



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

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



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Spanish Version

Maquiladora Workers Tell Calvin Klein to Move Over

In March 2002, for the second time in her life, a Mexican maquiladora worker and single mother named Amparo was fired for organizing. She was one of 956 who insisted on her right to elect union representatives democratically, through the ballot. And she was one of 26 whom management fired for helping to organize the ballot rebellion. Amparo spoke for many workers when she said of the situation in Piedras Negras, "We workers generate the wealth for the rich. Without us there is no wealth. They use our hands; they use our lives... to turn a profit. They leave us sick and in misery."

Piedras Negras has hosted clothing manufacturers for years. In 1978, US-based Galey & Lord opened Dimmit Industries, which made pants for Levi's, Liz Claiborne, Polo, and Calvin Klein. When they closed in August 2001, salaries had fallen from \$120 to \$31 a week. Market studies corroborate Amparo's assessment of where the money goes. In the apparel industry, for example, when a US consumer buys a pair of jeans for \$30, the retail store gets \$15, the brand name gets \$10.80, and the manufacturer gets \$4.20, out of which they pay the production worker \$1.00.

Amparo was a volunteer organizer for the Border Committee of Women Workers, or CFO, a grassroots border organization that has worked for 24 years to improve the maquiladora system and promote worker and human rights. They have bred pockets of savvy and informed workers who know their rights and who can look a CEO in Pittsburgh in the eye and demand to be "treated with the respect due a human being, nothing less."

CFO organizing has met many successes. A clear liability, however, has been that employers band together to blacklist activists. Consequently, the CFO community has wanted to hatch small, worker-owned businesses to employ activists labeled as *personas problemáticas*, or problem people. Fired workers who wrested legal severance pay from employers attained capital to open their own businesses—a beauty salon and a tortillería. But nothing happened on a larger scale until, by a series of coincidences, the CFO and North Country Fair Trade (NCFT) met in the summer of 2003.



D&J's patternmaker shows Luis and Yvonne Montejano how patterns are sketched and cut in order to make fair trade t-shirts, D&J's first product.

NCFT is a small distribution company committed to improving wages and labor conditions for Latin American production workers by identifying socially conscious consumers in the US. "It is easier at this point," says John Flory of NCFT, "to find customers who want to apply ethics to their purchasing than to find sources for fair trade products. More and more people care how their pants are made, not just how much they cost."

NCFT had been distributing for existing producers, primarily COMUNAVI, a women's sewing cooperative in Nicaragua. In search of more sources, Flory speculated that Mexican workers fired for organizing might have the daring to start their own business and the passion to see it through. He further reasoned that workers who have no cash could become owners since they have something equally valuable to invest: their labor.

Flory, who lives on the Minnesota end of I-35, Texas's main north-south route, drove numerous times to Piedras Negras. He gave workshops in marketing, finance, and product development. He and the workers researched the intricacies of accounting, law and export in the age of NAFTA. In March 2004, the Dignity & Justice Maquiladora Company (D&J) incorporated. They had reached consensus on basic issues. NCFT and the CFO are each 30% owners. A group of workers owns the remaining 40%. A worker's mother rents a house to D&J, which has acquired a few machines.

Much remains to be done; even so, April 3 was not too soon to celebrate D&J's grand opening. The date coincided with the 6th anniversary of the CFO's move into office space, which greatly spurred their growth. And so, this community celebrated and affirmed their double commitment: to start a tiny, new transnational business, but also to continue to struggle but also to continue to struggle within the belly of the transnational beast.

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

