

SECOND DRAFT

The De-Humanized Life of a Mexican Factory Worker

[Part 1: Introduction] [note: everything in brackets [] will be removed in final essay]

[what is the nature of the issue?]

Maquiladoras are foreign-owned and operated assembly plants in Mexico. Companies import machinery and materials from all over the world and export the finished product ("Maquiladoras at a Glance" 1). Some of the American companies that have these factories include General Electric, Alcoa, Dupont, and Kraft Foods ("To Work and Die in Juarez" 2). There are more than 11,500 factories and assembly plants along the U.S. Mexico border and "employment in the maquiladoras has nearly doubled between 1993 and 1998" ("Maquiladoras" 1). (In Tijuana alone there are 4000 maquiladoras and they employ nearly one million workers ("Maquiladoras" 1). This increase is because of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement which promotes free trade between Mexico, Canada and the U.S. This agreement has made it much easier for foreign companies to open low-wage factories. Therefore, what NAFTA has done, according to many critics, is create more maquiladoras which are really "little better than sweatshops" (Soriano 2). This is happening all over the Third World and it is the reason there are protests at World Trade Organization meetings. What is happening in Mexico, on the Texas-Mexico border especially, gives us an inside look at the humanistic problems that exist in the maquiladoras.



This is an ariel view of the maquiladoras
(Source: <http://www.uwec.edu/geography/Ivogelerw188/border/maquil.htm>)

[why does it exist?] [who benefits from it?]

These factories exist because they help North American companies can make a greater profit. They do not have to pay the workers American wages and the environmental laws in Mexico are not as strict: "in poorer nations, "worker safety regulations are rare and wages are often exploitatively low" (Soriano 1). What are the attitudes behind a decision to build a factory

in Mexico and why does the Mexican government support it? It seems fair to say that a kind of racism is present when a factory owner doesn't care about safety for the workers or when a company knows it isn't paying its workers enough to feed their families or pay for adequate housing.

Mexicans work in these factories for very low wages and under terrible conditions. If you were a woman working in a factory in Tijuana or Ciudad-Juarez, your life would be difficult and dangerous. You might have to travel to work in the middle of the night and if you arrived a few minutes late, you would not be allowed in ("Purchasing Power" 2). Many women have been raped and some have been murdered since they live in very poor communities with high crime and drug trafficking ("Purchasing Power" 2). You would make between eighty cents and \$1.25 an hour. This would not be enough money to provide for your family: your children would be hungry, and you would live in a shanty town with no running water ("Purchasing Power" 1). In the factory you would work long hours and might have to breathe toxic chemicals. Your living conditions would also be terrible because there is much environmental pollution in the areas where these factories are ("Maquiladoras at a Glance" 7). If you are a woman and the management doesn't want pregnant women working there, you would have to prove you are not pregnant each month. Women traveling to and from work have been raped and even murdered (Soriano 2).

To give you an idea of how difficult it is economically, here is a summary of the economic conditions of the workers in these factories. "The average wages in any of the cities fall far short of meeting basic needs of workers and their families. Workers are forced to choose between adequate basic housing and the evolving squatter situations in which so many workers find themselves. Nutritional standards of many workers and their children are inadequate because of the lack of purchasing power at the present wage levels. The minimum wage scales, as presently constituted, are inadequate to meet basic needs of workers and their families" ("Purchasing Power" 1)

[Part 2: Body

Testimony: (journal entry, letter, interview)]

In order to understand what working in a maquiladora is like, here is the 'story' of one Mexican woman who needs this job to support her family but whose life and health are at risk every day. Her story is typical of the one million people who work in these factories just south of the Texas border. For her life to be this hard and dangerous, factory owners and the Mexican government are not looking at her as a human being with basic needs and basic rights. **This is a creative composite portrait based on the lives of a number of women described in my sources.**

My name is Luz Gonzalez and I work in a maquiladora (a factory) in Tijuana, Mexico. I am thirty years old and to keep my job I must work ten hours a day. I work from twelve midnight to six in the morning so that I can be with my children during the day. However, I have to leave them alone at night (Living in Fear 1). I earn \$ 1.00 an hour, but ten dollars a day is not enough to feed my three children and pay for housing, so we live in a shanty town ("Purchasing Power" 1). Here is a picture of where I live:



Source: <http://www.uwec.edu/geography/Ivogeler/w188/border/maquil.htm>
(Scroll to "very poor housing")

This is the only kind of work I can get and I am considered lucky, since the minimum wage in Mexico is \$3.40 a day and I earn \$10.00 (Maquiladoras at a Glance 4). But if you could see the conditions in the factory and how the people are treated you might not agree. I would like for women who work in comfortable factories in America to come and spend a day in my factory in Juarez. We work for ten hours with only one half hour break for lunch. We never see daylight (Soriano 2). We have to work with bad smelling chemicals and I cough at night so I know that these chemicals are bad for me ("Maquiladora"s 2). We manufacture shoes and handbags and some strong chemicals are used to treat the leather ("Industry Breakdown" 1).

Another terrible thing about our working conditions is that the managers treat women differently from men. It's not only that they pay us less; they fire anyone who becomes pregnant. You have to prove that you are not pregnant each month by showing a soiled sanitary napkin to a medical person. This is humiliating ("Maquiladoras" 2). The men who manage our factory prefer to have women workers because they think men are more aggressive and would not accept the conditions women do. There are a lot of young girls working in my factory because the managers feel they can control them ("Women are more easily managed" 1). Since we work night shifts, we travel at times of day that are unsafe and we are afraid for our lives because in other cities women are being raped and murdered ("To Work and Die in Juarez" 1).

Finally, our home environment is polluted from several of the nearby factories. I do not know what these chemicals are but I believe they are also in the water we use near my home because many of the children are sick and babies have been born deformed. [get source] The women in my community have no way of getting information or of getting the authorities to test the water. We also have no other water supply.



This is a view of the area my children have to play in. (Source: "Maquiladoras at a Glance."
<http://www.corpwatch.org/issues/PID.jsp?articleid=1528#map>)

[Part III: Solutions]

There are a number of individuals and organizations that are trying to help the factory workers in the maquiladoras. They are working to ensure their physical safety and to educate them about their legal rights. Some groups in maquiladoras have tried to organize unions so that they can fight for better pay and better conditions. Citizens groups are trying to support and protect those who have been fired for union activities. Finally, numerous studies have been done on the conditions, the toxic pollution and its consequences, including birth defects and cancer rates. One wonders if the right people are getting this information and if it is having any impact on the factory managers or on the Mexican government which should be protecting its citizens.

Women are organizing to help women in these maquiladora towns because it is obvious that the laws are not protecting them. As in so many cases of rape and abuse of women worldwide, the authorities blame the women themselves, saying they are prostitutes or that they are out in dangerous areas when they shouldn't be [Portillo--film]. In 1998 a woman named Esther Chavez founded Casa Amiga, a rape crisis center. She also organized rallies and wrote about the lives of the murdered women in her column in the city's newspaper, *El Diario de Juarez* ("To Work and Die" 3). Another problem is the laws in Mexico. Men are rarely charged with domestic abuse so authorities do not take violence against women seriously ("To Work and Die" 3). This shows that there is a serious humanistic issue in Mexican culture: women are not always treated with respect in their families or by the law.

A study done in 2000 by the Center for Reflection, Education and Action (CREA) and sponsored by the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladora shows that workers in the maquiladoras cannot make enough money to pay for their housing and feed their families ("Purchasing Power" 1). Studies like this need to be circulated and discussed in the American and Canadian Press so that ordinary people who benefit from the work done by these workers can see how they are being treated. But the workers themselves also need to be educated about their rights. This is being done by a group called the Constitutional Wage Campaign that is educating workers on their rights to a "sustainable wage as guaranteed by the Mexican Constitution" ("Coalition" 2).

Another group that has taken an active role in helping these workers is the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras. The Duro bag manufacturing company in Rio Brava (maker of Hallmark cards) threatened and intimidated its workers who wanted an independent union. Anyone who voted for the independent union was fired. CJM member organizations "exerted

international political pressure"; they "mobilized outside Hallmark Stores in twenty-five cities urging consumers to consider the plight of workers organizing to form an independent union to improve their working conditions" ("Coalition" 1).

The North American Free Trade Agreement was established in 1994. According to "Public Citizen" "NAFTA's proponents promised the pact would create new benefits and gains in each of these areas. . . . after eight years, NAFTA fails to pass the most conservative test of all: a simple do-no-harm test. Under NAFTA, conditions not only have not improved, they have deteriorated in many areas" ("NAFTA" 1). We know that there are more workers but the conditions under which they live are inhuman. It's time to insist that American factories follow the same guidelines in Mexico that they do in the United States. This is not just a matter of educating people or helping them organize. The companies and the Mexican government must be forced to treat these people fairly or shut down their factories. American companies that mistreat their workers should be publicly exposed and shamed. The documentary films that have been made, showing the terrible pollution of land and groundwater surrounding these factories should be shown much more widely in the United States and Canada. And women should feel that their lives are valued by men in their own culture, not that they are so unimportant that they can be raped and thrown on a garbage heap.

There are obviously many ways in which what happens in the maquiladoras is inhuman. The science and technology that have led to the creation of sophisticated factories and toxic pollutants should not be allowed to destroy the lives of innocent people. Greed and the profit motive should not be more important than individual lives. Everyone should get involved in some way: write letters to your congressperson, sign petitions, volunteer! We all deserve to live healthy, productive, safe lives.

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