



## Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

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



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## Woman's Fight for Women's Cause

### Ugebrevet A4/ Danish Confederation of Trade Unions

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[On the Mexican side of the border between the United States and Mexico](#) , thousands of women daily feel the harsh, shadowy sides of globalization. They slave for multinational companies for wretched wages and under miserable working conditions in order to produce, amongst other things, Harry Potter clothes for the wealthy part of the world. Julia Quiñonez is fighting for the Mexican women's cause.

#### Barbie Girl

Thousands of Mexican women toil under stress at the sewing machines. In row after row they sit with their heads bowed and hands busily working with the seams. Pink Barbie costumes and black Harry Potter costumes under the Christmas tree are hits with children throughout the world, and this can be felt at Rubies' factories in Northern Mexico . Women and girls slave for miserable wages and can only dream of seeing their own little daughters and sons dressed like the children's heroes of today.

It's the coordinator of the Mexican organization "Border Committee of Women Workers", Julia Quiñonez, who reports on the miserable working conditions and broken dreams. And she does not hide that it often is unbearable to be witness to the darker sides of globalization.

"For millions of Mexican women and girls life is a fight to survive, and this is especially true for women who work in the factories along the U.S. border. They receive miserable wages, hardly see their children, are exposed to dangerous chemicals, bad working conditions, and risk to be fired if they dare to protest."

She is outraged on behalf of the Mexican women. Outraged that politicians, international organizations, multinational companies as well as the consumers of the world let this happen. Either they close their eyes to obvious violations of international conventions, or due to ignorance, they don't notice at all that the global growth is galloping ahead with women's lives on its conscience.

"A work week of 48 hours brings approximately 50-60 U.S. dollars (ca. 350 DKR, editor) in wages at the Mexican factories. That isn't at all enough for a family. In order to survive, most workers will work at a second job, or the very young girls will have to enter the labor market in order to help feed the youngest members of the family. This means that girls as young as fourteen years of age become worn out and are not getting an education, and multinational companies hire them without hesitation." Julia Quiñonez tells us.

The list of multinational companies which have settled in Mexico along the U.S. border and have hired Mexican workers at wages reminiscent of starvation wages is endless. The giant Alcoa employs 15,000 workers in Mexico in order to produce automobile parts for Ford, Volkswagen and other automobile manufacturers.

"The employees of many factories work with chemical products which have been outlawed in the companies' homelands, but because we have a very liberal legislation, the companies move the dangerous production to Mexico . I have seen many women with allergies, cancer and leukemia due to a total lack of protection of the workers," she notes.

#### "Ghost" Labor Unions

But the list of sins doesn't stop at low wages, child labor and unhealthy work. Labor unions have been banned at most workplaces, and dissatisfied workers who try to organize in order to fight, in unison, for better wage and work conditions, get fired. This was, according to Julia Quiñonez, the case less than six months ago at the Rubies factories in the Mexican State of Hidalgo .

Rubies is licensed to produce for some of the largest entertainment concerns in the world. Time Warner Co. uses Rubies' Mexican factory for, among other things, sewing Harry Potter costumes, and the toy giant Mattel gets Barbie dresses and various accessories produced in Mexico .

At Rubies in Hidalgo , at little more than seventy workers managed to establish a labor union in April, but before the end of the month, they had all been fired. This in spite of the fact that the majority working for Rubies had backed the labor union.

"The list of complaints was long: lack of safety, working overtime without compensation, no health plan, compulsory pregnancy testing, and use of child labor. In spite of this, the women who tried to improve the working conditions by establishing an independent union lost their jobs," Julia Quiñonez says in an indignant tone of voice.

The story is the same for the multinational Alcoa with 125,000 employees worldwide. At one Mexican factory owned by Alcoa, a group of workers last year decided to make use of their right to start an independent union.

"Alcoa fired them, and the workers complained to the United Nation's International Labour Office (ILO) in order to have their rights backed up. So far the complaint has not been heard because the ILO is awaiting comments from the Mexican government which is sitting on the case."

And the unions which are allowed to exist are not always bona fide.

"We operate with a concept called ghost unions. That is companies which tell the employees that they have labor unions that they can join. But in reality they are in the pockets of the employer."

#### Bush has Made it Worse

The poor workers do not receive much help from the authorities, who, according to Julia Quiñonez, pay much more attention to the capitalist interests than helping that half of the one hundred million Mexicans who are estimated to live below the poverty line.

"The Mexican government bows to the multinational companies in order to make sure that the jobs remain in the country. The government takes care of a formidable infrastructure, that the electricity is on and that the factories have clean drinking water. This is in stark contrast to the living conditions which the factory workers have. They live in miserable sheet-metal sheds and often without electricity," she says.

In the beginning of the 1990's, Canada , the United States and Mexico made a free trade agreement, NAFTA, and in many ways the free trade has been generating growth and work also in the poor Mexico according to Julia Quiñonez. However, during the last few years, the development has gone into back gear, she thinks.

"It has definitely become worse since president Bush took over in the United States . The border between Mexico and the U.S. has become a sort of test laboratory where large corporations are permitted to try out things, push production and avoid too many environmental requirements. This is worrying workers on both sides of the border, and it is clear that both globalization and president Bush' way of governing are not equal for all."

Julia Quiñonez knows full well that the story of the unskilled workers in Mexico isn't unique. The same classic drama of exploitation and ignoring international workers' rights takes place all over the planet. From China to Honduras , from the Philippines to Cambodia . And globalization just strengthens the unreasonable working conditions, she figures.

"Therefore, we'll also have to organize ourselves in global networks. We'll have to raise our voices in unison and sharpen the attention of the media and the consumers."



### Warns Against Boycotts

It is also to make her voice heard that she just visited Denmark . Together with female union leaders from India , Australia , the United States and all of Europe , she is working at creating a global women's network of union leaders. From Denmark , Tine Auvig-Huggenberger, LO Vice President is involved in the new network whose task is to set focus on women's unreasonable working conditions.

"I hope that a global network of women union leaders can create attention around working conditions in multinational companies in Mexico , and not only there, but also in other countries where it is needed."

However, she answers clearly "No" to the question of whether or not it would be helpful if European consumers boycott businesses such as Rubies and Alcoa. Julia Quinonez warns against boycott of certain goods and does not think that it would be a lever for better working conditions.

"Consumers can do the most good by asking questions of the company subsidiaries in Europe and of the distributors of the goods. Alcoa also has factories in Spain . How the working conditions are there and why are they not corresponding in Mexico ? By asking questions, the consumers demonstrate that they are aware of working conditions. Today, companies worry about their image, and if they sense critical pressure, it will help."

Furthermore, the employees working for the same companies, regardless of whether the company is in the Unites States, Mexico or a European country can show solidarity and raise demands on behalf of each other.

"Globalization also takes place among the workers, and it is not only the finances of the company that gain from globalization. The worker also has a possibility of gaining by closer cooperation. Therefore, I prefer coordinated actions rather than isolated boycotts; actions where employees working for the same company show solidarity with each other by demanding decent working conditions for everyone in the workplace. And then actions where labor organizations raise their voices."

Finally, Julia Quiñonez has experienced that well-known Hollywood stars also can direct the spotlight towards unglamorous women's fates in Mexico . Besides fighting for working rights for women, Julia Quiñonez' organization also spearheads solving the mystery of the brutal murders of almost 300 young women in the State of Chihuahua during the last few years. The common denominator for the murdered women is that they worked at the big factories in Northern Mexico .

The American actress Jane Fonda has just spearheaded an initiative that demands a solution of the murders. And in 2006, the movie "Bordertown" will have its premiere. Jennifer Lopez and Antonio Banderas have the main roles in a movie that describes the murders of the young women, the working conditions at the factories, and the families' fight, in vain, to get the murders solved.

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