



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s

Annual Report 2006

Maquiladora workers confront corporations and demand their rights

In 2006, maquiladora workers again faced deteriorating working conditions. But it was also a year when many women and men workers confronted their employers about unjust working conditions and the abuse they face at work. In this fight they were supported by the CFO.

Workers at Delphi, Black & Decker, Emerson Electric, Fujikura, Motores Fasco, Grupo Innovador, Alcoa and other companies in four cities along the border were able to resist and restrain corporate abuses. Because of CFO-sponsored training, they workers, women and men, knew how to defend their rights, they refused to accept humiliating treatment by management personnel, they filed legal complaints seeking reinstatement when they were unfairly terminated, they engaged company shareholders to explain their circumstances, and some obtained generous severance pay when they were let go without cause.

In one recent case, CFO advised leaders of a group of 237 workers who filed a complaint against Delphi in Reynosa (a city located in the Mexican border state



Delphi Automotive has more than 3500 workers in its Delnosa operations in Reynosa, Mexico. Photo: Christina Murrey

of Tamaulipas). These women were fired for not using closed shoes. Delphi told them that they needed to stop wearing sandals for their own safety but the company did not supply them. The company would have preferred for the workers simply not to come back – but the women filed a complaint seeking reinstatement, arguing that their dismissal was unjustified.

Several of the leaders of this initiative, as well as workers from other maquiladoras, participated in CFO training and capacity building sessions. Our trainings included a program in Reynosa in February and a regional workshop in Nuevo Laredo in March. In these programs, participants reviewed their knowledge of an organizing

technique known as the “fishtank” as well as learning about strategy development and how to prepare organizing plans.

A new group of current and former workers from Barroterán, a mining town in the border state of Coahuila, joined forces with the CFO. Several maquiladoras are present in the area around Barroterán. In November, the local committee invited us to link with a local group known as EXOC (Former Workers of Coahuila), whose purpose is to support the most vulnerable members of the community, including the families of miners who are retired or deceased. The CFO made a commitment to support the active maquiladora workers of this coal-mining region.

ILO hears CFO testimony and urges the Mexican government to investigate the workers' complaints



The Alcoa plant in Piedras Negras as seen from a nearby intersection. Photo: Taylor Jones.

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND: - March 31, 2006- The International Labor Organization (ILO), a UN agency, released a report about an attempt to form an independent union by workers at Macoelmex (Alcoa) in Piedras Negras, also in the state of Coahuila. In its report, the ILO urged the Mexican government to investigate complaints by the workers about Macoelmex's failure to respect international agreements guaranteeing the rights to form unions, which are under the purview of the ILO.

The CFO was the only source in Mexico to report this news. On April 19, CFO held a press conference in Piedras Negras to publicize the ILO report; two local radio stations and a television broadcast picked up the story, as well as the national-circulation newspapers *El Norte* and *Reforma*.

CFO also organized a session with former workers from Macoelmex to review and analyze the ILO report. Participants in this workshop were drawn among those who were involved in the struggle for an

independent union in 2002 (and who continue today as CFO volunteers). The discussion was a very good one because it allowed workers to link struggles over the last few years in Alcoa with campaigns that are going on today in the same factory. Another positive development of the press conference was the re-involvement in the CFO of Javier Carmona, a former worker at Macoelmex who recently returned from the United States to Piedras Negras. Javier was one of the original signers of the complaint that was received by the ILO.

Because of the CFO's efforts, people in the United States have a better understanding of Mexico

Because our countries are such close neighbors, during 2006 the CFO continued to host many delegations from the United States, as well as visits and other contacts with activists who want to understand more about the lives of men and women who work in the maquiladoras.

Four times a year, we host solidarity delegations from the group Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (Austin, So Close to the Border), which is based in Austin, TX. Visitors from this group are always very supportive of our efforts. Each delegation is different, and the experience is always a rich one for hosts and visitors alike. In 2006 delegations from Austin Tan Cerca visited Piedras Negras, Ciudad Acuña, and Reynosa.

Mexican groups also learn from the CFO

We are always interested in learning about the experiences of other Mexican groups that defend workers' rights, as well as sharing our own experiences over the past twenty years. To this end we attended an August meeting of labor organizations in Mexico City focusing on the garment industry. All of those present worked together to develop a common understanding of the current situation in Mexico, global economic trends and how they are affecting maquiladoras in the garment industry, and workers' rights. We also learned more about the situation of assembly plants in China, since a visitor from a Chinese NGO was present at this meeting. We were able to share the experience that CFO has had in its work with Alcoa, which was very valuable for groups focusing on the garment industry because it allowed them to compare the situation of different industries regarding their behavior as socially responsible businesses.

In addition, grassroots organizations of Mexicans living in the United States have also learned from our experiences. In August, Julia gave a five-hour workshop in Portland, OR, for women immigrants from several states in the northwest United States. The Portland meeting was sponsored by the Western States Center, which holds a gathering each year; Julia offered a workshop sharing information about how the CFO organizes women, including some of the techniques for presentations and motivation that have proved successful in our work.

CFO's global connections win changes in Alcoa's practices

Even though the trend is for increased exploitation of workers by maquiladora firms, Alcoa workers noticed certain improvements in their working conditions that coincided with internationally coordinated efforts by Alcoa workers in different countries. One change we have seen in Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña, for example, is that line supervisors and managers have improved how they treat the workers.

In February, CFO participated in the "Global Companies, Global Unions, Global Research, Global Campaigns" conference in New York City. The conference was very important in building our relationships with the United Steelworkers union (USW). CFO's coordinator Julia Quiñonez was a panelist at a session on developing global strategies for Alcoa workers. As a result, stronger relationships of solidarity were built with those coordinating campaigns targeting Alcoa at other unions around the world, especially member unions of the International Metalworkers Federation, as well as national unions from Italy, Brazil, and Australia.

One initiative that grew out of this conference was participation in July at the Annual Shareholders Meeting of Alcoa, which took place in Pittsburgh on April 21. Invited by District 7 of the USW, Julia Quiñonez took the floor during the question-and-answer session of the meeting to address the issues faced by Alcoa workers in Mexico. Alcoa CEO Alain Belda made a public pledge to Julia that the company will not do anything against unionization in all locations. (An audio recording of their exchange is available on the CFO website, CFOmaquiladoras.org.)

The USW also published a report in its District 7 newsletter, as well as its electronic listserv, about participation in the shareholders meeting by CFO and USW.



The CFO and the Steelworkers union made a splash at Alcoa's shareholders meeting in Pittsburgh, April 2006

Building stronger bonds between CFO and USW

The CFO and USW have developed a dynamic cooperative understanding of strategies for strengthening the ties between workers in the United States and Mexico. As part of this process, the USW invited the CFO to participate in District 7's annual convention in Indianapolis in June. Julia Quiñonez participated in a panel that was repeated three times so that virtually all of the 150 delegates at the USW meeting could participate. The panel was titled "Globalization: Mexico's labor movement and the role of the CFO in the maquiladoras." The overall theme of global labor solidarity was emphasized during the three days of the convention by USW's District 7 Director, Jim Robinson. At the end of the convention, Jim affirmed to Julia that the convention had successfully accomplished its goal of educating the

USW membership about the need for greater global labor solidarity. We also agreed to lay out an exchange program between both organizations, with participants ranging from rank-and-file members to USW staff with experience in collective bargaining. A USW newsletter reporting on the convention also included an interview with Julia.

The United Autoworkers Union (UAW) also invited CFO to attend its annual convention in July in Las Vegas. In the July-August issue of *Solidarity*, the UAW newspaper, Julia is mentioned in a report about union members from 13 countries who were invited to the convention. This process of building alliances with trade unions in the United States has also been supported by the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center.

Workers empower themselves by expressing their point of view in meetings to inform shareholders

For more than a decade, the CFO has built close relationships with socially aware institutional shareholders, particularly the Benedictine Sisters and the American Friends Service Committee. In meetings to inform shareholders about the situation of maquiladoras owned by Alcoa, workers who participate develop their capacity to speak about the problems of fellow workers throughout the company. The workers were able to explain clearly how the problems faced by workers fall into four areas:

- Job security;

- Wages (including the possibility of promotions);
- Health and safety; and
- Harassment and supervision.

The CFO is assisting workers in particular who are affected by the lack of safety in the use of fiberglass in manufacturing wire harnesses for Harley-Davidson.

It is because of the work of the CFO that maquiladora workers have the confidence to speak before shareholders. The shareholders, for their part, act as advocates with company management. These relationships have also made it possible for the CFO to secure positive changes for workers inside the factories.

Comité Fronterizo de Obrero@s

Monterrey # 1103 Col. Las Fuentes,
Piedras Negras, Coahuila
C.P. 26010, México
cfomaquiladoras@prodigy.net.mx
www.cfomaquiladoras.org

U.S. mailing address:
2305 El Indio Highway
Box 115
Eagle Pass, TX 78852
USA



The Dignity & Justice Maquiladora Co. employs six women who produce fair trade t-shirts and tote bags made from organic and regular cotton.

The Dignity & Justice Maquiladora Co. continues to develop

In 2006 the Dignity & Justice Maquiladora Co., a fair trade enterprise, faced a year of many challenges. On the positive side, this fair trade maquiladora has made significant improvements in the quality of the t-shirts and tote bags that it produces from both organic and conventional cotton. It has also increased the quantity it is able to produce per week, and has begun to produce women's t-shirts. These successes in production are beginning to open up opportunities for successes in sales, and the possibility of future successes in obtaining profits.

On the other hand, there has been some instability among the women who make up this fair trade maquiladora. The women involved also need to take care of their families, and have difficulty finding time in the afternoons to take care of administrative, management, and marketing tasks need to build their enterprise.

The CFO has supported the women of this unique enterprise throughout the process of its development; during 2006 we took responsibility for many of the business's administrative needs, as well

as accounting and strengthening its marketing capacity. In the future, we hope that the Dignity & Justice maquiladora itself will take over responsibility for these areas. Currently, the six women involved in this enterprise (Tere Polo, Paty Leyva, Zoila Vera, Alma Puente, Rosa Villalobos and Enriqueta Trujillo) are taking most of the responsibility for these areas. One challenge – which also represented an advance in the administrative capacity of the CFO as well as the business itself – was the first formal audit of the Dignity & Justice Maquiladora Co., which was carried out with the assistance of a consultant from the Interamerican Foundation (IAF). Three other IAF representatives also helped with monitoring different aspects of the fair trade maquiladora's operations.

In addition, North Country Fair Trade from St. Paul, MN, which has supported this project since its inception, has also continued to offer technical assistance in sales and marketing. Working with the CFO and North Country Fair Trade, the women of Dignity & Justice developed

their initial business plan, as well as projections of the production levels they will need to achieve to operate without subsidies and the commitments and requirements to be members and co-owners of the enterprise, among other areas.

Border Committee of Workers
(CFO-Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s)
www.cfomaquiladoras.org



We would like to thank the United Steelworkers District 7 for generously donating their printing services for this publication.