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Cross Border Organizing Comes Home: UE & FAT in Mexico & Milwaukee

Abstract

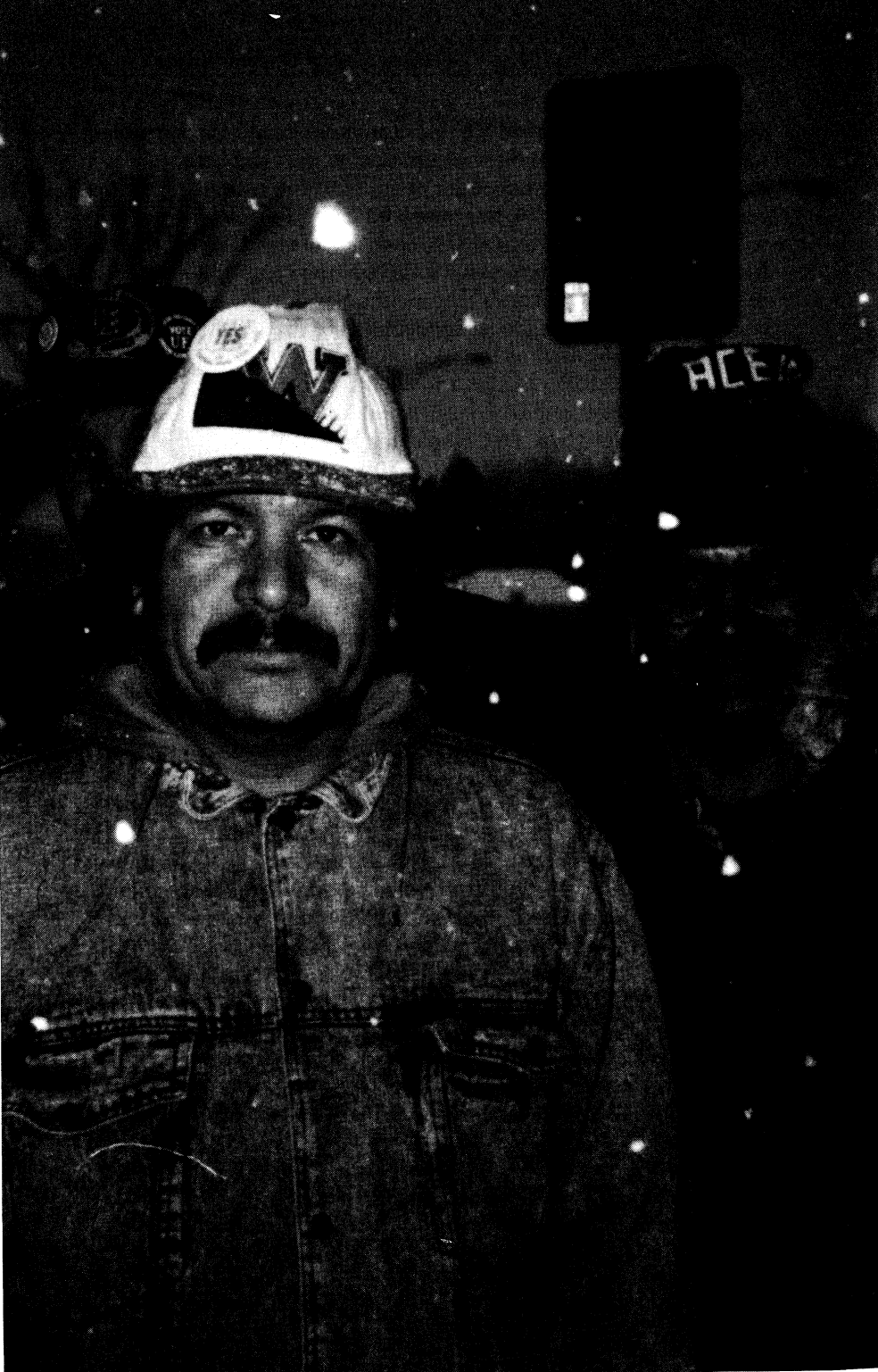
[Excerpt] When Manuel Ortega was sixteen, in 1993, the time arrived that his family had long been dreading. The pesticide-ridden land from which they eked out a living in Mexico could no longer maintain them all, and some of them had to leave. Manuel, his father, and two of his brothers headed north across the border to find a living in the United States.

Manuel (not his real name) and his father went to Milwaukee, while his two brothers went to California. They found sporadic employment as farm workers, dishwashers and busboys, sending home as much money as they could to Manuel's mother and brother, who had stayed on the land. Later, one of his brothers joined them in Milwaukee. Early in 1994, Manuel got hired at a Milwaukee factory, Aluminum Casting & Engineering Company. His brother Jose soon followed.

Like many Mexicans, the Ortegas suffered a personal crisis parallel to the general economic crisis gripping Mexico in the '90s. Even before the devaluation of the peso, even at the height of Mexico's "economic miracle," campesinos (small-farmers) were forced northward by economic necessity to seek work in the States. And like the Ortegas, they face a new set of problems here: separation from their families, a cold climate, the Immigration Service, unfamiliar language and customs, racism, violence, poverty-stricken urban neighborhoods, and degrading and exploitative work. Relying at first on guidance from friends and relatives who arrived before them, sometimes living two and three to a room to make ends meet they cautiously feel their way in the new environment. Many, like Manuel Ortega, miss their life back home and wish it were possible to find work there, but nonetheless face life up north with cheer and humor.

Keywords

Mexico, employment, labor market, immigration



Cross Border Organizing Comes Home

UE & FAT in Mexico & Milwaukee

■ *Terry Davis*

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THE ACECO FOUNDRY: THIRD WORLD CONDITIONS IN MILWAUKEE

Aluminum Casting & Engineering Company, or AceCo for short, is one of the largest employers of Mexican immigrants in Milwaukee. At any given time, it employs about 430 people, and the turnover is rapid. Thousands of people in the Near South Side neighborhood have worked there at some point. AceCo is hidden from view on a side street, and it boasts no flashy signs, but it has a reputation in the community as a low-paying and dangerous plant—and a plant that is continually hiring. Workers quit, or are fired, and then are replaced on almost a daily basis. For a newcomer, work is available. For the company, the newcomers are less likely to protest poor working conditions.

AceCo is an aluminum foundry which produces parts for major corporations such as Caterpillar, General Motors and Chrysler. Privately owned by an immigrant German industrialist, Eckhart Grohmann, the company employs mostly Hispanic workers, and of those, the largest group by far is Mexican. There are also African Americans and whites, with a handful of Hmung and Laotian.

The work at AceCo is dirty, heavy and hot, and the nauseating smell of chemicals permeates the air, the workers' clothing, and even the atmosphere around the plant. Molten metal accidents leave scars on hands and bodies. Back injuries and cut or amputated fingers are common. Workers are frequently given assignments for which they have never been trained. In 1993 this practice resulted in an explosion that cost one worker his life, and there have been numerous other serious accidents resulting in permanent injuries. AceCo has apparently found it easier to pay fines to OSHA than to correct the hazards in the plant. According to Ted Uribe of the Wisconsin Injured Workers Network (WIWN), "At that foundry there are many accidents and the company refuses to pay proper compensation to many of the workers who are hurt. WIWN has helped over 50 workers who the company refused to pay adequate compensation. We won every case."

In spite of the inferno-like conditions, AceCo keeps wages and benefits down far below the level of other foundries in the area. Starting pay is only \$5.85 per hour—less than Burger King—and there is no health insurance for the first nine months of employment. AceCo offers no paid vacation until after the first year, and no pension at all. Supervisors yell and curse at workers. Small wonder this foundry is often known as “SlaveCo.” As one labor activist comments, “AceCo has third world working conditions right here in Milwaukee.”



UNION MOVEMENT COMES TO ACECO

In the summer of 1994, AceCo workers got wind of organizing campaigns being run by the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (UE). Since July of 1993, UE had won two Milwaukee representation elections, and first contracts at both places, and another plant was being organized and awaiting an election. The word spread, and a few Aceco workers contacted UE organizers. At the first AceCo union meeting, thirty workers showed up, eager to start a drive. They were African American, white, Puerto Rican, and Cuban—but not one of them was Mexican.

“Everyone knows we need a union at AceCo. But the Mexicans are scared. Without them, we can’t do it. If they get into it, we can win.” This was the assessment of virtually all the pro-union activists in the early weeks of the campaign. Some of them were frustrated at their seeming inability to reach the Mexican workers with their message. The task was not made any easier by the company, which started holding weekly anti-union captive meetings in the plant, recounting exagger-

ated scare stories about union dues and violent strikes. The propaganda was particularly effective with newcomers to the country, who had no direct experience with unions in the U.S. to rely on. At the same time, rumors suddenly cropped up in the plant about raids from the Immigration Service, and one-on-one pressure from supervisors was stepped up.

In spite of all the anti-union pressure and management attempts to divide the Mexicans from the other workers, some of the longer-service Mexicans became active in the union drive. But as the date of the Labor Board election neared, cultural and language barriers still seemed to be preventing the full participation of Mexican workers. To achieve the unity necessary for a union victory, these barriers would have to be overcome.

TURNING COMPETITION INTO SOLIDARITY: THE UE-FAT STRATEGIC ORGANIZING ALLIANCE

The process of breaking down barriers between Mexican and U.S. workers was nothing new to the UE. In fact, the problem at AceCo mirrored locally a political problem that challenges the labor movement on an international scale: corporations use competition between workers in the U.S. and Mexico to drive down wages in both countries.

Employers use the threat of “competition in the global marketplace” and cheap labor in the Third World to deny wage demands in the U.S. Workers are afraid to demand too much, lest their jobs be sent to Mexico. But there is often no outlet for their anger and frustration. Workers, and some unions, have sometimes put the blame on the Mexican workers themselves, or have bought into the strategy of competing against them, advancing the slogan “Buy American” to combat the export of jobs. The same spirit of nationalism is often expressed against Mexican immigrants, who become scapegoats instead of allies against increasingly internationalized bosses. The result is anti-immigrant legislation like Proposition 187 in California.

In searching for a different approach to the flight of jobs, in 1992 the UE joined in a unique strategic organizing alliance with a Mexican organization, the Authentic Workers Front (Frente Autentico de Trabajo, or FAT), to combat the problem with solidarity instead of competition. Recognizing that as long as there are workers in Mexico earning less than \$10 a day the pressure on our jobs will continue to exist, UE decided to join forces with FAT to organize in Mexico, in the very shops that had run away from the U.S.

The alliance between UE and FAT has proved to be a congenial fit. UE is a progressive, independent rank-and-file union with a tradition

of progressive politics going back to the 1930's. FAT is a federation of labor, community, and campesino groups. Politically independent and a leading critic of NAFTA, FAT contrasts starkly with Mexico's principal labor federation, the CTM, which has close ties with the ruling party and a well-deserved reputation for corruption and bureaucracy.

The UE-FAT alliance initiated organizing campaigns at General Electric and Honeywell plants in northern Mexico, runaways from UE plants in the U.S. The idea is that when workers struggle to raise the standard of living in Mexico, the downward pressure on wages in the U.S. is lessened and workers on both sides of the border benefit in the long term. FAT provided the organizers and the UE contributed resources. Strategy and tactics were mutually discussed, and the project got underway. In spite of repression and flagrant violations of labor rights (which President Clinton's side agreements to NAFTA have done nothing to prevent), the project can point to significant achievements.

FAT ORGANIZER COMES TO ACECO

In 1993, around the same time Manuel Ortega and his father were leaving for Milwaukee, another Mexican worker named Roberto Valerio was working for General Electric in the Ciudad Juarez small motors plant. When the union campaign by the FAT-affiliated metalworkers union STIMAHCS got underway, Valerio, a skilled worker in his thirties,



Courtesy United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers

Roberto Valerio, Manuel Gomez, Apolonia Talamantes, and Fernando Castro, who were present at this November 6, 1993 meeting in Juarez with General Electric workers from the U.S., were all fired for union activity.

joined up and became one of the leaders. He and several of his co-workers met with a delegation of UE members from GE who came to Juarez in October 1993 on a solidarity tour. Shortly afterward, when he and several other union activists were fired, Valerio became a full-time organizer for STIMAHCS.

To strengthen the AceCo campaign, UE asked their allies at FAT for help, and Valerio came to Milwaukee in December and worked on the UE campaign for several weeks, leading up to the election in early January of this year. Working with the UE staff and several Mexican rank-and-file UE members from other plants, he leafletted at the plant gate and visited workers in their homes to discuss the union.

Within a few days the effect of the “Mexican connection” could be felt in the plant. Valerio, in his own words, helped people to “see the boss for what he is.” He could explain the differences between a rank-and-file union like UE or FAT and the corrupt government-dominated unions some of the Mexican workers had encountered at home. He could relate to people like Manuel Ortega and understand their concerns about the Immigration Service or strikes. He encouraged people to stand up for decent treatment on the job. Simply by being here, he embodied the principle of cross-border solidarity. Valerio’s presence gave the union activists in AceCo, especially the Mexicans, a stronger feeling that their struggle had significance. One of them, Regulo Ruiz, remembers: “I would tell the guys if he can come all the way from Mexico to help us, you should be able to come to a meeting three blocks from your house.” It was about this time that Manuel Ortega and his brother got involved with the campaign and began wearing UE buttons to work.

In a leaflet distributed at the plant in English and Spanish, Valerio gave a personal message: “The UE and the FAT fight for the same ideals: workers uniting to progress... I feel proud to see my countrymen demanding their union rights. And it’s moving to see workers of all races and nationalities joining forces... Keep on, brothers and sisters. The way to the future is the union!”

A UNION VICTORY

In spite of continued intense campaigning by the company, with threats and pressure and Christmas turkeys too, the union forces in the plant were able to hold their own. On the night of January 6, when the ballots were finally counted, UE had won the election. At the union hall, Mexican, Puerto Rican, African American, and white workers joined in celebrating their hard-earned victory over a tenacious employer.



AceCo Victory Party.

AceCo is the largest plant to go union in Milwaukee in years. UE organizers feel sure that the Mexican workers, encouraged by Valerio and the Mexican UE members, provided the surge that ensured victory. Cross-border solidarity now has new meaning in Milwaukee, where community activists are planning to get involved in supporting organizing efforts in Mexico.

The labor movement in the U.S. has a lot to gain from the example of AceCo. First, the popular wisdom that Mexican workers can't be organized is untrue. Approaching Mexican workers on their own terms and respecting their experiences led to far more participation at AceCo by the Mexican workers. Second, empowering the Mexican workers went hand in hand with building unity in the plant. Instead of running away from the question of immigrants' rights, we can gain strength and membership when we fight for those rights. During the campaign there was a march on Milwaukee's South Side against the recently passed Proposition 187 in California. The active UE workers at AceCo endorsed the march and all races and nationalities participated, thereby passing on a valuable lesson from their own experience: when we support each others' rights, we are all stronger. ■