

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Mexican Auto Workers Win Landmark Victory

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso, General Secretary, SINTTIA union

Shawna Bader-Blau (00:05):

Hello sisters and brothers, and welcome to The Solidarity Center podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions, and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the executive director of the Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C. We're the largest U.S.-based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities, and for greater equality in the global economy, and for one just future.

Shawna Bader-Blau (00:46):

Thousands of workers in Mexico recently formed an independent union at a GM auto plant in Silao, which is in central Mexico. Their victory is an incredible milestone, because they voted out a union that did not operate in the interest of workers. The union they threw out, the Workers Confederation of Mexico, or CTM, is the country's largest confederation and runs what are called protection contracts. These agreements are worked out directly between companies and unions, usually without the knowledge of workers, so they don't legitimately represent them. This practice is corrupt and it's illegal, but up until now has been widespread in Mexico. Although GM is one of the biggest companies in a key Mexican industry, the workers in Silao had some of the lowest wages in Mexico's auto plants. By standing strong and demanding a democratically elected union, they showed it's possible to defeat a corrupt system. Their fight and victory is an example to millions of workers in Mexico who now can see it's possible to have a real say in their union to improve wages, working conditions, and the lives of their families.

Shawna Bader-Blau (01:58):

Here to tell us about this incredible achievement is Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso. Alejandra was part of the struggle to form the independent union, SINTTIA, the National Independent Union of Workers and Automotive Industry Workers Union. Alejandra last year became the first woman to lead SINTTIA. And we are so thrilled to have her with us today. A quick note on terminology before we begin. You'll hear Alejandra refer a few times to the treaty, which is the U.S.-Mexico-Canada agreement, or USMCA. The USMCA includes worker rights, such as requiring that workers have input into collective bargaining agreements, and workers have the right to form unions. Now let's hear from Alejandra.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (02:53):

Hi, my name is Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso, and I'm the general secretary of SINTTIA. I've been working for 11 years at the GM plant in Silao. It's a plant that has many sections, transmissions, painting. I work in the painting part of the plant. But every section carries out a different function. And as workers, we had been aware of the problems that the company had. There were all kinds of irregularities, not only with the workers, but also with the actions [management was] taking. For example, with bathroom breaks or holidays or how long our days would be. Sometimes they were making us work double shifts.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (03:43):

And then in April 2021 the union started pushing for a legitimization of the new working contract, the new collective agreement, which us, because we already knew that the information was being false, we knew that that was not true. And we told the workers so. We knew that they were pushing for the

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legitimization of this collective agreement, saying that if they didn't accept it that they would lose their wages and their benefits.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (04:17):

I've been working at the GM plant for 11 years. And during my time at the plant I also got my bachelors in business and administration. And I joined Generando Movimiento, which was one of the first worker organization movements in GM in 2019 after the illegal firing of Israel Cervantes. This was like a call to bring down the corruption that we had seen in the system, especially the corruption that we saw in CTM. And it opened my eyes to the injustices that were happening in the company. So I decided to join the union. And I never thought that I would be elected secretary general. My coworkers voted for me. They elected me. And most of them are men. I'm one of the few women in the union. And it's been complicated. It's been complicated because, as women, we still face a lot of sexism in Mexico and in other places. And that's another dimension of the things we face in the union.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (05:26):

Well, it was important because it was a very big change, especially for those who are still under this CTM-ist regime, so to speak. And it gave people hope, hope that it was possible to represent the workers freely, because we know what goes on in the companies. We have firsthand knowledge. And we proved that it's possible to get organized and to fight for our rights and to leave behind the fear that we're going to lose our jobs.

Shawna Bader-Blau (05:58):

We've heard how workers at the Silao plant faced incredible pressure to cast their vote for a protection union that did the bidding of the company. After the break we'll hear how they were faced with a ballot that included four unions, three of which were sham stand-ins for the corrupt federation CTM, and the fourth one that offered workers a real voice on the job.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (07:21):

Then, as we were getting closer to the day that we had to submit our vote, we started seeing a lot more irregularities, to the point that we actually found broken ballot boxes, and some of our ballots had clearly been ripped and tossed around. So this led to the cancellation of that vote, and also to postponing the elections.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (07:54):

And so the new vote was postponed to August, which incidentally was also when we were recognized as a new union and I was appointed the secretary general of said union. And that's when we submitted a vote and the workers decided that they were not going to approve the new collective agreement. So we were able to present our ourselves in front of the workers as a new independent union.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (08:24):

And so, after presenting ourselves as a new independent union, we had to confront the new regime that was obviously backed by a union very much entrenched in the CTM, which they and their cronies had been pretty much calling the shots. This allowed us to inform the workers what a new and independent union could do for them, because we could bring them the support and the help they needed when the

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CTM had never done that. They had never supported them, they had never provided any kind of help. They were only there to pocket the dues. And that's how the fight started, by us informing the workers of all the benefits that we could bring them, of all the support that we could bring them. And I think that, when they realized all the benefits we could bring them, and that together with the exhaustion and the frustration after years of lack of support and years of company irregularities, they realized that it was a good idea to go with us. And that's what helped us inform them of all the changes that we could bring.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (09:33):

And so on the first and second of February, which were the days that the federal center had scheduled for the vote, the whole plant of GM in Silao went to vote, and we obtained that great victory. We were elected with 76 percent of the votes. There was no margin for the other unions, actually. And so we started negotiating the new collective bargaining agreement.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (10:07):

So the unions, after they failed to push for the legitimization of the contract in August, let's say that they divided themselves into three different unions that called themselves new or independent. And they proposed very similar measures to what we were proposing. But, unlike us, people knew who the representatives were and people knew who was actually behind the scenes, and it was the CTM.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (10:36):

So these unions harassed the workers, telling them that, if they didn't vote for them, they would be fired. Or they offered them money in exchange for their vote, or they offered them benefits in case they won. And that worked with some people. That intimidated some of the workers. And of course there were people who sold their vote. And that was what they based their campaign on. And they never sought to benefit all the workers, just the people who told them they would vote for them.

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (11:11):

We faced several barriers. But I would say the main two would be, on one hand, that in GM, the minute that they heard that someone was trying to organize the workers, that person would be fired. And either the union itself or the company themselves would fire this person. And then the second would be actually the laws. Ever since the legitimization of the [inaudible 00:11:33] in April, CTM was always heavily favored by the law. So that didn't give us a lot of room to maneuver, not a lot of flexibility. So we had a long standing battle with them in that regard. Once the approval of the new treaty, under the new treaty, it was easier to create an independent union. So we were able to tell our coworkers, "Listen. By law, now we can actually create an independent union. And not just the worker centrals that were allowed before."

Maria Alejandra Morales Reynoso (12:12):

I would tell them to inform themselves, to find out what their rights are, and to talk with our colleagues about them. Because it certainly helped us. We found out what our rights were, and then we talked about how to implement them. And we talked to the workers directly. And now with the reform of the USMCA, it's easier now to actually elect a union that will represent you. I just wanted to say that everybody's intervention, everybody's help, and especially the Solidarity Center's support, was incredibly valuable to us in our fight. And we're just really grateful.

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Shawna Bader-Blau ([12:54](#)):

We've covered in this podcast just how hard it is to form unions. Workers coming together can overcome the repression. But it takes work. The deck is so stacked against workers. The laws and widespread corruption, government repression, companies firing activists and harassing them. It takes courage to take on an entire entrenched corrupt system. Yet the workers in Silao did just that, inspiring workers all over world. And they did so at one of the biggest companies in Mexico with more than 6,000 workers. Many in the international labor community supported their efforts, including the AFL-CIO, IndustriALL, and U.S. unions like the United Auto Workers, Steel Workers, the Machinists, the Bakery Workers, and more. And it's worth noting that within days of the GM union announcement, workers at a second auto plant in Mexico called Tridonex also voted overwhelmingly in favor of a new independent union that also bypassed the CTM. This is living proof that worker power and global solidarity is a powerful voice and force for democracy and worker and human rights. And when we come together, when workers come together, we cannot be stopped.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([14:15](#)):

I am so grateful to you, Alejandra, for telling us about this incredible victory, and for your bravery and your hard work, along with all the workers in Silao and beyond. In standing up for your rights, you provide an inspiring example to workers across Mexico and all around the world.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([14:37](#)):

You can follow and subscribe to The Solidarity Center podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you find your shows. Learn more about the Solidarity Center at solidaritycenter.org, and follow our social media on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The Solidarity Center podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network. And our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. For The Solidarity Center podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.