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Abstract

[Excerpt] LRR asked Jose La Luz to offer some thoughts on the NAFTA fight. A worker educator for many years, La Luz served as international education solidarity director for the Amalgamated Clothing & Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). He is currently the associate director for education of the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME). He was interviewed by Pam Tau Lee, a labor health educator with the Labor Occupational Health Program at the University of California, Berkeley.

Keywords

North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, trade, labor movement, worker rights, activism

LRR FOCUS: Educating Workers About NAFTA An Interview with Jose LaLuz

LRR asked Jose La Luz to offer some thoughts on the NAFTA fight. A worker educator for many years, La Luz served as international education solidarity director for the Amalgamated Clothing & Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). He is currently the associate director for education of the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME). He was interviewed by Pam Tau Lee, a labor health educator with the Labor Occupational Health Program at the University of California, Berkeley.

LRR: How have your travels to Central America, Mexico, and Canada shaped your perspective on NAFTA?

La Luz: The approach of ACTWU regarding economic integration in the Americas was different from other unions. It was not a question of whether or not there should be increased trade with Mexico and Canada, it was more a matter of what kind of trade and investment policies would raise the standard of living of all workers in North America. Economic integration is an irreversible process and thus the question becomes, how can we contribute to improving the standard of living of the Rivera family in Matamoros, Mexico, the Rivera family in East Los Angeles, and the Smith family in Toronto, Canada?

We believed there was a need to put forth an alternative vision to the transnational corporations, which would bring together workers in Canada, in Mexico, and indeed throughout the entire hemisphere. In 1991 there was a summit of textile and garment worker unions in the Americas to formulate a common strategy for all workers in this hemisphere. The result was a consensus document entitled "No Economic Integration Without Worker Participation." This document called for workers to play a role in shaping economic integration strategies that would build unity instead of a corporate strategy that pits workers against each other in the mindless race to the bottom.

A follow-up conference in Costa Rica sponsored by the Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT) also called for a common strategy for all workers throughout the Americas. This was important because once again it challenged the transnational corporate agenda with the rise of xenophobia in the United States in the form of Mexican-bashing. For instance, there was a rally in Michigan where some workers were seen wearing T-shirts depicting a Mexican worker with a sombrero, grabbing onto a factory. The caption read, "No way Jose, my goddamn job you won't take!" By focusing only on protecting jobs and not on how trade policies could be structured to create jobs, throughout North America,

we failed to seize an opportunity to educate workers in the United States about their real interest in the global economy. ACTWU's alternative view did influence some unions to examine different ways of meeting this new challenge.

ACTWU worked with the Authentic Labor Front (FAT), by putting forth a notion of cross-border organizing as one of many strategies to build unity with Mexican workers and trade unionists. ACTWU assisted and continues to assist textile, garment, and footwear workers in the maquiladoras (free-trade zones) and help them in their organizing efforts.

I spent a lot of time with workers to build unions in the free trade zones in Mexico, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Honduras. Over the years the textile and garment industry has been relocating there and continues to relocate to many of these countries, partly as a result of programs run by the Agency for International Development (AID), which funds projects to attract investment capital from the United States. ACTWU was and continues to be in the forefront of exposing economic integration that only benefits corporations and the wealthy. ACTWU took the position that it must help workers to build strong, viable, independent unions not controlled by any government or political party regardless of its ideological persuasion.

LRR: What was the focus of the education in ACTWU for getting members involved in the anti-NAFTA campaign?

La Luz: We were planning an education program in the state of Texas. Somebody proposed that a top officer of the union be invited to give a speech about the union's position on NAFTA. After some discussion, most participants agreed that this was not the best method, because many people would fall into the "relaxation response" in the first 20 minutes. Then some other person suggested the union's chief economist be invited to give a lecture on the union's position on NAFTA. And after more discussion, people felt that after the first 10 minutes, most people would go into the "relaxation response." So finally someone suggested instead we invite workers from the maquiladoras across the border and members of our union to have a conversation about how NAFTA, as it was negotiated by our governments, affected their interests. The result of this conversation was quite dramatic. In the end, these workers came up with an alternative view of trade which called for raising the standard of living, and environment, social, and consumer standards protecting all North American workers.

I still have the images of some of our members with cowboy hats and Mexican women from the maquiladoras looking at each other and strug-

gling to find how much they actually had in common. These workers ended the day by embracing each other. Through the work of ACTWU's education program, this experience was repeated in many other areas around the country. The lesson is that workers can learn from each other when they are allowed to express and share experiences freely.

LRR: As a person of color, what is your evaluation of the anti-NAFTA campaign? What would you have liked to have seen?

La Luz: Since a lot of my work focused on bringing men and women together from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, I feel that we may have lost a good opportunity to educate many union members in the United States about the importance of building unity through diversity. You can't talk about having economic integration in this hemisphere without supporting the rights of all workers, including their freedom of association, and also raising the question of the movement of people across borders. That issue was not included on the agenda of many unions. Only a few were interested in raising this as an important part of the discussion around NAFTA. ACTWU, SEIU, UE, and ILGWU were the only unions, I believe, that raised this question in a comprehensive manner. As a worker educator and as a Latino, I felt this was a missed opportunity. In Canada, workers see the United States as "south of the border," and many resented the fact that when the United States-Canada Free Trade Agreement was being negotiated, there was no widespread movement among U.S. workers and trade unionists to denounce the proposed trade agreement. But when a free-trade agreement was proposed with Mexico, there was in fact a massive response among U.S. workers and trade unionists to reject the proposed agreement. This is obviously inconsistent.

LRR: Where do we go from here?

La Luz: My deepest conviction is that trade unions have to become more internationalist in their approach. The corporations would continue to invest their capital in less-developed countries to maximize their profits by paying lower wages. This is the case for textile, garment, the automobile industry, and electrical-manufacturing. As many jobs are created in Mexico, our task is to assist workers there to build strong democratic unions.
