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Allies across the Border: Mexico's "Authentic Labour Front" and Global Solidarity

by Dale HATHAWAY, Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2000, 267 pp., ISBN: 0-89608-632-1.

Formally structured around the analysis of the history of Mexico's "Authentic Labour Front" (Frente Auténtico del Trabajo-FAT), Dale Hathaway's book deals with other central issues derived from the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) facing not only Mexican workers but also U.S. and Canadian labour.

The "Authentic Labour Front" is an unusual labour organization. In spite of the fact that it is not a massive organi-

zation, it has contributed to the promotion of labour rights in various regions of the country and to the education of labour leaders through its union training program ("formación sindical").

Also, it plays a significant role in the organization of workers in various economic branches such as leather, shoe and clothing manufacturing in Guanajuato and auto parts and beverages in Chihuahua (it organized a union in Pepsi Cola bottling facility in that city).

In addition, in the 1970s and 1980s, FAT followed up on its successful campaign in organizing workers in the states of Guanajuato and Chihuahua and started to promote unionization of the Rivetex textile factory in the state of Morelos and by putting forward demands for the autonomy of labour from the State. Its success at organizing in the 1970s provoked president Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) to counterattack and promote the creation of the so-called radical Unión Obrera Independiente-UOI (Independent Workers Union), which made inroads in the automobile industry, such as Volkswagen and Nissan, thus limiting FAT's expansion in that branch of the economy.

Ideologically speaking, by postulating a set of guiding principles focused on (a) union freedom and the promotion of union democracy, (b) independence from political parties, and (c) the constant struggle for the material and spiritual elevation of the working class, FAT succeeded in challenging the corporatist subordination of the official Mexican labour movement to the State.

It is worthwhile to mention the emphasis that Dale Hathaway places on two questions that are central to the understanding of the capacity of FAT to survive and grow within Mexico's corporatist system of labour representation: first, the early awareness of the importance of the international dimension in labour action and, second, its commitment to the principles of self-management of production facilities.

Beyond its focus on unionization, leadership training and self-management, FAT also expanded its reformist perspective to include other forms of social mobilization such as the women's movement, the cooperative sector and peasant and shantytown dweller groups. This effort to go beyond workers' demands enabled FAT to question the impact that the new model of development—centered on free trade, privatization of state enterprise and the

flexibilization of work—had on the life of Mexican popular sectors.

FAT contributed to the creation of the Mexican Action Network Confronting Free Trade (RMCLC) and to a profound debate on the impact of NAFTA and the implications that it would have on employment, salaries, labour turnover, rural-urban migration and the economic geography of the country. In addition, together with the United Electrical Workers Union in the United States, it developed strategies to organize workers in the US where a majority of Mexican migrants were located. This strategy benefited from the election in 1995 of John Sweeney as president of the AFL-CIO because the new leadership of the confederation strongly contributed to the formation of a North American labour coalition, as is exemplified by the creation of an AFL-CIO representative office in Mexico City.

As respect for democratic elections deepened in Mexico from 1988 onwards, the need for a democratization of the labour relations system also became important. In this regard, in 1997, FAT, together with the Telephone Workers Union and the National Teachers Union participated in a forum called "El sindicalismo ante la nación," where proposals were made to strengthen independent labour organizations, study labour law reform, question the links between unions and political parties and present data on the deterioration of labour standards, increases in the informalization of labour markets and other issues that faced the Mexican labour movement in the first four years of NAFTA. This process culminated in November of that year with the creation of the National Union of Workers (Unión Nacional de Trabajadores-UNT), as an alternative to the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores de México).

In the period 1998-2000 FAT and UNT have had to face the profound changes that have occurred in the Mexican political scene, essentially the defeat

of the PRI (“Parted Revolutionaries Institutional”) at the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000. At the same time, they have had to face the campaign to privatize the oil and the electrical industry, the systematic decrease in minimum salaries and the growth of employment in the “maquillage” sector of the northern border, and the problems that labour faces as a result of the Labour Ministry intervention in the registration of unions.

Finally, on the basis of the Seattle events of 2000, Dale Hathaway concludes as to the future of Mexican labour. Here he shows the importance of the division within Mexican society and its political system concerning the development of further market liberalization, privatization and flexibilization. While the government continues to favour those three policies, organized labour, many intellectuals and some

middle class sectors question the hypothetical benefits they entail for the country.

Given the small but important changes in the Mexican labour scene, the exit of PRI from the presidential palace and its loss of control of the Congress, and the pressures coming from workers in some branches, such as the “maquila sector,” communications or aviation, it is possible to conclude that the future may well show transformations in the existing corporatist structure.

Dale Hathaway’s book is a well-written, documented case study that succeeds in projecting its specific considerations to the general scenario of present day Mexican labour. It should be required reading for all concerned citizens in Canada, the United States and Mexico.

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