



EMPOWERING WORKERS

LESSONS LEARNED AND EMERGING GOOD PRACTICES FROM LABOR RIGHTS PROJECTS IN MEXICO

The right of workers to form and join effective organizations is fundamental to a free and open society and the foundation of decent work. This right is closely tied to collective bargaining, enabling workers, employers, organizations, and trade unions to secure fair wages, safe working conditions, and equal opportunity. Mexico's labor relations – characterized by a corporatist model – have historically involved undemocratic protection unions aligned with the ruling party or employers, often excluding workers from meaningful negotiation.

To address these issues, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) was signed, incorporating labor clauses mandating the adoption of measures to uphold workers' rights. To support these commitments, the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) monitors and engages with Mexico and Canada, funding projects to support the 2019 Mexican Labor Reforms and protect workers.

This series of learning briefs captures lessons learned and emerging good practices from an evaluation conducted by DevTech Systems, Inc. in 2024 of two ILAB-funded projects in Mexico implemented by the same grantee, the Solidarity Center (SC): "Strengthening Workers' Ability to Exercise their Labor Rights in Mexico" (2020-2025) and "Building an Independent and Democratic Labor Movement to Protect Worker Rights in Mexico" (2022-2026).

Lessons Learned are defined as experiences - whether positive or negative - that can be applied to future projects. An **emerging good practice** refers to a process, practice, or system that has demonstrated improvements in the performance and efficiency of the project in specific areas. These practices also include recommendations for future programming in similar contexts. Additionally, the learning briefs address five learning questions, which were co-created between ILAB and SC. These Learning Questions include:

- LQ 1. Capacity-Building of Workers and Worker Organizations. What are the most effective entry points to support unions and worker organizations to better enhance workers' rights?
- LQ 2. Stakeholder Engagement. What support do key stakeholders need to advance workers' rights?
- LQ 3. Equity and Inclusion. What programmatic strategies are most successful in including historically underserved populations?
- LQ 4. Leverage Points. What are the key leverage points and potential collective action strategies to advance workers' rights, given the country and regional conditions?
- LQ 5. Collective Action. What mechanisms are needed or need to be strengthened to support adaptive, flexible, and efficient programming that focuses on advancing protection of workers' rights?

STRENGTHENING WORKERS' ABILITY TO EXERCISE THEIR LABOR RIGHTS IN MEXICO (SC2) (2020-2025)

In 2020, ILAB awarded a USD 10 million, cooperative agreement to SC to implement SC2. This project aims to build the capacity of workers, support worker engagement and organizing, and strengthen democratic worker organizations in the aerospace, mining, and call center industries to claim new rights accorded to them by Mexico's 2019 Labor Law Reform (LLR). Key activities to date include organizing, capacity building, research initiatives, women-focused activities, and Labor Centers-led research and to a lesser extent labor rights violation identification and tracking activities. The project's interventions take place in the Mexican states of Baja, California, Jalisco, Mexico State, Mexico City, Guanajuato, and Queretaro.¹

¹ The project did not implement all activities in all locations. The project had at least some activities in these states, at some point during project implementation.

BUILDING AN INDEPENDENT AND DEMOCRATIC LABOR MOVEMENT TO PROTECT WORKER RIGHTS IN MEXICO (SC3) (2022-2026)

In 2022, ILAB awarded a USD 10 million cooperative agreement to SC to implement SC3. In 2023, SC received additional funding of USD 10.75 million and an extension until July 2026. The total funding allocated to this project is USD 20.75 million. This project aims to strengthen the capacity of unions to organize by negotiating and legitimizing collective bargaining agreements (CBAs), establishing sustainable institutions and infrastructure to support the labor movement and future organizing drives, as well as foster social dialogue. Collective bargaining and collective action are central objectives. The key activities include technical capacity, and infrastructure for unions, including Worker Centers and labor centers. Target industries include the automotive, auto parts, aerospace, call centers, electronics, textiles, industrial bakeries, logistics, and mining sectors. The project's interventions take place in the Mexican states of Aguascalientes, Baja California, Campeche, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Mexico, Morelos, Nuevo León, Puebla, San Luis Potosí, and Querétaro.²

Drawing upon the evaluation's mixed-methods approach, these briefs aim to enhance stakeholders' knowledge and understanding of cross-cutting themes related to capacity strengthening, stakeholder engagement, equality and inclusion strategies, collective action for systems change, and project management considerations.



² The project did not implement all activities in all locations. The project had at least some activities in these states, at some point during project implementation.



CATALYST FOR CHANGE

EFFECTIVE SUPPORT MECHANISMS FOR WORKERS' ORGANIZATIONS

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In 2019, the Mexican government approved the Labor Law Reform (LLR) that overhauled the former union structure and created an opening to elect union leaders through a free and secret vote, recognized the right of workers to engage in collective bargaining and organize, prohibited employers' interference in union activities, and required existing collective bargaining agreements (CBA) to be revisited. The LLR, in coordination with the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) of the free trade agreement between United States, Mexico, and Canada (USMCA) changed the conditions available to organize and shifted the organizing and labor movement context in Mexico. Notwithstanding these changes that have taken place, there are several persisting hindering factors that prevent the full implementation of workers' rights. These include a closed operating environment for independent unions, an anti-union public narrative, lack of incentives and interests by the private sector and the government to uphold workers' rights, inefficient governance systems, and an overall lack of information on workers' rights shared with Mexicans. According to the views of local actors, there are three entry points that can be leveraged to support workers and their organizations. These include: (1) continuing direct support to workers and their organizations (2) using campaigns to disseminate information, and (3) shifting public narrative to reach more work and support workers' rights.

EMERGING GOOD PRACTICE NO. 1: Delivering personalized support, designed from the ground up for workers and their organizations, enhances organizing efforts, strengthens collective bargaining agreements, increases wages, and improves working conditions.

SC officially conducted 18 successful campaigns that led to the formation of groups with union leaders and committees. To uphold the rights of workers, SC and its implementing partners

supported these newly formed independent and democratic unions through a bottom-up, worker-led capacity strengthening and mentoring approach. Worker organizations were provided with access to labor lawyers and experienced organizers and gained strategic corporate research skills.¹ This listening and worker-led approach proved effective, leading to increased individual and organizational knowledge, skills, and institutional change. Moreover, for some workers, it was the first time that they felt heard and understood. A worker recalled SC's support:

“It was a very valuable experience to have an idea or have something you say or to identify a needand then to have someone (SC) to take us seriously and help us make it a reality.”

As a result, 10 groups have conducted or completed negotiated collective bargaining agreements (CBA), resulting in higher wages and improved working conditions for their members. These were historic wins, especially since some workers had been trying to unionize for nearly a decade.

However, improving the capacities of workers and their organizations takes time. As one grantee noted,

“We are in a process, and it has been slow because there are no models to follow. There was no democratic culture...”

EMERGING GOOD PRACTICE NO. 2: Campaigns are among the most effective entry points for disseminating knowledge about workers' rights and supporting workers in organizing to form independent and democratic unions.

Campaigns are a process by which SC and other organizers reach workers to identify their interest in organizing and forming an organization to advocate and negotiate for workers' rights. They are means to reach more workers beyond those that are already involved in the independent and democratic labor movement. Notwithstanding the long-term benefits of a campaign, they are a time and labor-intensive effort that require trained organizers with knowledge of the community, context, and company.

Successful campaigns generate process change and inspire workers, eventually leading to the formation of worker organizations or unions that negotiate collective bargaining agreements. As one SC staff member reflected,

“New campaigns are new opportunities.” Another SC staff member added, “There are many contracts that were not legitimized; [campaigns provide] an opportunity to continue with that process.”

Campaigns with tangible wins that lead to groups forming and improving conditions based on negotiations motivate workers. They help workers overcome their fears and increase their belief that

¹ Strategic corporate research skills refer to the ability of individuals to research corporations to better understand their structure, finances, ownership, and global operations.

unionizing and changing working conditions is feasible. An SC staff member noted,

“Where collective contracts have been achieved, it is because there were already nearby successes and workers learned about these.”

LESSON LEARNED NO. 1: Reaching all of Mexico’s workforce through campaigns alone is challenging, particularly because ILAB-supported projects do not encompass all sectors.

To achieve broader impact and expand the operating space to advocate for workers' rights, it is essential to invest in shifting the public narrative and increase awareness of the successes of newly independent and democratic unions. Additionally, evaluation participants emphasized the importance of leveraging digital tools, such as social media, as a key entry point for expanding outreach and effectively advocating for workers’ rights.

As part of the SC3 project, SC is working to improve the labor movement’s presence on social media and has created a new website. It also provided capacity strengthening support to workers and their organizations, teaching them how to effectively communicate with the media and generate a list of media contacts. To further shift the public narrative, more activities and funding are needed in this area.





UNLOCKING SYSTEMIC SUCCESS

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN MEANINGFUL WAYS TO CREATE SYSTEMS CHANGE

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The SC2 and SC3 projects work primarily with workers and their organizations. They also engage with civil society organizations and academic institutions that play an important and supportive role. The SC2 and SC3 projects aim to empower workers and worker organizations to demand that labor rights are truly exercised, and labor laws are justly implemented.

While the projects made important and historic advances in supporting workers and worker organizations, there are two other key stakeholders – the private sector and the Mexican government – that play a critical role that can advance or impede workers' rights. The Mexican government is responsible for creating, and perhaps most importantly, ensuring that labor laws are consistently implemented and are successful in protecting workers' labor rights. The private sector employs workers and is responsible for complying with the labor laws, including providing just compensation, ensuring safe working conditions, and respecting labor laws and rights. For there to be systemic change in Mexico, all key stakeholders must uphold their responsibilities and engage actively to implement labor rights.


LESSON LEARNED NO. 1: While independent and democratic unions have made significant strides in advancing workers' rights, they remain in a nascent stage and require ongoing support to grow and consolidate. Achieving institutional growth and sustainability for these unions necessitates long-term investments.

Despite the optimism among workers and their organizations regarding the sustainability of the newly formed independent and democratic unions, there is a significant risk that some unions may struggle to survive due to unchanged operating conditions that still favor employer protection unions. To mitigate these risks, it is crucial for workers and their organizations to continue receiving technical assistance support to grow, consolidate, and strengthen their internal capacities. However,

- Workers have expressed the need for continued support from SC in areas such as organizing skills, approaches to engaging colleagues, leader identification, union structure, committee formation, gender and inclusion, basic labor rights, and corporate strategic research. Additionally, some evaluation participants requested training in interpersonal skills. Financial management and planning were also identified as critical areas for capacity building, especially for organizations that have not yet begun collecting dues.
- Worker Centers play a strategic role as long-term spaces for organizing and convening. One worker emphasized the importance of these centers for forming relationships and alliances, stating,
“We are missing a Worker Center at this point because it’s not only about training but about generating ties between the workers themselves and visualizing needs from another perspective.”

However, the overall impact is limited, as some of the Worker Centers were inaugurated but are not fully operational.¹

¹ Currently, SC3 works with one operational Worker Center. It indirectly supports two more Worker Centers. They have inaugurated three more through their implementing partners.



LESSON LEARNED NO. 2: The definition of project objectives and subsequent outcomes was not sufficiently agreed upon by SC and ILAB, which hindered progress towards fostering ‘data-driven dialogue’ between key stakeholders, including the government at the federal and state level, and the private sector.

While both projects aimed to foster 'data-driven' approaches 'social-dialogue' with the private sector, these dialogues were largely confined to the CBA processes. SC considers this focus on dialogue through CBA processes as a core aspect of their work. According to SC, employers in Mexico rarely engage with independently organizing workers, but instead agree to negotiation only when an independent union formally wins the right to represent workers. These issues highlight the divergent understanding and expectations between SC and the USG on the feasibility and likely outcomes of ‘dialogue’. The USG places greater emphasis on continuous dialogue and sustained engagement with the private sector and government to achieve long-term, scalable change.

Additionally, the projects have not fostered ‘social dialogue’ with the Mexican government at either the federal or local levels, despite the government’s critical role in advancing workers’ rights. Many stakeholders expressed a desire for the government to take more active steps in implementing the LLR.

While some public sector officials have participated in key events organized by SC, the evaluated projects did not effectively leverage these key stakeholders to foster a 'social dialogue' that could have significantly enhanced their impact. Additionally, several stakeholders perceive that the Mexican labor authorities and public administrators are reluctant to attend events and engage in substantive discussions with the independent labor movement. It would be beneficial for SC to better document this constraint in quarterly reports to provide a clearer understanding of the challenges faced in promoting more sustained and inclusive dialogue.

- Federal Government – Key stakeholders described the federal government’s overall interest in enforcing the LLR. For example, an SC staff noted,

“In the campaigns, the (workers) have seen interest from certain authorities in ensuring that the Labor Reform is carried out to a certain extent. At the federal level, there is a will to enforce the reform. At the local level, not much change has been seen.”

- State and Local Government - Support for the labor movement varies by state, with some states being more supportive than others. As summarized by an SC staff member,

“We have not been able to influence local authorities. Workers present their complaints, but these are not resolved or even addressed with any guidance.”



ADVANCING EQUITY AND INCLUSION

STRATEGIES TO REACH MARGINALIZED AND UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

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The main target group of both projects are workers and worker organizations in the predetermined sectors. SC mentioned that they specifically work with low-income workers who labor under poor conditions, placing them among marginalized and underserved populations. Low-income workers are vulnerable populations as they are more likely to agree to less than minimum wage and endure harsh working conditions to maintain a source of income. Low-income workers may also have other identities, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, language, age, migration-status that may further negatively impact their working conditions. Considering the various identities of workers ensures that in the quest for the implementation of workers' rights, individual needs, particularly of those with intersecting identities, are also advocated for. However, despite the 2019 labor reform efforts, institutional and cultural challenges persist to ensure the rights of all workers are upheld, including gender equity.

- *"The changes in 2019 on gender are very timid. [The government of Mexico] did not want to harmonize the labor reform with the laws on access to a life free of violence and the laws on victims. They could make standards to test cases, prohibit confrontations/careos, when there are elements of violence and it coincides with a dismissal, the authority could notify it, but the worker has to do it."*

- Grantee/Implementing Partner

LESSON LEARNED NO. 1: Effectively working with low-income, marginalized, and vulnerable populations requires a deliberate approach that includes listening, accompaniment, and a bottom-up strategy.

SC currently lacks a targeted strategy for reaching underserved groups, such as ethnic minorities and migrant workers, and instead applies a general approach to gauge interest in unionizing across all workers, regardless of their characteristics. While this approach allows SC to engage with unions and worker organization leaders, as well as address workers' needs identified by these leaders, it may limit broader outreach to the entire worker base. The responsibility for engaging the broader base largely falls to the worker organizations themselves. Communication and advocacy initiatives could help extend reach to more workers; however, the current budget constraints limit these efforts, as noted in discussions with SC.

LESSON LEARNED NO. 2: Identifying and measuring the involvement of marginalized and underserved populations is challenging and must be approached with cultural and contextual sensitivity.

SC organizers, who are familiar with the communities in which they work, understand that determining who belongs to ethnic minority groups or is a migrant worker can be difficult, as individuals may be reluctant to self-report. As summarized by an SC staff member,

“Defining marginalized populations is challenging. All workers face structural disadvantages. Efforts have been made to develop women’s leadership, with 40 percent of leadership positions held by women, compared to a targeted 25 percent. However, work with LGBTQI+, migrant, and Indigenous groups have been more difficult and remains a gap.”

LESSON LEARNED NO. 3: Building truly independent and democratic unions requires intentional and intersectional strategies that actively include and address the needs of all populations, including marginalized and underserved populations.

While SC’s broad-based approach to engaging workers demonstrates a commitment to unionization, it can inadvertently overlook the unique challenges faced by specific populations, such as migrant workers, Indigenous populations, persons with disabilities, members of the LGBTQI+ community, youth, elder workers, and women. Without a targeted intersectional strategy that prioritizes the needs of these groups, their concerns are often addressed only if they align with the priorities of the majority. The project did include women-only activities to discuss their specific needs, which were both appreciated and valuable to participants.

Addressing the specific needs of marginalized groups within worker organizations requires more tailored approaches and strategies. The evaluation highlighted key findings regarding various populations:

- Persons with Disabilities and LGBTQI+ - At least two worker organizations mentioned that they are trying to integrate LGBTQI+ and disabled people into the union but there were challenges. They shared,

“People with disabilities and transgender people have been added to the representation (worker organization). They want to be trained in collective organization, not in representing vulnerable groups. It has been easier for the moment to incorporate them into the leadership.”

Another independent and democratic organization has tried to promote inclusive policies into their statutes. The representative noted,

“There has been attention to include policies to promote rights for people with disabilities and the LGBTQI+ community. A gender perspective was also included.” A US government staff noted the challenge of mainstreaming LGBTQI+ priorities when they stated that they are “not aware whether the LGBTQI+ community is mainstreamed in any organizing work.”

- Youth and Elder workers - Notably among the 57 discussions held with 86 people, older workers and youth workers were only brought forward by two people. One implementing partner shared that

“It would be important to also identify the age groups that participate and if new groups have to be included.”

The fact that these two populations did not come up more frequently is telling about the current labor movement and its focus. The evaluation engaged with relatively young workers and students which also did not address the needs or priorities of their cohort.

- Women Workers – Under SC2, women workers that are part of the independent and democratic unions had an opportunity to meet and discuss gender. Women that were part of the meetings found them beneficial and inspiring. A coalition is in the process of being formed (under SC2 but will continue under SC3). The project has introduced concepts of gender to worker organizations, but more work is needed according to validation workshop participants.



COLLECTIVE ACTION

EMERGING GOOD PRACTICES TO ADVANCE WORKERS' RIGHTS

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Collective action strategies play a crucial role in labor movements. At the core, SC and its implementing partners organize workers to enhance their bargaining position and advance worker's rights. Throughout SC2 and SC3, SC and its implementing partners used three collective action strategies to advance workers' rights, including organizing workers, building coalitions, and creating cross-border solidarity. Each of these strategies played a role in increasing salaries, improving working conditions, and creating future safety nets for workers.

EMERGING GOOD PRACTICE NO. 1: SC has effectively capitalized on the 2019 Labor Law Reform (LLR), using it as a strategic opportunity to advance workers' rights.

This reform provided a critical framework that allowed for the legitimization of contracts and negotiation of collective bargaining agreements (CBAs). SC's approach of focusing on organizing and negotiating CBAs has emerged as a particularly successful collective action strategy, leading to tangible improvements such as salary increases and better working conditions secured through these agreements. A key aspect of this emerging good practice is SC's and its implementing partners' continuous learning and adaptation. They have refined their approach by incorporating lessons learned from both successful and unsuccessful past campaigns, including enhancing their strategic corporate research capabilities to better understand each company's context before initiating organizing efforts.

LESSON LEARNED NO. 1: Creating and strengthening worker-led coalitions and networks is crucial for ensuring the sustainability and scalability of project outcomes, but this is a time-consuming and labor-intensive process. This is particularly true given the emerging nature of independent and democratic worker organizations and their supporting institutions, such as Labor Centers and Worker Centers.

While worker-led coalitions with allies and networks have significant potential for leverage- by articulating a unified worker voice and developing a joint agenda - these coalitions remain informal, lacking clear goals and strategies. As noted by an SC staff member,

“One obstacle is the lack of an organized strategy between organizations. [Organizations working side-by-side] with workers have their own understanding of workers’ needs, while other organizations work with different groups, companies, or the government. Communication needs to be clear and simple for workers.”

Historical, contextual, and organizational challenges, coupled with the nascent state of worker organizations, complicate efforts to formalize these coalitions.

Initial steps towards coalition-building occurred under SC2 and SC3, where union leaders were brought together to build relationships and networks. SC2 plans to establish a coalition of women working in independent and democratic unions and a network of researchers. SC3 aims to create a coalition of worker organizations, students from the Union School, and a network of labor lawyers while continuing to support the network of unionized women.

EMERGING GOOD PRACTICE NO. 2: Cross-border solidarity has emerged as a powerful motivator for Mexican workers, particularly within the emerging independent labor movement. By fostering international connections, the project has successfully leveraged cross-border solidarity to drive worker empowerment and action.

Through strategic ties with labor movements in Latin America and Europe, Mexican workers have built meaningful connections with their counterparts in the United States and Germany. These relationships were strengthened through exchanges, visits, courses, and events, which facilitated the flow of information, increased workers’ confidence, and led to collaborative actions. The exchanges heightened Mexican workers’ awareness of salary disparities; some discovered they were earning significantly less than their international peers, which spurred them to organize and negotiate.

As one SC staff member noted,

“We are experiencing a pivotal moment. Union changes in the USA, involving the same companies as those employing Mexican workers, have led to collaborative work plans between US and Mexican unions.”

This cross-border collaboration was further demonstrated when US unions supported Mexican workers during a five-week strike, which ultimately resulted in a salary increase.





PROMOTING ADAPTABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

PROJECT MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS TO ENSURE PROGRAM ADAPTABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

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The unprecedented influx of funds from SC2 and SC3 led to a scale-up of SC's Mexico operation. SC employs 2 full-time staff members under SC2 and 5 full-time staff members under SC3. A further 25 staff members are employed by both projects, splitting their time equally. SC also manages relationships with 9 implementing partners,¹ including five academic partners. There was also pressure by the US government and US worker organizations to capitalize on the 2019 Labor Law Reform. SC had to scale up during the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed additional organizing challenges given that Mexico received COVID-19 vaccines later than the United States. The funds provided to Solidarity Center were part of the funding to support the implementation of a free trade agreement between United States, Mexico, and Canada (USMCA).

LESSON LEARNED NO. 1: The project's administrative and financial processes are creating significant burdens for grantees and implementing partners, particularly for smaller workers' organizations.

¹ Implementing partners are defined as organizations that receive direct funds from the project to implement activities. There is one academic partner that is part of both SC2 and SC3 and therefore only counted once.

Several partners reported challenges with the project's administrative and financial demands. As one partner described, *“Too much time is spent on procedures, reports, evaluations, and requirements, making it difficult to respond to the immediate needs of workers while meeting democratic requirements.”* This burden was especially heavy for smaller organizations and academic institutions lacking institutional support, largely due to their lengthy and prolonged bureaucratic processes. An implementing partner highlighted the need for flexible programming and faster fund authorization, stating, *“Spontaneity is essential. While planning is necessary, it must be flexible. The fund authorization process has been very slow.”* Given the need to adhere to USG processes and regulations, the desired flexibility and faster turnaround is not often feasible.

2 **LESSON LEARNED NO. 2:** Limiting sector choices restricts the ability to seize opportunities that can advance workers' rights.

SC and its implementing partners were restricted to organizing within certain sectors identified as USMCA priority sectors. Consequently, they prioritized these sectors, but this approach proved limiting. In some cases, organizing within the chosen sectors, such as aerospace and call centers, was not feasible within the short project window and required long-term planning and sustained effort. As a result, SC was unable to support workers in other sectors who were eager to organize.

3 **LESSON LEARNED NO. 3:** Tailoring communication to client's needs and preferences is crucial for effectively sharing project materials, such as videos and infographics.

USG and ILAB staff rely on SC's Technical Progress Reports (TPRs) to brief various audiences, including Congress. Some of the USG staff interviews would like to see projects' achievements presented through more compelling narratives. The improved TPR format could enhance readability and storytelling. SC could proactively share some of its website and social media material with USG. This may help USG and ILAB staff more effectively communicate and personalize the projects' successes.