



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

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



[Home](#) > Free trade & workers

[Spanish Version](#)

KPFA The Morning Show
Berkeley, CA
May 4, 2005 (Broadcasted June 8, 2005)

David Bacon speaks with Julia Quiñonez

[David]: We are speaking this morning with Julia Quiñonez, who is the coordinator of the Border Committee of Women Workers, the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, and translating for us this morning is Eric Myers .

David: Julia, perhaps you can start by telling us what the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras is. Why is it actually called, in Spanish, "obreras" means women workers, so why specifically is the name of the committee in the feminine? Why is it talking about women workers in particular? And what is it?

Julia: The Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) is an organization of the base of the rank and file that's lead by women and men who work in the maquiladoras. So when the organization was born it was born out of a need, and it was born out of a need particularly amongst the young women who work in the industry. In the beginning the industry was particularly interested in employing women workers and even though this situation has changed over time we continue to maintain a focus on the experience of women. So we look for a greater level of participation, particularly for women, inside their unions and at levels of leadership.

David: What does the Comité actually do?

Julia: The CFO is an organization of workers that is working in three Mexican states, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Chihuahua . The purpose of the organization is to educate and organize workers around their labor rights. Apart from educating workers about their labor rights, we also have a focus on dialoguing about the impact of free trade. And we also have a focus on gender, a focus particularly on the violence against women. Finally, we have a program based on economic self-sufficiency and fair trade and in this we've created our own maquiladora making products and giving employment for women.

David: When you say that you do education around the effects of free trade, what are the effects of free trade and of NAFTA, as you see them, in the section of the border where you are active?

Julia: Maquiladoras began to arrive in our region over 40 years ago and with the advent of the Free Trade Agreement 11 years ago, we can categorically affirm that the working conditions for workers in the maquiladoras have gotten worse. And things have even gotten worse at all levels. Even plants that over the years had achieved better benefits, better wages, those plants began to move south into the interior of Mexico, even 3 hours away, where the salaries were much worse and where the working conditions were also much worse.

David: What about the plants that have remained on the border? Have salaries gone up in the years that NAFTA has been in effect? The Mexican government promised, really, when NAFTA was negotiated, that it would lead to a situation in which, first off, there would be more jobs, and second that those jobs would pay more and Mexico would become a first world country. This is what Carlos Salinas de Gortari said.

Julia: We the workers at the border think that all of this was a big lie. The problem of unemployment wasn't resolved at all. The salaries have not gotten better; in fact, the salaries continue to be completely insufficient for anybody to live on. The workers continue to live in extreme poverty and there are so many people who arrive to look for work. The cities are overloaded and don't have the services or the infrastructure to be able to provide for them. For example, if you look at Ciudad Acuña , New York Times reporters visited and chronicled the situations there. It's a disgrace. There are large transnationals such as Alcoa and Delphi operating in these cities yet workers are living in houses where they have to construct their houses out of cardboard, out of materials taken from the factories.

David: Could you give us an idea of what an average maquiladora factory wage is in the States where the CFO is active and what that wage will actually buy in the supermarket?

Julia: The average salary for a maquiladora worker is US \$45 a week. This allows workers to buy such food stuff as pasta, beans, rice, potatoes, maybe oil, just the basic products to eat. They can't buy cereals, they can't buy milk, perhaps milk in rare occasions if there are children, but that's what they consume.

David: How much in a Mexican supermarket on the border, how much does a gallon of milk actually cost?

Julia: There is a mistaken idea that just because we live in Mexico all the products we buy are cheaper. That is something the transnationals seem to believe. But, in reality, the basic food stuff that we buy is more expensive on the Mexican side. If you take a gallon of milk, if you go over to the American side of the border it'll cost about \$2.50 for a gallon; \$27 Mexican pesos. However, in our side of the border, in Piedras Negras, it would be \$45 pesos or about US \$4.50, basically twice as expensive. In reality, the salaries simply are not sufficient to permit a family to survive. It's always the case that in any family two or three people have to work to provide for the necessities of the family; or if there's just one head of the family, a man working, the family has to supplement their income by selling other products, like beauty products, or often they cross the border to sell their blood.

David: So a gallon of milk costing \$4.50 and a weekly wage that's US \$45 for a week, that really means that somebody has to work almost half a day just to buy a gallon of milk?

Julia: Approximately, Yes.

David: So, what are the conditions like in the neighborhoods where workers live: what does it look like, what are the conditions for people's lives?

Julia: It really is a shock. It's a shock even to workers who come up from the interior, from the countryside of Mexico because they are used to living in houses that are bigger, that have patios, that have space. And they come up and they see how people are living and the options for workers are very few. Perhaps the lucky ones can acquire a house through the Mexican housing program INFONAVIT. But if they do so they're really in debt to the Mexican government for the rest of their lives. Those houses are in slightly better condition. Otherwise, workers are forced to build their own houses out of whatever materials they can in places that are completely inappropriate for building; along the sides of cliffs or in areas that are prone to flooding stream beds and areas that are unsafe for them to raise their families.

David: What about basic services, like sewers, like running water, like electricity in those neighborhoods? Are those services being provided by the municipal authorities in the cities where people are living?

Julia: In some of the neighborhoods there are such services. For example, in those built by INFONAVIT, which I mentioned, the government does provide electricity. The problem there is that the bills are very expensive. A monthly electricity bill costs \$450 pesos, or US \$45, and a water bill costs \$150 pesos per month, or US \$15. The problem with the water is that it's still not drinkable water. In the other neighborhoods where the people squat and build their houses the best they can, the government doesn't provide services. People are reduced many times to trying to hook up, robbing from electrical lines.

David: Also, this must be also pretty dangerous if you are bringing in electrical power on wires hooked up illegally to the poles and you are living in houses that are made out of cardboard and shipping pallets, like you've described. There must be dangers of fire for instance. You've already talked about flooding in these areas too. It must be pretty dangerous living in these areas.

Julia: It is very dangerous, but it's also very common. Many times you can go into people's houses and you can see the wires have been set up and they run along the ground, kids walking around them, it's very dangerous, but that's what people have done.

David: We are speaking this morning with Julia Quiñonez who is the coordinator with the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, the Border Committee of Women Workers, and translating for us this morning is Eric Myers .

David: Julia, in the factories where these workers are working, there actually are unions, aren't there?

Julia: When you talk about the border you have to understand there is a great variety of situations. In Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez , for example, there is a phenomenon of what are known as protection contracts. These are contracts, union contracts, that the companies have but the workers don't know anything about. If you move down the border to Tamaulipas or Coahuila, there are unions. Most of the maquiladoras do have unions. The problem workers face is that these unions are what are called "charro" unions, they are unresponsive and corrupt and don't support the workers. Other situations exist, for example in Ciudad Acuña, where unions are actually prohibited and there is not a single union.

David: I know that the Border Committee of Workers was very active in Ciudad Acuña in helping the workers at the Alcoa Fujikura plant not only to improve the conditions in the plant but actually to form an independent union. Tell us what happened to that.

Julia: Our organization tries to work very strategically, in spite of the many obstacles that we face. Actually, it was in Piedras Negras where there was a movement to reform the union from within, a rank-and-file movement that made the decision to create an independent union.

David: So you mean that in the Alcoa Fujikura plant there was a "charro" union, or a union that was really not responsive to the workers and the workers kind of tried to organize a movement to try and take over the union and try to make it more responsive to what their needs were?

Julia: That's what the worker's wanted. In fact, they were successful. The workers formed an independent union and then they left the CTM union. Their union was formed. The next problem was to get their union to be registered and then recognized by the Mexican government. They filed the paperwork with the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board. However, that government agency denied them the registration of their union. So this case is still not resolved. In fact, after some appeals within the Mexican legal system, a complaint was filed with the International Labor Office, the ILO, accusing the Mexican government of failing to guarantee its citizens the right of freedom of association.

David: What happened to the workers who were involved in that effort?

Julia: Some of them were fired, some of the leaders. But others continued the struggle, continued the organizing work and that's really the key in having an organized rank-and-file base in your movement. Because when the company fires some leaders, other leaders emerge and continue the work. So, there are hundreds of workers involved in this movement.

David: What were the problems that workers were trying to resolve in the factory by means of organizing this independent union? What were the complaints that they had?

Julia: They simply wanted to take control of their own collective bargaining relationship, and they wanted to have an opportunity for collective bargaining to improve their salaries and their benefits, and they were seeing that the CTM leadership was partial to the company and was not representing the workers. In fact, the leaders in this independent union, before trying to form an independent union, were involved in trying to democratize the union from within. They, in fact, had won election to leadership at the plant level but they found out that everything they were trying to do in representing workers at the plant level was being undone by the leader of the union who was making secret agreements with the companies. This is a logical evolution. First workers begin to make changes in their individual lives and in their individual conflicts; then workers begin to organize and act together along the same assembly line; then at a plant-wide level and ultimately they want to have more say and control over the structures, the union structures that represent them. So this is what happens in a progressive way.

David: Julia, you know the story you're telling here is very similar to many others that we've heard in terms of workers not being able to get the legal status or their independent unions recognized, and also suffering firings as a result of it. You know, we could name a lot of different plants. You know, that happened at Sony, people actually getting beat up in front of the plant. It happened at Custom and Auto Trim. It happened at the Hang Young plant in Tijuana . It happened at the Duro Bag Co. It happened at a whole succession of different companies. NAFTA had a labor side agreement that was supposed to guarantee people's labor rights in Mexico ; that this wouldn't happen. So what about it? Did NAFTA have a process that you think was really useful to workers that they could use to stop the kind of violations of their rights that you're describing here at Alcoa Fujikura?

Julia: No. We're familiar with the labor side agreement and we understand that it also contemplates the principle of freedom of association, which is the principle at issue here. But, it's also obvious that these parallel agreements, the labor side agreements, don't force anybody to take responsibility. Complaints are filed, and after a long process, the only thing that comes is a recommendation as to how things should have happened. But that recommendation never translates into actual enforcement and it's not effective to guarantee anybody's rights.

David: If that's the case, do you think that there is any form of labor protection that can be incorporated into agreements like NAFTA that would guarantee workers rights, or do you think that workers have to guarantee their labor rights in some other way?

Julia: I think both possibilities are true. It can be if there is a renegotiation of the NAFTA agreement. The possibility of actual effective obligatory means of enforcing workers' rights and holding transnational corporations accountable to complying with the law would be a helpful possibility for workers. That's what is necessary for trade agreements. At the same time, even if you have such trade agreements, the organizing of workers at the grassroots level, informing workers' organizations is vital. Otherwise, we can't enforce these rights that are recognized by the trade agreements.

David: What about support from unions on the other side of the border? I know that CFO has relationships with U.S. unions. What kind of role does that play in helping to guarantee the rights of Mexican workers on the border?

Julia: We've been creating and looking for alliances because of the basic recognition that we're working for the same companies and we need to connect our struggles across the border. We've been successful in building alliances with some U.S. labor unions and these have been important to us. At the same time, respecting the autonomy of our own organizing style and our own organizing work. At this stage we're looking for an even greater level of commitment with Mexican workers. We need to continue to build the solidarity and move to the next level.

David: You've described also a situation in which, at least, much of the official Mexican labor movement is not very responsive to the actual needs of Mexican workers, especially those workers on the border. Do you foresee any changes in the Mexican labor movement? Do you think the Mexican labor movement is going to become more effective and more responsive to workers at the base there?

Julia: I think so. We've seen from our own experience that when workers take control of their situation, take control of their lives, they can make great changes. And that's our hope, to continue to organize and to continue ultimately to organize towards an independent labor movement in the maquiladoras in Mexico , because we know that true unionism is the best hope for our families and our future. And we have been able to build important alliances with other labor unions and movements within Mexico . Sharing common objectives with such unions, for example, with the FAT, with an independent union called Alcoa Puebla which was formed in Alcoa in that State; with the Volkswagen independent union, with the Miners, for example. All of these organizations are looking for ways to support maquiladora workers more effectively. We also have an agreement, a relationship, with the National Workers Union, the new labor federation that's been formed and we think it's very vital the Mexican workers form a common front, and that we work together towards revitalize the labor movement in Mexico.

David: There are a number of other maquiladora worker organizing projects along the border in different cities. You know, there is one in Tijuana , CITTAC. There's another one in Torreón, Enlace or Sedepac. There's the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras . Do you foresee any efforts to try and bring those groups together also so there is like one umbrella in which maquiladora workers can organize in lots of different cities all along the border?

Julia: All of the organizations you mentioned have the same objective. They're looking for social justice. They are looking for justice for workers. We find different ways to work, different methods. For the CFO is important to work in alliances to coordinate our efforts, even as we work at our local levels and according to our own methods. We are seeking the same goals, the same justice. Our common efforts are going to impact and reflect our common objectives. We also have to understand that this process has its ups and downs. We win sometimes, we lose other times. The challenge we all face is how to be consistent and constant so that when workers organize and there is a movement, and then there's a bunch of firings, sometimes the organization falls apart. The hard thing is to determine how to build organizations that can survive these blows that we face and build a consistent and constant labor movement.

David: One last question. For workers in this country, ordinary workers, in their workplaces, factories, schools, who are aware of what's happening at the border and are looking for something that they can do, that will help workers in the maquiladoras, what is what an ordinary worker in this country can do?

Julia: I think the first thing the workers can do is organize here, organize themselves and be strong, build strong organizations in their workplace, maintain their jobs; this is the first step towards building international solidarity. Obviously the companies are recognizing that there are simply no borders anymore as far as the movement of capital, the movement of companies. We need to take that mentality too and build the same borderless solidarity and support for one another. Workers supporting Mexican workers, particularly Mexican workers here in the United States and others who can understand the importance of the movement in Mexico might want also to understand what Mexican workers face important economic difficulties when they try to organize themselves, so economic support can be helpful, because workers in Mexico, their organizations, don't have the same capacity as organizations in the United States. Another thing that we are really conscious of is the struggle of Mexican workers and other immigrant workers to legalize their status in the United States and I think that's something that could really help build the solidarity movement is to advance these efforts. If workers here can't exercise fully their rights, that brings everybody down as well. Ultimately what needs to happen is the level of everybody should come up, because corporations are very good at looking around the world to see where conditions are worst to see where they can exploit the best and move to that place, but if we can help each other bring ourselves up they won't be able to do that.

David: People who want more information about the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, how do they get in touch with the Comité and how do they find out information?

Julia: We have four offices; our main office is in Piedras Negras, Coahuila. We also have a website: www.cfoamquiladoras.org . We have materials there available in Spanish and English.

David: We've been speaking with Julia Quiñonez, the coordinator of the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, and translating for us this morning was Eric Myers . Thank you both for being with us.

www.cfomaquiladoras.org is produced in cooperation with the
Mexico-U.S Border Program
of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (CFO)
Monterrey #1103, Col. Las Fuentes
Piedras Negras, Coahuila
C.P. 26010, México