Don't the bathrooms in your house have doors?

Workers at Black & Decker block removal of doors and partitions from the factory’s bathrooms.

Beginning in August 2004, management at the Black & Decker plant in the Mexican border town of Reynosa decided that the best way to stop workers from writing graffiti on the stalls and doors in the men’s bathroom was to remove them altogether.

Most of the workers said that undoubtedly only a few of their number were writing on the partitions between the stalls, and that it made no sense to punish all 700 employees. At first, the managers wanted the workers themselves to watch each other and turn in whoever was writing on the walls, an impossible request since the use of the bathrooms is a personal and private matter. What’s more, the workers refused to monitor each other.

Then, Black & Decker decided to remove all the doors and partitions, leaving nothing separating the stalls. The managers said, “this is the only way to teach people.” The workers found this measure humiliating and degrading, and so they decided to take action.

Following the lead of several workers, such as Vidal del Angel, who was fired on May 30, 2005, the workers presented a petition with 76 signatures to Reynosa’s secretary of health. The petition asked authorities to inspect Black & Decker’s Plant No. 2. A few days later, health inspectors visited the plant, asking one of the managers, “Don’t the bathrooms in your house have doors?”

Black & Decker put back the doors and partitions because the managers were obviously in violation of the law. The management was displeased and told the workers that if they wrote on the walls again the company would get rid of the bathrooms altogether, providing instead improvised bathrooms with no roofs outside the building. The workers replied humorously that maybe this would better, as this way they would be able to spend some time in the fresh air and enjoy the sun.

Their success motivated other workers to learn more about their labor rights, so they could improve the working conditions in the maquiladora. In June 2005, after four workers were fired, Black & Decker once again began threatening to remove the doors and partitions to the bathroom stalls, by means of a warning posted throughout the factory.

The warning read, “Important Announcement: It has come to our notice that the facilities have graffiti. If you continue these practices we will be obliged to take away the partitions and doors as we have before. Do not destroy what we have provided for your comfort and convenience. This is your house, take care of it!!! Human Resources”

When the workers went on the TV news on June 2, 2005 to disclose these renewed threats, Black & Decker removed the warnings. One worker, however, was able to obtain a copy as evidence.