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Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

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



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Working to End Sweatshops | North Country Fair Trade

Co-op America's National Green PagesT

2006 Edition

By *Andrew Korfhage*

In the fall of 2004, two worker-owners from Maquiladora Mujeres, a Nicaraguan women's sewing cooperative, embarked on an anti-sweatshop speaking tour of the United States, starting in Washington, DC, at Co-op America's Green Festival. Their next stop was Minneapolis, where their visit was sponsored by North Country Fair Trade, which had recently launched as a distributor of sweatshop-free clothing and accessories,

The two women told audiences about how they had escaped the unhealthy and abusive working conditions of bigger local factories by forming their cooperative and forging alliances with companies like North Country that are dedicated to keeping sweatshops out of supply chains.

"We heard about how one worker spent two days in a typical maquila, but quit even though she needed the money, because she couldn't stand how workers were treated at the plant," says John Flory, North Country's founder. "She works at the cooperative now and makes about 40 percent higher wages. Plus, production standards at the cooperative result in an eight-hour workday and five-day week, instead of workers being stuck at the factory until quotas are met."

As a distributor for Maquiladora Mujeres and one other sustainably run clothing cooperative, North Country Fair Trade counts schools, churches, businesses, and nonprofit organizations among its client base, providing blank T-shirts and bags for these clients to print with their logos. (Fair Trade involves guaranteeing a level of financial support for each link of the supply chain sufficient for workers and farmers to not only meet their basic needs, but also to improve their communities, develop their businesses, and lift themselves economically. Certain food commodities, such as chocolate, coffee, tea, and bananas are certified as fairly traded and bear a special Fair Trade Certified™ logo. For more information about Fair Trade and Co-op America's programs to support it, see p.41.)

"Many people think of Fair Trade as mainly coffee or crafts," says Flory. "That's true, but there's a very big commercial market for other Fair Trade items like clothing. North Country's role is to help develop producers of Fair Trade goods and then help them find a market for their products."

To that end, Flory helped provide start-up capital for another of his sweatshop-free suppliers, the Mexican cooperative Maquiladora Dignidad y Justicia, which began production after the Levi's plant in Piedras Negras closed, sending its sewing jobs to China, where labor is cheaper. The cooperative has the future goal of adding blue jeans to its product line, to capitalize on the workers' experience from the Levi's plant.

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Dignidad y Justicia is a worker-owned cooperative supplying Fair Trade goods to North Country Fair Trade.

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