

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Spotlight interview with Marcelina Garcia – (Nicaragua- FESTMIT/MLSM)

Unions join forces to organise the maquila

Brussels, 4 March 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): On March 8, 2006, the ICFTU will launch the second phase of its global campaign to organise women workers. Women working in the informal economy are a primary target of this campaign (*).

According to trade union statistics, the maquila (EPZ) employs around 73,200 workers, 80% of whom are women (i.e. 51, 240). The export processing zone is the setting for appalling working conditions, deplorable wages and widespread anti-union practices. Marcelina Garcia, general secretary of the Sindicato de Costureras y Modistas (garment workers' union), international relations secretary of FESTMIT, the trade union federation of maquila and textile industry workers, and a member of the Nicaraguan platform of maquila trade unions (M.L.S.M.), details the various aspects of the trade union campaign to organise the maquila.

Could you describe the pay and working conditions?

The women earn a monthly salary of 1,300 cordobas, that's less than 70 US dollars a month. By way of comparison, the monthly shopping basket comes to 4,800 cordobas (on the black market). The health and safety conditions are atrocious: poor lighting and ventilation, no protective equipment, insufficient and poorly maintained sanitary facilities and no information on occupational hazards. Moreover, the workers have no or very limited access to medical care in clinics or health centres. The employers do not pay social security contributions for their workers and have no regard for the legislation protecting pregnant women. There are no periodical medicals to check for occupational diseases. Overtime isn't paid as dictated by law. Physical and mental abuse of the workers is commonplace, and pregnant women are the first to suffer. The production quotas are excessive, and the repression of union members or those trying to organise a union is ruthless. Finally, any attempts to negotiate collective agreements are met with real hostility.

What are the main obstacles to unionising the workers in the maquila?

There are many. Some are internal, related to the situation inside the company, such as the fear of being sacked and blacklisted. The fear of repression in the workplace is also widespread. If the workers are sacked, they are left with no means of survival. It's not easy, because it's often the only job possibility in Nicaragua.

All our organising efforts have to be carried out clandestinely, which has its limits, making it difficult to organise meetings, for example, as they cannot be held at the workplace and the workers often live far from the maquila. It's a very long process, because we have to build up a relationship of trust. On a more practical level, we're restricted by the lack of human resources needed to pursue the long and painstaking process of organising a trade union under such conditions. Nor do we have the necessary

financial resources, we are not self sufficient, and cannot guarantee the staff needed for this type of work, which requires a great deal of skill and experience.

There are also external obstacles. Transport problems, for example. The women who live in rural areas have to travel for over two hours to get to work. The companies do not provide their employees with a food allowance, so they have to prepare their lunch in the early hours of the morning, at dawn, or buy from the stands outside the factories, where the food is exposed to pollution.

The maquila workers have to cover the cost of all this, no matter how high, and do everything to make sure that they reach work on time so that they don't lose their good time keeping bonuses, which represent 25% of their salaries.

If they are sacked or give up their jobs, they have to apply for a new position with other companies, where they have to compete with the thousands of other job seekers and contend with all types of discrimination: age discrimination (there's no work for people over age 29); racial discrimination (jobs are rarely given to black workers and those who are contracted are paid less); gender discrimination (women have to take pregnancy tests, are asked if they have children, and are not contracted if they do). Pregnant women are not taken on either and weight discrimination occurs (the recruitment conditions are posted at the factory gates, and state that overweight people will not be accepted).

Do the blacklists pose a serious problem?

The blacklists are one of the biggest problems we face. The employers have private offices through which they operate to find out who is unionised and who is trying to organise a union. That's how the blacklists are circulated. When people come looking for work, the employers enter their name into a database which tells them whether the person has ever been a trade unionist or affiliated to a trade union. They share all this information with each other. This is how they are able to wage anti-union campaigns against workers belonging to a union. The companies practising this type of discrimination and workers' rights violations are mainly owned by Taiwanese, Korean and US capital.

Can you give any examples of specific companies?

At the KB Manufacturing Company, a US-owned company, there was a case of highly repressive measures taken against Edgar Roblero, a unionised worker, when we were trying to plan a national, or even international campaign to denounce this company, which works with brands such as Bayer Cloteen, Jessy, Peny, David Tylor, etc.

We have already started a denunciation campaign against the US company CHAPRIH SA. It's a national campaign but we have organised some actions in the United States, where the company sells its goods. This campaign was supported by WRC (Workers Rights Consortium for the protection of labour rights in the maquilas). In June 2005, this company sacked over 45 workers affiliated to the company union, including the trade union representatives. Nine of them demanded compensation before the labour courts of Managua for breach of trade union laws and repression at work.

The company works for the buyer "Catherine Charmeen Choopy". Its owner is from the United States and is called Craig Miller. The company practises discrimination when recruiting workers, using the blacklist, and forces newly employed workers to sign a pledge that they will not join a union.

At SAE A TEXTOTEX SA, the workers are told they will be sacked if they try to organise. Police are posted inside the industrial park to intimidate the workers. We think this company works for WAL-MART, but the workers don't have access to any official information.

ISTMO TEXTIL SA and CUPIDO FOUNDATION (both US-owned companies) also wage anti-union campaigns as of the recruitment stage, as do the two Korean-owned companies YU JIN SA and TEXTIL UNLIMITED (TXU).

What organising strategies or resources are deployed?

The aim is to organise all the maquila workers, men and women, into a single, strong and democratic organisation that represents the sector and is capable of ensuring that employers respect workers' rights. To achieve this, the various trade union federations have developed a common agenda, which is being pursued by a trade union platform bringing together all the unions in the maquila, including FESTMIT, the maquila workers' federation I represent.

Our union has lawyers specialised in labour law. Most of our members are women or former women workers from the maquila who cannot find work simply because they exercised their right to organise a union. By affiliating with the union they are able to benefit from free legal support to defend their rights before any labour court or authority and to help their friends and families working for these companies. Another aim is to train the union members who are not yet on the blacklist and can still work in the maquila, where they can form a company union.

There are also people in these unions that have received trade union education and are ready to organise the EPZ companies from the outside, as they can no longer work on the inside.

We are also waging awareness-raising campaigns for the benefit of the workers in general, such as cultural activities at the gates of the companies and industrial parks (songs, dances and short plays related to the everyday lives of workers, which underline that unionisation is the only way they can defend their rights).

We have created clandestine workers' cells in the neighbourhoods where they live. We are also carrying out adult literacy/education programmes aimed at the men and women working in the maquila.

Another aspect of our organising strategy is the gathering of information on companies using the blacklist, with a view to denouncing them before civil society organisations as well as national and international authorities.

We have submitted reports to the ILO authorities in Nicaragua.

Public denunciation forums are being set up. There are also meetings at which workers can denounce their employers before the companies, in instances, that is, where the union is involved in a conflict, because if there is no union, the workers would end up being fired.

Interview by Pierre Martinot

(*) On 8 March 2006, the ICFTU will be launching the second stage of its global campaign on organising women workers. The campaign is called "Unions for Women, Women for Unions" and is principally targeting women working in export processing zones and the informal economy, and migrant women workers.

The first stage of the campaign, between 2002 and 2004, was led by 60 national centres from 49 different countries. It achieved remarkable results in some countries, including Mauritania, where the number of women trade unionists tripled.

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories (www.icftu.org). The ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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