

# Faith group investigates conditions among Nabisco workers in Mexico

By Don McIntosh

In late September, Houston activist Martha Ojeda of the group Interfaith Worker Justice traveled to Mexico to see the massive new Nabisco bakery. Parent company Mondelēz calls it the world's largest cookie manufacturing plant. It's in an industrial park outside of Monterrey, near the town of Salinas Victoria, about three hours south of Laredo, Texas. She never got past the gate.

In 2016, Mondelēz got rid of half the Nabisco production lines at its flagship Chicago plant and laid off about 450 workers — and shifted production to its new “Salinas” bakery. That led to an ongoing nationwide union boycott of Mexican-made Nabisco products by the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco and Grain Millers (BCTGM) union. The boycott has the support of the AFL-CIO.

Now Interfaith Worker Justice — a network of groups that bring together labor and religious leaders — is gathering information on the decision to shift production to Mexico. It will publish a report, possibly in December. Representatives of the group have interviewed



Lamar Kennedy, center, is a minister at the Church of God in Christ — and a union worker at the Nabisco's Northeast Portland bakery. On Sept. 27 he took part in a press event at St. Charles church to announce that a national network of faith-labor groups is investigating Nabisco's labor practices.

Nabisco employees in Chicago, Illinois; Fairfield, New Jersey; and Portland, Oregon. Next up are Richmond, Virginia and Atlanta, Georgia.

Ojeda's trip to Monterrey was part of that effort. As she waited at the plant gate, a guard connected her by phone to a Mondelēz manager. He told her

that the company doesn't employ any production workers: They're all provided by a staffing agency called Human Quality. Workers are brought to the fenced-in industrial park on buses. BCTGM believes they work 12-hour shifts — for less than \$2 an hour.

The products they make —

Oreos, Chips Ahoy and other Nabisco snacks — can now be found everywhere in the United States, often on the same shelf as Nabisco products made by American union members who are paid \$26 an hour. BCTGM Local 364 member Lamar Kennedy, a 25-year employee of the Portland Nabisco bakery,

says Mexican-made Nabisco products were even brought to his workplace for an employee product sale that takes place several times a year.

“I want everybody to check the label and make sure they're buying American-made products,” Kennedy says, “not because we don't want Mexican workers to survive, but because they're being exploited.”

Nabisco's Salinas workers supposedly work under a union contract too. But the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) — a federation of 340 labor organizations in 163 countries — has been highly critical of how most Mexican unions operate. Most labor agreements in Mexico would be more accurately described as “employer protection contracts.” Unions sign the contracts with employers without the participation or knowledge of workers. Workers don't vote on the contracts, or their union leadership. Often they may not even know there is a union.

The laid off Chicago workers are not the only ones harmed by Nabisco's shift to Mexican pro-

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**Labor Industry Division Manager**  
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602-337-6512

**Southern California, Southwest, Midwest**  
Armand Antonian, Sr. Relationship Manager  
213-236-5046

**Northern California, Pacific Northwest, East Coast**  
John Mendoza, Sr. Relationship Manager  
415-705-7112



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