

Grassroots Mobilising: Is Direct Democracy Really Possible in an Age of Globalisation?

A Case Study of an Independent NGO from Mexico's Border Region¹

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A major objective of any grassroots organisation is to give a voice to its members. Decisions are not imposed from the top down but rather are arrived at through consensus, thus espousing direct democracy principles. This would hold true at least for the overall direction of the organisation, major fundraising and expenditures, and for their representation outside of the organisation. When such an organisation seeks to expand, to develop transnational ties, or to operate on a global scale, is it possible to retain the direct democratic decision process and not lose sight of the local grassroots membership? Rather than exploring the more common theme of democratic challenges **and** the politics of contestation, this paper examines the democratic challenges **of** the politics of contestation. The democratic challenges within social movement organisations that purport themselves to be democratic and grassroots-based will be analysed through the case study of one such organisation.

The Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (CFO) (Border Committee of Women Workers) has been mobilising maquiladora workers in Mexico's northern border region for almost three decades. Although sometimes characterised as a community-based organisation, the CFO is also seen as an NGO that is part of a larger women's movement and workers' movement. Among academics and social activists who concentrate on Mexico-US border issues, the CFO is known as one of the first organisations of and for Mexican workers in the maquiladoras², empowering women from the ground up. Its main objective is to help workers in precarious conditions claim their rights in an undemocratic system where the decisions are made in favour of the powerful and rich transnational corporations to the detriment of the Mexican workers. Community-based organising is closely related to feminism and women's movements. As Armbruster explains it:

Community-based organisations symbolize a reaction to the sexist, hierarchical, and centralized decision-making processes common to many trade unions. In contrast, community-based organisations such as the CFO establish participatory democracy as their goal in which community members and workers decide their own strategies and the methods for social change³.

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² Maquiladoras are foreign-owned factories operating in Mexico which import materials in order to transform and re-export them. They are usually textile, electronics and machinery assembly factories that are located in low-wage zones and that benefit from the free trade agreements established to attract transnational corporations to locate in particular areas such as Mexico's northern border region.

³Ralph Armbruster (1995), "Cross-National Labor Organising Strategies", *Critical Sociology*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1995, p. 81.

Other authors, such as Domínguez⁴, see the CFO as more than a community-based organisation; rather it is an NGO that is part of a larger women's movement and one that has found alternative ways to help workers claim their rights, through the use of transnational networking⁵. These analyses represent the dual discourse of the CFO. It is a community based organisation whose first and foremost priority is to help the workers who are its members. However, it is also an organisation that with the help of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) has developed to become a voice to the outside world of the working conditions of the maquiladora workers (see section below *CFO: A brief overview* for more details). This idealised notion of a grassroots organisation that is espousing direct democratic principles while at the same time playing a key role on a transnational scale is problematic. I argue that there are contradictions in competing for scarce resources internationally while needing to maintain direct democracy internally. It is difficult if not impossible for an organisation such as the CFO to be dedicated to both objectives simultaneously.

Methodology

This study was conducted by a combination of secondary source analysis of all the existing archives on the CFO held at the AFSC offices in Philadelphia, PA (August 2005), as well as field investigations in the Mexican cities where the CFO is currently the most active, Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuna, in the northern central state of Coahuila (November 2006) and in the cities where the CFO originated, Matamoros and Reynosa (and nearby Rio Bravo), in the northern eastern state of Tamaulipas (September to November 2007). This field work included conducting approximately 50 semi-direct interviews with current and ex-members of the CFO and participatory observation. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. However, no names or identifiers were used anywhere and all participants were promised confidentiality and anonymity. This is essential since organising workers in Mexico's northern border region is dangerous and many of the workers can and do lose their jobs for talking about the working conditions in the maquiladoras or trying to organise workers. Understandably, trust issues needed to be overcome. Other obstacles included CFO employees sitting in on many of the interviews in Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuna which resulted in limited amounts of information concerning the internal struggles of the CFO during these interviews. Participating in the CFO activities and social outings, living with some of the members and conversing with all of the members in Spanish did however lead to some of the more cautious members opening up to me. This also led to confidential and anonymous interviews with current and ex-members of the CFO, interviews which proved to be a much richer source of information. This information concerning the democratic challenges within the CFO was further enriched by interviews with one of the founders of the CFO as well as members of the CFO who left to start their own organisations⁶.

⁴ Michael Kohout (1999), "Challenging the Private-Public Dichotomy in Latin American Women's Movements: An Example from Mexico", unpublished paper presented at the 1999 General Meeting of the Canadian Association for Latin America and Caribbean Studies, Ottawa, Ontario, September 30th to October 2nd

⁵ See Keck and Sikkink's conceptualisation of transnational advocacy networks in Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

⁶Due to the nature of the information obtained, which is sometimes critical of the CFO itself, ensuring the anonymity of the interviewees is crucial. Therefore, the following designations will be used throughout:

LTM (Long-time member): Anyone who has been a member of the CFO for more than 10 years and has an in-depth knowledge of the organisation or who is a current or ex-employee, volunteer or executive council member and

CFO: The major players

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a U.S. based Quaker non-profit organisation that seeks to promote peace and social justice throughout the world⁷, first started taking an interest in the maquiladoras and the plight of the maquiladora workers in 1978 as part of their Mexico-United States Border Program. At first, the focus was on educational information about the maquiladoras, called ‘runaway shops’ at the time⁸. This was done in conjunction with the Mexican Friends and Service Committee⁹. By 1981, the AFSC Mexico-U.S. Border Program had already been working on a project entitled *Obreras Maquiladoras Unidas* (Women Maquiladora Workers Together) whose focus was to address the worker and human rights violations of women maquiladora workers along the border by organising solidarity and support groups¹⁰.

These first efforts to organise women maquiladora workers in northern Mexico were done in a tripartite structure: SEDEPAC (*Servicio, Desarrollo y Paz, A. C.* – Civil Association for Service Development and Peace which was formed when the MFSC divided into two groups in 1983), Comité de Apoyo (Support Committee), a Texas-based bi-national non-profit ecumenical organisation, and AFSC. SEDEPAC and AFSC roles are clearly explained in a 1985 Report on the Mexico-U.S. Border Program Maquiladora Women Workers Project:

The AFSC Mexico-U.S. Border Program works in unison, harmony, close relationship with SEDEPAC’s (*Servicio, Desarrollo y Paz, A.C.*) Women and the Border Program. AFSC staff carries the responsibilities for initiating and developing groups of Mexican maquiladora workers, and for providing educational materials and outside contacts for them. SEDEPAC staff carry out the “organizing” functions of the groups and are responsible for networking primarily within Mexico[...] As requested early on by SEDEPAC, AFSC provides the key staff person to the program. A major factor in the decision is the safety of the maquiladora program which must work within the context of an increasingly-repressive Mexican government – a government which looks to the maquiladora industry as its major buffer against economic ruin and rising social unrest.¹¹

SEDEPAC, the only autonomous Mexican association in this structure had a limited history with the CFO. In fact, fears of repression by Mexican authorities made them give up their work in the northern border area by 1986. The two American religious organisations, the AFSC and Comité de Apoyo, were therefore, from 1986 on, the major contributors and influences on the organising efforts of women maquiladora workers in Mexico’s border region¹². During the transitional

has acquired their in-depth knowledge of the organisation in this way (in which case, she or he does not necessarily need to have participated in the CFO for more than 10 years).

NM (new member): Anyone who identifies herself or himself as a member of the CFO, has been participating for 10 years or less and has never worked or volunteered for the organisation.

***All of the quotes from CFO members’ interviews have been translated from Spanish by the author.

⁷ See AFSC (2009), [About AFSC], consulted January 27. <http://www.afsc.org/ht/d/sp/i/267/pid/267>

⁸ AFSC (1978), [Draft copy of “Runaway Shops and Displacement of People – Global in Scope”, internal memorandum], June 10, p. 1.

⁹ AFSC (circa 1978-1979), [An Effort Directed at Public Education: Publications and Media Watch Project of the Mexico-U.S. Border Program] (undated document), pp. 4-5.

¹⁰ AFSC (1981), [Letter to National Community Funds explaining the work of the AFSC’s Mexico/U.S. Border Program’s project *Obreras Maquiladoras Unidas*], May 7th.

¹¹ AFSC (1985), [Report on the Mexico-U.S. Border Program Maquiladora Women Workers Project, November 1984 through March 1985], July 3, p. 5.

¹² AFSC (1986), [Minutes of the Mexico-US Border Program Working Group], Feb. 21 & 22, 1986, p. 9.

period of SEDEPAC phasing out from the supervision of the border work, the new organisation the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras started to take shape. The CFO was still very much at its infancy stage and asked that the AFSC maintain their key staff person, namely Ed Krueger, who was also the director of the Comité de Apoyo, to assist them. The Comité de Apoyo was to help with the day to day support needed¹³. Their role was transformed from a supportive, oversight committee to a hands-on working committee. It was at a mid-July 1986 joint meeting of the Comité de Apoyo and the maquiladora workers that the workers named their emerging organisation Comité Fronterizo de Obreras and named representatives from each town to form this body¹⁴.

The internal struggles: local vs. transnational

The Comité de Apoyo, which was responsible for the administering all of the funds destined to the CFO and for the writing of the fundraising reports for a large part of the CFO history, always focused on the local level, the consciousness-raising. Its director, Ed Krueger, played a pivotal role in the development of the CFO by undertaking the first on the group organising efforts by knocking at doors of maquiladora workers in poor neighbourhoods, mostly women, and asking them if they would be interested in forming an informal community committee. The focus on having an informal, low-profile organisation was of the utmost importance to Krueger who felt they would be safer as a clandestine organisation and strongly discouraged their applying for a legal status under Mexican Law. This sentiment was echoed by the CFO regional coordinator at the time, Maria Guadalupe Torres, who stated that it didn't seem convenient to become institutionalised because they would run risks and they felt their anonymity helped them achieve things through pacific and non-confrontational ways¹⁵. It was therefore no surprise that when the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras was established in 1986, it did not register itself as a non-profit organisation¹⁶.

The AFSC pushed for more independence on the part of the CFO, a higher profile and transnational networking efforts. They felt that the border committees of women workers were not advancing past the consciousness-raising stage and that there was a lack of group identity due to the style of organising (at home, quietly among workers) which led to more isolated groups who don't realise or care that they are part of a larger struggle¹⁷. SEDEPAC agreed that local organising or community-based organising is insufficient when faced with the global nature of maquiladoras and before leaving their work in the border area and explained that when women workers arrive at the bargaining table, they are weakened because decisions are taken at the home plant of the maquiladoras - the local plant has only limited authority to change policies, and recommended the creation of a transnational network¹⁸. The AFSC developed an advocacy role in relation to the CFO, which included fundraising, information tactics such as public education efforts that focused on circulating information about the exploitation going on in the

¹³ AFSC (1986), [Maquiladora Women Workers Project: Mexico-US Border Program], October, pp. 2-5.

¹⁴ AFSC (1986), [Minutes of the National Community Relations Division Mexico-U.S. Border Program Working Group Meeting: Section B) Report from Comité de Apoyo], October 17-18, p. 10.

¹⁵ CFO (1990), [Comité Fronterizo de Obreras: Proposal for the Ford Foundation], January, p. 10. *Translation from Spanish done by author.*

¹⁶ AFSC (1986), [Maquiladora Women Workers Project: Mexico-US Border Program], October, p. 2.

¹⁷ Pat DeCarlo (consultant for AFSC) (1985), [Observations and Recommendations re the Border Maquiladora Organizing Project], October, p. 1.

¹⁸ SEDPAC (1984), [Plan de Trabajo del Program Frontera y Mujeres].

maquiladoras that the mass-media usually distorted, and leverage tactics such as writing to the American head offices of the maquiladoras with whom the CFO members were dealing and not getting any results in Mexico¹⁹.

The push for the CFO to become independent became more pronounced when problems with funding started appearing in 1995. It is at this time that most of the funding of the Comité de Apoyo was no longer renewed. Since the Comité de Apoyo was managing the CFO funds, this created a major problem for the CFO. There were many explanations of this situation: Firstly, the Comité de Apoyo explained that a large portion of the funding they received was from churches that were seeing their own funds dwindle due to lower attendances, etc.²⁰. Secondly, the AFSC uncovered that the Comité de Apoyo was using the CFO achievements in order to apply for funding, without separating the funds or guaranteeing the donors that the funds will go to the CFO, which created major accountability issues²¹. This led to other problems as many European donors refused to fund a Mexican organisation through a US one. Thirdly, the lack of communications between the AFSC and the Comité de Apoyo led to them sometimes both applying to the same foundation to ask for funds for the CFO. This created major frictions with the AFSC since it put their relationship with major donors in jeopardy²². Fourthly, NAFTA played an important role at this time by being a rallying point for organising around issues that affected maquiladora workers at this time. However, because the issue became so popular, it also led to the creation of many other cross-border alliances around the problems with the maquiladoras. This in turn led to difficulties in obtaining financing for the CFO because they were no longer the only group working on these issues²³. Finally, many donors started taking issue with the fact that the yearly reports were very similar from year to year, that there did not seem to be much progression. The anecdotal nature of Ed Krueger's reporting, focusing on descriptions of project activities rather than concrete objectives and expected outcomes, was creating problems with the fundraising efforts²⁴.

In the years between 1995 and 1997 most of the funding of the CFO was being directly provided by the AFSC. The AFSC felt that the lack of independence of the CFO was a major issue, as not only were the existing donors dropping out, but other potential donors, especially European, were stating that they would only provide funds to an independent organisation with its own bank account in Mexico. This is when the AFSC started focusing on the devolution of the CFO²⁵. Since the AFSC had had difficulties in the past in dealing with Ed Krueger and their current director of the Mexico-US border program had left, they chose to hire Ricardo Hernandez as the new Mexico-US Border Program director in 1997. Shortly thereafter, he did a complete overhaul of the program and almost forcefully encouraged the independence of the CFO. This was done against Ed Krueger's wishes who resigned in 1998, as did many CFO members who were loyal to him. The CFO was relocated from its center in Matamoros to Piedras Negras and became an autonomous organisation in 1998.

¹⁹ AFSC (1986), [Mexico-US Border Program 1986-1987: Overriding Considerations], May 30, p. 5.

²⁰ Rachael Kamel, [Report on trip to the border, July 11-26, 1995, AFSC Mexico-US Border Program], p. 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²² Phoebe McKinney, "(Draft) Strategy Memo for Maquiladora Project Change", AFSC Mexico-US Border Program, March 6th, 1996.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 9 & Rachael Kamel (1995), [Update: Border Program Fundraising], October 2nd, p. 4.

²⁴ Rachael Kamel (1995), [Report on trip to the border, July 11-26, 1995, AFSC Mexico-US Border Program], p. 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

The power struggles between the Comité de Apoyo and the AFSC over the local versus the transnational are symbolic precursors to issues with which an independent CFO must still grapple. However, key questions still need to be answered, such as how the members themselves viewed the independence of the CFO and the end of the relationship with the Comité de Apoyo. It is clear that direct democracy principles were not present at the decision making level in the pre-independence (pre-1998) period of the CFO. Unfortunately, as we will see in the next sections, this does not get any better; in fact, according to some long-time members, it actually gets worse with the decision making being further taken away from the grassroots base.

The Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s: the official discourse

The CFO became an independent organisation when it opened its own office in Piedras Negras, Coahuila in 1998 and acquired the status of *asociación civil* (recognized non-profit organisation) in Mexico²⁶. Although now independent, the CFO retains close ties with the AFSC, in what is now qualified as an equal partnership²⁷. The CFO also works with other groups at the transnational level: organising tours of the maquiladoras for their sister organisation, Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (Austin So Close to the Border)²⁸ and working with Human Rights Watch in order to bring attention to issues such as forced pregnancy testing in the maquiladoras²⁹. The CFO was also one of the founding members of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras and played a key role in the CJM for many years³⁰

The CFO describes itself as a “grassroot organisation that supports union democracy and workers rights in six cities along the Mexico-U.S. border”³¹. The main objective of the CFO is to educate, organise and empower women who work in the maquiladoras in order to achieve their overriding goal “to improve working conditions and the quality of life for workers in the maquiladoras, especially women and their families”³². Specific objectives include:

- To increase knowledge, self-confidence, and empowerment among maquiladora workers;
- To foster union democracy and advance independent unionization;
- To help both female and male workers understand the impact of the maquiladoras on health, for themselves, their families, and their communities;
- To forge links of solidarity and strategic partnerships with like-minded organisations around the world;
- To expand the rank-and-file organising to other cities with maquiladoras³³.

²⁶AFSC (1999), “Chapter Five, A Border Partnership: The CFO and the AFSC”, in Rachael Kamel and Anya Hoffman (eds.), *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-Border Organising Since NAFTA*, Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1999, p. 89.

²⁷ AFSC (2009), [Mexico-US Border Program Maquiladora Project], consulted January 27th, 2009, <http://www.afsc.org/community/maquiladora.htm>

²⁸ Greg Norman (2002), “Maquila Workers Celebrate Victory in Struggle for Freedom of Association”, consulted January 27, 2009 <http://webarchive.afsc.org/tao/sp0205.htm>, and Judith Rosenberg, “Mexico –U.S. Border Delegations”, consulted January 27th, 2005, http://www.afsc.org/central/austin/austin_border-delegations.htm

²⁹ Edmé Dominguez (2002), Op. Cit, p. 227.

³⁰ AFSC (1996), [Memo regarding History of Maquiladora Project Involvement in CJM and Recommendations for Future re: CJM], April 11, p. 2.

³¹ CFO (2009), [What is the CFO?], consulted January 27, 2009.

http://www.cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/quienes_somos.en.html

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

As their official discourse states, the self-described *raison d'être* of the CFO is the workers themselves. This is echoed by Ricardo Hernandez, the current director of the Mexico-US Border Program of the AFSC, who states that the CFO never registers workers as being members of the CFO because by definition, the CFO is the workers themselves. He explains that the work plan of the CFO is developed in a collective manner through direct and continuous consultations of workers in different towns and each year in November approximately thirty to sixty workers get together to develop the work plan at the annual meeting³⁴.

Grassroots decision making is a major part of the CFO's official discourse. Unfortunately, it is not a precise portrayal of the current conditions and internal struggles within the CFO. It is clear that the CFO plays an important role within the larger category of politics of contestation by promoting union democracy and by educating, organising and empowering maquiladora workers (see CFO objectives listed above). However, it also faces major challenges internally as a grassroots organisation seeking to expand on the transnational scale to promote these same democratic principles. One major theme that emerges from the interviews is that all of the members, past and present, feel a pride in the ideals of the CFO, to help empower workers so that they have the tools and skills to defend themselves. The ideal of the CFO has never been questioned, even by those who chose to leave the organisation. However, many long-time members expressed a strong feeling of disillusionment with where the CFO is heading, with the changes in the last decade and a sense of loss of the grassroots base, the *raison d'être* of the organisation. This is indicative of a larger problem which is only further emphasised when we take a closer look at the structure of the organisation.

Structure of the CFO:

Understandably, the structure of the CFO has changed over time. This is normal in any organisation, especially before and after its registration as an independent organisation in 1998. What is surprising however is that rather than developing a more established structure, the CFO's official structure has been slowly falling apart slowly ever since its independence, and is now practically non-existent. The dependence on the help provided by the AFSC and the Comité de Apoyo might actually have been the glue that kept the structure together. As an 1987 AFSC report explains: "The AFSC staff person [Ed Krueger] coordinates the Project [CFO] from all aspects. He is responsible for communicating when/where meetings will be held as the workers do not have telephones. There are currently 12 worker organizers [promotores] who are working in the region, and they all relate to our staff for guidance, planning and coordinating efforts"³⁵

Partly because of this help with the coordination, the CFO had a very stable internal structure at its beginnings. The 1986 CFO year-end report lists all of the positions within this newly formed organisation which included 4 coordinators, 4 secretaries, 3 treasurers, a 3 member legal committee, a 2 member health committee, a 2 member automotive industry committee, 3 counsellors and finally 3 legal counsellors³⁶. These officers of the CFO were to meet with the Comité de Apoyo at least 3 times a year in order to determine the program³⁷. There were also extra-official meetings a few more times a year. In 1988, they had a regional coordinator for the

³⁴ Communication by e-mail with Ricardo Hernandez, Director of the Mexico-US Border Program of the American Friends Service Committee, April 22nd, 2004.

³⁵ AFSC (1987), [6 month report for Funding Exchange grant, Maquiladora Women Workers' Project], Dec.15.

³⁶ Comité de Apoyo (1986), [1986 Year End Report: The Border Project], p. 22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

south eastern area of the border (Matamoros, Rio Bravo and Reynosa), Maria Guadalupe Torres, and a regional coordinator, for the western section of the area the CFO worked in (Nuevo Laredo, Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuna), Julia Quinonez³⁸(see Map of CFO, Annex A). Each region held two meetings per year and both regions would join together at the annual meeting in November where the major decisions were made: “During the annual meeting they select their board (mesa directiva); review and evaluate their projects and program; make decisions about organizational matters and the direction and structure of the CFO; and share planning for the upcoming year and projects”³⁹. Also, each region has a regional directive board which is elected by the CFO members⁴⁰ (see 1988 Organisational Chart, Annex B).

The CFO of the late 1980s was organising at many different levels: at the homes of the workers in small groups where they felt comfortable, at the colonia (or neighbourhood) level, at a city-wide level, at a regional level and finally at an international and cross-organisational level. There were four regional meetings per year, two weekend evaluations sessions of the Executive Committee and one yearly weekend meeting of the General Assembly. Most of the composition of the city-wide committees of women workers and all of the colonia groups were maquiladora workers⁴¹. There is a real sense of grassroots democracy in this process, even though the CFO was still largely dependent on American organisations.

Describing the structure of the current day CFO has proven to be a much more difficult task and is based on interviews with key members of the organisation as well as on participatory observation of local CFO meetings and CFO’s General Assembly meeting in November 2006. The CFO statutes do give specific powers to the General Assembly and the Executive Committee. Chapter VI, section 1 states that “The highest authority of the CFO resides in the General Assembly”, and Chapter VII, *Powers of the Coordinator and of the Executive Committee*, specifies that

The administration, coordination, representation and enforcement (legal force) of the association will remain entrusted to the Executive Committee, which will be composed of a moderator, a secretary, a treasurer and two members with their respective replacements. These persons will be elected by the General Assembly, and will last in their positions for twelve months. The same people will not be able to be re-elected in the same position in the following period except with the agreement of 50% plus one of the total of the associates⁴².

However the reality on the ground is a very different story. The coordinator is the top position within the CFO. The second in command is the moderator. Neither of these positions is an elected position. The position of coordinator has been filled by Julia Quinonez since the registration of the organisation as an *asociación civil* in 1998 and there is no process in place for an eventual change of coordinator. None of the archival information explains how the decision was made to have Julia Quinonez named as the general coordinator for the CFO and why Piedras Negras was chosen as the location for the office. Quinonez herself explains that “The position of

³⁸ Comité de Apoyo (circa 1988), [History of the Comité de Apoyo/Support Committee and Border Committee of Working Women/Comité Fronterizo de Obreras], pp. 6-7.

³⁹ AFSC (1988), [Internal memo regarding reporting on Maquiladora Women Workers’ Program], December 6.

⁴⁰ AFSC (1989), [Final Report for 1988 Grant from Joint Foundation Support, Inc. – Maquiladora Women Workers’ Project], March 17, p. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴² CFO (1998), [CFO Statutes], pp. 3-4.

coordinator is not an elected position; it's not as if I was elected by all of the membership. To become coordinator, I left my full-time job because I did not want any other responsibilities"⁴³. She furthered that although she wasn't elected, they proposed her to become the coordinator at an annual meeting. What is however troubling is that none of the long-time members interviewed had any recollection of electing or even choosing Julia as a leader. Most do not remember exactly how it happened and just accepted it as a *fait accompli* once she was named coordinator, which happened simultaneously with the CFO registering as an *asociación civil* in Mexico. One LTM thought it might have been Ed Krueger who chose Julia as the coordinator, because it was certainly not any of the workers. Krueger however explained that this was not the case and that the decision to register the CFO as an *asociación civil* and for Julia Quinonez to become its leader was done at a meeting organised by Ricardo Hernandez and the AFSC in which Maria Guadalupe Torres, the other regional CFO coordinator, was unable to attend because her mother was dying⁴⁴. From her previous statements in writing to the AFSC, as well as her resigning from the CFO shortly after this decision was made in 1998⁴⁵, it is clear that Torres would have been against the registration of the CFO as an *asociación civil*. Some LTMs were even more adamant in their explanation that Julia was not chosen by the members. As another LTM expressed it when asked what happened at the meeting when Julia was elected as coordinator: "No one elected her! ...Well, I know that Julia elected herself all by herself." Finally, an LTM who was also an employee stated in regards to Julia becoming the coordinator: "*She appointed herself. And that is how she continued, alone, therefore when we have wanted to change, she fires us, she threatens us and.... or she simply no longer sends us our pay*".

The second position in the organisation, Julia's second in command, is that of the moderator. This position is also not an elected position. Ana, who held the position until 2003 and who has not been replaced, explained a bit of the role of the moderator and the structure of the CFO while talking about the annual meetings:

The moderator is the person who succeeds Julia and that has... here everyone is equal and everyone makes propositions and the decisions are made by everyone in majority but yes there is a ... well, they are like ranks, you could say, there is Julia, then the moderator, and then the secretary, the voting members, everyone, to say a structure.

She described a typical day for a moderator as the following:

I was in the office, I also received foreign visitors and workers, I visited workers. I also traveled to represent the CFO in Canada, the U.S, all of Mexico. The promotora (organiser), her duty is to visit the colonias (shantytowns) and visit the workers, not to travel outside. If it is necessary, she goes to courses but doesn't always go to represent the CFO as Julia does.

The coordinator, the moderator, as well as a few other members (2 to 3 from each of the cities where the CFO is located) formed the executive committee which is now dissolved⁴⁶. When questioned on the executive committee, Julia Quinonez responded that "Right now, it isn't working, but the structure we had in the past is the *coordinadora* (coordinator), the *promotores*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ From Interview with Ed Krueger, founder of CFO and director of Comité de Apoyo, November 2007, Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico.

⁴⁵ AFSC (1998), [Letter to Maria Guadalupe Torres regarding her decision to retire from the CFO], May 15

⁴⁶ Data as of November 2006.

(promoters or organisers who are paid employees), therefore in the cities there were local committees and then from the local committees, one or two representatives from each city, for example the ones in Reynosa would decide who would be on the council [executive committee] and the council would meet 2 or 3 times a year. And other decisions like approving the budget were made in the meetings of the council”⁴⁷. She explained that there were complaints that some of the members of the executive committee from towns such as Reynosa were only coming to the meetings in Piedras Negras to eat and sleep at the CFO’s expense. However, since they were volunteers and did not receive any pay, it was difficult for her to complain. Little by little members of the council started to leave and the structure no longer exists. There are no more local committees. In fact, in November of 2006, there were only promotores in Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuna. As I was able to verify for myself, there was no longer any CFO presence at all in Reynosa and Matamoros in 2007 (and this presence was absent from Matamoros for quite some time, at least 5 years). Julia Quinonez also confirmed during her interview that the CFO was no longer operating in Ciudad Juarez because of the cost and danger associated with organising there. There were a few volunteers in Nuevo Laredo in November of 2006 but no full-time organisers because of the danger due to the drug trade. Therefore, for various reasons, not only is the structure of the executive committee crumbling, the presence of the CFO is no longer being felt in 4 of the 6 cities it purports to represent. Julia Quinonez explains it is very difficult because they have to rebuild the structure; she describes it as being at “the bottom of the barrel: many requests from the workers, from the other cities, many requests from people from the United States that want to help, that want... and there isn’t many people on whom you can count.”⁴⁸ What is clear is that the CFO is at a crisis. Without adequate representation in 6 border cities as stated on their website, it will have an even harder time competing for resources from international donors. One example of this is a large scale 3 year project from FITIM that was offered to the CFO in 2004. The FITIM first approached the CFO to set up a large scale union organising. They were ready to fund 10 organisers in each region where the CFO was located. The CFO was unable to meet this requirement or even come close and therefore did not receive this funding and the project was given to another group⁴⁹.

Additional problems with the executive committee itself, it would seem that there was at one time a decision making process in place which did lead to some input and influence from the members. However, it appears that some of the executive council members did not take their role very seriously or did not get overly involved in the decision making process. For example, one LTM who also belonged to the executive committee never questioned any decisions regarding the funding of the CFO: “*And as I told you, inside the organisation, I belonged to the committee, how do you say it, the executive committee and they always touched on the finances with me but I never asked where it came from, how much there was, no*”. This was not the only LTM who chose not to question major decisions such as budgetary ones and in fact seems to be a common theme. The members of the CFO in a position to actually question any decisions chose not to for various reasons. Other LTMs mention that some of the members of the executive committee were in fact chosen because of their acquiescence and lack of questioning, that the

⁴⁷ Interview with Julia Quinonez, *Op. Cit.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Information obtained through an interview with Eleuterio Torres Ibarra, Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico, November 15th, 2007. He is the assistant coordinator for the FITIM project in question, who when asked by his supervisor who they should work with, suggested the CFO and when asked if they had a structure in place and people who were prepared, answered in the affirmative. He later realised the structure was simply not there.

committee did not have any real function. Either way, the structure has now collapsed, which means that the major decisions are now being made solely by the coordinator, Julia Quinonez, or in consultation with Ricardo Hernandez from the AFSC, who spends approximately 20 weeks a year in Piedras Negras helping out with the CFO. This, not surprisingly, is causing rifts with some long-time members who feel that Ricardo Hernandez is more important to the organisation than them. When asked if they ever questioned why decisions are made without consulting them, one of the LTMs answered: “No, and do you know why we don’t do it, I think because sometimes we think that they are above us”. When I countered that they say it is a grassroots organisation, the same LTM replied: “But it isn’t that way”. In this LTM’s opinion, it is Julia Quinonez and Ricardo Hernandez who are at the top making all of the decisions. He is believed to have more influence in the CFO than long-time members or any of the workers. The lack of any stable group within the CFO is the reason given by the same LTM to explain why none of the members ask for more influence. Although there are people who have participated for many years, there have been differences between them and for various reasons they have all separated and gone their own way.

As we have already started to discover by examining the current structure (or lack thereof) of the CFO, and will become even more evident in the next section on decision making, the CFO is presently going against its own statutes regarding where the power within the organisation lies. Unfortunately most of its long time members are not even aware that their organisation’s own statutes entitle them to the right to be part of the decision making process. This LTM’s response to a question about the structure of the CFO seems to sum it up best: “*The only person in charge is Julia [...] No structure exists; there is none.*”

Decision making before and after independence of CFO:

The AFSC archives spoke of a lack of group identity before the independence of the CFO in 1998. This needs to be further explored as it is contrary to most of the analyses of the CFO that speak of a community-based organisation espousing direct democracy principles. We therefore turn to an examination of what the members themselves have to say about their group identity before the autonomy of the CFO. Although not many members have been there since the beginnings of the CFO (early 1980s), many have been there for more than 10 years and sometimes closer to 20 years and they all felt that there was a strong sense of group identity before the independence of the organisation in 1998 and that the status of *asociación civil* did not change how they felt about their organisation. For the most part, they do not remember exactly when the CFO became an *asociación civil*. What they do remember is that Ed Krueger left although most did not really know why, that Ricardo Hernandez arrived and that Julia Quinonez became the coordinator – again, most do not know why or how she was chosen. When questioned concerning the decision making process and whether the independence led to more participatory democracy or not, many responded that they had less say in the decisions now than before the independence.

When asked how things were different from before the independence, when the CFO worked with Ed Krueger and not directly with the AFSC, and after the CFO became independent and had a direct association with the AFSC, one long-time member responded:

Yes. I think that before Julia was different because she did not feel as independent, as free to make decisions. Before, it was the workers that made

decisions. Before, Julia never made a decision without consulting with the workers. The workers were the ones that decided if they made a call, if they decided to go to such and such a city, if they decided to create a movement, the decision was up to the workers. When the CFO went directly to the AFSC, directly, things changed a lot. They changed a lot: now, they do not consult the workers, they do not take them into account, the workers, now the decisions are made by only Julia and Ricardo, they no longer consult the workers...

Another LTM echoed the feeling that the workers were no longer part of the decision making process and feels that since Ed Krueger left (since the independence in 1998) there have been problems, that in the past the workers were the CFO; however, that statement is no longer true:

For example, well, before it was better because we didn't have anything, no material, nothing, everything we achieved ourselves and that is one of the things that would please me, going back [to how it was previously] because before, the CFO was more ours, the workers, and now no. Now I feel that it isn't ours. I, in fact, sometimes feel that I am not of the CFO... Yes, sometimes I feel that I am not of the CFO. In fact, now I am not going to go to the annual meeting... I am going to miss it all and it is not, I say, because I don't want to participate, it's not that I don't desire participating there because many things have happened...they ask me are you CFO or do you consider yourself CFO? Yes I consider myself CFO but they don't let us grow as CFO or decide ourselves, as workers.

For another LTM, the CFO has lost its grassroots base. It now focuses too much on the international level without giving the local level the importance it should. When asked to compare the role that Ed Krueger played in the CFO with the one now played by Ricardo Hernandez, this LTM replied:

No, I don't think it can be compared. Beto [Ed Krueger] started with this organisation from the bottom, from the grassroots and he was the one who founded everything, did... he gave...you could say he handed it over to Julia the confidence so that she could direct. Ricardo is different. For me, he is different. Ricardo is a very big support, a serious support, but he is from above. He did not start from the bottom with the CFO. He came to the CFO and knew the CFO when the CFO was already the CFO.

When asked which form of the CFO was better, before or after independence, the same LTM offered the following explanation:

For me, I don't know. Now, the CFO is very internationalised and has a lot of strength internationally. But I see that the international strength, it does not have it nationally. You understand? That is the difference. When before, although there we lacked things, that there wasn't an office, that there wasn't a phone, that there wasn't a car, that there weren't many things, there were more people. More people and more solid, the CFO was stronger before and I think there was more diffusion (more known) at the local level than now that it is more structured.

This is a common theme, a feeling of disenfranchisement among many long-time members of the CFO who feel they no longer have a say and who are unable or unwilling to challenge the leader, Julia Quinonez. Some stay and remain unhappy with the direction the organisation is taking but do not feel they have the power or the right to question the decisions. Others simply leave. They still like the ideal of the CFO; it is the reality of where the organisation is at that is the problem. Since there is no process in place to change the leader and the annual meetings, the largest gathering of members and when the major decisions should be made, are mostly attended by new members, this seems unlikely to change in the near future.

Annual meetings:

The work plan of the CFO was described earlier, being developed in a collective manner through direct and continuous consultations of workers in different towns and in an annual meeting of thirty to sixty workers each November⁵⁰ evokes an image of organisation with a great deal of grassroots base decision making. This image is further enhanced when one takes a look at the CFO statutes, specifically Chapter VI, sections 1 and 4 which clearly state the powers of the General Assembly:

Section 1: The highest authority of the CFO resides in the General Assembly. This assembly will meet in ordinary session during one weekend around the 20th of November of each year.

Section 4: The following are powers exclusive to the assembly: deciding on all questions related to the object of the association that affect the whole of the associates, approving and modifying the work projects, defining the way in which each associate will participate in the tasks proper to the association and any others that have been conferred by the present statutes⁵¹.

Unfortunately, this grassroots power seems to only exist on paper and in the official discourse. On the ground observation of the CFO annual meeting in Ciudad Acuna from November 18th to 20th, 2006 revealed quite a different story which seriously questions the description of the CFO as a worker organisation in which the decisions were made by the workers, the grassroots base of the organisation. For example, during the annual meeting in November 2006 and prior to the annual meeting, Ricardo Hernandez was very involved in the decision making process. Julia Quinonez explained that the *promotores* in the city where the annual meeting was taking place were incapable of undertaking the organisation of an annual meeting and that she, Julia, needed Ricardo's help to organise the meeting and that is why was present for 2 weeks prior to the meeting⁵². The annual meeting ended up being more of a workshop with experts and union leaders from the US teaching workers about their rights than a meeting of the grassroots base. It was difficult to determine who the intended audience was, since it was on the one hand a presentation of all that the CFO has accomplished since its beginnings for the international audience which included the president of the United Steel Workers (USW) union from the United States, Jim Robinson. On the other hand, since most of the members present at the annual meeting were new members, it was also a presentation aimed at giving them an overview of the CFO and also the future project that it hoped to establish with the USW. The majority of the weekend meeting was spent in presentations from Americans to the Mexican workers. These included union organising workshop (the subject of the Saturday evening meeting), a

⁵⁰ Communication by e-mail with Ricardo Hernandez (2004), *Op.Cit.*

⁵¹ CFO (1998), [CFO Statutes], pp. 3-4.

⁵² Conversation with Julia Quinonez, Coordinator of the CFO, November 17th, 2006, Piedras Negras, Coahuila.

presentation on the political and social context in Mexico in 2006 by Ricardo Hernandez and finally a presentation on international solidarity between workers and the USW by Jim Robinson. The focus was very much union organising and specifically, organising ALCOA workers (in partnership with USW). Over two-thirds of the members present had been participating in the CFO for less than a year. Of those who had been members for a longer time period, most were *promotores*, employees of the CFO and therefore obligated to participate in the annual meeting. Furthermore, on the day when the decisions should have been made, Monday, November 20th, 2006, most of the members had returned to work and there were very few people actually present - less than half than on previous days (approximately 15-20 people) and the two *promotores* from Piedras Negras (some of the only long time members present at the annual meeting) were also absent. The meeting on Monday was therefore shortened from 4 to 1 ½ hours and there were no decisions made at that time. Later conversations with Julia Quinonez revealed that this was not common practice and that the decisions would be made in each city individually.

My observations at the annual meeting led me to question whether or not the major decisions are actually made by consensus at the annual meetings. Since I was not able to obtain the minutes or agendas from the previous annual meetings, I spoke to many of the long time CFO members who revealed an image of an organisation that can no longer be qualified as grassroots. One LTM, who had attended the November 2006 annual meeting, when asked to describe an annual meeting in the past:

*It was very different, because in the past we were workers of many years and we went the very united at the committee and we always had a report for each city that was what had been done in each city. In this occasion, this wasn't done because there hasn't been any work done in any city, therefore no one could present a report. When asked why no work was done: Well, for the same reason, because there aren't any *promotores*. And if there aren't any *promotores*, there isn't anyone who does the work, who is going to do it?*

Another LTM, when asked how the decisions were made in past annual meetings:

*At the annual meeting, they are supposed to present a plan of the achievements, what are the goals, what is the work plan and in a certain way, yes they do do it, the workers, BUT which workers are you talking about, of which city are you talking about, or who are the workers that participate in the annual meetings ... because **it wasn't the members of the CFO that participated in this meeting, it was new people and it is always the same. It is always new people that go, a client that is only for the moment and who you will never see here again. ... I participated in many annual meetings ... in the ones I participated in before, yes there were workers of the CFO, there were workers that were engaged with the CFO, there were workers that they themselves did the work It is very different now.***

When asked how the annual meeting went the previous year (2005):

Yes. I wasn't very...the people that were there were solely new people, new in the CFO, we were only 4-5 people of many years.

Another LTM had this to say when asked to speak about the annual meetings in the past and about how decisions were made:

Well, the annual meetings supposedly take place in each city where the CFO is, that the last ten years, it is only in Acuna, Piedras and Reynosa. Therefore, the

*promotora from each city goes and she presents the work she did during all the year and this....and they invite a group of workers that are no more than 5, therefore we would meet in some city, I don't know, in Laredo as a middle point and we would present our plan. **In all of the past meetings, there were never any elections, there were never any elections like let's vote to change the committee, I don't know.***

Finally, another LTM, when asked to compare the annual meetings of the CFO at the beginning, 10 years previously (around 1996) and at the last few years:

*Yes, they changed a lot. I remember when at the beginning of the CFO when it didn't have a name yet, we had the meetings in Miguel Aleman. We were around 20 people at the most. We talked about strategies, experiences, achievements, we made future plans of how we could visit more people, how we could talk to the companeros about work, about our rights and now... you could say that 10 years later, I was in an annual meeting in Reynosa where there was close to 40 people, we debated a lot over the union leaders, to see how we could go about developing large strategies covering a whole plant to be able to change these leaders and 10 years later...which was 4 years ago (in 2002), it was in Laredo... Well, I saw it more as, more as international, how do I say it, more projecting, more the CFO internationally and **I felt that the sense of the base (the grassroots level) was a bit lost, which was how to extend itself more locally.***

When asked if there were guests from other countries at the annual meetings in the past:

There were never people from other countries in the annual meetings. It was always solely CFO because it is a meeting of the CFO.

Conclusion:

There is a clear feeling of discontent from the long time members, that the meetings are no longer for them, that they are no longer really an important part of the CFO. Many have expressed the feeling that the meetings are now for the new members, who are viewed, as one LTM explained, as clients that have to be won over. No matter the reason, the grassroots base is clearly disappearing from the CFO membership. Some of the long-time members are limiting their participation in the organisation while others are leaving. Of those who have left due to feeling disenfranchised within the CFO, some have tried to recapture this grassroots base by starting their own organisations which follow many of the principles of the CFO. Others have joined similar organisations that also tried to help maquiladora workers learn about their rights. Both of these scenarios cause multiple problems for the CFO. Losing long-time members in their organisation leads to a destabilisation of the internal structure and the grassroots base. When these members leave to start their own organisations or join other organisations, this also creates even more competition for scarce resources from international donors. As was mentioned earlier, the CFO is at a crisis. For reasons out of their control and of their own doing, they have lost their grassroots base and the democratic principles they promote in their official discourse are not present internally. Not only is the local level of organising affected by this, so is the transnational level which is suffering from the loss of their ability to take on large scale projects and obtain much needed sources of funding.