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Costureras' Struggle Continues

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Costureras' Struggle Continues

Abstract

[Excerpt] The struggle to build an independent union in Mexico's huge garment industry began in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City, killing 1,000 garment workers and leaving 40,000 more unemployed, most of them women. After more than two years, the September 19 Garment Workers Union – which takes its name from the date of the quake – continues its efforts amid deeply altered, and more difficult, circumstances.

Keywords

costureras, garment workers, Mexico

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The struggle to build an independent union in Mexico's huge garment industry began in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City, killing 1,000 garment workers and leaving 40,000 more unemployed, most of them women. After more than two years, the September 19 Garment Workers Union—which takes its name from the date of the quake—continues its efforts amid deeply altered, and more difficult, circumstances.

The earthquake, in ripping the facades from buildings housing garment sweatshops, had literally revealed to public view the conditions of extreme exploitation that had endured in the industry unremarked for decades. Because their suffering was so great, the women garment workers, or *costureras*, came to symbolize the trauma of the quake, and the first uprush of their movement was extensively and sympathetically covered in the Mexican press. The Mexican government, facing heavy criticism from many quarters for its handling of relief efforts, lent its active support, and material and moral support came pouring into the young union from every quarter—feminists, leftist and popular organizations, ecumenical groups, and other independent unions. These people's movements have remained committed to the garment workers' cause, but the media and government have not. A mantle of invisibility once again cloaks the Mexican garment industry.

September 19 now officially represents workers in 12 factories, but

its organizing has been hampered by opposition from the official CTM labor federation and by the failure of the government to fairly enforce the labor code. In Mexico, independent unions like September 19



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are generally perceived as a threat to government domination of labor through the CTM, which has strong ties to the government party. In many plants, garment workers have been officially represented, without their knowledge or consent, by company unions affiliated with the CTM. Sexual harassment and violence have been used to dissuade women from voting for September 19.

In response, September 19 members are taking their case directly to the public, staging sit-ins and leafletting actions in Mexico City's central plaza. They also are building their organization internally, providing training and education for their members and recently opening a permanent day care center for members' children. Support from other groups inside and outside the country continues to play an important role. Funds for the day care center, for example, came from Mexican and U.S. ecumenical groups.

September 19 organizers will rally support in the U.S. with a speaker-movie tour and photo exhibit in late April of 1988. For more information, contact the Women & Global Corporation's Project, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102—(215/241-7160).