ity are common; examples of real international labor organizing strategies are almost nonexistent.

According to some labor activists, the proposed "Free Trade Agreement" (FTA) with Mexico may change all that, and force labor unions to coordinate campaigns with their counterparts in other countries as a matter of survival. Labor and community groups have begun to organize against the FTA in Mexico and the U.S. (Canadian groups have been fighting it for years), and there have been some tentative steps towards developing a cross-border strategy. At the very least, labor and community groups have started to share information and develop organizational ties.

According to activists from all three countries, a concerted mobilization against the FTA might not stop the agreement from being signed, but it might be able to fight its worst effects. From an organizers point of view, the Free Trade proposal offers a vital opportunity to "internationalize." In the opinion of progressive labor researchers such as Kim Moody, if organized labor in the U.S. does not forge concrete organizational and strategic ties across national boundaries, it will soon become nearly irrelevant to most U.S. citizens.

The FTA is a broad-reaching proposal to link the economies of Mexico, Canada and the United States into one enormous regional market, similar in concept to the planned integration of the European Economic Community. Canada and the United States signed an agreement two years ago, and if the Bush administration has its way, Mexico will be integrated by early 1993. Congress voted to give Bush the authority to negotiate the FTA with Mexico on a "fast track" basis on May 23 and 24, virtually guaranteeing that the agreement will eventually be signed. The Bush administration also has the authority now to negotiate similar agreements with other countries; as many as 106 other countries may be integrated under similar conditions.

Working-class people of color in the United States and especially immigrant communities will probably suffer the most from the "industrial restructuring" that will take place after the Free Trade Agreement goes into effect. But perhaps the worst irony is that, economically speaking, low-income workers in the U.S. will be pitted against their counterparts in Mexico in competition for the same jobs. Baldemas Velasquez, president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, argued at the Labor Notes conference that the only way for workers in the two countries to stop competing economically is to cooperate politically by organizing on common campaigns.

Other organizers point out that there has already been a racist backlash against immigrants who come to the U.S. to "steal American jobs," a backlash encouraged by campaigns against imports such as the International Ladies Garment Workers' (ILGWU) attacks on clothing made by "cheap foreign labor."

For workers of color, who often find themselves fighting as much against their union leadership as against exploitive working conditions, some of the current union campaigns against the FTA have a racist tinge to them, since they seem to put the blame on Third World workers and on immigrants. Organizers who want "fair trade" rather than "free trade" argue that a real campaign to end job flight overseas would entail supporting workers and union struggles in Mexico and other countries in an effort to bring up their wages and standard of living. Instead, through the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), the AFL-CIO has long supported the most repressive and anti-labor governments in the world, including Mexico's.

Labor's Worries

The U.S.-Mexico FTA is of enormous concern to U.S. labor unions and labor activists for a number of reasons:

◆ it increases the incentive for U.S. companies to move south of the Rio Grande, where wages are far lower, unions weaker and environmental, safety and health restrictions limited;

◆ as even the most pro-free trade analyses have admitted, the FTA will increase downward pressure on wages in the U.S.;

◆ workers in certain industries will suffer badly, especially in small-scale agriculture and business such as textiles and electronics assembly that can be easily moved;

◆ it gives employers a powerful weapon in labor disputes; either unions submit to wage and benefits rollbacks, or the jobs will be taken to a more congenial (from the business point of view) area;

◆ once a Free Trade Agreement is signed with Mexico, it will be nearly irreversible, and will increase the pressure on other Latin American countries to follow suit or risk losing all U.S. investment.

From the point of view of Mexican trade unionists — especially those in the "Democratic Tendency" who are not controlled by the government — the FTA promises to have some equally pernicious effects. The vision of the FTA is one in which Canada supplies natural resources, the U.S. provides the investment capital and Mexico the cheap labor. To maintain the flow of investment to Mexico and retain a "comparative advantage" in labor costs, Mexico is obliged to keep salaries low.

In fact, Mexico has been on this path for several years under the economic policies of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Because of a massive debt burden, Salinas has been trying desperately to attract foreign investment. To accomplish this, progressive labor legislation has been reversed, unions repressed and other economic policies implemented in order to drive down the cost of labor. Real wages have dropped 60% over the past ten years to establish Mexico's position in the world labor market, and the FTA will cement this process. Mexican workers also worry that:

◆ it drastically reduces Mexican control over its economy and its natural resources, since public ownership and environmental and social legislation can be construed by the U.S. to be "impediments to free trade;"

◆ it guarantees that the kind of jobs that will be created by new investment pouring over the border will be of the Maquiladora type, that is, low-pay final assembly work with no union protection in U.S.-owned subsidiary plants;

◆ it puts Mexican workers, according to labor researcher Hector de la Cueva, in the position of being "a form of blackmail against U.S. and Canadian workers to bring down their standard of living;"

◆ it forces Mexican industry to competewith huge multinational corporations that have assets greater than the Mexican government's, with predictable consequences,

◆ it opens Mexico to a flood of U.S. products, displacing domestically-produced goods and undermining Mexican culture.

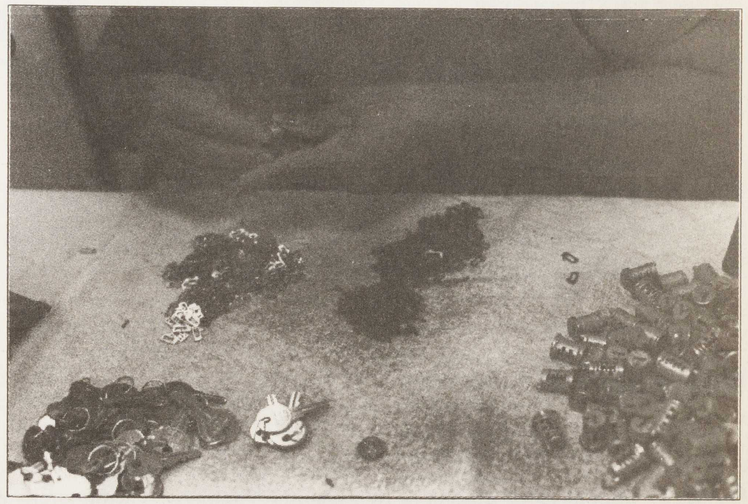

Photo: Amy Zuckerman, Impact Visuals

Mexican workers in some Maquiladores, *like this one in Nogales and the automatic garage door factory on the opposite page, work nine and a half hours a day for 55 cents an hour. The wage is barely enough to live on, and yet because of Mexico's high unemployment rate thousands of job seekers pour into the* Maquiladora *zone in search of jobs.*

Photo: Amy Zuckerman, Impact Visuals

Winners and Losers

After the May 23 vote in the House of Representatives authorizing the administration to go ahead with trade negotiations, President Bush proclaimed "this is going to be good for the working man in this country, and good for the environment." In fact, the exact opposite is true. According to free trade expert Robert Lehman, who studies trade issues at UC Berkeley, the FTA "will override local legislative efforts to protect the forests or other environmental concerns if these are found to be barriers to free trade." This applies in all three countries; as Stephen Shrybman of the Canadian Environmental Law Association stated recently at a conference in Mexico City, "from an environmental perspective, [the free trade agenda] is suicide" for Canada, Mexico and the United States.

As far as the "working man in this country," if Bush was really referring to the bulk of the working population employed in industry and services, he must not read his own briefing papers. As *Business Week* explained, "free trade will almost certainly benefit white-collar and technical jobs at the expense of blue-collar ones." In other words, the tendency will be for managerial, financial, research and development and legal functions to expand in the United States, while actual

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