

Report about Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera to SCYM
2020 date_____?

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-TAO 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.

What follows is a brief report about ATCF from the past year.

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 the quarters at a reduced cost..

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 maquiladores (transnational corporate factories) in border towns. One delegation usually goes in autumn, another in early January and during which time participants can celebrate Los Tres Reyes (Three Kings or Epiphany) with maquila families, and a third one goes in March. In Mexico, the delegates are hosted by the Comite Fronteriza de Obrer@s (CFO), including a meal or two in the homes of CFO members. Because of COVID-19, delegations have been suspended and the CFO does not have this source of revenue.

The CFO works for the labor and human rights of the maquila workers via research and organizing. It is considered one of the best sources by some unions in the U.S. of what actually goes on inside maquiladores. 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 maquiladores, the dominant union 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 organized an annual celebration at the time 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 Quiñones, 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 has organized 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; the latter has sorted and distributed them to their families.

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. Vendors display and sell fair trade items from Chiapas, Mexico; Guatemala; Palestine, Equador 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. ATCF's director, Leona Calvo, took maternity leave for her third child earlier than expected this spring. Although she was to return to an ATCF grant-writing position in August, family needs have delayed this. Laura Hoyos, the education coordinator, did not work for ATCF in January while she gained full-time employment. She returned to organize the International Women's Day event in March, graduated with her bachelor's degree in May, and has since rejoined ATCF as a part-time, paid employee. Earlier in 2019, Laura came to the Friends Meeting of Austin and presented a multi-media forum about the history and activities of the 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 has discussed a GoFundMe campaign to raise funds for the CFO and Jolom Mayaetik. Ruthie Powers of FMA, Josefina Castillo and Janet Cook have formed a team for this project. The weavers have requested help for families to re-learn how to grow their own food, in part because food prices have escalated since

the pandemic hit. These family gardens will 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 would use money to purchase phones and phone cards.

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; see attached.

The regular two-day WFT event cannot happen in 2020 due to COVID-19. However, Josefina has proposed a backyard, one-day version of the festival. Items to be sold would include those left by Jolom Mayaetik weavers.

For further information visit www.atcf.org and Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera on Facebook.

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