



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

For the labor rights and all human
rights of the maquiladora workers



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Workers endure harsh conditions

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By Brian Chasnoff

Editor's Note: All workers' names have been changed due to threats and harassment received from superiors, including the use of employer blacklists and threats aimed at the workers' families.

Across the Rio Grande, Diana Abrego said the watery divide is called Rio Bravo in Mexico, because it takes great bravery to conquer its strong currents.

From her home in Del Rio, Texas, Diana Abrego can see the green hills of Ciudad Acua rising up from the Rio Grande valley.

Abrego works at the Immigration Clinic of San Jose, where she helps immigrant families - many having just crossed the Rio Grande into America. She has many clients, perhaps due to the rising tide of Mexican immigrants into the U.S. over the last decade. The number of undocumented Mexicans in the U.S. rose from 2 million in 1990 to an estimated 4.8 million in 2000.

At the clinic, Abrego encounters many ex-workers from the maquiladoras of Acua. She hears many stories.

"There's so much rape in the maquiladoras," said Abrego. "It's disgusting."

One of Abrego's clients got pregnant by a plant supervisor who then forced her to get an abortion. Abrego said most maquiladora workers are "just part of the machine," afforded no human value.

Albert Valdez lives a few blocks away from Abrego. He works for Dylsa, a Mexican company that subcontracts a maquiladora in Acua with Interior Automotive of America, a company from Michigan. Valdez receives \$40,000 a year as general supervisor for the factory, which produces automotive seat covers. He said little harassment occurs at his plant.

"Personnel is pretty hard-core on no harassment," he said.

The workers have their own park with barbecue pits and a cabaa, receive bonuses, hold savings accounts that accumulate interest and get 30-minute lunch breaks in an on-site cafeteria.

They receive a salary of between \$5.50 and \$6.50 a day.

"The wages are [messed] up," Valdez said.

Recently another company bought out Dylsa. Valdez said they kept the old name in order to avoid paying severance packages to workers who lost their seniority.

Another company operating in Acua is Alcoa Fujikura Ltd. Alcoa operates 11 maquiladora plants in Acua alone, where more than 15,000 workers put wire harnesses together for automobile manufacturers in the United States.

The Comite Fronterizo de Obreros, or the Border Committee of Women Workers, describes one of Alcoa's policies that prohibits workers from going to the bathroom more than twice in one day. They say many workers are afraid to ask for permission; sometimes they must wear humiliating signs around their necks that indicate whether they have gone "number one" or "number two." Other times, said the CFO, they are allowed to go only if they agree to provide sexual favors to supervisors.

According to a report by the National Labor Committee, Alcoa's wages in Mexico run from \$57.55 to \$86.58 a week. Acua is a union-free zone, so the workers' only representatives are members of the Confederacion de Trabajores Mexicanos, Confederation of Mexican Workers, the institutionalized labor union. The NLC report states that Alcoa's CTM, at most, holds one meeting a year at which nothing of substance ever happens.

Alcoa workers in Acua have repeatedly challenged management policies. In July 2000 they established the Workers' Committee. Although not legally recognized, the committee functioned as a union representing the workers. In October, in response to a broken agreement by Alcoa's chairman to raise wages, hundreds of workers walked out and congregated in the parking lot. The police lobbed tear gas, and many workers were fired; nonetheless, the

protest spread, and in November, the workers won a 30-percent wage increase.

Three months later, when Alcoa refused to raise wages in conjunction with a government mandate declaring an across-the-board 10-percent wage increase, the Workers' Committee again objected. Alcoa didn't budge; in August 2001 it fired all members of the committee. A few days later, 186 more workers were fired under suspicion of sympathizing with the fired leaders of the union.

According to the NLC report, many of the fired workers have been unable to find work in any of Acua's other 50 maquiladora factories.

Abrego is not surprised by such reports.

"The ethics of global conglomerates are to give as little as possible and take as much as is politically acceptable," she said.

Nonetheless, Alcoa has recently given something of substance. This year the company built a refugee shelter for homeless migrants in Acua and provided a \$3,000 grant to Casa de la Cultura, a cultural arts center in Del Rio.

Such bouts of generosity, however, have done little to improve Abrego's opinion of transnational corporations in Mexico. She recently participated in a protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, an agreement that, if passed, will expand the scope and power of free trade throughout Canada and the Americas. According to Lori Wallach, director of Global Trade Watch, U.S. negotiators have said that they view CAFTA as a means to advance FTAA negotiations. Along with a number of maquiladora workers, Abrego helped close down a bridge in Del Rio.

Abrego recalls some truckers that shouted, "Stupid idiots! This is what sustains you!" She said one maquiladora worker shouted back, "Yes, but at what cost?"

During the protest, Abrego said, there was a lot of fear.

"The women were so afraid they covered their faces. They were scared of losing their jobs," she said.

One Family

The streets of Acua differ little from those of Nuevo Laredo. They are rough and unpaved, lined with houses made from cheap material like sheet metal, rubber patches, tarps and wooden planks. Some homes are constructed entirely out of cardboard. Others are literally old rusted boxcars that litter abandoned railways.

One home belongs to Enrico Sanchez, an employee at Alcoa.

Sanchez is thin with a black mustache that hangs over his upper lip. He stands in the living room of the small house that was built by the Mexican government, surrounded by his three children, his wife and two Americans - one with a notepad and another with a camera - who are asking him questions about his life. He does not raise his eyes from the floor when he answers.

Sanchez said he pays the government a monthly rent to own the house, but thinks it will be a very long time before he pays it off. His salary is about \$70 a week. It has increased very little in the 12 years that he has worked at Alcoa. He said his family buys only necessities.

Sanchez's job is very important to him, because he receives medical benefits that two of his children desperately need. His son and oldest daughter were both born with the same debilitating spinal disease that has rendered their bodies permanently stunted and immobile. Today they sit in expensive wheelchairs that an Austin nonprofit organization recently gave them. They roll their oversized heads up at the Americans and smile. Sanchez's 4-year-old daughter bounces around the room, chattering, laughing and playing games.

In a few minutes, Sanchez's wife Alicia must leave for work at the same Alcoa plant where he works. They split day and night shifts, so someone will always be home with the kids.

Before she leaves, Alicia tells the Americans stories.

She says her friend recently suffered a miscarriage after being forced to do heavy labor at the Alcoa plant. She claims the supervisors at Alcoa are trained to mistreat workers. She describes an incident that occurred a few days ago - a technician at Alcoa was killed, electrocuted by live wires, although Alcoa claims he died from natural causes.

"The workers saw his body explode," Alicia said. "The community had to pay for his funeral."

She said Alcoa has paid the dead man's wife a large sum of money to keep quiet, but the widow is still considering filing a lawsuit. Alcoa is presently firing its workers, she said, and hundreds have been fired in the past few weeks.

Sanchez is afraid of losing his job. When the CFO comes around to talk to him, he refuses so as not to stir up any trouble. He can't afford to lose his medical insurance.

His wife departs for another shift at the assembly plant. Eventually, the Americans leave too, driving past a dirt field where children play soccer, past a crumbling church made from sheet metal and wooden pallets, past the dogs, roosters and cardboard houses, across the treacherous Rio Grande, back into America.

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