

tors of Mexico, "We feel cheated, deceived by the jobs that the maquiladora industry offers us."⁸

Further cracks in Mexico's labor system have emerged since the 1995 RCA-Thomson strike that challenged the corporatist labor system. First, the inevitable happened: Fidel Velásquez, the ninety-seven-year-old head of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), died in 1997. Velásquez played an enormous role in bringing organized labor into the mechanisms of the ruling party during the Great Depression and had been the undisputed boss of Mexican labor since 1941. "Don Fidel" helped engineer the many pacts that made the CTM a key player in the PRI, and, when the party was unable to deliver the goods after the rise of neoliberal strategies in the 1980s, he provided the discipline necessary to maintain the social peace in the face of enormous wage losses. Velásquez signed on to the pacts in the eighties and nineties that kept wages low, sliced social spending, and facilitated the restructuring of Mexico along the lines demanded by foreign investors and the new Mexican elite. After the CTM leader's passing, new labor federations began to emerge with new goals and more modern and aggressive relationships to both foreign capital and the Mexican state. Some have maintained an alliance with the PRI, others have thrown their weight toward Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and the left, and some even began discussions with the AFL-CIO. Other forces, such as a 1999 Mexican Supreme Court ruling that gave workers the right to form independent unions, may have provided an additional boost to the fledgling independent labor movement. Like so many steps in the "decorporatization" of Mexican labor, however, these events leave open the question of whether the fossilized old labor-relations system will be replaced by a vibrant new movement, or no movement at all.⁹

Much rides on the historic 2000 national elections in which Vicente Fox of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) not only beat the PRI candidate but was allowed to take office. This watershed event marks the first time in over seven decades that the PRI has not ruled Mexico. To achieve his historic victory, Fox had to associate with activists on the left who despised the PRI more than they feared the right. He has even spoken as a "third way" candidate, using market mechanisms and taxes to help the poor in ways similar to those used by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. As one observer of his campaign noted, "He stressed the importance of labor unions—real unions, run by their own members, instead of the state unions that are run by the PRI."¹⁰ But others, such as long-time opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, whose momentum Fox usurped, see him as an agent of probusiness conservatism—perhaps even religious bigotry—and not the democrat the Mexican people have waited so long for. Undoubtedly, neoliberalism has placed tremendous pressures on old labor-relations systems throughout Latin America and the world. Many Latin American nations have been pushed to-

ward more "flexible" industrial relations systems, and with the added pressure of democratization in Mexico it is reasonable to assume that the country will fall into the broader pattern and that the corporatist framework will crumble. No one is clear what will happen under the new leadership, whether Fox will indeed foster more democracy and national entrepreneurship or merely provide more mechanisms for social discipline on behalf of foreign capital. No matter what the eventual outcome, a peaceful, legal, and democratic transition is wonderful news for Mexico.¹⁰

As the actions in Seattle and the experiences from Camden to Juárez reveal, the local-global tension is a profound problem of citizenship in the twenty-first century. As much as the Battle of Seattle brought the undemocratic aspects of global institutions to the forefront, the search for a balanced and meaningful solution will never end with a single agenda—whether local, national, or transnational. Envisioning a broad framework for the future, it must be concluded that anything that offers more bargaining power to local people in the world economy is worth the fight. Actions that make explicit, progressive linkages between global transformations and national policy will serve the interests of working people. Policy that ensures upward harmonization of labor rights and standards rather than a race to the bottom will point to a better world for our children. Interactions that bring the "other" closer and seek to inject democratic participation into the closed-door-decisions of the WTO, IMF, and World Bank will ultimately serve the interests of RCA workers, former workers, and their sisters and brothers around the world. Mechanisms that ensure that not just markets grow, but that democracy and access do also, will serve those struggling to find their way in the global world. As Juárez labor attorney de la Rosa Hickerson concluded upon reflecting on the local opportunities and transnational failures of the 1995 RCA strike in Juárez, "Once we understand the basics of solidarity, we can go from there and expand the range of things we can do together; and, well, after that, imagination is the limit."¹¹

economy, has not been as dire as the fate of many workers traumatized by layoffs and plant shutdowns in earlier times. While displaced workers do not make what they did at RCA, an official unemployment rate of less than 2% means that work is available. After a rocky two-year transition period, workers who chose retraining benefits are making an average of 92% of their previous RCA wages (without the overtime and often with less benefits). It is, however, difficult to tell whether the pattern will continue since the need for jobs will increase after a wave of layoffs and shutdowns in 1999. Otis Elevator, which earlier had migrated from Yonkers, New York, to Bloomington, announced two sets of layoffs, totaling 400 jobs. The AT&T call center also shut down, costing the community an additional 140 jobs. The old Westinghouse facility (now ABB Power) closed as well, resulting in the loss of another 180 employment opportunities. Most traumatically, General Electric made the official announcement in December 1999 that 1,400 out of a total of 3,200 jobs at its side-by-side refrigerator plant would be relocated to Mexico. A community coalition of labor representatives, students, and community members came together to protest GE's decision to relocate production. Claiming the corporation posted \$9 billion in profits, the coalition questioned GE's need to move production to Celaya in north central Mexico.⁵

Might transnational labor regulations have saved the jobs that left Bloomington in the late nineties? It is possible that a progressive global agenda might have taken the edge off of the hypermobility evident in GE's relocation strategies. GE has been forcing not just its own managers but even its suppliers to move to Mexico. As explained in an internal report discussing GE's seminars on moving south that the corporation held for its suppliers, "Migrate or be out of business; not a matter of if, just when. This is not a seminar just to provide information. We expect you to move and move quickly." As a local Cincinnati supplier to GE complained, "They are suggesting the how along with the what. It takes away the freedom to run your own business. No one else is doing a full frontal assault like this." This strategy takes the classic process of whipsawing to entirely new, and systemic, levels. And after relocation, GE retains the hard line. In Juárez, the corporation fired nine workers and forced the resignations of others for their participation in the Authentic Labor Front (FAT) independent organizing campaign. GE's ever-indomitable CEO, Jack Welch, whom the *New York Times* declared the "Manager of the Century," put it bluntly in a separate interview. "What's important is that you're agile," he argued. "Ideally, you'd have every plant you own on a barge." Clearly, at this level of capital mobility, all of the transnational tools—from international solidarity to transnational regulation—must be called upon.⁶

Memphis today has neither the intractable problems of Camden nor the postindustrial cushion enjoyed by Bloomington. The number of manufacturing jobs as a percentage of all employment continues to lag behind other

areas of the state. The average percent of the labor force involved in manufacturing in Tennessee is 19 percent, for instance, while Memphis has only 10.8 percent of its workforce in the manufacturing sector. Like the RCA-Memphis story of a previous generation, Birmingham steel came to town in 1997 and invested over \$200 million in its plant and equipment, created 250 jobs, generated a lot of hope, and then suddenly shut down, allegedly due to "poor performance." Like the Camden case, the Memphis situation goes straight to a central issue: employment as a core civil rights issue. For many poor minorities, civil rights are a mere formality if there is not adequate employment. "Once they got most of the stuff [segregation] straightened out, they shut the factory down, in fact, all of the factories in the South. . . . You don't know what I want until you try to give me a job," explained former Firestone worker Evelyn Bates. As much as Memphis and Shelby County continue to struggle to attract industry, they have benefited from the burgeoning—and geographically sticky—health, service, and transportation sectors. While global regulation and labor transnationalism are not going to transform the Memphis labor scene, such an agenda would, most likely, place it in a better bargaining position for jobs by avoiding the spiral of loosening regulations, lowering taxes, and downward pressures on wages that has pitted Southern communities against one another and, in the long run, nationalized what were once thought of as uniquely Southern strategies for development.⁷

Of all of the places this study touched, no other has undergone the swift, dramatic, and at times hopeful transformations that Mexico has experienced in the last few years. The "maquiladorization" of much of the country has continued apace, bolstered by the 1995 currency crisis that presented a dramatic de facto wage cut for the transnationals. Electronics firms continue to pour into Mexico and they account for almost half of maquiladora employment, as well as nearly all of the televisions purchased in North America. Thomson alone accounted for around 15,000 Mexican jobs as of 1998. But this is only partly good news for Mexican workers. Wages remain grossly inadequate by any material standard, and there have been frightening social upheavals in the Juárez area involving heightened violence, drug trafficking, immigration problems, and, most horrendous, a murder spree in which over two hundred young female maquila workers have been raped and killed.

In the midst of all this, the link between productivity and wage increases has continued to be more mythology than economic reality. Maquila workers have assisted in creating a productivity leap of over 58 percent between 1990 and 1997, but employees are not reaping any share of the profits. As Juárez labor lawyer Gustavo de la Rosa Hickerson explains in pointing to inadequate wages and marginal benefits as compared to the old industrial sec-

But those sympathetic to bringing the social question—particularly labor rights and standards—into the heretofore technocratic issue of global trade must be cautious that their subsequent steps are productive and well-considered. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States so dominates the world stage that globalization is readily confused with “Americanization.” If globalization continues to be just another form of Americanization, in which even allegedly progressive responses to the threats globalization poses end up looking a lot more like strong-arm tactics by the powerful nations, then the project to build more humane and equitable forms of globalization will have failed. Clearly, there are no reasonable autonomous paths for national development outside of the current global framework (unless one wants to follow dead-end paths toward the Myanmar or North Korea). Even though the global nexus is the only engine of growth and stability, there is a growing realization that the U.S. model does not need its every whim catered to by the smaller nation-states (witness the Asian currency crisis). It will be both an intellectual and political challenge to ensure that the regulation of world trade is done at a table that is both round and inclusive.

This is particularly important with regard to transnational labor rights. Despite the demands of Buy American advocates and the paternalistic pleas of some Americans who blindly see the current model of U.S. industrial relations as the only or best system of industrial governance, U.S. credibility in setting the international workers’ rights agenda must be questioned. As a recent Human Rights Watch report concludes, “many [U.S.] workers who try to form and join trade unions to bargain with their employers are spied on, harassed, pressured, threatened, suspended, fired, deported or otherwise victimized in reprisal for their exercise of the right to freedom of association.” The lack of labor rights in the United States is “especially troubling when the U.S. administration is pressing other countries to ensure respect for internationally recognized workers’ rights as part of the global trade and investment system.” Because the overly legalistic framework of the U.S. model, in which, quipped labor lawyer Thomas Geoghegan, the “the rank and file stay home and send out their lawyers,” U.S. labor relations undermine the types of community networks and civic engagement that are important to the emergence of a global model of civil society. Since labor law in the U.S. is weak, poorly enforced, and highly litigious, the United States must proceed cautiously when setting standards for the World Trade Organization or other bodies that are pushed to confront the social dimensions of globalization. Chances are that if an American belongs to a union, it was organized long ago, in a fundamentally different economy. It is extraordinarily difficult to organize a new shop in the United States today—just as it is in Mexico.³

Clearly, any effort to bring a labor rights agenda into international trade mechanisms must be multilateral in order to prevent the appearance of

simple First World protectionism. Planning for a just and sustainable global economy must be done with an explicit and open recognition of the tensions, conflicts, and varying agendas of different progressive groups. This requires a tremendous amount of dialogue of the type begun in Seattle, a discussion about labor rights that puts local and national issues and policy in play with global tools and reforms.

How might demands to democratize the WTO and include meaningful labor regulations in the global economy speak to the concrete needs of the four RCA communities studied here? The report must be, at best, a mixed one, that stresses the importance of local, national, and transnational arenas of action. What follows is a brief tour of recent events in the United States and Mexico with an eye toward understanding how the Seattle agenda might serve, or fail to serve, workers in the four RCA communities examined in this book.

Transnational regulations and labor rights will not help those, as in Camden, New Jersey, left furthest behind in the “new” economy. Today the south Jersey city may be more akin to the Third World (with lower levels of employment than many “underdeveloped” societies) than the glamour economy of the new millennium. Crumbling residential districts are all that remain after an exodus of factories, workers, investment, and residents, leaving only recalcitrant political problems and staggering municipal budgets that the state of New Jersey may soon have to take over from the city administration. With 84,000 residents, no movie theater, and only one supermarket, Camden remains an “island of desolation” between the affluence of Philadelphia—a city once plagued with its own deindustrialization problems—and the success of much of the rest of New Jersey. As globalization has increased both the amount of wealth in the United States and the disparity of its distribution, the need for policy concentration on the deserted but once booming manufacturing centers becomes all the more imperative in the struggle for racial and economic justice. The sociologist William Julius Wilson argues in his important study *When Work Disappears* that the migration of industry out of the major urban centers “has adversely affected not only individuals, families, and neighborhoods, but the social life of the city at large as well.” The hardening of inner-city, minority joblessness, argues Wilson, needs to be understood outside the parameters of race and brought into a national discussion about the structure of economic opportunity and employment. The exciting struggle for transnational labor rights and standards will be a failure if it limits the attention needed to solve core domestic problems.⁴

Bloomington has continued to hemorrhage manufacturing jobs since the RCA-Thomson shutdown, but, in contrast to Camden, the college town can still boast of an impressive level of economic prosperity. The fate of displaced RCA-Thomson workers, thanks to federal retraining efforts and a buoyant

Seattle and Beyond: RCA Workers and the Future of Global Labor

Not long after this book's first printing, events on the eve of the new millennium seemed to indicate that the idea of a "fragmented social geography," which was put forth in the last chapter, may be more surmountable than originally suggested. In late 1999, tens of thousands of protesters crossed geographic, social, and political boundaries to gather in the cosmopolitan, successful "new economy" port city of Seattle, Washington, to challenge the elitist conceptualization of global governance projected by the World Trade Organization (WTO). Rubber bullets flew through the streets and tear gas wafted across the windows of delegates who were trapped in their hotel rooms and limousines while citizens outside sought to build a new, globally oriented civil society. Workers and labor leaders from the developed North declared their solidarity with those from the underdeveloped South. Fueled by the energy of the nongovernmental organizations, environmentalists and labor activists marched side by side in what some called a new blue-green or Teamster-turtle alliance. Long-standing tensions between New Left-style activism and old-style labor liberalism seemed to melt away, at least for the moment, as workers and students hit the streets together. The coalition's peaceful efforts were marred by a few militant anarchists and by what was, primarily, a highly militarized and poorly managed police force that occasionally gave the city an appearance more like Jakarta than Seattle. Despite—or perhaps because of—the violence, events in Seattle thrust the WTO and the broader social dimensions of globalization into public debate in exciting new ways.

The question remains as to whether the Battle of Seattle will have marked a watershed in the development of a new global civil society or whether it will simply pass as an isolated protest in the sweeping trend of corporate global-

ization. Only time will tell. The refreshing part, however, was that this struggle was *not*, as proclaimed by the *New York Times's* Pangloss of globalization, Thomas Friedman, made up of "a Noah's ark of flat-earth advocates, protectionist trade unions, and yuppies looking for their 1960s fix."¹ The protestors instead put forth a relatively tight, positive message. The immediate goal, announced in chants and signs around the WTO ministerial meeting, was to "shut it down." And shut it down they did. The broader and more important agenda, however, was to democratize the global governing bodies, to ensure that world trade did not come at the cost of workers' rights and the environment, and to define a notion of global citizenship that could keep up with the dizzying pace of the economic system. In essence, the need for a policy linkage between labor and trade moved beyond the offices of a few brave NGOs, labor unions, and policy wonks, and found a place in living rooms around the world. After Seattle, only the cynical or frightened could frame the problem as a simplistic choice between free trade or protectionism. The spectrum of positions had become far more complex and far more interesting. In essence, the protestors forged a clear, viable, and popular political space for discussing a linkage between social issues and trade questions. It suggested that the popular bumper sticker slogan "Think Globally, Act Locally" might be incomplete. It was time to turn the tables and act globally in order to preserve the best of hard-won local rights and protections.

The success of the Seattle protests is evident in the new rhetoric of President Bill Clinton and WTO Director General Mike Moore. After the entire idea of a linkage between labor rights and trade had been dismissed in the 1995 formation of the WTO, by late 1999 the tune had changed. "Not all our critics are wrong," declared Moore. "There are things to do. There are great injustices out there." Although Moore only grudgingly acknowledged why some would criticize the WTO and the current path of globalization, the United States went as far as proposing the creation of a Working Group on Trade and Labor. President Clinton, meeting with WTO ministers during the Seattle meeting, even positioned himself on the side of the protestors who were in control of the streets. "What all these people in the street tell us is that they would also like to be heard. And they're not sure that this deal is working for them." The President went so far as to advocate that the WTO ensure that the process "respects core labor standards that are essential not only to worker rights, but to human rights." A transformation in the rhetorical stance of elites hardly comprises a new agenda, of course, but it is an important step. And while one could simply chalk this position up to Clinton's preoccupation with his historical legacy in the waning days of his presidency, "one-worlders," as Robert Wright has written, "should be cheered by his Seattle performance. No one has ever accused Bill Clinton of not knowing which way the wind is blowing."²