Mexico in the United States and Canada?" Bacon asked. "Capital is global, but migration is increasing," responded Steve Teixeira. "Migrants are a strategic group of people in these four sectors of trinational cooperation, especially for the resurgence of unions and worker organizations."

Precarious work was another important topic suggested by participants. "We haven't talked enough about precarious work—how will this affect our future, our unions, how can we organize in this group, and does it even fit within the umbrella of traditional unions," said Alexander. "We should also be thinking about who is not at the table here but should be, e.g., agricultural workers but also others, like health workers."

Benedicto Martinez concluded the discussions, saying, "We've made many of the proposals and formulated much of this analysis over the past twenty years. A lot remains valid, yet we haven't been able to accomplish it all. We need to leave with one or two concrete commitments. One should be around the twentieth anniversary of NAFTA, and the other should be a commitment to a process of education and creating a greater political consciousness. Without this we won't be able to transform the situation in which we find ourselves. Victor Fabela added, "Our challenge isn't just to share ideas but to develop ways of fighting the processes we've discussed and defend our social rights. After we leave, we have to maintain this commitment."

DECLARATION OF THE CONFERENCE

Trinational Perspectives on the Future of Labor: The State of Labor 20 Years after NAFTA

DECEMBER 2–3, 2013

The participants in this conference declare our solidarity with the Mexican National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE) and the Mexican teachers' movement.

We call on the government of Enrique Peña Nieto to listen to the demands of the teachers and respect their labor rights, their civil and political liberties, and the international conventions that protect them.

We demand an end to the use of agents to infiltrate demonstrations and an end to the criminalization of social movements.

To the government of Mexico City, we request the suspension of the illegal and abusive use of the police to restrict the democratic right to demonstrate and hold meetings.

We demand that the government of Enrique Peña Nieto resolve the conflict with the SME by implementing the commitment to restore to their rightful place in the electrical sector the workers who have not accepted severance and who have maintained their resistance for four long years.

We reject the unconstitutional intervention of state authorities into the life of unions, which violates their right to autonomy and the freedom of association. We demand that legal status be restored to the Union for Workers for the State, Cities, Decentralized Institutions and Private Businesses of the State of Nayarit (SITEM).

We declare our solidarity with Mexican telephone workers in their struggle to maintain the stability of their jobs and to defend their workplaces against the impact of the telecommunications reform presently being discussed.

We also declare our solidarity with the fifteen workers at First Energy Corporation in Pennsylvania, USA, who have been locked out by the company.

List of participants

1. **Sage Aaron**, Communications Director, Canadian Office and Professional Employees, 378 (COPE)
2. **Robin Alexander**, International Labor Affairs Director, United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (UE)
3. **María de la Luz Arriaga**, Professor of Economics, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)
4. **David Bacon**, Independent Journalist
5. **John Dugan**, Organizer, Communications Workers of America District 9 (CWA)
6. **María Elena Durazo**, Executive Secretary-Treasurer, Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO
7. **Ethan Earle**, Project Manager, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung NYC
8. **Victor Enrique Fabela Rocha**, Sindicato de Telefonistas de la República Mexicana (STRM)
9. **Fred Glass**, Communications Director, California Federation of Teachers (CFT), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), AFL-CIO
10. **Jenny Jungehülsing**, Doctoral Fellow, Global Social Policies and Governance, Universität Kassel
11. **Larry Kuehn**, Director of Research and Technology, British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF)
12. **Rosemary Lee**, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA)
13. **Benedicto Martínez Orozco**, Co-president, Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT)
14. **Humberto Montes de Oca**, Secretary of the Exterior, Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME)
15. **Victor Narro, Project Director**, UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education (Labor Center)
16. **Peter Olney**, Organizing Director, International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU)
17. **Bernardo Ramirez**, Binational General Coordinator, Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB)
18. **Gaspar Rivera-Salgado**, Project Director, Institute for Transnational Social Change (ITSC) / UCLA Labor Center
19. **Bertha Rodriguez**, Writer and Editor, El Tequio Magazine
20. **Odilia Romero**, Advisor, Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB)
21. **Javier Salinas**, Coordinador de la Unidad Multidisciplinaria de Estudios sobre el Trabajo, Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro
22. **Janna Shadduck-Hernández**, Project Director, UCLA Labor Center
23. **Chris Tilly**, Director, UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE)
24. **Goetz Wolff**, Lecturer, UCLA Department of Urban Planning
25. **Veronica Wilson**, Partnerships Director, UCLA Labor Center
26. **Kent Wong**, Director, UCLA Labor Center
27. **Carl Wood,** Director of Regulatory Affairs, Utility Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO




CODA

ASSESSMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL AND MULTISECTIONAL FORUM

"Twenty Years with NAFTA, Enough Free Trade, No TPP"
By David Bacon, February 6, 2014

From January 28 to 31, 2014, a series of forums were held in Mexico City to assess the disastrous impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement on the people of Mexico, Canada, and the United States and to develop opposition to the signing of yet another trade pact, the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The anchor for these forums was the Transnational Solidarity Network, a loose body including labor, environmentalists, and other activists in all three countries. In particular, the Mexico events were organized through the efforts of the Mexican Network Against Free Trade (RMALC) and by independent unions, including the Authentic Labor Front (FAT), the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME) and the National Union of Workers (UNT). The forums were held at the Mexico City building of the Union of Workers at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (STUNAM).

Although the planning started last fall, I think it is no coincidence that these events gained a great deal of momentum because of the trinational conference held in Los Angeles at the beginning of last December. That conference and the three that preceded it brought together many of the players who led the organizing effort for the Mexico City forums and pushed forward the idea of organizing mass resistance to NAFTA and now to the TPP.

The first two days of activities consisted of four concurrent forums, two each day, for the basic constituencies opposing the neoliberal, free-market regimes. On the first day were forums discussing mining and the impact of NAFTA on the environment and on women. The next day, forums focused on agriculture and labor. Each began with panels of organizational representatives from all three countries and Quebec, which had an independent role in the proceedings.

I presented on the impact on workers and unions in the United States based on a recent article I wrote on the topic. Other presenters included representatives of Canadian unions, including the United Steel Workers, the National Union Confederation of Quebec, and several representatives of Mexican unions, including the SME, the mineros, and the STUNAM.

In the afternoon, a new panel of representatives made connections between the impact of NAFTA, experienced over the last twenty years and the expected impact of the TPP. The AFL-CIO participated actively in each panel. Although they were not formally represented on the panels, both the United Electrical Workers and the FAT made key contributions.

In particular, Robin Alexander of the UE emphasized that her union's extensive experience led it to conclude that incorporating labor protections into trade treaties, whether through side agreements like that with NAFTA or in the body of the agreements themselves, was not effective in protecting workers' rights. This conclusion was reinforced strongly by Mexican participants who denounced the fact that in Mexico, the object of most of the labor complaints under NAFTA, the position of unions has deteriorated greatly because of the passage of neoliberal labor, education, energy, and telecommunications reforms.

On Thursday a plenary session joining all four constituencies met to discuss the TPP and talk about alternative models to neoliberal free trade agreements. Ideas put forward were then discussed, among others, in two pairs of workshops, one following the other. The first pair dealt with sovereignty issues and the role of the state in guaranteeing social rights. I went to the second, where there was general agreement that the problem we face is only partly a question of vision and is also largely one of the lack of political power of workers and popular movements in relation to corporations and the capitalist state.

The second pair of workshops discussed the defense of land and communal benefits and the defense of democratic liberties facing the growth of militarization. I went to the second, whose moderator was Juan Manuel Sandoval, a Marxist analyst of immigration and member of the RMALC executive committee. We have worked together closely for many years and shared the presentation. We noted the role of trade agreements in producing displacement and a reserve labor force and the use of migration policy to regulate the labor supply in the interest of employers, whether in maquiladoras in north Mexico, or in the United States and Canada. Together with other workshop participants, we analyzed the use of the military on the United States/Mexico border and the growth of criminalization and detention. As alternatives, we discussed forcing the inclusion in trade agreements of provisions prohibiting the increase in displacement and lower living standards, the decriminalization of migration, and the demilitarization of the border.

Very important contributions were made in this discussion, as well as in others, by five rank-and-file members of the United Electrical Workers, who had visited Mexican unions and workplaces in the days before the forums. They spoke very realistically of the difficulties they face, even in a very progressive union, of talking with their coworkers about the real situation of Mexican workers and the need for cross-border solidarity. Eva Crutchfield, an African American worker from Virginia, spoke eloquently about her own family's experience of racism and the parallels she sees in the situation of Mexican migrants in the United States.

The forums set up a committee to discuss a joint declaration, and I was asked to participate. Ideas for the declaration were forwarded by each of the four constituency groups and then reconciled in a series of long meetings. A final document was approved by the plenary on the last day. A heated discussion was also held at the end over proposals for actions to greet the meeting of the heads of state of Mexico, Canada and the United States in Toluca on February 19. This is also the day on which miners observe the deaths of sixty-six coal miners in an explosion in Coahuila a decade ago, which led to the forced exile of the head of the miners union to Canada. The point at issue was the importance of acting in conjunction with the presidents' meeting, while also respecting the historic meaning of the day for miners and their planned actions for it.

The four days concluded with two marches on Friday, January 31. Teachers and SME members marched in the morning and the UNT unions and their allies in the afternoon. The morning march included about 2,000 participants, including hundreds of teachers from Oaxaca who have been camping out in a *plantón* in the Plaza de la Republica. The afternoon march included over 75,000 people.

The afternoon march included large contingents of the Party of the Democratic Revolution, the most

left of Mexico's three major parties over the last two decades. The UNT invited Cuauhtemoc Cardenas to be the march and rally's sole speaker, and he invited the participation of the PRD. Teachers and the SME then withdrew to organize their own march because the PRD deputies in congress had supported the education reform and failed to oppose strongly the energy reform. In addition, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the PRD's presidential candidate in the last two elections, registered a new party, MORENA, the day before the march and announced that it would not run joint election campaigns with the PRD. He also refused to participate in the afternoon march.

While the internal problems of the progressive movements in all three countries are important obstacles to the growth of an effective movement to oppose neoliberal globalization, the forums demonstrated that key advances have been made in the last twenty years. At the time NAFTA went into effect in 1994, solidarity between Mexican, US and Canadian unions and popular movements hardly existed. Today those networks exist, they share a common political perspective, and they are capable, at their best, of organizing mass actions that express the rejection of the free trade model by a majority of people in each country.

I believe that the growth of this movement is our best hope for building the political power that will allow for an effective challenge to the kind of globalization that NAFTA represents. It is a slow process of the continued meeting of people to deepen understanding, and to plan actions based on that understanding but there is no substitute for it. I came away from the forums rededicated to helping this movement to grow.

Trinational Perspectives on the Future of Labor:

The State of Labor 20 Years after NAFTA