

OAKPRESS: UAW plans to send organizer to Mexico

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The United Auto Workers plans to dispatch an organizer to Mexico to help Mexican workers campaign for better wages and workers.

Cynthia Estrada, the UAW vice president in charge of organizing, said the goal isn't to bring Mexican workers into the UAW. "Mexican workers are capable of organizing themselves," she said during an interview at a conference at UAW headquarters in Detroit.

Instead, the goal is to build alliances with workers and independent unions in Mexico, Estrada said. It's about how we can help them help themselves," she said.

Auto workers around the world face similar challenges, including pressure for concessions even in Mexico, where wages are low. At the same time, Mexican workers are being warned their jobs could be moved to China.

Workers at Ford's Cuautitlan plant outside Mexico City, who make the equivalent of \$4.50 an hour, had to agree to a new two-tier wage system — which will see new hires make about half that — in order to secure Fiesta production in 2008, according to the trade publication Automotive News.

Bolstering campaigns for higher wages in Mexico also helps American workers whose wage increases have been limited by both the recession and the threats to move work to low-wage plants in Mexico or other countries such as China, she said.

The UAW plans to do more in educating its own members in the United States about how aiding Mexican workers benefits workers in the United States by halting the downward spiral in wages, Estrada said.

"Many of the workers don't even make a living wage," she said. "Belonging to a union is basic human right."

The International Metalworkers Federation also had pledged support for the Mexican workers.

The United Auto Workers was been a major critic of the North American Free Trade

Agreement, negotiated under President Ronald Reagan and finally implemented under President Bill Clinton in the 1990s.

The belief was that NAFTA would bolster the economies of both nations by fostering more trade.

However, studies by groups such as the Economic Policy Institute, which generally takes pro-union positions, have indicated the NAFTA agreement has wiped out thousands of jobs particularly in the industrial Midwest.

The Mexican government has encouraged automakers to invest in Mexico and Japanese, European and American companies all have major operations across Mexico. GM, Ford and Chrysler, for example, have continued to make heavy investments in Mexico during the deep recession despite the drug-related violence, which has claimed thousands of lives in recent years.

The United Steelworkers welcomed the release from jail last week of Juan Linares Montufar, a union leader of the National Mexican Mine and Metal Workers Union, following a week of union protests at Mexican embassies and consulates in more than 40 countries, including 17 cities in the U.S. and Canada, including Detroit.

“This is a tremendous victory for international trade union solidarity,” said USW President Leo W. Gerard. Steelworkers in the United States and Canada lobbied for Linares’ release and provided support to his family.