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Women, Solidarity & the Global Factory

Rachael Kamel

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Women, Solidarity & the Global Factory

Abstract

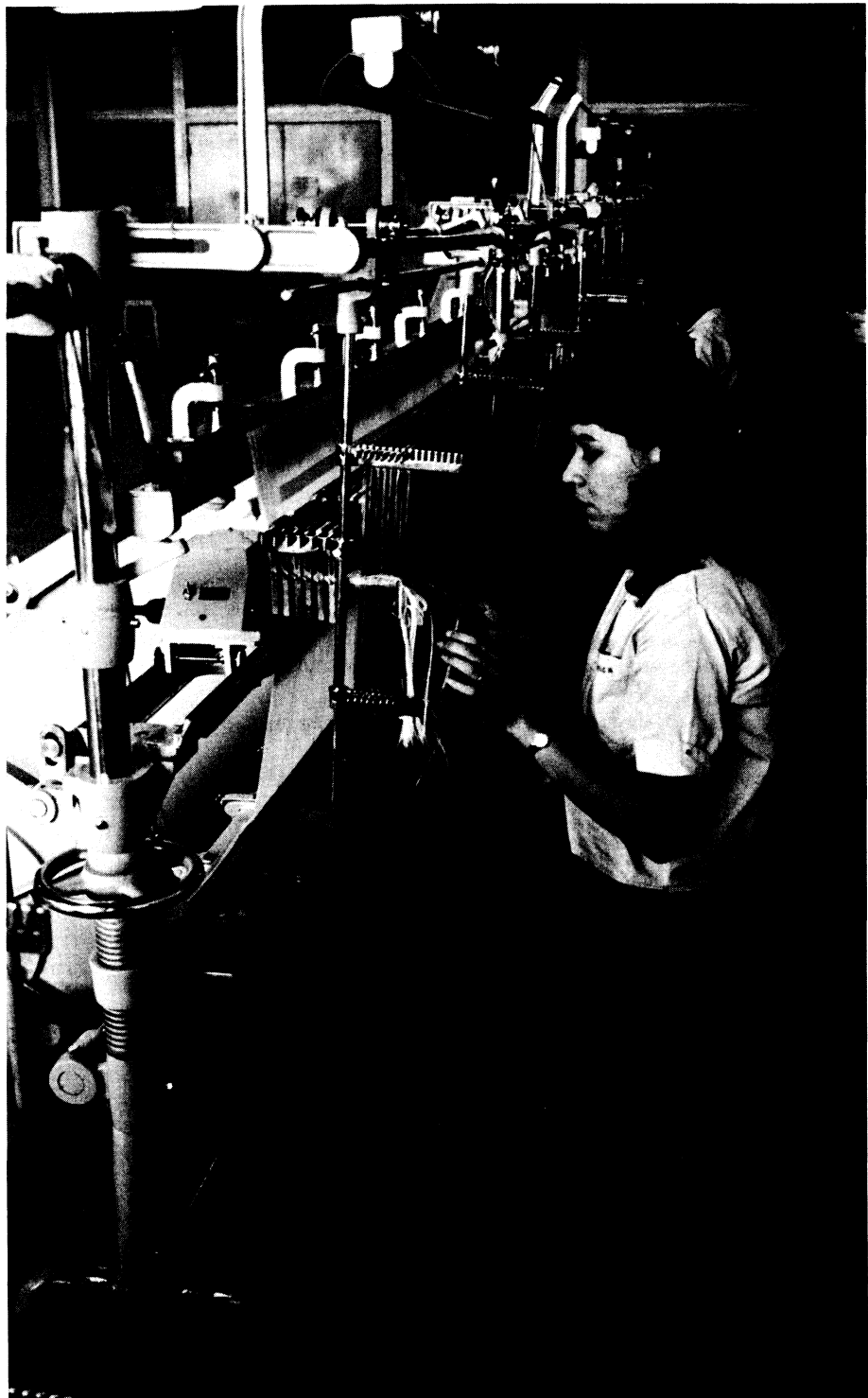
[Excerpt] For many of us who are concerned with international labor issues, a new image has come to represent our collective understanding of the global economy. It is an image of women in Third World nations toiling under sweatshop conditions in huge assembly plants owned by U.S.-based transnational corporations (TNCs).

Yet what does international solidarity really mean in practice? Who does it include, and how? From a U.S. standpoint, if so many women workers are not organized into unions, how can they be included in international networks? If their voices are not heard, what can these networks hope to accomplish?

This article explores these questions by looking at the experience of several groups in promoting international communication among women workers in the nonunion sector. It is excerpted from *The Global Factory: An Organizing Guide for a New Economic Era*. The complete publication, developed by the American Friends Service Committee, surveys the efforts of many different kinds of groups, inside and outside the trade union movement, to build international labor networks.

Keywords

globalism, transnational corporations, sweatshops, unfair labor practices, union organizing, gender, women's rights



Women, Solidarity & the Global Factory

■ *Rachael Kamel*

For many of us who are concerned with international labor issues, a new image has come to represent our collective understanding of the global economy. It is an image of women in Third World nations toiling under sweatshop conditions in huge assembly plants owned by U.S.-based transnational corporations (TNCs).

These women are the other side of the coin from the hundreds of thousands of U.S. industrial workers who have lost their jobs over the last 20 years, as more and more manufacturers have opted to take advantage of ultra-low wages and repressive working conditions in countries throughout the Third World.

Yet when we envision the U.S. side of this equation, the image that comes most readily to mind is that of male workers in basic industry. These are the workers whose plight has usually received the most attention in discussions of plant closings. Women are not seen as part of the picture, except perhaps as the wives of men who have been laid off. In fact, though, women make up at least 35% of displaced workers, according to a study by the federal

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- *Rachael Kamel is a Philadelphia-based writer and videomaker, specializing in international women's issues. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), publisher of The Global Factory guide from which this article is excerpted, is a Quaker service and social action organization headquartered in Philadelphia. Two AFSC programs—the Maquiladora Project and the Women and Global Corporations Project—collaborated in developing the organizing guide.*

Bureau of Labor Statistics.

To understand the meaning of this reality, we cannot simply add women to the mental picture we already have. As with most economic situations, women are affected differently than men by plant closings, deindustrialization, and the global economy. One of these differences is that women workers are mainly concentrated in labor-intensive industries, which have traditionally offered far less in terms of wages, working conditions and job stability than heavy industries like steel or auto. Another related difference is that women are less likely than men to belong to unions—and thus they have far less access to the institutional resources of organized labor.

Within the labor movement and many other groups in society, more and more voices are calling for international solidarity as the strategic response to the growing power of TNCs. With so many corporations operating in dozens of countries, workers in those countries obviously need to be talking with each other.

Yet what does international solidarity really mean in practice? Who does it include, and how? From a U.S. standpoint, if so many women workers are not organized into unions, how can they be included in international networks? If their voices are not heard, what can these networks hope to accomplish?

This article explores these questions by looking at the experience of several groups in promoting international communication among women workers in the nonunion sector. It is excerpted from *The Global Factory: An Organizing Guide for a New Economic Era*. The complete publication, developed by the American Friends Service Committee, surveys the efforts of many different kinds of groups, inside and outside the trade union movement, to build international labor networks.

Coalitions in the Global Factory

Directly or indirectly, the international movement of jobs in the global factory affects many millions of working people, in the United States and around the world. In the U.S., the trend is toward the erosion of industrial jobs, a decline in union membership, and a falling standard of living for most people. In the Third World, its effects include distorted development, dramatic increases in poverty, and a snowballing economic crisis.

The variety of different social groups who are affected by TNCs is one of the most important features of the global factory. By themselves, none of these constituencies can successfully challenge the tremendous power of these corporate giants. Only

through building coalitions—both within the U.S. and internationally—is it possible to imagine successful campaigns to demand greater accountability from TNCs.

What groups would make up such coalitions? With union gains and unionized workplaces being targeted for attack, organized labor in an obvious actor. Many religiously based organizations also address the impact of economic dislocation on local communities. Both of these sectors already have extensive international ties.

Unions, for example, relate to their counterparts in many parts of the world through both established organizations and emerging solidarity networks. In recent years, U.S. labor networks concerned with Central America and South Africa have had a major impact on the overall labor movement. A newer network is in the early stages of building solidarity with Filipino workers. Likewise, some religious bodies, concerned with poverty in the Third World, have come to appreciate how the global economic system works to maintain Third World "underdevelopment."

Many groups concerned with women and international development have also developed a thoroughgoing critique of the negative impact of TNCs on the status of women. And, even without a specific orientation toward labor issues, some groups that are working to oppose the U.S. role in southern Africa or Central America are also concerned with the role of TNCs in perpetuating unjust systems in those areas.

Outside of the organized labor movement, labor groups involved with nonunionized workers must often address the problem of TNCs. Since the impact of job loss is greatest for communities of color, organizations based in those communities also have a stake. The same is true for groups focused on women's poverty, which is related in part to the declining availability of stable industrial jobs. Groups concerned more specifically with women and labor issues also frequently deal with the impact of TNCs.

In thinking about building coalitions, it is obvious that "women" are not a single, monolithic constituency. They are part of all the groups I have named, in many different ways. No single movement or point of view could represent women as a whole. At the same time, it is often true that women's experiences and perspectives are overlooked, especially when it comes to international networking. Thus there are many important lessons to be learned from international projects focused on women workers.

Often the initiative for international networking comes from outside the United States. One example is the Philippines, where many women workers are employed by TNCs, working for

starvation wages in special areas known as "export processing zones" (EPZs).

For women in the EPZs, the global factory is a daily reality. The companies they work for are headquartered in Japan, the U.S. and other advanced industrial countries. Their jobs involve assembling goods for foreign markets, using foreign components. Severe health problems are rampant and most women must leave the EPZs after a few years, their health destroyed. When women organize to demand better conditions, they are often threatened that their jobs will move to yet another country. Many strikes and demonstrations have been violently suppressed by government soldiers.

Women and Microtechnology

It was inside the EPZs that the Women Workers Movement or KMK (for *Kilusang ng Manggagawang Kababaihan*) was founded in 1984. And the experience of working in the EPZs was a strong incentive for Filipina women to reach out internationally.

Like women workers the world over, KMK activists have found that women's needs are best served by a dual strategy, working both inside and outside of union structures. Internationally, many of the women the KMK has the most in common with are not union members. Such women generally cannot be reached through existing labor networks.

In some cases, international feminist networks have provided an alternative channel of communication. An example of this was an October 1986 conference in the Philippines on "Microchip Technology: Its Impact on Women Workers." This 10-day meeting was jointly sponsored by the KMK, the Women's Program of the International Council for Adult Education, and women's resource centers in the Philippines and Canada.

The conference brought together organizers, labor educators, and rank-and-file workers, with experiences ranging from microchip production in Asia to clerical jobs in Canada and the U.S. that have been transformed by microchip-based technology. Participants came from half a dozen Asian countries, the Caribbean and the Netherlands as well as North America.

The microtechnology conference was designed to launch an international network that would bring together women workers in both the electronics industry and the automated office. The results of the meeting illustrate both the difficulties and the importance of reaching out to unorganized workers, in the U.S. and internationally.

Overall, the idea of forming an ongoing international network

was premature, concedes Carol-Anne Douglas of the Participatory Research Group in Toronto, which helped organize the meeting. "In North America," says Douglas, "we found that we lacked an organizational framework that could coordinate follow-up. We realized that we were not sufficiently integrated with the labor movement."

"Some of the Asian women," Douglas says, "continued to stay in touch for a year or so after the meeting. But the repression they face has increased so much that many groups are no longer able to be active." Waves of arrests have stymied labor activists in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. In the Philippines, key labor and women's organizations have been declared undesirable by the government and violently attacked by local vigilante groups.

Douglas' judgment is borne out by the experience of U.S. women who attended the microtechnology conference. One U.S. participant was Lisa Gallatin, who staffs the Office Technology Education Project (OTEP) in the Boston area. Although Gallatin believes her trip was valuable, the relative absence of unions among her constituency makes follow-up difficult.

Office workers, explains Gallatin, are organized mainly in the public sector; with a few exceptions, unions have not gained a foothold among private sector office workers. OTEP's overall strategy is to reach out to unorganized workers through educational programs. "We help women understand the health effects of new office technology, and also its impact on how jobs are structured. We can also provide organizing assistance for office workers who are trying to improve their situation."

For Gallatin, the experience of attending the microchip conference was "thrilling, and even more eye-opening than I expected. What sticks in my mind the most is how much women workers have in common, despite the many differences between the First and Third World. In both contexts, women are concerned with health issues, childcare, sexual harassment, pay and benefits, and job security."

In addition, notes Gallatin, "management strategies for discouraging unions are very similar. Sometimes it's 'we're all one big happy family,' and sometimes it's 'we'll move out of the country and you'll lose your job.' I didn't realize before how multinationals hop from country to country all over the world—it's not just workers in the United States who are left behind."

When Gallatin returned home, she spoke widely about her experience, showing slides to rank-and-file workers, union groups and women's organizations. "Talking about the Philippines and the movement there gave us a way to talk much more deeply about

the global economy. We looked at how the automated office is also tied into these worldwide trends. Information processing is like assembly work—it can be done anywhere in the world now, because of computer and satellite technology. Both ends of the global assembly line—the production work and the information processing—employ mainly women in very low-paying jobs."

Under present conditions, Gallatin believes, international networking is still a distant goal. In the United States, she says, the weakness of unions themselves is the limiting factor. "The service sector as a whole has been neglected by the labor movement. As a result, unions often have a negative image and many office workers do not realize what unions could offer them."

As Gallatin spoke with OTEP supporters about the lessons of her trip, "we talked a lot about the need we saw for building international solidarity. But we realized that it is a long process—and the first step is building solidarity among unions and other organizations in Massachusetts." In this line, a key priority for OTEP is strengthening the Massachusetts Coalition on New Office Technology, a two-year-old group that brings together union locals, women's organizations, and other community groups. "The purpose of this coalition," says Gallatin, "is to bring together organized and unorganized office workers. We want to be accessible to the vast majority of office workers who are not unionized." Currently the coalition is pressing for legislation to restrict the electronic monitoring of clerical workers. Without more progress on the home front, Gallatin believes, there is little opportunity to proceed with international solidarity.

Many of Gallatin's observations are echoed by Amanda Hawes, a Silicon Valley lawyer who also attended the microtechnology conference. Hawes has represented many electronics workers who have been injured by exposure to toxic compounds. She is also board president of the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health (SCCOSH), which focuses on health hazards in California's electronics industry.

At the conference, recalls Hawes, "I was able to share a lot of what we've learned about chemical hazards. The women from Asia found this helpful, because for them it is difficult to obtain such information. For me, it was very useful to look at the broader perspective of how the industry operates worldwide. I was also very moved by the spirit of the people I met. But it's difficult to say how we could follow up. Our work in California simply does not reach that level."

Hawes describes SCCOSH's efforts as "trench warfare against the industry on behalf of individual people whose lives are being



wrecked. Not only women but also their unborn children are threatened." In addition to fighting for worker's compensation or disability benefits for individuals, SCCOSH has also conducted wider campaigns for restrictions on specific chemicals. "But when we succeed in eliminating one hazard, they switch to something else," she says. "They're keeping one step ahead of the sheriff."

Hawes sees a lot of changes in awareness of the threat to workers. "The electronics industry has lost its image as a clean industry, with both workers and many health professionals. But over the long term, workers cannot protect themselves effectively without collective bargaining. And in 15 years, no one has succeeded in organizing a union among production workers in Silicon Valley."

Likewise, the absence of unions leaves workers without any mechanism to pursue international contacts. "Until we learn how to organize here," Hawes asserts, "international solidarity will remain more of a vision than a reality."

Like many activists in the same bind, Hawes has come to believe in the necessity of exploring alternative organizing strategies. In Silicon Valley, she notes, many production workers are recent immigrants. Thus classes that teach English as a Second Language (ESL) may be a way of reaching workers who cannot be reached by traditional union approaches. Many ESL teachers, Hawes has found, would like to use teaching materials that have more

relevance to the lives of their students. "If we can teach about occupational health through ESL classes," she says, "then the students can take this information back to their own communities." Creating this new channel of communication could eventually lay the basis for coalition efforts among unions, groups like SCCOSH, and immigrant communities.

The View from El Paso

Nowhere in the United States is the global factory more visible than along the 1,900-mile border with Mexico. For 20 years, U.S. manufacturers have been moving just across the border to open *maquiladora* or assembly plants, taking advantage of low wages and widespread unemployment in Mexico. These firms also benefit from special regulations that allow them to pay reduced tariffs when finished goods are reimported into the U.S.

With more than 1,000 *maquiladora* plants employing some 300,000 workers, Mexico now ranks first among Third World countries in supplying cheap labor to U.S.-owned TNCs. More and more *maquiladora* workers are acutely aware of the need to build solidarity with U.S. workers. And in recent years, increasing numbers of U.S. unions have sought to develop ties with their counterparts across the border.

In many ways, though, it is nonunionized U.S. workers who have the most in common with the *maquiladora* workforce, which is 85% women and only 10% unionized. Yet, as in the other examples discussed above, nonunionized workers seldom have access to attempts at international networking. One of the rare exceptions to this rule is the experience of La Mujer Obrera ("The Woman Worker"), a resource center for garment and textile workers in El Paso, Texas.

El Paso lies just across the border from Ciudad Juárez, a city of 1.5 million that is home to Mexico's largest concentration of *maquiladora* plants. The closeness of the two communities—as well as the family, cultural and language ties between El Paso's many Chicano workers and their Mexican neighbors—has made cross-border communication far more accessible. El Paso's garment workers are 85% women, mostly Chicanas, and the majority are not unionized.

According to Cecilia Rodriguez, director of La Mujer Obrera, "Given the economic situation in the textile industry, the unions don't know what to do. They are at a loss. We feel that we have to develop new strategies—and also challenge the unions to respond better to the needs of unorganized workers."

In developing new approaches, La Mujer Obrera has been heavily influenced by its connections with Mexican women's groups. Says Rodriguez: "We've learned from working with them the importance of building in leadership, a political analysis, and a long-term perspective when you're trying to build an organization. We've begun to integrate more economic analysis into our work. We've learned to use a popular education approach" that teaches skills for critical thinking based on people's own life experiences.

One approach taken by La Mujer Obrera is organizing workers committees inside the textile plants. "The first goal for these committees," says Rodriguez, "is to pressure the companies to publish personnel policies. The way things work now in the sweatshops is that the owners have total control—they do what they want, when they want. We have a suit pending in the Texas Supreme Court, in which we argue that personnel policies should have contractual force." Already, the factory committees have won several rulings from the Texas Employment Commission and the National Labor Relations Board. Union affiliation may be an option for the long term, says Rodriguez, "but in our present situation, it's just not realistic."

For La Mujer Obrera, work inside the plants is complemented by a strong emphasis on leadership training and organizational development. "The economic devastation of our communities cannot be described," says Rodriguez. "It is like living after a war. To survive as a community, we need people with certain skills—organizing, or technical skills like translating and grant-writing. It is very hard to find people who can do these things but who also respect textile workers and believe that they are human beings. If we can train the workers themselves in these skills, three-quarters of our battle is won."

This emphasis on organizational development has prompted La Mujer Obrera to form a network with other women-of-color organizations in Texas, New Mexico and California. "For women of color," says Rodriguez, "these questions are not being addressed on a national level, and we cannot tackle them by ourselves on a local level. We need to understand what is going on with multinational corporations and what strategies will allow us to deal with them."

Rodriguez cites the example of another member of the network, a Navajo women weavers' cooperative in New Mexico. "The tribal government has an economic development strategy," she observes, "but the community doesn't really understand what it is. They are talking about developing free trade zones inside Indian

reservations—just like on the border. People need to understand what that means."

To sustain itself over the long haul, Rodriguez believes that groups like La Mujer Obrera also need to attend to their own economic base. "The future of groups like ours is not very bright. Funding is drying up. Our newest campaign is to start some small economic projects that could provide a permanent income base for us."

"When you're dealing with multinational corporations," Rodriguez concludes, "you can't afford to be complacent. It's a big help to us to be on the border. Our situation is difficult, politically and economically, but we have the advantage of being exposed to a model of organizing that comes from a Third World country."

Lessons for Labor

A majority of U.S. workers touched by the global factory are not reached by unions. This is especially true for women workers. When they organize, it is more likely to be through small, community-based groups than through traditional trade unions. Such grassroots organizations often develop the most creative strategies for meeting the needs of unorganized workers. They are also far more likely to appreciate the problems women face in combining family and workplace responsibilities. But because they lack an institutional base, they tend to be poor in resources, and they seldom have access to international channels of communication.

The same problem exists in other countries. For Cecilia Rodriguez, for example, the Mexican groups she feels closest to are informal bodies that operate outside any institutional structures. They, too, are bypassed by formal trade union channels, and they too lack resources of their own for international networking. The problem is redoubled for grassroots groups in other Third World countries, which are farther from the United States than Mexico is in both distance and culture.

The lessons of OTEP, SCCOSH and the microtechnology conference parallel the experience of La Mujer Obrera. To make significant headway, efforts to organize in the global factory must find new ways of reaching out to workers who are women, recent immigrants, and people of color. These groups make up a large portion of the transnational workforce in the U.S.—and are the least likely to be unionized.

Domestically, cooperative efforts between labor and many

different kinds of community groups have proven to be the surest way to reach out to the unorganized. Whether the goal is forming a union or organizing around plant shutdowns, such cooperative efforts have been far more effective than those led by unions working in isolation. These innovative efforts can also provide a new channel for international outreach and communication.

As the microtechnology conference illustrates, generally the conditions do not exist for drawing nonunionized U.S. workers into ongoing international networks. But many labor and religious groups do have the capacity to include grassroots groups and non-union workers in speaking tours, educational programs, and visits to other countries. In this way, groups with greater institutional resources can help lay the groundwork for a more broadly based international solidarity. ■

From the American Friends Service Committee

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for a New Economic Era

The Global Factory

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