



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

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



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One Stitch at a Time

In *Maquiladora Dignidad y Justicia*, workers are learning to be the bosses

Toward Peace & Justice

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By Willie Colón Reyes

The newly painted, bright yellow walls of the cinderblock warehouse dwarf the six antiquated sewing machines that sit in one corner. The warehouse is, without a doubt, much too big for its current occupants.

But all that extra space hints at a sense of cautious optimism. The ability to double or even triple the number of sewing machines if-or hopefully, when more workers are hired is a tantalizing lure to succeed for the AFSC-supported *Maquiladora Dignidad y Justicia* (Dignity & Justice Maquiladora Company).

Based in Piedras Negras, Mexico, the small-scale clothing production company makes organic cotton T-shirts and tote bags for bulk orders. It is a rarity in this border town: a worker-owned cooperative begun by a group of maquiladora employees after they were fired or laid off by apparel factories. (Maquiladoras are foreign-owned factories along the Mexico-U.S. border. Most are subsidiaries of U.S. companies.)

Treacherous terrain

Now in its second year of operation, the company is trying to navigate the treacherous terrain of any small, start-up business, which includes cost control, increasing production without sacrificing quality, and finding new customers.

Then there's the struggle of changing the mindset of the company's worker/owners so they truly believe that they're in control-and accept the extra time and effort that entails.

"There's still a perception among the workers that they're just employees," noted Ricardo Hernández, director of AFSC's Mexico-U.S. Border Program, who has worked closely with *Dignidad y Justicia* since its inception. "They want to do the work and go home, not have after-hours meetings to talk about import/export issues, for example. They're not used to being the owners and what that means."

False accusations

Dignidad y Justicia was launched in March 2004 with help from the **Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (CFO)**, or Border Committee of Women Workers), a long-time AFSC partner organization. The CFO organizes and educates workers on their human and labor rights. It's a part-owner of *Dignidad y Justicia* and shares office space with the company.



The label is Justicia!
Photo: Terry Foss

For the CFO, helping the fledgling company get started was, in part, a bold repudiation of some hurtful and false accusations.

"When we started the D&J maquiladora, it flew in the face of charges made by company-friendly unions and government officials that the CFO was a gringo puppet trying to destabilize the work force and drive away jobs," said Julia Quiñonez, the high-energy coordinator of the CFO. "How could they say that? We're Mexican. We don't want to drive away jobs."

The CFO's support of *Dignidad y Justicia* is very much in keeping with its efforts to empower workers. Its work clearly threatens the status quo in Piedras Negras and the five other Mexican border cities where the CFO operates.

"Knowledge is power," Julia said. "With our work, we see workers becoming more conscious of their rights and power."

Running a risk

Dignidad y Justicia also has a U.S. partner and part-owner, Minneapolis, Minnesota-based **North Country Fair Trade**, which markets its products and provides the raw materials and equipment. Because of its legal structure under the maquiladora industry's official rules, *Dignidad y Justicia* exports its T-shirts and tote bags to the United States.



Becky Flory, a North Country supporter, is committed to helping *Dignidad y Justicia* succeed. However, she acknowledges that the company is a work in progress and that its worker/owners are running a risk.

"This isn't a charity-this is their livelihoods. The workers have to feed their families," Becky said.

Right now, the company's bottom line is tight. *Dignidad y Justicia*'s sales during its first year of operation were close to \$US4,000-not enough to stay afloat. For several weeks, there was no production, and a few donations helped to cover some operational expenses.

The company currently pays \$50 a week, the going rate at most maquiladoras. The goal is to increase the pay to \$100 a week. The company also hopes to diversify its products to include sweatshirts, school uniforms, and jeans, and replicate its business model in other border cities.

The fair trade market

Dignidad y Justicia's fortunes could hinge on the level of interest in fairly traded goods. "The fair trade movement is growing in the U.S., but we have seen that many advocates, while loving the idea of fair trade, just don't buy fair trade products," Becky noted.



Juanita López and Matilde González.
Photo: Ricardo Hernández

You can help

Are you active with a group looking to increase its visibility or promote an event? Then consider placing a bulk order for fair trade T-shirts and/or tote bags with the worker-owned Maquiladora *Dignidad y Justicia*.

Find out more at [Dignidad y Justicia's webpage](#)

Becky Flory showing D&J tote bag.

Photo: Terry Foss

healthy working conditions for producers, environmental sustainability, and consumer education.

North Country is primarily approaching colleges, church, and community groups that might be attracted not only to the products, but to a fair trade philosophy that includes fair wages and

And how can people in the U.S. support Dignidad y Justicia?

"Helping them get more business," Becky said, "would be the strongest form of respect."

Willie Colón Reyes is the editor of AFSC's Quaker Action magazine

Worker/Owner Profile:

Ana Patricia de Luna Duarte

For more than seven years, Ana Patricia de Luna Duarte supported her three children by assembling car parts in Macoelmex, a maquiladora that's a subsidiary of U.S. aluminum giant Alcoa. Paty was a coordinator in the factory and had an excellent work record.

When the company began to lower wages and scale back benefits, employees staged a spontaneous work stoppage. In retaliation, and as a way to send a message to workers, Macoelmex fired 22 employees-including Paty-in February 2005.

Paty's situation was especially dire because one of her three children is disabled. He requires physical therapy and special food and supplements.

Not only did Paty lose her livelihood, but as a result of being unjustly connected with the work stoppage, she discovered that she'd been blacklisted. "I looked for work in other factories, but the doors were closed to me," she said.

Some of Paty's friends were volunteers with the **Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s** (CFO, or Border Committee of Women Workers), a long-time AFSC partner organization, and that's where she turned for help.

She's now one of the worker/owners of the CFO-supported **Maquiladora Dignidad y Justicia** (Dignity & Justice Maquiladora Company), a small-scale clothing production company based in Piedras Negras, Mexico. For Paty, there's no comparison between Dignidad y Justicia and her former employer.

"In Macoelmex, there was no justice," she said. "In Dignidad y Justicia, we work well, we're in harmony. Each of us has a voice that counts. I feel very calm working there."

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Women & Fair Trade

Dignidad y Justicia recently participated in the second annual **Women and Fair Trade** event organized by AFSC's **Austin, Texas, office.**

[Find out more](#) about the event and fair trade.



Judith Rosenberg from Austin Tan Cerca and Paty de Luna.

Photo: Josefina Castillo

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