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Spotlight interview with Silvia Marina Grevalo Santos (CGTG- Guatemala)

Women in the maquilas face age discrimination

Brussels, 13 March 2008 (ITUC OnLine): For more than 20 years the Guatemalan maquilas (export factories) have been concentrated in the textile sector. Silvia Marina, now a volunteer activist for the CGTG (General Workers' Confederation of Guatemala - Central General de los Trabajadores de Guatemala), was dismissed from a maquila for trying, along with others, to unionise the workers. She has found it impossible at her age - 45 - to find work in the same sector, where women are the victims of many forms of discrimination.

What are working conditions like in the maquilas ?

Work in the maquilas is very tough. In principle, the day begins at 7.00 a.m. and ends at 6.30 p.m. But whenever there is a big order to be met, we have to work until 10.00 p.m.. The employers lock the doors and we can't get out. We are like prisoners, locked up against our will. Worse still, it is very difficult to get the employers to pay for the overtime. People work in the maquilas every day from Monday to Saturday, and when production is high, we have to come and work on Sundays too.

What about trade union rights in the zones ?

Oh my God, it's just terrible. There are virtually no rights. Why? Because every time workers try to organise, they are sacked on the spot. So workers' rights are violated every day.

What kind of maquilas do you work in?

Most of the maquilas in Guatemala are linked to the textile sector. I worked for the SIMSA group. I was sacked because I got together with other workers to try to organise a union. After we were sacked, the employers closed the maquila down and we never received our severance pay. No money, none of our outstanding leave, nothing. We lost everything. Following consultations, we lodged a complaint with the Ministry of Labour, but to no avail. Last year, 37 maquilas closed their doors. As employers don't pay any tax for the first ten years, as soon as they reach the ten-year deadline, they close, then they set up somewhere else under another name, and the cycle begins again. Complaints were made concerning all 37 maquilas, inspectors were sent to see the employers, who are mostly Korean, but it hasn't made any difference. They close the maquila, and leave us with nothing.

How can the unions help you?

First they can exert pressure to get the law respected. Workers have rights! The biggest problem is the cycle of factory openings and closures. In 2007 alone, nearly 17,000 workers lost their jobs. I'm one of them. I'm fighting for my severance pay, because I never got any.

What is the percentage of women in the maquilas ?

About 75%, depending on the company. One of the real problems women in the maquilas face is age discrimination. As soon as they get to 40, they are considered too old to work. They are pressured into leaving. You are no longer productive enough. Employers don't take our experience into account. There is clear discrimination.

What is the solution for these women ?

That's not clear at all. And that is why we want the government to help us. We can still work between the ages of 35 and 60, we still have the strength to work. Being a woman in Guatemala is very difficult. There are a lot of women on their own who have children to care for. Discrimination does nothing to help. Because of the economic problems, it is difficult for our children to go to school. School is very expensive here, we have to pay a registration fee. Even the public schools are very expensive, and the average family has five children.

You mentioned the government. Do you think the new President, Alvaro Colom, can change things?

We hope so, but there's no doubt it will be very difficult. Let's hope he does everything he promised to, that he helps the Guatemalan people. He said he will treat the ordinary people in the same way as the rich. We are impatient to see if that proves true. He said that one of the problems he wanted to tackle was the injustice in the maquilas.

What about the difference in men and women's pay?

It's a fact. It's another area where there is discrimination. Women get about 50 Quetzals (4.5 euros) more than the minimum wage (which is 1475 Quetzal's per month (editor's note: 131 euros approx). Men get about 150 Quetzals (12.5 euros) above the minimum wage. The work is the same, but not the pay.

Tell us about health and safety...

This is another cause of concern. The "maras" (gangs of juvenile delinquents) who hang around the maquilas extort money from us, money that it was so difficult for us to earn. Inside the factories, we have other problems. The employers do not allow workers to go to the toilet when they want. They can only go once in the morning and once in the afternoon. At mealtimes there is usually nowhere to eat, and so we have to eat outside even if it is raining. We don't always have the right to drink water, which is often bad. But above all, the pressure of work is enormous. Every morning, the workers are told how many items they have to produce, for a set wage. But every day this increases for as long as the workers force themselves to meet their quota, causing themselves harm and of course never reaching their target. Furthermore, when employers find out that a woman is pregnant, they put pressure on her to resign. She is not officially sacked but she is pressed into leaving. There are always plenty more to take her place. They have the right to two months maternity leave, but they have to go back to work after that and it is difficult for them to look after their children.

Do you think that trade unions will be allowed to operate fully in the maquilas one day ?

There are only three examples in Guatemala, notably in the Sae maquila, and they have very little power. But most of the time it is impossible. The first thing that has to be done is to make workers aware that they have to be united in order to organise and to fight to improve their working conditions. If we all work together, we can do it. Quite a lot of workers do realise that the union is a good thing, but they are frightened of losing their jobs. I give my time to the CGTG. I am not paid for my services, but it's important. Victoriano Zacarias is the union official responsible for the maquilas and I help him the best I can because there is too much work for one person alone.

Do you think you will get another job in the maquilas ?

No, that's over. I'm too old for them. I hope I will find another job, so I can take care of my family. I'm 45 years old and I can still be useful! I need my severance pay. I worked in the maquilas for 12 years! With that money I could perhaps start up a small business and support my family.

Interview by Mathieu Debroux

-See Union View : Guatemala (12 pages) at the following web address:

http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/VS_Guatemala_EN.pdf

-Read the full interview with J.E. Pinzón Salazar, General Secretary of the CGTG, "Fear drives me to protest against injustice" on the ITUC website :

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article1341>

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