

Working conditions in the
maquilas have gotten

WORSE SINCE NAFTA

says Mexican labour
rights activist

PHOTO: TAYLOR JONES



The following is an edited version of an interview by US journalist David Bacon with Julia Quiñonez, the coordinator of the Border Committee of Women Workers (Comité Fronterizo de Obreras).

David: Julia, perhaps you can start by telling us what the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras is. Why is it called “obreras,” which means women workers?

Julia: The CFO is a grassroots organization that’s led by women and men who work in the maquiladoras. It was born out of necessity, particularly among the young women who work in the industry. In the beginning the industry was particularly interested in employing women workers and even though this situation has changed over time we continue to maintain a focus on the experience of women. So we look for a

greater level of participation, particularly for women, inside their unions and at the leadership level.

David: What does the Comité actually do?

Julia: The CFO is working in three Mexican states, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Chihuahua. Its purpose is to educate and organize workers around their labor rights. We also have a focus on dialoguing about the impact of free trade. And we focus on gender, particularly on violence against women. Finally, we have a program promoting economic self-sufficiency and fair trade and we’ve created our own maquiladora making prod-

ucts and providing employment for women.

David: When you say that you do education around the effects of free trade, what are the effects of NAFTA in the section of the border where you are active?

Julia: Maquiladoras began to arrive in our region over 40 years ago, and with the advent of the Free Trade Agreement 11 years ago, we can categorically affirm that the working conditions for workers in the maquiladoras have gotten worse. Even plants that over the years had achieved better wages and benefits began to move south into the interior of Mexico where wages and conditions were much worse.

David: What about the plants that have remained on the border? Have salaries gone up in the years that NAFTA has been in effect? The Mexican government promised that there would be more jobs, and that those jobs would pay more and Mexico would become a first world country.

Julia: We the workers at the border think that was a big lie. The problem of unemployment wasn't resolved at all. The salaries have not gotten better; in fact, the salaries continue to be completely insufficient for anybody to live on. The workers continue to live in extreme poverty and there are so many people who arrive to look for work. The cities are overloaded and don't have the services or the infrastructure to be able to provide for them. It's a disgrace. There are large transnationals such as Alcoa and Delphi operating in these cities yet workers are living in conditions where they have to construct their houses out of cardboard, out of materials taken from the factories.

David: I know that the CFO was very active in Ciudad Acuña in helping the workers at the Alcoa Fujikura plant not only to improve the conditions in the plant, but actually to form an independent union. Tell us what happened.

Julia: Actually, it was in Piedras Negras where there was a movement to reform the union from within, a rank-and-file movement that made the decision to create an independent union. In fact, they were successful. The workers formed an independent union and then they left the CTM union. The next problem

was to get their union registered and then recognized by the Mexican government. They filed the paperwork with the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board. However, that government agency denied them the registration of their union. So this case is still not resolved. In fact, after some appeals within the Mexican legal system, a complaint was filed with the International Labor Office, the ILO, accusing the Mexican government of failing to guarantee its citizens the right of freedom of association.

David: What happened to the workers who were involved in that effort?

Julia: Some of the leaders were fired. But others continued the organizing work and that's really the key in having an organized rank-and-file base in your movement. Because when the company fires some leaders, other leaders emerge and

continue the work. So, there are hundreds of workers involved in this movement.

David: What were the problems that workers were trying to resolve in the factory by means of organizing this independent union? What were the complaints that they had?

Julia: They simply wanted to take control of their own collective bargaining relationship, to have an opportunity to negotiate improvements in their salaries and benefits, and they were seeing that the CTM leadership was partial to the company and was not

representing the workers. In fact, they had been elected to the union leadership at the plant level, but they found that everything they were trying to do was being undone by the CTM leader who was making secret agreements with the

companies. This is a logical evolution. First workers begin to make changes in their individual lives and in their individual conflicts; then workers begin to organize and act together along the same assembly line, then at a plant-wide level; and ultimately they want to have more say and control over the union structures that represent them.

David: Julia, you know the story you're telling here is very similar to many others that we've heard in terms of workers not being able to get the legal status or their

independent unions recognized, and also suffering firings as a result. NAFTA had a labor side agreement that was supposed to guarantee people's labor rights in Mexico. Could the workers use that process to stop the kind of violations you're describing?

Julia: No. We're familiar with the labor side agreement and we understand that it also contemplates the principle of freedom of association. But, these parallel agreements don't force anybody to take responsibility. Complaints are filed, and after a long process, the only thing that comes is a recommendation as to how things should have happened. But that recommendation never translates into actual enforcement and it's not effective to guarantee anybody's rights.

David: If that's the case, do you think that there is any form of labor protection that could be incorporated into agreements like NAFTA that would guarantee workers' rights, or do you think that workers have to guarantee their labor rights in some other way?

Julia: I think both possibilities are true. It can be if there is a renegotiation of NAFTA. Effective obligatory means of enforcing workers' rights and holding transnational corporations accountable to comply with the law would be helpful for workers. At the same time, even if you have such trade agreements, the organizing of workers at the grassroots level is vital. Otherwise, we can't enforce these rights that are recognized by the trade agreements.

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For a copy of the full interview and for more information on the CFO, visit: <http://cfomaquiladoras.org/>