

Injured GM workers on hunger strike in Colombia

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

At a General Motors auto plant in Bogotá, Colombia, workers enter whole, and leave disabled. John Walsh, a Portland printer and local union officer, wants GM to take responsibility.

The cause of the workers disabled at GM subsidiary Colmotores received international attention in August, when outside the U.S. embassy in Bogotá a dozen of them declared a hunger strike, and seven sewed their own mouths shut with surgical thread. That spurred union activists around the United States to take action, especially because it shows the connection between workers in the United States and Colombia now that the two nations are joined by a NAFTA-style trade deal.

But the story doesn't start or end outside the embassy. It begins years before.

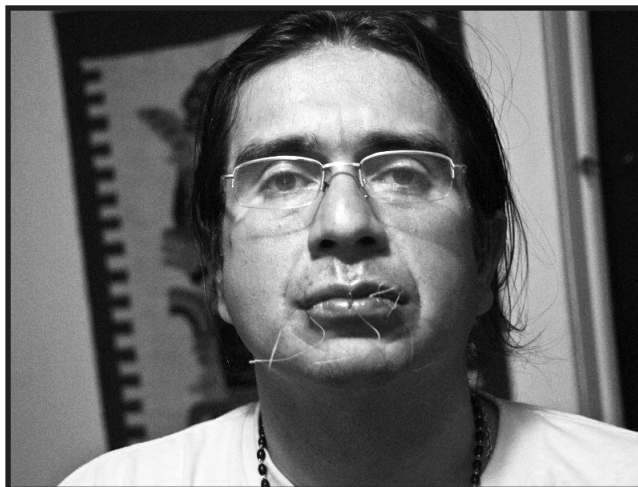
Jorge Parra, 36, walks with a cane. He can't bend or squat easily, nor lift or push. Screws in his spine help him stand, but he says his condition is getting worse.

When he went to work at GM in 2001, Parra was given a comprehensive physical, which declared him to be in good health. He was hired for the equivalent of \$1,050 a month as welder at a GM assembly line making Chevrolet cars and trucks for sale in Colombia. But nine years of that work — which required him to move heavy welding guns suspended from rails above the assembly line — took a toll of pain in his back, shoulders and hands. In 2010, he complained, and went to the medical center GM had set up for workers. Doctors gave him injections of painkillers and sent him back to work.

Then one day near the end of his shift, Parra found himself unable to move. The plant's doctors referred him to a private outside clinic, where he was told he had carpal tunnel syndrome in both hands, tendinitis in his shoulders and elbows, and a severely herniated disc that required an immediate operation. A second surgery followed. Doctors put screws in his back to hold his spine together and another in his wrist. GM terminated Parra Nov. 29, 2010, as he recovered from the surgery.

But Parra fought back. Under Colombian law, the labor ministry has to authorize such a firing, and they had not done so. Parra won reinstatement. He soon found other workers with the same problems — dozens of co-workers, some as young as 28, had been dismissed after developing herniated discs and shoulder and hand problems. Parra faults the assembly line's fast pace — and the requirement that workers move too-heavy equipment.

Parra formed a group, ASOTRECOL, to protest unsafe working conditions. (The name is a Spanish-language acronym for Association of Injured Workers and Ex-Workers of GM Colombia.) In response, GM made improvements at the plant, rotating workers into different jobs, and installing robots to do the welding work Parra once did. But Parra was branded as a troublemaker and fired again on July 29, 2011, on accusation that he had instigated his co-workers to take actions against GM.



Jorge Parra, injured on the job at a GM auto plant worker in Colombia, sewed his lips shut in a hunger strike to demand reinstatement.

Three days later, he and 67 other injured workers began a 24-hour-a-day protest outside the U.S. embassy in Bogotá, demanding compensation and reinstatement with retraining for jobs they're physically capable of performing. They asked the U.S. government to intervene, because they considered the U.S. government to be part owner of GM.

Workers had another reason to choose the embassy: safety. Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for labor union activists, with nearly 2,700 slain in the last two decades. Parra says he was threatened and followed. He complained to authorities, who authorized police protection, but the police didn't provide it. Outside the embassy, on the other hand, videocameras and police keep a 24-hour vigil. For protesters to be murdered within view of the U.S. embassy would be a scandal for GM and the Colombian government, which was especially sensitive to human rights concerns at a time when the free trade agreement was before Congress.

It was that trade agreement that brought Portland resident John Walsh to Colombia. Walsh works graveyard shift in the Graphic Arts Center's Northwest Portland bindery, and serves as shop steward, executive board member, and regional vice president at 514-member Local 767M of the Teamsters Graphic Communications Conference. U.S. unions fought to oppose the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, and Walsh wanted to see for himself the country the United States would be partnering with. He took part in a trip organized by the group Witness for Peace, and then in 2011, organized a delegation of trade unionists which met Parra and the other protesters outside the embassy.

On their return to the United States, Walsh and other labor activists worked to publicize the cause. With help from AFL-CIO Sol-

idarity Center, United Auto Workers (UAW) and Labor Notes magazine invited Parra to attend a May 2012 conference in Michigan. The United States denied his visa, until U.S. Rep. Sander Levin (D-Michigan) stepped in. Parra was able to tell his story at the conference and meet UAW President Bob King.

Parra returned to Bogotá, but outside the embassy, the protest was dwindling. GM had not agreed to meet. With the 24-hour-a-day protest turning one-year old, Parra and 11 others declared a hunger strike and sewed their mouths shut — both as proof they would not be eating and as a symbol that no one had listened to them in more than a year of protest outside the embassy.

That act — on video — got GM's attention. Twenty-two days into the hunger strike, GM agreed to negotiate. Several GM executives flew to Bogotá, joined by three representatives of the UAW and, at the insistence of the hunger strikers, mediators from the U.S. government's Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, which mediates private sector labor agreements in the United States.

GM insisted that the mediation pertain only to the 12 workers who'd engaged in the hunger strike, not all 68 who remained outside the embassy. The mediated talks took place in a hotel. GM executives refused to meet the hunger strikers face to face, "as if we workers were terrorists or guerrillas," Parra told the Labor Press in Spanish. Mediators shuttled between the GM execs and the hunger strikers three stories below, cordoned off by security.

GM's offer was \$6,000 to each hunger striker — to set them up in small businesses that would have no connection to GM, an amount later upped to \$30,000. But the hunger strikers stuck to their demands: back wages, return to jobs at the plant suitable for their physical limitations, and the right of workers at the plant to form a union. On Aug. 31, after three and a half days, talks ended with no resolution.

The protest recommenced outside the embassy, and Parra flew to the United States with the help of U.S. activists to seek a meeting with GM corporate higher-ups. For weeks he stayed with Walsh in Portland while others tried to arrange a meeting with GM in Detroit. Parra visited the Northwest Oregon Labor Council Oct. 22, and met with the Oregon AFL-CIO and with staff at local Congressional offices.

Weeks later, with GM still refusing to meet, Parra flew to Detroit Nov. 15 to make the case in person. On Nov. 21, Parra — together with Melvin Thompson, former president of UAW Local 140 — declared a renewed hunger strike. Eight others in Bogotá also renewed the hunger strike. On Nov. 28, Parra took part in a protest outside GM's world headquarters. On Nov. 30, Parra and the other Colombians sewed their lips shut once again. They say they will not lift the hunger strike until there is a final and just resolution.

HOW TO HELP: At asotrecol.com, an online donation portal sponsored by the Wellspring United Church of Christ in Centreville, Virginia, makes it possible for supporters to make donations to support the families of the hunger strikers.

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