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ORGANIZING FOR PLANT CLOSURES

This is part two (see part one in LCR #195) of an interview with Maria Elena Durazo and Cruz Phillips, who taught a workshop on union organizing at this year's Western Regional Union Women's Summer School. Durazo is an organizer with HERE Local 11. She was formerly an organizer and business agent for the ILGWU in Los Angeles. Phillips formerly worked as an organizer for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), where she directed the successful Campbell Soup Boycott Campaign.

LCR: We talked earlier about the importance of internal organizing (see LCR #195) Where should the labor movement focus its internal organizing efforts?

Phillips: It's important to organize all workers. But I think it's especially important to organize in those areas where workers are facing plant closures. A steel plant moving out and leaving a city totally ravaged is a disgusting thing. Both community organizing and organizing for strong contracts are crucial so that when companies leave, they leave something behind.

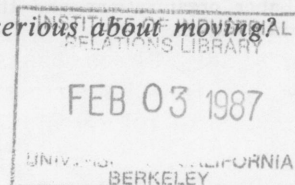
LCR: How should unions respond to plant closures?

Phillips: We shouldn't "respond" to them. We should organize to prevent them. Now, when a company says, "We might move," the union will sign a contract out of fear of losing jobs. But there are lots of cases, especially in the northeast, where workers just said, "Well, hey, if you're going to move the shop then take the shop and move because we're going to strike you for what we want and we're not going to work for less than that. We'd rather be forced to find a job somewhere else than just bow down to this." Those workers realized that if employers are willing to threaten to move, they might sign concessions now, but then in two years when it becomes economically feasible for them to move, then they're going to move anyway. It's going to happen anyway unless workers take control.

Durazo: I went to see "Lady Beth," a production put on by the Steelworkers union. The performers are workers who were laid off when Bethlehem Steel closed down here in L.A. These workers now believe that the company knew that they were going to close down several years before it actually closed. The workers believed that all the take-back bargaining was aimed at taking as many profits out of the workers as they could before they closed down. The workers and the union believed the company, that if they gave concessions, they wouldn't close down. But nothing the union did changed the company's plan to close down. It didn't delay it. It only enabled the company to make the maximum amount of profits before they closed. The workers on stage said, "Had we known this, had we really analyzed it and talked about it, we would have preferred to strike then and fight for our jobs." As it turned out, they were told of the closing only a few days before it happened. It's so inhuman, but that's the employer's approach. Why are we being nice to the employers?

Phillips: We need to be militant instead. Especially in a case like that, we've got to be strongly organized so we can get things like severance pay and retraining programs in the contract. Those are the things we've got to fight for.

LCR: How can unions know whether companies are really serious about moving?



Phillips: We shouldn't trust them. Unions are always so shocked when plants close. But we have to remember that their interests are different from ours. If they can make more money overseas, most of the industries and plants that are leaving the country are going to do it anyway, regardless of any concessions we make.

We can't stop them, but we can come up with a plan like the workers did at the GM plant in Van Nuys. They started years ahead of time. They didn't wait until the company said they were going to close down. They knew. They said, "Hey, we're the last GM plant in California. They're going to close us down." Although the company hadn't said they were going to close, they asked for a written guarantee that GM wouldn't close them down. When the company wouldn't give them one, that's when the workers said, "We're right. They are planning to close this plant down." Then they organized to make it less profitable for the company to move than to stay in Van Nuys.

LCR: *What else can be done to prevent plant closures?*

Durazo: We need to recognize that it's a smaller world in the sense that it's more likely than ever before that companies will move to third world countries. Shouldn't we start thinking about seriously developing relationships with unions in these other countries, at the rank and file level? Are we really going to stop employers from moving to countries where wages are low? Is our government going to allow us to stop employers from taking the shop to other countries? No way!

Phillips: They're encouraging it with free trade zones and tax breaks.

Durazo: That's right. Our government not only doesn't stop it but is encouraging it. And so in addition to fighting in Congress for plant closures legislation, why don't we set something up where we're working with the unions in those countries? I mean really working with them, not just having a conference every once in a while and talking to some of the leaders, but creating a real solid grass-roots network.

We tried to do that one time when I was with the Garment Workers. We organized a shop that was incredibly militant. This garment shop had two major contractors, one in Mexicali, on the Mexican side, and one in Riverside, California. We realized that we were not going to be able to negotiate a contract unless we were able to do something with those subcontractors. It was obvious that all the employer was going to do was send the work out to the subcontractors. So I went out and tried to organize the Riverside shop, to get them involved so that if they sent work to them, we'd have them. Then we sent people over to Mexicali to work with the trade unions over there. The employer's shop in Mexicali was unionized. In Mexico, there's a high level of unionization in some areas. Our union was really serious about this. We were going to pay all of the strike benefits for the Mexicali union if they would sanction the strike and get their workers to do a job action at the same time as we would do a job action in L.A.

What wound up happening was that the union leadership in Mexicali didn't go through all the way. If we had developed that relationship and carried it on for the future and really built it in a solid way, they could help us and we could help them. Anytime we had an organizing campaign or negotiations, the employer couldn't threaten us because we would strike at the same time. That puts the employer in a difficult position because then he'd have to find new contractors and get the work out.

At least we tried it. It didn't work in this case but maybe we didn't do something right. Let's go back, evaluate and come up with something else that's better the next time.

Phillips: Look at the GM plant that just moved to northern Mexico. It would be easy to create a relationship with workers at that plant. There are places that would be harder, but look at Levi's in El Salvador. They're organized. There are a lot of links that could be made. I know the Farm Workers have started to talk to the Mexican farm worker's unions. A lot of big food processors lease land in Mexico: Del Monte and Campbell's have canneries down there. And those are all union canneries! There's a lot of that kind of work that has to be done. That's going to come from the local level. Districts and locals are going to have to create relationships with similar locals in other areas.

-- Pam Tellev

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