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01. Introduction

- 1 Trade agreements increasingly included non-trade provisions to balance trade issues and other issues affected by trade. Yet, they are now strategically oriented because of the economic tensions between the United States and China (Gagné and Rioux, 2022; Orbie, 2021; Velut and al 2022)¹. As outlined in the introduction to this issue, this trend must be understood in relation to a 'dialectic' between regulation and geoeconomic rivalry special issue, trade policy is no longer being governed by international liberalism as it is increasingly shaped by security concerns, technological rivalry, and the politicization of global supply chains. The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)² introduced new labor provisions, and more specifically a Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM). This offers a good case study for this special issue since as a tool for labor rights enforcement targeting progressive policy interests, it also is a strategic instrument to realign production away from low-cost jurisdictions.
- 2 Unlike the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its weak labor side-agreement on labor, the USMCA's RRM empowered governments, unions, and civil society actors to target workplace-level violations swiftly and with real sanctions, bypassing lengthy state-to-state dispute processes. Hence, the RRM brought significant, improvements in labor conditions in Mexico, particularly in industries long dominated

by employer-controlled unions. The RRM embodies the kind of embedded linkage that the special issue describes as the strongest form of trade integration, both substantively and procedurally. However, the trade-labor linkage reveals the fragility of those types of linkages in a volatile political and strategic context.

- 3 The re-election of Donald Trump will shape the future of the RRM and the broader social dimension of the USMCA. At this moment, the RRM is still an important trade policy instrument and is used by the new administration as a tool to block “social dumping” in North America. If the RRM mechanism was the result of bipartisan collaboration, Trump’s America First doctrine and deregulatory economic agenda suggest a more disembedded and strategically oriented trade policy. This potential rollback echoes the concept of “trade disconnects” in which integrated social concerns are de-linked or marginalized when they conflict with nationalist, security-based, or purely commercial imperatives. The social dimension being a tool to block Mexican imports and the entry of Chinese products crossing the US-Mexico border.
- 4 The structure of this article is organized around four sections : 1) the trade-labor linkage in the literature; 2) the USMCA’s RRM and how it improved on the NAFTA side-agreement; 3) the RRM cases and their impacts; and, 4) the future of the RRM in the new North American context. As the USMCA approaches its 2026 review process, it is crucial to assess the RRM's effectiveness and its future trajectory³.

02. The Trade and Labor Nexus

- 5 Since the 1970s and 1980s, the global economy has experienced deep structural changes, leading to a widening gap between national labor institutions and increasingly transnational economic activities. This has weakened the traditional international labor regime centered on the International Labour Organization (ILO), which, although still active and very pertinent, no longer functions as the only pillar of labor governance as other institutional trajectories have emerged and developed.
- 6 Rioux (2014) introduced the concept of global labor governance (GLG) within the broader context of globalization and the declining coherence of national regulatory systems. The GLG identified three emerging “constellations” of global labor governance. The first is related to possible reform or redeployment of multilateral institutions, specifically the ILO (Drouin and Duplessis, 2009), the second is the trade and labor linkages in trade agreement and the third is the realm of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Arthurs, 2008; O’Rourke, 2006). The coexistence of public, private, and hybrid initiatives reflects both innovation and incoherence.
- 7 The literature on international labor cooperation mostly centers on the ILO and, as a result, the trade-labor nexus in trade agreements is often portrayed as a menace to the ILO well-respected mandate and work. Historically, there were discussions on the interactions of trade and labor systems in international law since the creation of the ILO and the negotiation of the Havana Charter (Charnovitz, 1987). Yet, the ILO did not, until only recently, address directly the labor and trade nexus and the WTO decided not to go that route. As a result, labor provisions were included in bilateral trade agreements by many industrialized countries that were willing to link trade to labor norms and standards, such as the United States and Canada which first negotiated NAFTA and a its side-agreement on labor cooperation.

- 8 NAFTA was the first trade agreement to introduce dispositions regarding labour cooperation. NAFTA addressed this issue in a side-agreement, the NAALC (North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation). NAALC was elaborated after a debate preceding the election of President Bill Clinton who had promised to work towards a global social system and a more human globalization process⁴. This side-agreement was a subject of intense scientific and politique debates, and was generally considered weak (Middlebrook, 2024; Compa and Brooks, 2019, Polaski, 2025). Indeed, many other trade agreements improved of the NAFTA-NAALC model (Deblock and Rioux, 2009; Zini, 2013).
- 9 At the beginning of the first term of Donald Trump, it was decided to include “all of the incremental strengthening of labour obligations found in US trade agreements negotiated after NAFTA and notably included an annex that required detailed reforms to Mexican labor relations law (Polaski, 2025; Compa, 2018)⁵. The RRM was not yet part of the agreement. The Democrats had won control of the US House of Representatives and refused to ratify the pact without stronger enforcement labor provisions. It was agreed that a Facility-Specific mechanism (RRM) was to operate at the firm level. It was the Democrats in the US Congress who forced the negotiation of the RRM⁶.
- 10 The pressure for labour law reforms in Mexico was first exerted by the US in the context of the negotiations of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP). The Mexican government had promised to undertake labor reforms during the US-led negotiations of TPP but “(...) when the Trump administration pulled the United States out of the TPP, domestic progress on labor reform in Mexico once again stalled”. (Bown and Claussen, 2024, p. 344). Historically, despite a strong national labor law⁷, Mexico’s labor regulations allowed companies to suppress wages and workers’ rights, creating a competitive advantage that attracted manufacturing jobs from the United States and Canada. In the context of the USMCA, the labor reform abolished “protection unions” (unions controlled by employers) while the RRM helped in its enforcement.
- 11 The United States signed a bilateral protocol with Mexico which was replicated by Canada. The RRM is a state-to-state enforcement tool that allows the United States or Canada to request an investigation of a specific facility (covered facility) in Mexico that is suspected of denying workers’ rights, particularly on the freedom of association and collective bargaining. Its goal is to provide rapid, facility-specific remedies, and it represents the most judicialized and binding form of trade-labor linkage to date.
- 12 It stands out within GLG schemes that rely mostly on soft law, moral persuasion, voluntary compliance, and fragmented institutional frameworks. The ILO monitors and issue recommendations but cannot sanction. CSR initiatives and trade-labor clauses are often aspirational or dependent on diplomatic pressure (Rioux and Vaillancourt, 2020; Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). In contrast, the RRM is aiming at “hard law”: it has binding enforcement powers and targets the facilities directly. It allows for on-site verification, labor panel review, and the imposition of tariffs or trade remedies if violations are not addressed. As such, it can be considered a scheme of corporate social responsibility scheme by treaty (Claussen and Bown, 2024). It was depicted as a potential new generation of trade-labor linkages (Polaski, Nolan and Rioux, 2022) tying labor rights enforcement to market access, a breakthrough in trade-labor governance schemes (USMCA Chapter 31-A and B).
- 13 The trade-labor linkage is not a panacea. Much of the literature on the subject is quite critical (Compa and Brooks, 2019; Boulanger and al, 2021; Carillo Obregon, 2023). The

weakness of the trade-labor linkage is mostly related to three dimensions: the emphasis of trade and corporate interest, the complexities of its enforcement as a trade related issue and the importance of the role of civil society and trade unions that are not well endowed in resources to make a real difference in the equation. The RRM is nevertheless an innovative new instrument that had some real impacts in Mexico. The next section will concentrate on how the USMCA's RRM improved labor governance in North America.

03. How did the USMCA's RRM improve the North American Labor Governance

- 14 In this section, we will discuss how the RRM improved on previous trade-labour linkages in North America. Many developments have been observed since 1994 in linking trade and labor issues in a movement of trade policies “embeddedness,” i.e. their linkages with other social and economic policies (Kolben and Rioux, 2023; Velut, 2023). It was not until the USMCA and its RRM, driven by decades of labor advocacy and political shifts, that a more embedded and enforceable trade-labor mechanism emerged. Other trade agreements made improvements since 1994 (Velut and al., 2022; Goff, 2021) but the RRM stands out. One of the most impressive trade-labor mechanisms is indeed the RRM under the USMCA specifically targeting companies operating in Mexico that export goods to the United States and Canada.
- 15 While the NAALC was limited in enforcement power, it symbolized an early attempt to address “trade and” linkages within the broad agenda of humanizing globalization (Polaski and al, 2022). The RRM is an innovation that planted the seed of a new approach to trade-labor linkages and enforcement. Designed to address specific labor rights violations within exporting enterprises, the RRM departs from traditional state-to-state dispute mechanisms and allows for faster intervention against individual workplaces suspected of infringing labor laws. The RRM is an expression of the “enforcement turn” in trade policies that have concrete effects on the ground (Boulangier, Rioux and Zini 2021). Undeniably, it has made significant progress in labor cooperation with outcomes that deserve attention.
- 16 The RRM targets workplace level violations of freedom of association and collective bargaining, but it sets a precedent for targeted labour enforcement in trade deals. Its key objectives are to ensure stronger labor protections in Mexico, prevent unfair wage competition that disadvantages workers in the United States and Canada, encourage independent unionization in Mexican industries and could perhaps serve as a model for future labor trade agreements⁸.
- 17 In theory, the USMCA is reciprocal, but footnotes in the text support the argument of asymmetry of accessibility to the RRM.

(...) the bilateral agreements between the US-Mexico and Canada-Mexico are formally reciprocal in that any of the parties can request review of denials of rights by firms in another party's territory. However footnotes to the two agreements limit requests by Mexico to challenging an ‘enforced order’ of the relevant labour relations administrative bodies of the other countries (USMCA Annex 31-A.2 Footnote 2; Annex 31-B.2 Footnote 1). In addition to waiting until the administrative process has been completed, court challenges must also be allowed to proceed before action can be taken. In practice, this vitiates the timeliness of the ‘rapid response’ mechanism with regard to denials of rights affecting workers in

the US and Canada. This asymmetry has been widely criticized in Mexico and there is no theoretical or policy logic for this higher threshold for accessibility of the RRM. (Polaski, 2025, p. 18)

- 18 The mechanism has gained attention for its effectiveness as it punishes the exporting enterprises rather than the exporting country, thereby putting the pressure of adjustment on the workplace and the employers. Unlike previous labor provisions, which required state-to-state arbitration and lengthy proceedings, the RRM enables direct action against specific firms. This is achieved through a petition-based system that allows labor organizations, trade groups, or governments to submit claims of worker rights violations. If the allegations are credible, an investigation is initiated, and penalties such as tariff increases or import restrictions can be swiftly imposed on the offending company.
- 19 It is called “rapid” and it is rapid in comparison to other mechanisms. Traditional labor enforcement mechanisms often require years of negotiation and litigation before any corrective measures are implemented⁹. The RRM aims to resolve disputes within approximately 115 days, making it one of the fastest trade-related labor enforcement tools in the world (see tables 1 and 2 below). This speed is important for labor activists and workers, as delays in enforcement often mean prolonged exploitation, if not impunity. By ensuring swift responses, the RRM creates immediate incentives for companies to comply with labor laws, rather than engaging in prolonged legal battles.

Table 1: USMCA's RRM versus NAFTA's NAALC

Factor	NAFTA-NAALC	USMCA-RRM
Labor Enforcement	Weak, dependent on politics	Strong, binding
Enforcement Speed	3-5 years, legal appeal available	115 days, no appeal
Targets	Governments	Individual workplaces
Sanctions	Never	Trade penalties, import bans

Source: Authors

Table 2: USMCA's RRM

Enforcement Process and Timeline Stage		
Stage		Action
Complaint Submission	Day 1	Labour unions, workers, or NGO file complaint
Initial US Review	30 days	USTR assesses credibility
Mexican Government Investigation	10 days	Determines whether to investigate
Company Resolution Period	45 days	Violating firm must comply

US Trade Action	115 days	Import bans or penalties imposed
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Source: Authors

- 20 The next section is concentrating on cases and impacts of the use of the RRM.

04. Cases and Impacts

- 21 According to U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the RRM has been actively utilized to address labor rights violations in Mexico. Since 2020 and as of January 2025, the U.S. DOL, in collaboration with the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), has initiated more than thirty RRM cases that primarily focus on allegations of denying workers' rights to free association and collective bargaining. Through these RRM cases, over 42,000 workers have directly benefited from interventions aimed at safeguarding their labor rights.
- 22 The RRM has delivered benefits to Mexican workers, including: the formation of independent labor unions, replacing employer-dominated unions, increased accountability of corporations operating in Mexico, particularly in the automotive, manufacturing, and mining industries, and encouraging Mexican employers to comply with labor laws and improve conditions for workers. Furthermore, unlike previous trade dispute mechanisms that often led to diplomatic tensions, the RRM has largely fostered cooperative enforcement. Out of all cases initiated under the RRM, few required independent panel reviews, demonstrating that most disputes can be resolved through direct negotiations. Recent cases (as of January 2025)¹⁰ involve:
- Vidrio Decorativo Occidental (January 2025) *Allegations:* Denial of workers' rights, including failure to pay owed bonuses and wrongful termination of union-supportive employees. *Resolution:* The company agreed to pay back wages and bonuses, rehire dismissed workers, issue a neutrality statement, and allow labor rights training.
- Hulera Tornal (January 2025) *Allegations:* Non-compliance with a sector-wide agreement, resulting in reduced contractual benefits for workers. *Action:* The U.S. government requested Mexico to review the alleged violations under the RRM.
- 23 The very first case offers few insights on the effectiveness of the RRM. The RRM's very first case was important in establishing the effectiveness of the mechanism. It targeted General Motors (GM) plant in Silao (2021) in which workers' rights violations led to a full RRM investigation. The case resulted in a new independent union being elected to represent workers. The case set a precedent for how the mechanism would be applied and enforced in Mexico illustrating how labor complaints could lead to real consequences for corporations, forcing them to respect workers' rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. It empowered Mexican workers, encouraged fair union representation, and reinforced trade-labor compliance under USMCA.
- 24 The violations were: interference in a union contract vote, obstruction of workers' rights to freely organize, destruction of ballots during a collective bargaining agreement vote and intimidation and retaliation against pro-union workers. The complaint was filed by the USTR, Katherine Tai, the Independent Mexican labor activists, the Mexican Ministry of Labor and the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations)¹¹. From the report of irregularities to the

rescheduling of a new union vote under independent monitoring, there were 4 months. In August, 5,000 workers participated in a new, monitored election overwhelmingly rejecting the existing union contract with CTM, breaking decades of employer-controlled union dominance.¹²

- 25 GM was forced to accept the new vote outcome. The benefit for GM was that it was assured fair labor trade compliance under the USMCA and could export to the United States and Canada. Not only did GM have to adjust labor practices to ensure compliance, but other multinational companies in Mexico took notice, ensuring more transparent labor conditions as the case strengthened confidence in the USMCA's labor provisions. Firms operating in Mexico understand they need to comply with strict labor rights provisions and that violations can lead to trade penalties, financial losses, and reputational damage. The case led to a decline in employer-controlled unions in Mexico as independent unions gained ground, giving workers real bargaining power. This is part of a larger issue regarding Mexico's labor law reforms and the USMCA innovations.
- 26 In July 2025, an RRM panel found for the first time that a facility in Mexico denied its workers' rights concluding that the facility fired workers based on their union preferences and helped the company's favored union gather worker support. In May 2024, a panel decision in a San Martin mine case had confirmed previous reports that Mexico prevailed in the first RRM case to reach a panel¹³. The RRM continues to be a trade-labor linkages with much potential for the future.

05. The Future of the RRM

- 27 Bown and Claussen (2024) analyzed the effectiveness of the RRM in enforcing labor rights assessing the RRM's design, implementation, and outcomes, providing insights into its successes and areas for improvement, discussing the broader implications for labor rights enforcement in international trade agreements. They highlight the innovative approach to enforcing labor rights and note that the RRM has been effective in addressing labor violations promptly and enhancing corporate accountability and improving labor conditions. They suggest that addressing issues related to transparency, fairness, and administrative capacity is crucial for its sustained success and potential adoption in future trade agreements of the "RRM model".
- 28 Polaski and al (2022) explored the motivations behind and implications of the USMCA's unprecedented labor provisions. They evaluated these changes in terms of their effectiveness, legitimacy, and impact on Mexican sovereignty, concluding with reflections on the USMCA-RRM potential as a model for future trade agreements. This perspective highlights the mechanism's role in addressing workplace-level labor rights issues within the framework of international trade agreements while recognizing that this process is structured politically by the influence exerted by social actors and trade unions as well as by the asymmetric relations between the three countries.
- 29 Claussen (2024) acknowledged that the RRM has positively impacted on Mexico's labor reforms, particularly in regions where implementation has been slow, while emphasizing that the RRM should complement, not replace, Mexico's institution-building efforts. Claussen recommended procedural improvements, such as increasing transparency and information sharing with companies under investigation to ensure its smooth operation and to support broader labor reform initiatives within member

countries. The RRM has been criticized for its opacity. The criteria for selecting cases, the evidence required for initiating investigations, and the decision-making process of the USTR are not fully transparent. This has led to concerns that lobbying and political pressures may influence which cases are pursued and which are ignored. Companies have also raised concerns about due process, arguing that they are not always given sufficient notice or an opportunity to appeal before import restrictions are imposed. Furthermore, the USTR has withheld complaint details from Mexican authorities.

- 30 The RRM is criticized for the bureaucratic burden and economic costs on Mexico. Mexican labor authorities are overwhelmed, spending resources investigating RRM cases instead of broader labor policy improvement thereby focusing on individual cases rather than systemic issues might not be the most efficient way to improve labor conditions across Mexico¹⁴. LeClerq and al. (2024) recently reported that the RRM was mostly efficient in the case of well-organized labor unions, and they recommend more technical assistance and social engagement in the future.
- 31 Polaski (2025) argued that the upcoming USMCA review scheduled in 2026 will be a strong moment that will define its future as many stakeholders are gearing up for the consultations that are opening November 2025. Mexico might exert pressure for a more symmetrical RRM. Asymmetry is a problem as the RRM is a one-sided tool against Mexico for the United States and Canada. Mexican companies can be targeted anytime, whereas U.S. and Canadian companies are only investigated if their governments agree to an inquiry¹⁵. This creates a power imbalance, reinforcing the perception that the RRM serves trade interests more than labor justice. This imbalance has led some Mexican officials to argue that the RRM functions as a one-sided enforcement tool, reinforcing US economic interests rather than promoting fair labor practices equally across all three countries.
- 32 The most important critique is indeed that US trade interests are most important. One of the main objectives is economic competitiveness, not just labor rights. The RRM indirectly benefited the United States by raising labor costs in Mexico, reducing its low-wage advantage. Although few Mexican companies have been targeted, the RRM sanctions might discourages investment, particularly in export industries. Trump's trade advisors admitted that labor reforms in Mexico were a way to shift automotive production back to the United States.
- 33 During the 2026 review, Mexico could push for adjustments to make the RRM more balanced and reciprocal. Polaski (2025) argued:
- (...) accumulating experience indicates that there are flaws in the design of the RRM when a case is referred to a labor panel. The scheduled 2026 review of the USMCA provides the parties an opportunity to reflect on the RRM and potentially to strengthen it in pursuit of further upward convergence of wages and working conditions in North America. The upheaval in broader US trade policy makes the outcome highly uncertain. (Polaski, 2025, p. 20)
- 34 The RRM under the USMCA was not a primary focus for Donald Trump, but it was indirectly significant to his broader economic and trade policies. Trump championed the USMCA as a replacement for NAFTA, claiming it was a better deal for American workers. In their respective ways, Trump and Biden made strong cases of linking market access to the respect of the labor chapter included in the USMCA. The RRM was enforced by the Biden administration and thus the question arises as to how the Trump administration will enforce the USMCA and the RRM. Trump's public statements on the

USMCA focused almost exclusively on economic nationalism, repatriating manufacturing jobs, and correcting trade imbalances created by NAFTA, which he described as “the worst trade deal ever”.

- 35 Let’s recall that, if the RRM was ultimately included in the final agreement, it was added under pressure from Congressional Democrats and labor unions, particularly to secure the support of Nancy Pelosi and AFL-CIO during the ratification process (Polaski and al., 2022). During his first mandate, Trump’s administration’s acceptance of the labor provisions was primarily strategic, aimed at neutralizing opposition to the deal rather than advancing a labor rights agenda. As Bown and Claussen (2023) noted, while the RRM became a central tool for labor enforcement under the Biden administration, it was essentially a congressional and union-driven mechanism, folded into the USMCA in exchange for bipartisan legislative support.
- 36 While Trump signed the USMCA into law, the substantive implementation and activation of the RRM only began after his term, aligning more closely with the Biden administration’s worker-centered trade policy. There were positive political and diplomatic implications; notably with improved U.S.-Mexico labor cooperation through joint investigations. The United States invested in labor capacity-building programs for labor inspectors, the modernization of Mexico’s labor courts and, efforts to strengthen workers’ ability to unionize and bargain collectively (DOL 2023).
- 37 Trump did not publicly champion the RRM, but since his re-election his administration initiated six new cases ¹⁶. The RRM aligns somewhat with his "America First" agenda aimed at securing better trade terms for the United States and reducing trade deficits by keeping manufacturing jobs in the United States instead of allowing lower-wage competition from Mexico and holding Mexico accountable for labor rights violations (Lighthizer, 2023). While the Trump administration has initiated six new cases, it is also reviewing the overall structure and political utility of labor enforcement mechanisms within trade agreements. On April 16, 2025, the USTR invoked the RRM under the USMCA to address alleged labor rights violations at Modern Metal Alloys, an aluminum auto parts manufacturer in Querétaro¹⁷. During his Senate confirmation hearing the new USTR Greer described the labour chapter of the USMCA as the most ambitious labor chapter in any agreement and stated he would protect it and try to improve it.
- 38 The RRM could be impacted if business interests push back against strong labor regulations. A significant element is the contrast with the fact that, during Donald Trump’s first mandate, DOL prioritized deregulation, pro-business policies, and limiting the influence of labor unions, while still maintaining worker protections. DOL played a key role in shaping labor, wage, and workplace safety regulations under Trump's "America First" economic policy and limiting foreign labor. Donald Trump opposed increasing the federal minimum wage, supported "right-to-work" laws, weakening unions’ ability to collect dues, and made it easier for companies to classify workers as independent contractors. Indeed, labor policies during the Trump and Biden administrations were fundamentally different. Trump’s policies prioritized business-friendly deregulation, while Biden’s policies focus on worker protections, union support, and wage increases.
- 39 There seems to be a disconnect between the US international and domestic labor policies since US competitiveness and strategic interests are prioritized. If the trade labor linkage is important, it as a competitive policy rather than as a social policy. On his first day back in office, President Trump issued memorandum directing a

comprehensive review of US trade and economic policies mandating federal agencies to assess the nation's trade deficits, investigate unfair trade practices by other countries, and evaluate the impact of current trade policies on national security.

- 40 The future of RRM enforcement under the USMCA appears uncertain. The new trade agenda, focuses mainly on economic nationalism, deregulation, and corporate flexibility, deprioritizes labor diplomacy in favor of strategic protectionism. The DOL and USTR have scaled back funding and institutional emphasis on transnational labor rights monitoring (Polaski, 2025). Mexican officials and labor advocates have raised concerns that the United States is retreating from its enforcement commitments, even as RRM-related capacity-building efforts in Mexico face stagnation due to reduced U.S. engagement. These facts undermine the embedded “trade for” linkage that the RRM represents and could mark a return to more disembodied, market-driven trade logic, as described in this *Trade Linkages and Disconnects* special issue.
- 41 The 2026 review could determine if the USMCA-RRM's future. As the 2026 USMCA review approaches, the potential for labor provisions to be weakened, sidelined, or reframed as mere strategic leverage—rather than rights-based commitments—is high, signaling a possible transition from trade linkages to disconnects. Undoubtedly, Mexico and Canada will have to deal with a complex discuss on the future of the USMCA . It now appears this review could be nothing short of a renegotiation, thus increasing the uncertainties. (Wayne and al, 2024)

06. Conclusion

- 42 The introduction of this special issue warned that geoeconomic rivalry risks reinforcing trade disconnects regarding social and environmental linkages initially embedded in progressive trade agendas. Those linkages seem increasingly marginalized by security, protectionist, or nationalist imperatives as a paradigm shift. Non-market issues are under deregulatory constraints and oriented by strategic industrial and trade policies. While the USMCA RRM is one of the most innovative labor enforcement tools in the history of trade policy improving worker conditions in Mexico, it remains politically charged and structurally biased in favor of the trade interests of the United States. In the short term, the RRM’s success depends on addressing transparency, fair enforcement, and administrative burdens and it is likely to serve as a model for future trade agreements, but without reforms, its credibility and sustainability may be challenged. This article’s core message—that trade-labor linkages are fragile, contingent, and often subordinated to power politics—is especially relevant in an age where trade is being weaponized for strategic competition.
- 43 The RRM functions as a geopolitical lever to reduce Mexico’s comparative labor advantage, reshoring manufacturing to the US and reinforcing American industrial competitiveness. The dual function promoting values while securing national interests is emblematic of a geoeconomic approach where trade instruments are increasingly deployed in service of broader political and strategic objectives. Labor linkages cannot be dissociated from the emerging logic of competitive economic statecraft, where trade policy becomes a terrain for advancing national security and hegemonic influence under the guise of social progress.

- 44 Is the RRM a model for future trade agreements that prioritize labor rights and corporate accountability, or just a one-time experimentation specific to North America (Fortnam, 2022)?¹⁸. The RRM is not just an enforcement tool but a strategic instrument in shaping US labor policy, economic competitiveness, and future trade negotiations. As countries like the United States increasingly prioritize national competitiveness and strategic autonomy, trade policy becomes a tool of unilateral leverage rather than cooperative norm-setting dedicated to progressive goals. This article's core message, which is that trade-labor linkages are fragile, contingent, and often subordinated to power politics, is relevant in an age where trade is being weaponized for strategic competition.
- 45 In the end, we agree with Gomez and Reis that “Multiscalar governance should therefore be understood not merely as a form of international intervention but as a process that strengthens workers’ capacity to exercise meaningful influence in collective bargain” (Gomez and Reis, 2024, p. 57). The trade–labor linkage can be part of the governance transformations, but it is ultimately dependent on the strength of collective action. The imbalance in who can activate the RRM, who is investigated, and how complaints are processed reflects the institutional and discursive barriers to a fully democratizing trade governance. Progressive linkages like the RRM are certainly susceptible to the forms of exclusion this special issue flags as characteristic of disconnects.

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NOTES

1. The idea that the USMCA is "strategically oriented" is supported by Gagné and Rioux (2022). The USMCA, through mechanisms like the RRM, is portrayed as part of a broader effort to rebalance globalization in favor of democratic accountability and social justice, but geopolitical and competitive interests are central. The USMCA has a strategic trade orientation reflecting a new multipolar world economy and economic rivalry.
2. In Mexico, the agreement is called Tratado entre México, Estados Unidos y Canadá (T-MEC) while in Canada it is the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) or Accord Canada-États-Unis-Mexique (ACEUM).
3. This article will concentrate on the United States as Canada has not been very active in this respect.
4. The concept of "globalization with a human face" was a hallmark of President Clinton's trade policy discourse, particularly during the 1992 U.S. presidential campaign and the early years of his administration. See Clinton, Bill. 1993. “Remarks on Signing the North American Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act.” *The American Presidency Project*, December 8. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-signing-the-north-american-free-trade-agreement-implementation-act>.
5. For information of reforms planned, see: United States Mexico Canada Agreement Chapter 23 Annex 23-A. <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/agreements/FTA/USMCA/Text/23-Labor.pdf>

6. Bown and Claussen recall: « Reaching agreement on the RRM required a perfect storm of political-economic events in the United States. These events included the election of Donald Trump in 2016; the unique way and position through which the Trump administration was able to renegotiate the NAFTA, including its timing with respect to the election calendars in both Mexico and the United States; and the way Democrats in the US Congress renegotiated the USMCA after Trump's deal arrived at their door. » (Bown and Claussen, 2024, p. 336).
7. Although Mexico has long maintained a formal legal framework that recognizes core labor rights, including freedom of association and collective bargaining, the enforcement was a problem (Marroquín Bitar, 2024). In response to both domestic pressure and external demands, Mexico enacted significant labor reforms in 2019 (Polaski et al., 2022).
8. For a discussion of the RRM and why it targets Mexico see Polaski and al. (2022) and Compa (2018).
9. Process of the RRM: A government or stakeholder (such as labor unions) can file a complaint against a specific facility suspected of violating workers' rights. During the initial review, the U.S. or Canadian government determines whether there is enough evidence to initiate a formal request for review. Mexican Government Response: The Mexican government investigates and attempts to resolve the issue. If violations persist, U.S. or Canadian officials may conduct an independent verification. If the problem is not resolved, enforcement actions such as tariffs, import bans, or other penalties may be imposed.
10. For a list of RRM cases, please visit the DOL's official page on USMCA Labor Rights Cases. Or <https://ustr.gov/trade-topics/enforcement/dispute-settlement-proceedings/fta-dispute-settlement/usmca/chapter-31-annex-facility-specific-rapid-response-labor-mechanism>. As one reviewer of this article pointed out, the most recent case (as of October 2025) is US vs Alimentos (<https://ustr.gov/about/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2025/august/united-states-seeks-mexicos-review-alleged-denial-workers-rights-alimentos-grole-sa-de-cv>)
11. The involvement of the DOL of the USTR, under Katherine Tai, directly filing a labor complaint under the USMCA's RRM marks a departure from past practice. Traditionally focused on trade interests, the USTR's active role in labor enforcement reflected a shift toward more socially embedded trade governance. This action signaled the emergence of transnational coalitions between state and civil society actors in the implementation of trade agreements. See: USTR (2021). *United States Requests Mexico Review of Worker Rights Denial at General Motors Facility*. Press release, May 12, 2021]. Available at: <https://ustr.gov>
12. In early 2022, SINTTIA (Sindicato Independiente Nacional de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores de la Industria Automotriz) secured better wages and working conditions.
13. The petition alleged that Grupo Mexico committed “denials of rights” by resuming operations at the mine despite an ongoing strike and by engaging in collective bargaining with a coalition of workers despite the fact that a union held the right to represent workers at the mine. On of the question pertained to the definition of a Covered Facility which involves “trade related operations”.
14. Indeed, the USMCA-RRM have a limited impact on the informal economy as the RRM only applies to exporting firms, which employ about 14% of Mexico's workforce.
15. The General Motors Silao case resulted in U.S. intervention over union election irregularities in Mexico, but no equivalent enforcement exists for U.S. workers, despite cases of labor rights violations in U.S. factories. Under current rules, Mexican firms can be investigated and penalized immediately, while U.S. and Canadian companies are only subjected to scrutiny if they are already under investigation by their own national authorities.
16. From January to August 2025, there were several new cases. See: <https://ustr.gov/about/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2025/august/united-states-seeks-mexicos-review-alleged-denial-workers-rights-alimentos-grole-sa-de-cv>

17. The petition, submitted by the Mexican labor union Transformación Sindical, alleges that MMA failed to recognize the union's legitimacy, refused to sign a collective bargaining agreement, denied union access to the facility, retaliated against pro-union workers—including through dismissals—and promoted a company-aligned union. See:

<https://ustr.gov/issue-areas/enforcement/dispute-settlement-proceedings/fta-dispute-settlement/usmca/chapter-31-annex-facility-specific-rapid-response-labor-mechanism>

18. Fortnam (2022) argued that the United States planned to utilize the RRM "frequently," and suggested similar tools are likely to be incorporated into future US trade policies.

ABSTRACTS

Labor provisions in the USMCA, and more specifically its RRM, offer a good case study for this special issue. As a tool for labor rights enforcement, it also is a strategic instrument to realign production away from low-cost production areas. The RRM represents a rare instance of an embedded “trade for” linkage, wherein trade policy is explicitly used as a tool to enforce labor rights. It embodies the kind of linkage that the special issue describes as the strongest form of trade integration, both substantively and procedurally, that ties a trade to social and other non-commercial objectives. However, this article reveals the fragility of trade linkages in a volatile political and strategic context. The re-election of Donald Trump endangers the future of the RRM and the broader social dimension of the USMCA. Trump’s America First doctrine and its deregulatory economic agenda suggest a more disembedded and strategically oriented trade policy. This potential rollback echoes the concept of “trade disconnects,” in which integrated social concerns are de-linked or marginalized when they conflict with nationalist, security-based, or purely commercial imperatives. Yet, the RRM remains an important trade policy instrument and is used by the new administration as a strategic tool to block “social dumping” in North America. This article has four sections: 1) the trade-labor linkage in the literature; 2) the USMCA’s RRM and how it improved the NAFTA side-agreement; 3) the RRM cases and their impacts; and 4) the future of the RRM. As the USMCA approaches its 2026 review, it is crucial to assess the RRM's effectiveness and its future trajectory.

Les dispositions sur le travail de l'ACEUM (Accord Canada-États-Unis-Mexico), et plus précisément son mécanisme de réponse rapide (MRR), constituent une bonne étude de cas pour ce numéro spécial. En tant qu'outil pour l'application des droits des travailleurs, c'est aussi un instrument stratégique pour réaligner la production loin des zones de production à faible coût. Le MRR représente un rare exemple de lien « d'encastrement » (commerce et autres enjeux), où la politique commerciale est explicitement utilisée comme un outil pour faire respecter les droits des travailleurs ou d'autres enjeux non-commerciaux. Le MRR incarne le type d'encastrement social du commerce que le numéro spécial décrit comme la forme la plus forte d'intégration économique. Cependant, cet article révèle la fragilité de ce type de liens dans un contexte politique et stratégique volatil. La réélection de Donald Trump met en danger l'avenir de cette dimension sociale de l'ACEUM. La doctrine America First de Trump et son agenda économique de déréglementation suggèrent des politiques commerciales stratégiquement orientées. Ce possible recul fait écho au concept du numéro spécial de « déconnexions commerciales », dans lequel les préoccupations sociales intégrées sont déconnectées ou marginalisées lorsqu'elles entrent en

conflit avec des impératifs nationalistes, sécuritaires ou purement commerciaux. Cependant, en ce moment, le MRR est toujours un important instrument de politique commerciale utilisé par la nouvelle administration pour contrer le dumping social en Amérique du Nord. La structure de cet article est organisée autour de quatre sections : 1) le lien entre le commerce et les questions relatives au travail dans la littérature ; 2) le MRR de l'ACEUM et comment il a amélioré l'accord parallèle à l'ALENA ; 3) les cas MRR et leurs impacts ; et 4) l'avenir des MRR. À de l'examen de l'ACEUM de 2026, il est crucial d'évaluer l'efficacité du MRR et sa trajectoire future.

INDEX

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