Moving Parts: Trade Politics in High-Skill Manufacturing from CT to Guanajuato, 1994–2018

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PART I: WHAT IN THE WORLD WAS NAFTA?

Introduction

Criticism of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by pro-labor politicians and worker unions in both the United States and Mexico has been long-standing, stretching from before the deal's inception in 1994 through well after the switch to the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in 2020. The division between corporate interests and worker interests is equally established. Yet, the contemporary animosity between U.S. and Mexican workers as a mainstream attitude is a more recent development, stoked by former President Donald Trump's campaign rhetoric.[1] To better understand the origins of such animosity and its link to trade policy, a discussion of early disputes over NAFTA within the U.S. Senate is warranted. The dialogue that took place between proponents and opponents of the treaty sheds light on the diametrically conflicting analyses of trade and labor history during this watershed moment in the 1990s.

In the U.S. Senate hearing on NAFTA in 1993, most witnesses—including a former U.S. ambassador to Panama and then Senior International Officer of Citibank, William H. Rhodes—sang the praises of free trade and emphasized that Latin American political leaders would be unhappy if NAFTA did not pass. Still, one expert witness called to testify, Andrew A. Reding, director of the North America Project and Senior Fellow for Hemispheric Affairs at the World Policy Institute, stressed the importance of implementing increased labor protections in conjunction with NAFTA.[3]

Reding eventually went on to occupy "expert researcher" positions in both the U.S. Department of Justice and the U. S. Department of Homeland Security.[4] He was not a strict protectionist, especially not in comparison to later figures like Trump. He did, however, clearly explain to the Senate the implications NAFTA could have for laborers in Mexico. He also strongly recommended that the U.S. Senate ratify the American Convention on Human Rights, reminding the Senators that "a supplement to the Convention—the Additional Protocol on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—sets labor standards for the Americas. Central among these principles is the right to organize free trade unions."[5]

Although NAFTA included labor provisions, Reding argued before Congress that they were not sufficiently integrated.

For decades, the basis of Reding's argument for supporting Mexican labor standards was not contentious in the Federal Government. In his 1949 inaugural address, President Harry Truman proclaimed that "guarantees to the investor must be balanced by guarantees in the interest of the people whose resources and whose labor go into these developments. The old imperialism, exploitation for foreign profit, has no place in our plans."[6] Following Truman's administration, presidents touted similar pro-labor principles for several decades, recognizing the recurring cycles of debt crises and inflation caused by the unchecked application of capitalism to Latin American economies.[7] Before President Ronald Reagan's administration rid the White House of this norm, the solutions put forth by the Oval Office were outsourced, including demanding the Mexican state take "an active role" in its economy to stabilize its commodity and capital markets in the 1950s and '60s.[8] These leaders at least openly acknowledged the gravity of the exploitation of Mexican workers under free trade. By contrast, the Mexican labor rights issue was of little concern to the neoliberal economic thinkers that shaped U.S. policy in the '90s. Some opponents to NAFTA, however, were still considering the question.

In the following section of this paper, "*Conflicting Economic Histories in NAFTA Hearing Testimony,*" I use dialogue from the 1993 NAFTA Senate hearing to show how the two predominant trade policy schools of thought are grounded in two different understandings of trade history. Part II then lays out the changing views of high-skill Mexican and U.S. workers during and after NAFTA, as seen in a range of local news and government sources. In Part III, I argue that region-specific politics molded worker perceptions of trade history in each decade of the agreement.

On a broader level, this paper seeks to examine the historical relationship between workers and corporations under NAFTA in both Mexico and the United States. By examining local microhistories in areas where high-skill manufacturing labor unions and individuals were forced to adapt at the whims of corporate decisions, this interpretation of history aspires to foster mutual understanding and solidarity of union workers across the U.S.-Mexico border. Here, I will examine various shifting narratives in the historical record, such as changes in union rhetoric, media coverage, and political discourse, that color the impacts of trade policy on local populations.

How did workers and worker communities in Connecticut, U.S., and Guanajuato, Mexico, perceive NAFTA over its span? How did they navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by NAFTA-borne manufacturing sector developments? I found that throughout the period in question, manufacturing worker opinions on the deal in both Mexico and the United States were influenced almost as much by their experiences of economic conditions as by the regional political rhetoric prevalent at the time.

Furthermore, these opinions were far from static; they shifted over time, reflecting the broader social, political, and historical contexts in which workers

operated. I propose that the interconnected experiences of workers reveal a shared struggle against corporate exploitation, emphasizing the importance of cross-border solidarity under economic globalization. By exploring local narratives, U.S. scholars can better understand how policy changes affect not just economies, but also the lives and ideas of individuals and communities on both sides of the border.

Conflicting Economic Histories in NAFTA Hearing Testimony

Even among leading academics and political thinkers, the truth about the state of North American trade in the years preceding NAFTA is heavily disputed. These conflicting understandings have divided the United States, not between left and right, but between so-called "free traders" and "protectionists." In the second half of the 20th century, several Nobel Prize winners associated with the Chicago School of Economics proposed that all nations would be better off without tariffs. This concept, known as "free trade," has since become the dominant economic philosophy.[9] On the other end of the trade ideology spectrum, "protectionists" held the conviction that limiting imports with trade barriers like tariffs, while supporting exports, would protect domestic industry.[10] Protectionist theory gained momentum in Latin American developing economies in a unique way, where famed Argentine economist Raúl Presbisch advocated industrial manufacturing in the Americas in the wake of World War II.[11] He argued that otherwise, the exportation of raw materials would keep Latin American economies subservient to the United States because of ever-declining prices of these raw goods.[12] The dialectic between free traders and protectionists has been fortified in textbooks over the years and has slowly seeped into the fabric of U.S. and Mexican societies, impacting how manufacturing laborers themselves viewed free trade agreements over time.[13] [14] These ideologies have been shaped by the distinct versions of history that academics on each side rely on.

Indeed, the debate among economists, businessmen, labor advocates, and policymakers over trade policy and economic history started in the very Senate floor testimony that led to the passing of NAFTA, nearly 30 years after the dispute's bloom. For Reding and other pro-labor protectionists, the narrative of declining real wages and labor abuses was key. The decline in the average real minimum wage in Mexico in the late 1980s and early 1990s coincided with a sharp increase in the number of billionaires in the country, which grew from one in 1987 to thirteen in 1994 and nearly doubled to 24 in 1995.[15] Notably, this exponential decline in real wages and rise in billionaires in Mexico was joined by an expansion of free trade policies between Mexico and the United States that culminated in NAFTA. This concentration of wealth was facilitated by significant corruption and became particularly evident in the privatization initiatives led by then President Carlos Salinas, who sold off more than a thousand state-owned enterprises to his Mexican elite political allies.[16]

On a broader level, the economic conditions in Mexico during the lead-up to NAFTA, including the 1982 debt crisis and the 1994 peso crisis, were shaped by the neoliberal policies of the time. Liquid Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) encouraged by free trade proponents meant foreigners could pull money quickly from Mexico in anticipation of a currency devaluation, worsening the pain of economic suffering for the Mexican people. More precisely, the decline in the average real minimum wage and the rise in wealth inequality align with the effects of NAFTA, as the agreement was part of the same broader strategy of economic liberalization that favored large international corporations. The concentration of wealth, facilitated by privatization under Salinas, arguably paved the way for the kind of economic environment that NAFTA exploited, where corporate profit and economic efficiency were prioritized over domestic labor interests. This was something many workers on both sides of the border resented.[17]

In this context, Reding's critique of NAFTA becomes particularly relevant as it represents the transnational sentiments of workers in the early 1990s, going against the grain of popular free trade ideology of the time. Just as free trade academics saw rising GDP and increased trade flows as justifications for continued neoliberal policy, Reding's vision of the past also informed what he believed.[18] Based upon his understanding of the effects of neoliberal trade policy on Mexico, Reding told Congress that changes to NAFTA would be necessary to avoid worsening worker quality of life. He notes in his opening statement that "the side agreements merely seek—and very gently at that—to enforce differing national standards. In the case of labor, the right to organize free trade unions is explicitly left out. That is peculiar, since by definition–there can be no free market without free labor."[19] "Free labor," as used in this quote, references a worker's ability to organize freely, associate with trade unions, and collectively bargain for safety standards, factory conditions, and fair benefits without restrictions or interference. Reding goes on to say that "free markets are the ostensible aim of international trade agreements such as NAFTA." In other words, the status quo was not enough. The quotation exposes the fundamental contradiction within NAFTA, highlighting how the exclusion of labor rights undermines the very principles of free trade that the agreement purports to support. This internal contradiction is crucial context for a dialogue later in the testimony that bluntly represents the blind eye U.S. Congress turned on its own experts when considering labor issues of its neighboring Latin American country.

The dialogue in question is between Mr. Reding and NAFTA Committee Chairman Senator Dennis DeConcini, a then-freshman Democratic representative of Arizona with a staunch pro-business stance. One section in particular illuminates the intractable dynamic of differing historical world-views. Reding raised a point of concern about the trends in economic reforms, drawing a parallel with the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, where he argued that the benefits of growth were disproportionately channeled to the top one to five percent of the population. He referenced reports from security and CIA analysts, suggesting

that the benefits of Mexico's economic growth were not reaching the majority of the population.

In response, Deconcini focused on job availability and GDP growth in Mexico as a metric of worker wellbeing, rather than income inequality or labor standards. In his version of history, Mexico saw great financial gains during the 20th century and, thus, had nothing to complain about. However, Reding countered by shifting the focus of the conversation to the catastrophic decline in real wages early in the reform period, an aspect of the economic experience that Deconcini overlooked in his assessment of the situation.

Deconcini replied by reminding Reding that, in the very year in which this testimony took place, the peso had been devalued by the Mexican government and was stabilizing. The devaluation drove investment from the country and plummeted wages, necessitating a quick fix to wages, Deconcini argued, that could be accomplished by U.S. investment in Mexico through NAFTA. Reding didn't disagree with Deconcini that U.S. investment in Mexico could have positive impacts on wages, but he did remark that after the stabilization of the Mexican economy, real wages did not rebound as expected. He compared this situation to Costa Rica, where wages typically rose faster than the economy after a crisis, but only in the presence of an independent labor force with free unions, collective bargaining, and the right to strike—asserting that NAFTA would be a threat to those four crucial factors.

In the end, the U.S. Congress *did* pass NAFTA and did not ever ratify, nor come close to ratifying, the American Convention on Human Rights, revealing the ultimate triumph of corporate interest over labor standards. [20] [21]

Reding's testimony reveals a transnational understanding of worker rights that has since deteriorated in manufacturing and political spaces alike, accompanied by built-up resentment for the Mexican workers. In Trump's calls for the end of NAFTA at his first presidential debate in 2016 he said outright, "they're taking our jobs," referring to the Mexican people.[22] With competition between nations so strongly emphasized in political discourse such as this, transnational labor activism in North America, such as partnerships between Mexican, U.S., and Canadian unions, has endured, but achieved little.[23]

PART II: VIEWS FROM HIGH-SKILL MEXICAN AND U.S. WORKERS

Mexico

Mexico: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 2010s

A focus on the benefits of FDI, or the flow of capital from foreign companies and governments into Guanajuato during NAFTA, was common in U.S. print media about the area throughout the 2010s. A *New York Times* article from 2013 entitled "In the Middle of Mexico, a Middle Class Is Rising" describes how the automobile manufacturing industry transformed Silao, Guanajuato,

Mexico.[24] Located in central Mexico, the state of Guanajuato has been a mining hub and exporter of raw metals and minerals since the colonial era.[25] Over the 20th century, its production of a vast range of goods slowly yet steadily grew. In the thirty years since NAFTA's enactment, the state saw a dramatic uptick in machine and aerospace manufacturing—what industries typically refer to as a "high-skill" export.[26]

The article describes the region by relying on an interview with Ivan Zamora, a 23-year-old local mechanical engineer. Zamora had witnessed the changes in his home state throughout his childhood and adolescence. The article asserts that Guanajuato was long known as a "mostly poor state" and as "one of the country's main sources of illegal immigrants to the United States," suggesting that Zamora might have left for the United States if not for the dramatic increase in opportunities that began emerging in Guanajuato. An academic journal corroborates the Times article's narrative, referencing historical automotive data from the Mexican Ministry of Economy on various municipalities within Guanajuato. The data shows that, between 2006 and 2016, the automotive industry added over 18,000 jobs to Silao's workforce, by far the largest number in the province.[27]

In Zamora's depiction of NAFTA, the people of Guanajuato have some level of agency in the region's economic success. It suggests that many of these companies originally entered Guanajuato to take advantage of low wages and maintain the trade benefits under NAFTA, but stayed because of government incentives and the efforts of the diligent local population. He writes that approximately 40 percent of all auto-industry jobs in North America are in Mexico, where thirteen years prior that same figure sat at just 27 percent. Dozens of foreign conglomerates had moved plant operations to Guanajuato by 2013, including major industrial players. Among them were General Motors (GM), a leading American automotive manufacturer; Volkswagen, a prominent German carmaker; Pirelli, an Italian multinational specializing in tire manufacturing for various vehicle types; and Nissin, a Japanese company that provided precision stamping and advanced tooling for automotive parts.

The interview offers an idyllic view of NAFTA's impacts, and of Guanajuato more generally. Likewise, a 2011 academic article offers the narrative of local civilians taking full advantage of the new business from NAFTA and of company initiatives to create productive work environments in the Silao plants.[28] The research paper compares the style of organization at a GM automobile manufacturing plant in its original Mexico City location to the newer version of the plant moved to Silao, Guanajuato in 1995. It notes, for instance, that in the new Guanajuato GM plant "the continuous dissemination of technical knowledge, through the integration of work groups, information, and technological learning allows us to act and make, both individually and collectively, the most correct decisions within the production process."[29] By emphasizing the role of knowledge-sharing and collaborative decision-making at the Silao GM plant, this analysis supports the argument that Guanajuato's perception

of NAFTA in the 2010s was shaped by narratives of opportunity and modernization, even as labor challenges persisted.

The more positive vision of free trade is complicated by the context that NAFTA was implemented during great economic turmoil in Mexico—on the heels of the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s and in tandem with the 1994 Mexican peso crisis.[30] After a steady increase in interest rates and shortening of debt repayment windows globally, Mexico had reached a point in 1982 at which it could no longer repay, or "service," its national debt. When Mexico's minister of finance announced this debt crisis to the U.S. Federal Reserve and the International Monetary Fund, the announcement catalyzed a slew of 27 other developing countries, owing a total of $239 billion, to reschedule their debts as well.[32] The result of the debt crisis in Mexico was a recession, sunken wages, failing banks, and low employment. Subsequently, just as the effects of the Latin American Debt Crisis were beginning to wane, the Mexican people were dealt another financial stab: In 1994, Mexico's government deviated from its traditional monetary policy and devalued the peso against the dollar significantly as an attempt to stabilize it, incidentally leading to capital flight, a severe economic downturn, and ultimately the need for an emergency U.S.-led bailout to stabilize Mexico's economy.[33] This was the era of poverty that Ivan Zamora's grandparents lived through.

Reflecting back on the pre-NAFTA period from the 2010s, some argued that free markets harmed Mexican workers by prolonging the policies that caused the economic hardships of the 80s and 90s. Even the largely optimistic *Times* article reckoned that the "free-market wave of the 1990s failed to produce much more than low-skilled factory work."[31] The statement suggests that, without government intervention, the initial impact of NAFTA on Silao, Guanajuato generated limited worker opportunity.

Although jobs at foreign firms typically offered higher wages compared to what had been available in Guanajuato before the companies established themselves on the market, factory floor employees still earned roughly $3.65 per hour. This persisting low salary shows that floor workers continued to struggle with labor issues—issues the article earlier asserts were only "of the 1990s." It also notes that higher-up professionals began to make up around 30 percent of the workforce at "many" of the automobile plants in the region. The use of the word "many" is noteworthy because it is non-specific and because it suggests that this professionalization trend was not uniform across all plants. Thus, while certain companies and locations may have experienced an increase in well-paid technical and managerial positions, others continued to rely on a predominantly low-wage, low-skill workforce.

Zamora's was just one of several interviews conducted for this article by the *Times* that suggest some real opportunity did emerge in the 2000s, but that most trickle down in Guanajuato was driven by the strategic adaptation of local government rather than emerging as a natural consequence of free trade policy. For example, state-made improvements such as customs facilities, a railroad depot, facilitated transportation to the airport, as well as subsidized

standardized employment tests and training, transformed Silao. One change that had a particularly significant impact on Zamora's life was the opening of a new polytechnic university in Silao, where he got the chance to study engineering, and ultimately secure an internship in the field after graduation. This is something that he says his parents, who became teachers, did not have available to them. The Times' attitude is especially noticeable in a sweeping phrase used towards the end of the article, "on a smaller scale in Guanajuato, individual success is creating a sense of possibility."[34]

Mexico: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 2020s

From the start of his first presidency, Trump sought to dismantle NAFTA. This was not because he acknowledged it was contributing to labor abuses in Mexico by deregulating corporations, but because it was in his political interest to push the idea that Mexican manufacturing workers were "taking" U.S. manufacturing workers' jobs.[35] Eventually, Trump's political ambitions led to the birth of a new trade deal between the United States, Mexico, and Canada called the USMCA. Since the transformation of NAFTA into the USMCA, including the addition of several hefty labor provisions that NAFTA lacked, Mexican perceptions of the original agreement have soured. Although it may not have been President Trump's intention, the introduction of the USMCA brought stronger labor provisions, prompting a reassessment of NAFTA that led to more critical evaluations of its impact on labor conditions, even within high-skill beneficiaries like Silao, Guanajuato. Recent sources thus paint a very different picture of what was occurring in Silao, Guanajuato, during the span of NAFTA.

Just this August, the U.S. Trade Representative's office recognized a complaint against the Pirelli facility in Silao that the company had denied workers the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, and demanded the Mexican government investigate within forty-five days.[36] A USMCA labor law enforcement clause establishes a tool called the Rapid Response Mechanism, making this kind of expedited workers' rights petition possible. The petition, filed by the workers of a local union called *La Liga Sindical Obrera Mexicana*, provides evidence of mistreatment over time and further serves as local historical evidence of the working conditions in Silao during the duration of NAFTA. Under the USMCA, a growing number of interconnected cases against various companies reveal that union leaders in Mexico were controlled by the State or a corporation. This "charro" unionism went virtually unpunished under NAFTA.[37] [38]

The most recent Rapid Response case illuminates how the perception of NAFTA shifted negatively after its end. The case was brought against both the company Pirelli and an allegedly conspiring union called the *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria Metal-Mecánica, SideroMetalúrgica, Automotriz y Proveedoras de Autopartes en General, de la Energía, sus Derivados y Similares de la República Mexicana "Miguel Trujillo López,"* which translates to "National Union of Workers in the Metalworking, Iron and Steel,

Automotive, and Suppliers of Auto Parts in General, Energy, Derivatives, and Similar Industries of the Mexican Republic." I will refer to the aforementioned union as "the MTL union" throughout this paper. In 2003, the MTL union was founded in the province of Coahuila, which borders the American state of Texas and sits two provinces north of Guanajuato.

Pirelli was neither the only company tied to the MTL union, nor the only plant accused of violating international labor law in Guanajuato under NAFTA. According to a 2021 article in *El Sol de México*, workers at the General Motors plant in Silao—that same plant that was praised for efficiency and job creation in the 2010s—were also strategically "neglected" by the MTL union's leader Tereso Medina Ramírez for ten years.[39] This would mean that the labor violations began as early as 2011 but were not aired until the aftermath of NAFTA. Another 2021 article in the *Sol de León* elaborates on the same story, pointing to the distance between the union's central location and Guanajuato as a major issue. The article asserts how the workers felt about the Coahuila-based union representing them on paper before General Motors: *"no tienen ningún tipo de arraigo con nosotros,"* meaning, "they have no ties with us."[40]

Connecticut

Connecticut: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 1990s

The effects of NAFTA and economic liberalization in Guanajuato paralleled significant shifts within the manufacturing-heavy region of Connecticut. While NAFTA's impact on labor in Guanajuato brought about challenges of low wages and uneven labor protections, the "upskilling" programs that came with it were viewed by the Guanajuato local government as opportunities for upward mobility.[41] Meanwhile, Connecticut unions upheld their labor standard demands and grew skeptical of "upskilling" programs that sought to reduce the number of employees necessary in each plant over time.[42] Connecticut workers also became wary of U.S. manufacturing companies like General Electric and Pratt & Whitney, as CEOs increasingly moved plant operations abroad.[43] Just as Mexican workers in Silao contended with issues of labor representation and job stability, U.S. industrial workers grappled with job relocations, wage pressures, and the weakening of union influence.

Over the course of NAFTA, manufacturing giants Pratt & Whitney and General Electric misled a Connecticut manufacturing union multiple times.[44] The impact of this betrayal can be best understood in the context of the New England state's extensive history of manufacturing work. Pratt & Whitney first entered the Connecticut labor market when establishing operations in 1850s Hartford as a machine tool producer. They eventually transitioned in 1929 to designing aircraft engines. After World War II, the company expanded operations dramatically across the state and became Connecticut's most prominent industrial employer. In 1920, General Electric first entered the Connecticut market when the company purchased a factory in Bridgeport.[45] After steady expansion in Connecticut over the course of the 20th century, General Electric

moved its headquarters in the early 1970s from Manhattan, New York City to Fairfield, Connecticut.[46]

The first major fracture of trust between Pratt & Whitney and the Connecticut workers occurred in 1993 as NAFTA was being passed through Congress. During the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) union contract renegotiations that year, the company was able to win significant agreements on wage reductions, less stringent seniority provisions, and even tax concessions from the Connecticut legislature.[47] The struggle between the two entities only heightened in the following years. This demonstrates how NAFTA's passage coincided with a critical moment in which many of Connecticut's manufacturing workers were beginning to distrust Connecticut-based multinational manufacturing corporations. It also illustrates how corporations like Pratt & Whitney exploited the climate of economic uncertainty surrounding NAFTA to secure a higher profit margin.

By December of 1998, the IAM union of District 91 in Connecticut reached an accord with Pratt & Whitney for a three-year contract.[48] Yet, within less than a year, the company announced plans to relocate critical engine repair work outside the state. The following year, General Electric would also move even further than other U.S. plants, launching its "Globalization and Supplier Migration" strategy.[49] Moving production to nations with lower labor costs was the only way for GE to reduce the 10 percent input price reduction targets to 14 percent that year, the company announced.[50] According to Forrant, the benefits of moving to Mexico included the potential for sustained low labor costs, more "friendly" unions, and "average daily wage rates of $6.00."[51]

The experience of Connecticut's manufacturing workers in the 1990s reflects a broader shift in U.S. perceptions of NAFTA as a driver of labor insecurity rather than economic opportunity. Initially framed as a pathway to mutual economic growth, NAFTA instead exposed U.S. workers to heightened vulnerability as corporations like Pratt & Whitney and General Electric leveraged the threat of outsourcing to extract wage cuts, weaken union power, and justify plant relocations. From its start, NAFTA symbolized a deeper betrayal for workers in a state with a rich manufacturing legacy. While local governments in Guanajuato, Mexico, promoted NAFTA as a means for "upskilling" and economic mobility, Connecticut unions viewed corporate "upskilling" initiatives with suspicion, recognizing them as tactics to reduce workforce size. This growing cynicism about trade liberalization would later shape political discourse on globalization and trade policy well into the 21st century.

Connecticut: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 2000s

By the 2000s, the notion that manufacturing jobs were disappearing as a result of NAFTA remained prevalent in CT local media, and yet, there was also awareness that the deal had a similar impact on Mexican workers. A 2006 *Hartford Courant* article rails on the damages of NAFTA to both Connecticut and Mexican communities, calling for Congress to reject the copycat Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).[52] The Courant claims that between

1993 and 2002, 12,720 Connecticut manufacturing jobs were "destroyed by NAFTA." They also acknowledge the issues the deal posed for Mexico and the promises it failed to live up to there, noting the continued increase in labor issues in Mexico over the first decade of NAFTA. The Courant even pointed out that, "by flooding the market with highly subsidized American agricultural products, NAFTA destroyed 1.7 million farming jobs in Mexico." The article purports that in the Central American countries in question (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, as well as the Dominican Republic), "workers, teachers, farmers and church leaders" were forming a movement to oppose the Trade Agreement after "Learning from Mexico's tough lesson." The article called for organizing a similar movement to oppose the Act in Connecticut. Nevertheless, any movement that may have emerged was unsuccessful, and CAFTA, NAFTA's younger sibling trade agreement, was passed through Congress and ultimately implemented widely in 2006.[53] Eventually, local concern culminated in the introduction of a Connecticut State Senate Bill.

In 2007, Connecticut's General Assembly proposed House Bill No. 7032 to address the retention of state manufacturing jobs.[54] The bill mandated that the governor review all existing state contracts by January 1, 2008, to identify those involving services performed outside of Connecticut and assess their economic impacts. It also established a 10-member task force to examine why Connecticut businesses outsource and how factors like taxes, regulations, energy, and healthcare costs contribute to this choice. The bill allowed state agencies to prioritize proposals from companies performing services within the U.S. when contracting and required transparency regarding service locations for state contract bidders. It even specified that contracts involving overseas service would have to include notification requirements and penalties for any unreported domestic changes—a condition that would have been helpful in the cases of Pratt & Whitney and General Motors. Additionally, the Attorney General's office also assisted Connecticut businesses in protecting patents and other operations from unfair foreign competition. These details demonstrate the scope and political power of local concerns over manufacturing jobs in the early 2000s.

Connecticut: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 2010s

In the 2010s, the sentiment that machinist jobs were being drawn from Connecticut to Mexico was still popular. As the field began to shrink, lack of youth interest emerged as another common explanation for disappearing jobs. Simultaneously, the local government and media began to paint a picture of the still-growing employment gap as an affront to Connecticut culture, rooted in its manufacturing history and reputation as the birthplace of various notable inventions. Such cultural pride is evident in the Connecticut State Government account of local industrial history, which boasts the invention and production of the fuel cell that powered NASA's first space suit, as well as the first nuclear submarine and helicopter. The website points to

these accomplishments as proof of the constituents' "Yankee ingenuity and stick-to-itiveness."[55]

A 2011 *Tribune Business News* article explored various perspectives on the decline of machine jobs in manufacturing companies.[56] One executive at the Kaman Corp., an aerospace manufacturing company located in Bloomfield, CT, answered the question of where jobs were going: "We're really competing with offshore companies. In aerospace, they're driven to lower-cost centers like Mexico and China."[57] Robert Desjardins of Granby, a CT machinist of 26 years who had been a victim of mass layoffs and was eventually re-hired by other companies multiple times between 2009 and 2011, subscribed to the idea that flat wages were driving the change. However, while some–like the Kaman executive–believed flat wages were a result of foreign competition, others complained that community colleges were not training machinists properly anymore, or that young people simply grew to regard manufacturing as "dirty." Whether this idea of "dirtiness" stemmed from the shift of many plant jobs abroad is not discussed in the article, but the two phenomena seemed to be occurring simultaneously.

The article concludes with the opinion of 52-year-old manufacturing worker Joe Morin on why job growth in the industry was slow and why it lacked so many young people. Mr. Morin himself had moved to Connecticut from Massachusetts because of manufacturing layoffs, and his wife, as a schoolteacher, had a unique window into how youth saw manufacturing. Morin said all the volatility in the manufacturing job market had simply pushed high schools to encourage their students to attend college instead, and to seek a white-collar job as opposed to a blue-collar one.

Clearly, late into NAFTA, in the 2010s, manufacturing remained core to Connecticut identity, and the belief in the unfairness of trade policy for their industries also persisted. This phenomenon was still apparent in a piece written by Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy in the *Hartford Business Journal* in 2015:

> Since I was elected to the Senate, I've learned that any factory in Connecticut can compete with those in China or Europe or Mexico. It's the wrongheaded trade agreements, like NAFTA, that harm our state's companies.[58]

Murphy's sentiments were not just a passing critique, but part of a broader political and socio-economic strategy. In 2011, industrial exports were the most successful sector of Connecticut's economy.[59] As such, Murphy emphasized local manufacturing as a priority in his campaign as early on as January, 2011.[60] His advocacy reflected a broader sentiment that had become increasingly common in the 2010s: the view that free trade agreements, especially NAFTA, had been designed without sufficient regard for the impact on U.S. manufacturing communities—high-skill industries included.

These frustrations in the 2010s blended with an acceptance of adaptation to a smaller workforce and a hope to maintain a competitive advantage, at

least in the most educationally demanding jobs. Not long after, though, the undercurrent frustration bubbled to the surface in the 2020s, where it was exacerbated by politicians. Representatives shamelessly used nationalist economic ideas as an easy unifier among U.S. workers, which soon turned to a hatred of Mexican workers.[61] All across the country, on both the right and the left, the nationalist argument has increasingly solidified itself as a tool to secure the working-class vote.[62] Nowhere was this nationalism more fervent than on Trump's campaign trail.[63]

Shortly following Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election, Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy emphasized how Democrats need "to listen to working-class Americans" in an interview with National Public Radio, attributing the election loss to a disconnect between the democratic party and the working-class voter base.[64] He spoke broadly, arguing, "We claim to be the party that represents working people, poor people. And yet, as you saw in this election, they are moving to the Republicans in droves. I think that is in part because we aren't listening to what is really driving people's emotional center right now." Murphy's success in a resilient, high-skilled manufacturing region like Connecticut indicates the strategic power of mobilizing emotionally resonant national narratives–like manufacturing decline–to win working-class votes.

PART III: CONCLUSION—SAME STORY, DIFFERENT TRUTHS

Ideological Trajectories of Guanajuato and Connecticut Workers

Consider again the peaks and valleys of worker perception of and adaptation to NAFTA. If the trade deal itself were judged in a vacuum, workers might have an unchanging opinion, or a steadily worsening or improving view of it. Instead, each shift is dictated by a broader social, political, cultural, and historical context.

For Connecticut industrial workers, the 1990s marked a simmering disillusionment with globalization.[65] [66] Many believed their livelihoods were becoming increasingly precarious. By the 2000s, the workers' experience of companies reneging on agreements with unions combined with declining employment in the Connecticut manufacturing industry caused increased concern for the future among workers. Although revenues from exports in Connecticut were peaking, job availability was diminishing as cheap inputs from abroad flooded in and technological improvements made production processes more efficient.[67] In the 2010s, young people had begun to come to terms with the new structure and voluntarily train for other work. As fewer young people entered the field, the already shrinking specialty was left with growing vacancies. Subsequently, as NAFTA came under attack in Trump's first administration, the late 2010s ignited an all-time high of fear and anger at the deal.[68]

In Silao, however, manufacturing workers in the 1990s were cautiously hopeful, having been burned before by Salinas-era politics but desperate for job opportunity in the aftermath of the peso crisis.[69] The 2000s and early 2010s brought a slightly more optimistic attitude among workers, as governments in Silao and Leon began to adapt to attract and keep higher-skill manufacturing jobs.[70] Still, real wages remained low and many were quietly disgruntled with the persistence of poor labor standards even as business flooded in.[71] [72] At the end of NAFTA and afterward, workers and politicians alike in the U.S. became more vocal about *their* dissatisfaction with the effects of the trade deal, and Mexican workers—including in Guanajuato—became outwardly wary of the stagnant wages and lack of adequate union freedoms.

In both places, it was in the years following NAFTA that the deal reached peak unpopularity among workers, based on evidence in the media and legal documents. Over the course of NAFTA, worker attitudes somewhat followed the economic conditions, but not entirely. Attitudes were mixed in both Guanajuato and Connecticut, where life was improving in some ways but worsening in others. In Guanajuato, this meant more high-skill jobs but stagnant wages and continued concerns over labor standards. In Connecticut, this meant revenue from cheap inputs and duty-free exports, but some outsourcing of labor and weakened unions. Ultimately, the strongest shift in perception of the deal came from the political weaponization of the effects of NAFTA. The perceptions manufacturing workers had of NAFTA, in both Connecticut and Guanajuato thus responded even more strongly to the politicization of NAFTA's effects than to the effects themselves.

High-Skill, High Tolerance

The high-skill specialization of the Connecticut manufacturing economy maintained resilience compared to the American Rust Belt.[73] Aerospace and advanced auto parts, the predominant domains of Connecticut plants, proved far more resistant to outsourcing than the downstream metal products of the Midwestern plants. Low-skill labor is, after all, easier to source abroad. Meanwhile, engineering work—even at the assembly floor level— requires significant training and apprenticeship compared to simpler products.

Like Connecticut, Guanajuato is one of the few areas in Mexico today that still boasts a relatively high-skill labor force capable of producing complex automobiles and weapons. Largely thanks to the ingenuity of the local government, trade school and vocational training programs have flourished in Guanajuato, ensuring that the workforce is equipped with specialized skills.

High-skill workers "should," according to the free trade philosophy, be quite happy as they gain more and lose less under NAFTA than other regions of their respective countries. However, it is evident that Connecticut's "emotional center" is angry at the politicians who enacted NAFTA. What free-market enthusiast academics miss is that local culture, governance, and global political trends alter the public mind in important ways. The fact that

these two regions are full of "high-skill" manufacturers makes the emotional intolerance to free trade all the more surprising, and the weight of political influence all the more visible.

Politicians Framing the Past

All of the worst "effects" of NAFTA were not inevitable, but rather hardline decisions made by private manufacturing firms to maximize profits. Despite this, by way of persuasive protectionist politicians, the predominant narratives around NAFTA in manufacturing communities have been framed as an issue of one country versus another, masking the true culprits.

One lesson embedded in the trajectories of worker attitudes in these two high-skill regions is that political will is incredibly powerful, as it cherry-picks which economic reality to emphasize. In 2018, Trump struck a deal with Foxconn, a Taiwanese manufacturer, to build a campus near Milwaukee, promising 13,000 jobs and calling it the "eighth wonder of the world." Backed by $4.5 billion in taxpayer subsidies, the project so far has only created 1,000 jobs, yet Trump still won the manufacturing vote in the 2024 election.[74] This scenario is reminiscent of the 2010s free-trade campaigns in Guanajuato. There, local government officials ran on a promise of worker opportunity and promoted that dream in the media, while also allowing union corruption and unlivable factory floor wages to persist. In both scenarios, optimistic and misleading political messaging eclipsed the politicians' failure to address the issues at hand.

Although NAFTA is a story of the past, its history has many angles that can be emphasized. At least for now, the emphasis placed by politicians tends to become what is widely considered the truth. As evidenced in the case of *La Liga Sindical Obrera Mexicana*'s Rapid Response Mechanism petition against Pirelli, the USMCA has initiated a new wave of reevaluating trade history. If manufacturing workers in the United States and Mexico are ever to be free of the shared struggles against corporate exploitation, they should use the adjudication tools available in this new trade deal to their fullest extent. By bringing enough transnational labor cases to USMCA courts, it could be possible to collectively override political pressures and finally forge an accurate media narrative of cross-border worker solidarity that holds policy-makers accountable for their labor promises.

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