

Mexican Labor Protest Gets Results

By GINGER THOMPSON, NEW YORK TIMES

ATLIXCO, Mexico, Oct. 3 — At the time, it seemed an insignificant act of disobedience. About 900 workers at Mexmode, which produces sweatshirts for colleges in the United States, boycotted the company cafeteria because they were fed up with finding worms in their salads.

But their defiance set off a combustible chain of protests that led to negotiations from the wealthiest corners of the first world to the most impoverished depths of the third.

Marcela Muñoz, 23, a seamstress turned labor leader, still seems amazed by all the attention. "Eyes around the world have been focused on us," she said.

Mexmode — an assembly factory, or maquiladora — is a principal supplier of college sweatshirts to Nike and Reebok. Hearing that Mexmode workers were fired for their cafeteria boycott, leaders of an activist coalition supported by students and administrators from about 85 American colleges and universities rushed here to investigate.

The group, the Workers Rights Consortium, heard complaints about low wages, verbal abuse and corruption among union officials, then began a high-profile campaign that threatened the image of the Nike swoosh.

Nike, the world's largest athletic shoe and clothing manufacturer, had already come under fire for similar conditions at Asian plants. Nike officials pressed Mexmode managers to abide by corporate codes of conduct that guarantee fair conditions for workers.

As a result, workers at Mexmode, most of them single mothers in their 20's with elementary school educations and no prior work experience, have received two raises this year. The cafeteria food now seems safe for human consumption. Some employees even say it tastes good.

Child laborers have been removed from production lines. The 450 seamstresses and machine operators at Mexmode recently won the right to kick out corrupt labor leaders and form their own union.

The actions at Mexmode invigorated the American anti-sweatshop movement. Labor experts argue that the changes here prove that corporate codes of conduct can reach across borders to protect workers' rights in regions of the world where labor laws are weak or poorly enforced.

"This fight showed that globalization has another face," said Huberto Juárez Núñez, a labor expert at the Autonomous University of Puebla. "Companies are going to be required to do more than abide by weak regional laws. Their codes of conduct must set global standards that treat workers as world citizens and guarantee them certain levels of dignity and respect."

The changes won in this scenic city filled with colonial churches some 70 miles southeast of Mexico City, a center of the textile industry since the 1930's, have also provided help for Mexico's fledgling independent labor movement.

With an explosion in the number of foreign-owned assembly plants since the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect seven years ago, labor organizers hope the movement at Mexmode will inspire workers in 3,400 foreign-owned assembly plants across the country to fight against poverty wages and unsafe workplaces.

The fight will be a tough one. In recent months, in a tough economy, open acts of intimidation by government-controlled unions have shut down campaigns by independent unions and raised concerns about President Vicente Fox's commitment to labor reforms.

As the first opposition politician to win the presidency in more than seven decades, Mr. Fox promised to promote workers' rights and to dismantle labor organizations that had operated hand in glove with the former governing party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party.

Critics charge that Mr. Fox has so far forged alliances with traditional union leaders and turned a blind eye to their corruption.

Under the former governing party, unions operated as pillars of the political machine, looking out for the interests of the employers. Workers were forced to belong, were rarely included in negotiations with management and never received a clear accounting of how their dues were spent.

Talking over plates of enchiladas and lemonade, Mexmode workers, who still earn \$4.50 to \$5 a day, said that conditions had improved but that they did not make enough money to support their children, and so they were forced to rely on their parents. Most of their men, they said, migrate to the United States.

"How can a man support his family on \$5 a day?" asked Josefina Hernández Ponce.

During a tour of the \$25 million factory, which can produce 500,000 sweatshirts a month, Hoon Park, the general manager, pointed out that workers got free breakfast and lunch, birthday cake and performance awards.

Ms. Muñoz was one of the workers fired after the cafeteria boycott. When workers turned to their former union leaders for help, Ms. Muñoz said, they were ignored.

Officials of that union, the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants, did not respond to several telephone requests for interviews.

In early January, Mexmode workers walked off their jobs and staged a sit-in. Police officers forcibly removed workers from the plant, and managers refused to let protest leaders return to work.

In response, leaders of the United Students Against Sweatshops staged their own protests outside Nike stores and offices across the United States. Officials from the Workers Rights Consortium and from Nike conducted separate investigations of conditions at Mexmode.

"The burning question on U.S. campuses has been whether colleges and universities can really make a difference in the conditions in overseas factories," said Scott Nova, the executive director of the Washington-based consortium. "Now we know the answer is yes."

Sportswear companies including Nike and Reebok have come under fire from the anti-sweatshop movement for conditions in the factories across Asia as well. And mirroring the workers' triumph here in Mexico, a new semi-independent trade union in a tennis shoe factory in China has won new rights for its workers.

The cross-border campaign prompted Nike to press managers at Mexmode to reinstate the ousted workers, to create a formal grievance process, to address complaints of harassment by its managers and to improve cafeteria conditions.

A Nike spokesman, Vada Manager, said the company takes seriously its power to make sure that its suppliers adhere to fair labor practices. He said some 50 employees at Nike were assigned to monitor compliance with the corporate codes of conduct.

"We remain vigilant about these issues," Mr. Manager said. "We have learned a lot" at Mexmode, he added, "that will allow us to apply new monitoring rules at other factories."

Two weeks ago, after Mexmode managers revoked the former union's collective bargaining agreement, workers were granted the right to form an independent union. Membership is voluntary. Yet leaders of the new union said they have already signed up 80 percent of the plant's workers.