

MEXICO: RECYCLING WORKERS FACING THE PANDEMIC ORGANIZED AND UNITED

As the world reels from the impacts of COVID-19, workers and communities are affected differently in their local contexts. Over the course of the summer, the Steelworkers Humanity Fund (SHF) Updates will report on the experiences of our partner organizations in Asia, Latin America and Africa, as they respond to this evolving crisis. This second update will focus on the Authentic Labour Front (FAT, in Spanish).

Scavenging for recyclable materials in garbage dumps has kept poor families alive in cities across Mexico. COVID-19 lockdowns changed that as access to landfills has been restricted for the *pepenadores* ("garbage pickers").

"We are forced to collect a few recyclable materials directly from public roads in the nearby neighborhoods in order to get by. But this is not sustainable, it is very unsafe and there is too much competition," says a female garbage picker.

Ignored by government policy makers, the 100 poor families who have organized themselves into the Lázaro Cárdenas del Río Association have been forced to take matters into their own hands and establish their own protocols to protect the most vulnerable members of their communities due to their age or health condition.

This implies that some workers must stay home, losing all of their income. Other *pepenadores* cut back on the number of hours worked in the landfill by half to try to avoid crowding, reducing drastically the amount of material they can recover and sell. In a garbage recycler's words, *"we used to get about 1000 pesos for a week (60 dollars), during the pandemic we can only get about 500 pesos (30 dollars) for a week's work."*

Local business owners have been pushing to restart economic activities without the necessary considerations to limit the spread of the virus. As such, the Lázaro Cárdenas del Río Association has presented the municipality with a series of proposals to resume working in the landfill in a safe way, for example by organizing a rotation of garbage picker groups.



Garbage recycling workers receiving food baskets from the Lázaro Cárdenas del Río Association.



A garbage recycling worker hand-washing clothes.



Pepeñadores not being able to access landfills are forced to work directly on the streets.

Living in the fear of falling ill and with the insecurity of a low and unstable income, entire families who depend on garbage recycling for their survival have received almost no government support. In this context, the SHF and local unions in District 5 have joined the Québec-based Centre international de solidarité ouvrière (CISO) to support its long-time union partner, the FAT, in distributing food baskets and providing basic safety equipment such as masks, gloves and sanitizer to help Mexican landfill workers get through this crisis.

As they take the necessary measures to protect their health and maintain their source of income in the short term, the FAT's recycling workers continue to rely on organization and solidarity as the only way to get through the COVID-19 crisis.



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An outreach worker from FAT handing a food basket to garbage recycling workers.

All photos by Eladio Abundiz and Abel Banderas Ramirez

To learn more about the
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