

## Report about Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera to SCYM 2021

*Much of this report is a repeat of last year's report, as our yearly meeting in 2020 was delayed by COVID until August. Therefore, much of it may sound familiar to Friends who were in attendance at the August meeting of SCYM.*

Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (Austin So Close to the Border - ATCF) is a nonprofit organization which grew out of the now-closed AFSC office in Austin. From its inception, it has been led by Josefina Castillo. Judith Rosenberg, an active co-founder and president of the board of directors, also continued leadership until her death in 2015. Josefina currently is president of the board.

ATCF is physically based in La Casita, a small house on the Friends Meeting of Austin (FMA) property. However, it has not been used for meetings or gatherings since the Covid-19 pandemic. ATCF rents La Casita at a reduced cost, and the Meeting reserves the right to use the back room for meetings.

Each year, ATCF has organized three weekend solidarity delegations of four to 12 people who travel to the other side of the US/Mexico border. Participants go to learn more about the lives of the workers at the maquiladoras (transnational corporate factories) in border towns. One delegation usually goes in autumn, another in early January and during which time participants can celebrate Los Reyes Magos (Three Kings or Epiphany) with maquila families, and a third one goes in March. In Mexico, the delegates are hosted by the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO), including a meal or two in the homes of CFO members. Because of COVID-19, delegations have been suspended this year and the CFO does not have this source of revenue.

The CFO works for the labor and human rights of the maquila workers via education on their rights and organizing. It is considered one of the best sources by some unions in the U.S. of what actually goes on inside maquiladoras. The CFO is led by Julia Quiñones, an amazing woman. It is affiliated with Los Mineros, an independent and "real" union that has cross-border solidarity with some progressive unions in the United States. As is all too prevalent in the maquiladoras, the corporate union (CTM) is a "fake" one that is controlled by corporate owners. As I understand it, the Mexican constitution provides excellent laws regarding workers' rights; however, enforcement always has left a lot to be desired.

ATCF has traditionally organized an annual celebration of International Women's Day, March 8. This coincides with the date of Judith Rosenberg's death. In 2020, it was held at an outdoor commercial venue in East Austin. ATCF provided costs for Julia Quiñonez, and three other CFO women to come and speak at the event. The latter also sold t-shirts and canvas bags. Singer-songwriter Leti Garza, and Las Gabachas-chas provided live music. ATCF created a game of Loteria (Mexican Bingo) which featured historical labor organizations by and for women as well as female organizers. Winners received large gift baskets.

In August, ATCF typically organizes a fund-drive for school supplies for the children of CFO workers. As neoliberalism has grown in Mexico, funding of public schools has decreased. This has increased the financial burden on families for school supplies. ATCF has delivered supplies to the CFO for the last 8 years; the latter, in turn, sorts and distributes them to their families. We had to cancel the 2020 school supplies drive, due to the pandemic and the closing of the US/Texas border.

ATCF's Women and Fair Trade Festival (WFT) is held after Thanksgiving for one weekend and typically at the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Austin. 2019 was the 16th time for this event. (We had to cancel the 2020 event for the reasons already stated above). Vendors display and sell fair trade items from Chiapas, Mexico; Guatemala; Palestine, Ecuador and India. Women from San Antonio's El Hilo de la Justicia also sell products from their sewing collective; they formed after Levi Strauss left them without

work when the company moved production out of the U.S. Each year, ATCF provides airline tickets and lodging for two weavers from Cooperative Jolom Mayaetik (Women Who Weave), a textile cooperative of women from the highlands of Chiapas. Visitors at WFT also can buy delicious food made by refugees in Austin, sit and enjoy live music by volunteer musicians.

To make all these events happen, they rely on a community of volunteers including ATCF board members, folks from Friends Meeting of Austin and other spiritual groups, and an array of other volunteers both new and experienced.

Paid staffing has decreased in the past year. Director Leona Calvo, and Laura Hoyos, Education Coordinator, no longer work with ATCF.

ATCF's board of directors includes two members of the FMA. Since the COVID-19 pandemic came to Austin, board meetings have been virtual via Zoom rather than in-person. The board also has met numerous times via Zoom with ATCF's Mexican partners, the CFO and Jolom Mayaetik. Howard Hawhee of the FMA is one of two board members who provide interpretation for these meetings.

Being mindful of special needs since early summer because of the pandemic, ATCF's board organized a GoFundMe Charity campaign to raise funds for the CFO at the border and for Jolom Mayaetik in Chiapas. Ruthie Powers (of FMA), Josefina Castillo and Janet Cook formed a team for this project. The weavers requested help for families to re-learn how to grow their own food in gardens of their own, in part because food prices have escalated since the pandemic hit. These family gardens need seeds, tools, and training. Because CFO workers cannot meet in person due to COVID-19, they continue to have great needs for communicating with each other for transmission of information and for organizing. They are using the money raised to purchase phones and phone cards. ATCF was able to reach the goal of \$ 6,000 and sent \$3,000 for each organization in December 2020.

Currently, another online project is up-dating of ATCF's website.

On July 1, 2020, the USMCA (aka the New NAFTA) went into effect. At the September Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business at the Friends Meeting of Austin, the Peace and Social Concerns committee brought the opportunity for FMA to sign onto a letter generated by ATCF and to be sent to the Mexican Consul General in Austin, Texas' two U.S. senators and local U.S. congresspersons. The letters ask for intervention on these issues: (1) full implementation of the labor rights for maquila workers that are guaranteed by the USMCA, and (2) the extremely harsh and repressive treatment of Susana Prieto, a Mexican union organizer and labor attorney. The Meeting minuted its support for signing onto the two letters.

ATCF sends tax letters (which are also thank you letters) to all donors annually. Here is an example sent out at the end of January 2021:

*Dear friend of Austin Tan Cerca,*

*We are deeply grateful for your generous contribution to Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera in 2020. Your contribution helped us to continue our communication via zoom with our partners in the US as well as those in Mexico. In spite of the pandemic, we were able to achieve the following:*

- *We sponsored two delegations in January and March 2020 to the Mexican border with Texas for a direct, unique, transformative, and affordable educational experience.*
- *We celebrated the achievements of women in the labor movement on International Women's Day, March 8, just days before the closing of activities*

*due to the pandemic. Four women from the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (Border Committee of Workers) came to share their personal experiences in the factories at the border.*

- We had to cancel the rest of the activities during the year but were able to continue our communication via zoom with two of our Mexico partners: the CFO at the border and Jolom Mayaetik in Chiapas.*
- As we heard how the pandemic affected these partners, we organized a GoFundMe Charity campaign (during November-December) on their behalf surpassing our goal of \$6,000. We have already sent \$3,000 to each of them.*

*ATCF is a 501(c) non-profit organization; the contribution you made is completely tax deductible. In accordance with the Internal Revenue Service Regulations, we state that no goods or services were provided by Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera in return for this charitable contribution. Our federal Tax Identification Number is: 27-2849415. Details of your contribution(s) are below. Please keep this written acknowledgement for your tax records.*

For further information please visit [www.atcf.org](http://www.atcf.org) and Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera on Facebook. You can write to ATCF at 3707 East MLK jr. Blvd, Austin, Tx.78721.

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