

Mexicans do *not* want 'free trade'

by Peter Rush

Refuting the myth that "Mexicans want a free trade agreement with the United States," opposition candidate Jesús Tirado Valdez, running for municipal president of Cajeme, the municipality in which Ciudad Obregón is located, in the state of Sonora, has an excellent chance to win, if there isn't widespread vote fraud. Tirado has created the possibility to win against the entrenched, corrupt ruling PRI party apparatus by successfully mobilizing the "forgotten masses" of Mexico—the 70% or more of the electorate who are so disaffected with the political system that they have stopped voting at all.

Tirado is backed by a coalition of the Party of the Authentic Mexican Revolution (PARM) and the Ibero-American Solidarity Movement (MSI), both of which oppose the sell-out of Mexican sovereignty and prospects for economic growth represented by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) being pushed by Presidents George Bush and Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Under the election slogan "Tirado is the good candidate," Tirado has gone into the slums and barrios that ring Ciudad Obregón, and has found a ready response. The PARM-MSI coalition has also fielded a number of other candidates who are running for state and federal positions, opposing the PRI's neo-liberal economic policies with a program for the industrialization and development of the nation.

On July 31, for example, Tirado held an open meeting, which in itself is significant, given that the candidates opposing him have been reluctant to hold even a single such meeting, for fear of failure. In the words of the local paper *Diario del Yaqui*, the event "had the full attendance of the citizens who poured out from the barrios where Dr. Tirado has been conducting his visits to homes and workplaces." It quoted Dr. Tirado saying, "This rally once again confirms that the overall attitude of the people is a total rejection of the official [PRI] candidates and a strong commitment to defend participation in the elections and defend the vote." He added, "I fiercely oppose the free trade treaty, which is only producing work for slaves with miserable wages of 13,000 pesos a day" (\$4.30 for 9-10 hours).

Opposition to dictatorship

The Sonora state daily *El Imparcial* also favorably reported on Tirado's campaign, detailing his attacks on how Salinas

de Gortari has further indebted Mexico and the candidate's charge that the government's embrace of the International Monetary Fund's policies has destroyed the nation's productive capabilities. The daily reported Tirado's statement that "we were told that the foreign debt would be reduced by 30%, down to \$75 or \$80 billion. The fact is that the current debt is more than \$100 billion. . . . We were told that there would be help for agriculture to produce more efficiently. . . . The fact is that the elimination of guaranteed prices for producers has accompanied the constant increase in the prices of inputs."

In the same article, PARM State Deputy Alberto Vizcarra is quoted saying that "what no one wants to say is that George Bush wants a dictatorship in Mexico to implement the genocide already imposed on Iraq and in Panama. He wants a dictatorship like that already existing in the United States, where political dissidents, such as Lyndon H. LaRouche and his collaborators, are jailed, along with black civil rights and religious leaders, who also suffer police brutality."

Other opposition candidates are also shaking up the political scene in northern Mexico. Patricio Estévez Nenner, a federal deputy from the PARM, is running for governor of Sonora, one of Mexico's richest—but still quite poor—states, bordering on Arizona and California. Estévez has defined the issues in his race against PRI favorite Manlio Fabio Beltrones, by attacking the inhuman working and living conditions of workers in the *maquiladora* factories that have proliferated along Mexico's northern border. The *maquiladoras* are plants that import parts from the United States, perform final assembly in Mexico paying very low wages, and then ship the total output back to the U.S.—benefiting Mexican workers hardly at all, and stealing jobs from American workers.

Cecilia Soto González (see interview with her below), a deputy in the Sonora state legislature who is running for federal deputy from the third congressional district, has stirred up a storm by her exposé of one particular *maquiladora*, Tetakawi, located in Empalme, Sonora. Tetakawi is an auto parts plant at which she worked, incognito, for a week, before revealing to the press the real situation in the plant. In a packed press conference on June 13, Soto González revealed that wages at the plant were about as low as any in Mexico—50¢ an hour, low even compared to other *maquiladoras*.

Surrounded by 14- and 15-year-old girls with whom she had worked in the plant, Soto revealed that as a condition of employment, she had to sign up with the "company" union, and sign an undated resignation form, such that if the plant ever wanted to get rid of her for any reason, the management could do so on the spot, without having to pay severance or any other benefits. The interview which follows is a report from Soto on what she encountered, and of the successful strike which workers at the plant held to obtain better wages and working conditions.

'The maquiladora system is suicidal'

Cecilia Soto González is a candidate from the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM) for federal deputy from the third congressional district. Mrs. Soto was interviewed by Hugo López Ochoa in Sonora on July 29, about her experience working "under cover" at the Tetakawi maquiladora for a week.

EIR: Tell me about the workers' fight for better wages and conditions at the Empalme *maquiladora*, for example, the fact that hundreds of workers surrounded the CTM leader's house and forced him to call a strike.

Soto: When I held my press conference after working for a week at the *maquiladora*, I reported that I hadn't seen mistreatment of the workers—at least, I didn't see people getting beaten, or anything like that. But then a tall young man who was at the press conference interrupted me and said, "I have seen that." He was Sergio Villa, the one who organized everything. He asked for a wage increase, and the company threw him out and sent him to jail. When his friends saw that he wasn't coming back, they left, one by one, and held a four-hour strike. The union had never acted. . . . The incredible thing was that they didn't even know whether what they were doing was really a strike. The work stoppage finally lasted 12 hours. The company didn't let him back into the plant, and told other workers to stay out. . . .

No one went to work, and they all went out to march—1,000 of them—to surround the house of the CTM leader, to demand that he call a strike. The labor leader, Juan Salas de la Paz, decided to do that, rather than lose his credibility. He had been the CTM leader in Empalme for three years; not only had he done nothing, but he looked the other way and allowed all sorts of irregularities. . . .

EIR: Why are they called the Tetakawi *maquiladoras*? Are there several of them?

Soto: Yes, they mainly belong to National Industries of Alabama. The other one is Wilson, a clothing *maquiladora*. Tetakawi is the Mexican firm which services the *maquiladoras*. One of them hires the workers, so the gringos won't have any labor problems. They hire for all the others. . . . It's

one company which offers one wage for all of Hermosillo's *maquiladoras*. . . .

EIR: How long did the strike last?

Soto: It lasted 10 days, but they stopped working every day for four hours. . . . Before the strike began, the company decided to increase wages "on their own initiative," so terrified were they that a precedent might be set, and not wanting to have to deal with the union. But the workers replied, "We won't accept this. . . . We want to have a union," so they went ahead, in order to get more benefits.

Incentives are so poor, that instead of improving production, they sabotage it. For example, if you have "perfect attendance," you don't arrive late, don't get sick, etc. for a month, they give you a 15,000 peso bonus for the month. The problem is that for women with children, it's hard not to miss work for a whole month. So the workers got the company to make this a weekly, rather than a monthly bonus. Moreover, the company increased the wage from 11,800 pesos daily to 18,000-19,000 pesos, although they demand more production in exchange for that.

EIR: What did you conclude from all this?

Soto: The important thing was that the union was revived. Within eight months, the workers can alter their contract when it comes up for renewal. Another important thing is that the company committed itself not to force workers to sign a resignation letter when they are hired, and they will also demand a birth certificate, so as not to hire under-aged workers. By the way, in a radio interview I did in Guaymas on this issue, I said I would send copies of the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Centesimus Annus* to the owner of Tetakawi, Luis Felipe Seldner Tonella, so that he can deal with his workers in a more Christian manner.

I also noticed that the president of the Hermosillo *maquiladoras*, Armando Lugo, told me in Guaymas that wages are low because there is no competition, and that there's not a wage problem, but it's just that the workers don't want to work. I said to myself, "They're dying of hunger and don't want to work? They must be Martians, so I'm going to look into this."

EIR: What else can you say about your work in the *maquiladora*?

Soto: I saw a real sense of dignity. There are many under-aged workers, working because they have to; but they don't let themselves be so worn down by accepting non-existent wage incentives. Sure, there's a certain cynicism that develops. But the point is that the *maquiladora* strategy is suicidal from the standpoint of real productivity. Where I worked, every day they hired 50 to 100 new workers; it was a revolving door. They all have job applications at three other places, to get out as soon as they can. You'll never achieve labor productivity that way.