

Maquila Solidarity update



PHOTO: PRODUCCIONES Y MILAGROS AGRUPACIÓN FEMINISTA A.C.

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Violence, economic crisis and women workers' rights in Juárez

THE SEEMINGLY NEVER-ENDING WAVE OF VIOLENCE IN Ciudad Juárez during the past two decades has turned this Mexican border city into a virtual war zone. Murders are an everyday occurrence, now fuelled by an on-going turf war between rival Mexican drug cartels over important trafficking routes into the United States.

But the tragedy that has befallen the city has particularly affected women, with approximately 1,400 femicides occurring since 1993. Many of these women were maquila workers.

Most of these crimes remain unsolved to this day. And the killings have not abated; in October 2010, 47 women were reportedly killed in the city, the highest recorded number of deaths in one month.

● see 'Ni una más...', p.8

This March 8, International Women's Day (IWD), three of us from MSN will have the honour to be in Nicaragua for the thirteenth annual colloquium of the Movement of Working and Unemployed Women - Maria Elena Cuadra (MEC). The colloquium, which MSN is co-sponsoring, brings together over 1,000 maquila workers to talk, plan and strategize for the coming year.



Lynda Yanz

FOR ME, THERE ARE always two sides to IWD. On the one hand, it is inspiring to celebrate the tremendous victories women's organizations around the world have achieved over the years, and the strength of the women who continue to struggle to advance women's and worker rights.

IWD, however, is also a reminder of the challenges that still face women workers despite over a century of struggle.

2011 is the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, a disaster that took the lives of 146 young garment workers in New York City and inspired a generation of trade union organizers and legal reformers to put workers' health and safety at the top of their agenda.

Yet in 2011, fatal fires and other disasters are still a common occurrence in the new centres of garment production, like Bangladesh. MSN continues to receive calls for urgent action when workers suffer preventable injuries, and even death, due to unsafe

and unhealthy working conditions (see page 7).

Those who speak up for workers' rights also face threats of violence and death. Our colleagues at the Worker Assistance Centre (CAT) in Mexico, for example, have endured beatings and death threats in retaliation for supporting workers' organizing efforts at Johnson Controls factories in Puebla. Workers have also been threatened and beaten (see page 3). And, as Elizabeth Avalos of the Centro de Estudios y Taller Laboral (CETLAC) explains (page 1), the continuing wave of murders of young women in Ciudad Juarez, as well as job insecurity caused by the economic crisis, are being used to discourage workers from speaking out and/or organizing.

Yet women workers and solidarity activists have also developed new, sophisticated and creative tactics to organize for women's labour rights in global supply chains.

Recently, MSN staff had the opportunity to sit down with Jenny Chan, a young organizer from Hong Kong-based Students and Scholars Against

Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM). Jenny described a range of innovative tactics SACOM is using to advance worker rights in China's massive electronics, toy and apparel manufacturing centres.

These include on-the-ground investigations, corporate campaigning, worker centres, and engagement with major electronics brands like HP on worker rights training (see page 4). With the right mix of dedication, energy and thoughtfulness, a small group of students has emerged as a potent force for change.

Maybe that's the lesson of IWD 2011 – that women will always face challenges at work and at home, but there are creative, determined and inspired women and women-led organizations out there that have the capacity to meet those challenges head on. Hopefully, that inspiring message will continue to drive our work in 2011.

We hope you find this issue of the *Update* of interest and of use in your work. ■

**Lynda Yanz,
for the MSN team**

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Global action in solidarity with Mexican workers

ON FEBRUARY 14-19, RALLIES WERE HELD IN Canada, the US, Mexico and around the world to mark the Global Days of Action in support of Mexico's independent labour movement and the right of Mexican workers to be represented by unions of their free choice.

In Canada, trade unionists and other supporters staged demonstrations outside the Mexican Embassy in Ottawa and consulates in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, demanding respect for freedom of association and an end to anti-union violence.

In recent years, Mexico's few authentic, independent unions have increasingly come under attack by both government and employers. In the cases of the Miners' Union (*Los Mineros*) and the Electrical Workers' Union (SME), the Mexican government seems determined to destroy these historically important unions altogether.

Meanwhile, workers seeking to be represented by independent unions and the human and labour rights groups providing them advice and support have been assaulted and targeted with death threats.

In early February, Blanca Velázquez, Director of the Worker Assistance Centre (CAT) in Puebla, Mexico, was in Canada at the invitation of

MSN and the Social Justice Fund of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) to draw attention to the assaults and death threats she and other members of her organization have suffered for supporting the right of workers to be represented by a union of their free choice.

On December 20, 2010, the CAT office in Puebla was broken into. The assailants

hacked into Blanca's e-mail account and the CAT's institutional account, stole hard-copy and electronic documents, and destroyed office equipment.

On January 11, Blanca and members of the CAT team received a death threat through the

CAT's hacked e-mail account. The threatening message described in detail the violent assault against human rights



PHOTO: JORGE ROBLES

ABOVE: "Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt: examples to follow". Mexican unions demonstrate, January 30, 2011.

BELOW: Blanca Velázquez, CAT



their union. The company also agreed to end its relationship with a "protection union" affiliated with the Confederation of Trade Union Organizations (COS) that had been imposed on the workers by their employer.

A major barrier to freedom of association in Mexico is the existence of "protection contracts" signed by employers and unrepresentative unions or labour lawyers without the knowledge of the workers covered by those agreements. These contracts, which seldom provide for more than workers' legal entitlements, "protect" the employer from the threat of their workers joining or forming a democratic union and/or having to negotiate with their employees on wages and working conditions.

Despite the precedent-setting victory at JCI Interiores, Milwaukee-based Johnson Controls continues to delay the legal registration of *Los Mineros* as the workers' union, and protection contracts remain in place at its other Puebla factories.

MSN is an active participant in an international coalition of trade union and labour rights organizations that is pressuring Johnson Controls to respect its workers' associational rights, demanding protection for the CAT team, and calling on the Mexican government to end its attacks on independent unions and to remove institutional barriers to freedom of association. ■

activist Digna Ochoa in 1999, who was later murdered. To date, the Puebla State government has refused to investigate the case and neither it nor the Mexican federal government has responded to a formal request for protective measures for the CAT team.

On several occasions over the past year, members of the CAT team have been beaten and/or threatened physically for their support of workers at two Johnson Controls (JCI) auto parts factories in Puebla. In May and again in August, workers at the JCI Interiores plant staged two three-day strikes, winning a signed agreement with their employer to recognize *Los Mineros* as



From the outside and

SACOM uses novel strategies to advance worker rights in China

IN JANUARY, MSN MET WITH JENNY CHAN, CO-FOUNDER and previous coordinator of the Hong Kong-based Students & Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM), while she was in Toronto to speak at the University of Toronto. Jenny discussed the challenges of working in China and the innovative strategies SACOM has developed to overcome those difficulties.

Although China has no independent trade unions, and the right to strike is not protected by law, the Chinese government no longer has the ability to control workers with an iron fist as it did in the past. A new generation of workers is using cell phones and the internet to connect with each other and share their stories, even using code to evade censorship. In factory dormitories or small rental apartments outside of the production facilities, some Chinese work-

ers are strategizing and planning protests to defend their legitimate rights.

SACOM was born out of bi-weekly meetings of students from Hong Kong's eight universities, during which they discussed issues such as the rise of global capitalism, under the tutelage of university professors.

"When we set up SACOM in 2005, one of the first decisions we had to make was whether to base ourselves in Hong Kong or in mainland China. We decided on Hong

Kong because of the relatively freer local and international media presence there through which we could publicize workers' grievances. In mainland China groups can be blacklisted and censored," explains Chan. "SACOM is devoted to organizing cross-border campaigns to amplify workers' calls for decent work in globalized China."

In anticipation of the September 2005 grand opening of Disneyland Hong Kong, the group launched its first

major campaign. "That summer, we organized ourselves into 10 study groups and each group visited a different factory in mainland China that was producing children's books, toys, and stationary for Disney. We gained access to the workers in lots of different ways. Some of us applied for jobs in the factories, and became undercover

"Although campaigning is needed to spread our message, worker participation is indispensable if we are to have a lasting impact at the workplace level!"

Jenny Chan

researchers right on the assembly lines. We also met with workers outside of the factories at the street food vendor stalls where they



would come to eat. And some of us went to hospitals where we located workers who had suffered injuries," says Chan.

SACOM published reports in both Chinese and English, exposing the plight of workers producing for Disney. "Our research showed that workers weren't getting paid what they were entitled to by law, and that factory managers weren't providing injury compensation, let alone paying for workplace health insurance. Injured workers did not have money to pay their hospital bills, so

we would see swollen fingers and badly infected wounds," says Chan.

SACOM released its findings at an August 18 press conference in Hong Kong. On the same day in Washington DC, the National Labor Committee (NLC) held a press conference using

 **For more information about SACOM, visit <http://sacom.hk>**

SACOM's report. The next day the English-language newspaper the *South China Morning Post* ran a full-page article on the story. Disney was forced to send its Asia-Pacific Regional Director to talk to SACOM, though, according to Chan, that visit was more a PR exercise than an effort to engage in serious discussion.

"During the next few years, we escalated our campaigns, expanding our focus from Disney to include Wal-Mart, Motorola, and more recently different IT [electronics] brands," says Chan.

Learning from the success of their Disney campaign, the group saw that it could leverage the high value that international corporations place on their brand image in order to promote worker rights. But from that experience they also learned that media attention faded quickly. To have a longer-term impact, they had to involve workers in the process.

They did just that, by convincing Hewlett Packard (HP) to participate in a joint worker rights training project between 2007 and 2009. SACOM was allowed access to two HP factories in Dongguan City in South China where it set up labour rights training for over 4,000 workers and 30 managers, in coordination with two

Chinese labour rights organizations. Although HP cooperated with SACOM to allow training inside the factory, SACOM maintains financial independence and operational autonomy from corporations such as HP, raising its own funds from international foundations.

"We also set up a hotline that workers could call in to report problems such as lack of hot water in the winter time, or whether overtime was being paid. In the past they had no trustworthy channels for their grievances and could be retaliated against for complaining," says Chan.

Chan says it took a year of negotiations to get the project off the ground, but it was worth it because given the small space to manoeuvre in China, being allowed onto the shop floor and to speak directly to workers was a great achievement. "Unlike workers' centres, which can be removed by the government, the factories are there to stay, so the impact of speaking to workers there is longer lasting," she explains.

"Although campaigning is needed to spread our message, worker participation is indispensable if we are to have a lasting impact at the workplace level, and this type of project is one possible way to do that," says Chan. ■

TOP LEFT: SACOM demonstrates in support of Foxconn workers
TOP RIGHT: SACOM students
LEFT: Jenny Chan

the inside



An industry's decline leaves Tehuacan workers in a precarious situation

PHOTO: RODRIGO SANTIAGO HERNANDEZ



OVER THE LAST DECADE THE COMBINED EFFECTS of the 2001 US economic downturn, the final phase-out of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) in 2005, and the 2009 global economic crisis have severely weakened the garment industry in Tehuacan, Mexico and have made working conditions more precarious for workers and their families.

ACCORDING TO A 2010 study by Rodrigo Santiago Hernandez, it appears that approximately 32,000 jobs have been lost in the garment industry in the Tehuacan Valley during this period, yet the industry remains vital to work-

ers in the area, accounting for at least 50% of the Tehuacan economy.

Along with the loss in jobs has been a shift from producing for international brands to production for national brands. There has also been a disturbing increase in the use of short-

term employment contracts, and a continuing rise in subcontracting to small clandestine factories, workshops and home-based facilities.

The first trend is important because international brands, which often place a high value on their brand image, can often be pushed to use their economic clout to get their suppliers to improve conditions at factories.

Hernandez's new research shows that the vast majority of workers in Tehuacan are now working without employment contracts or on short-term (1-3 month) contracts, instead of indefinite-term contracts that were more common in the

past. Short-term contracts deprive workers of government social security (health) coverage and other legal entitlements while also making their employment more precarious.

The lack of employment contracts is particularly an issue in clandestine workshops and home-based facilities, which makes work in those facilities even more pre-

carious than at larger maquilas. "There are no signed contracts, just verbal agreements and only between the workers and middlemen, so the workers [in clandestine workshops] never know who owns their workplace, making it difficult for them to demand their rights," says Hernandez. "Workers can be forced to work overtime two weeks straight without overtime pay and then not have any work the third week," he adds.

Reyna Ramirez, of the Colectivo Obreras Insumisas (Defiant Women Workers Collective), a Tehuacan-based women's indigenous labour rights group says, "In home-based workshops the conditions are worse than in the factories; there are no safety regulations in place, no ventilation, sometimes no clean drinking water. They are often not registered with social security, so if a worker gets sick they have nowhere to go."

According to Hernandez, home-based and clandestine workshops now account for more than half of all production in the Tehuacan area, a dramatic increase from the previous decade.

Women continue to make up the majority of the workforce in Tehuacan's garment industry, and in the clandestine workshops and home-based facilities almost all the workers are women. The workers interviewed for the study reported frequent sexual harassment and discrimination, especially in the clandestine workshops. ■



 A summary of Santiago's study (pictured above) can be found at: www.maquilasolidarity.org/node/979.

Then or now?

A massive fire engulfs a large, multi-story garment factory that employs about 500 workers, mostly young women, who work long hours making shirts for poverty wages. Most of the workers cannot escape the burning building because managers locked the doors to the stairwells and exits to keep them from leaving early. Women jump to their deaths from the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors to escape the flames. By the end of the day, 146 workers are dead.

The above description is of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of March 25, 1911, an event that galvanized the labour movement in the United States and led to new laws and fire safety measures that served as a model for the whole country.

Sadly, it could just as well describe recent factory fires that have killed and injured hundreds of young women and men a hundred years later in modern-day Bangladesh. Young women workers are once again dying in preventable accidents — victims of locked exits, unsafe working conditions, and the slow response of manufacturers, government, and international buyers to an intolerable situation. ■



ABOVE: Flames and smoke engulf the Hameem factory in Dhaka, December 14, 2010

Known risks: When factories become deathtraps

LAST DECEMBER, A FACTORY FIRE took the lives of at least 28 Bangladeshi garment workers and injured dozens more at a factory near Dhaka, the country's capital.

In a horrifying replay of the famous Triangle Shirtwaist fire in New York (see box, left), some workers appeared to have suffocated, while others jumped to their deaths trying to escape the burning building or were trampled by their colleagues as they rushed towards the exits.

The factory belongs to the Hameem group, one of the biggest manufacturers in the country. It was producing clothes for Gap, JC Penney, Target, Carter's (Osh Kosh B'Gosh) and others.

What made the tragedy worse was that it was clearly preventable. In fact, labour rights groups in Bangladesh and internationally, including MSN, have repeatedly pointed to concrete actions that could be taken to address the known dangers in the country's garment factories. Between

2005 and 2010, close to 200 garment workers have died at work in Bangladesh while producing clothes for well-known international brands, and hundreds more have suffered severe injuries.

Since the Hameem fire, brands, suppliers, international and Bangladeshi trade unions and labour rights groups have been discussing new ways to ensure safety in the country's garment factories.

Discussions in Bangladesh are ongoing, and this time will hopefully result in concrete action to prevent these horrible deaths from recurring. As with the regulatory changes that came in the wake of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire a hundred years ago, the deaths and injuries suffered in the most recent factory fire in Bangladesh could lead to changes in industry practices and government regulation that protect the workers that remain. ■

Read more at: www.maquilasolidarity.org/currentcampaigns/Bangladesh

'Ni una mas'

● continued from page 1

Added to this dire situation of utter lawlessness and concentrated violence against women has been the devastating impact of the recent financial crisis. Over the last few years tens of thousands of workers in the Juarez area lost their jobs.

Those maquila workers lucky enough to have kept their jobs have seen their working conditions worsen, in part because the climate of fear, intimidation and high unemployment discourages them from reporting violations of their rights.

MSN discussed the situation with Elizabeth Avalos of the Centro de Estudios y Taller Laboral (CETLAC), a labour rights centre in Juarez which works with maquila workers as well as street vendors and workers in the informal sector.

According to Avalos, CETLAC has always believed that maquilas were not an effective development model for the city, despite the fact that they provided much-needed revenue. "And for workers, although wages have always been too low and working conditions very precarious, the maquilas at least provided some income," she explains.

But the situation deteriorated in 2007 when the economy began to slowdown. According to the Maquiladora Association in Juárez, maquila employment slid from 249,837 workers in January 2008 to a low of 166,454 in June 2009, a loss of more than 83,000 jobs over 18 months. Only 26,000 of those jobs had returned by

August of last year.

"The high level of unemployment in the last three years has left people hungry; many families have no money to buy food," says Avalos. "In the past, workers could resort to the informal sector to earn a bit more, and at least they could survive, but now with the insecurity and the threat to their lives all that has become more difficult."

The security situation in the city has not only made earning a living in the informal sector as a street vendor almost impossible, says Avalos, it also resulted in the closure of many small businesses. "Many businesses cannot afford the protection payments demanded by the drug cartels, with the result that their owners are kidnapped."

At the same time, money offered by the drug cartels has represented an attractive option for out-of-work youth. "Given the choice of going to work in the maquilas for 600 pesos (US\$50) a week, or working with the narcos who pay 2,000 (US\$167) or more pesos a week or up to 15,000 pesos (US\$1,250) for those willing to spend two weeks working in the mountains, it's pretty clear which option they would choose," says Avalos.

Amid the economic and social upheaval, women's and labour rights in Juarez have taken a back seat. "Right now labour rights are not a priority," says Avalos. "Workers fear that if they complain about anything they will lose their jobs or be thrown to the assassins," she explains, noting that there are

rumours that managers have connections to the cartels.

The lack of safety in the city has even spread to the buses provided by companies to transport their workers to and from the maquilas. In October 2010, five women workers were killed and dozens wounded when gunmen opened fire on buses used by Eagle Ottawa, a Canadian automotive leather supplier.

According to Avalos, companies are not taking responsibility for the safety of their workers and instead are blaming them when they get assaulted. "There is a stigma attached to workers who are victims of violence; the assumption is that they were targeted

because of ties to the drug trade. That stigma is used to justify inaction by the authorities and increased control and discrimination by companies."

"In the case of the maquila Eagle-Ottawa, there were rumours that the workers that were killed were involved in the drug trade, but nothing was ever proven," she continues. "Those kinds of rumours are used as an excuse to avoid taking action. There was no further investigation in this or in any other case."

As a result, the business sector has intensified its security checks on workers. Companies now request criminal records from the police, and prejudice and discrimination against workers based on

the clothes they wear or any tattoos they might have has increased. "We are all viewed and treated as criminals, and this has clearly affected the world of work."

The recession also brought with it the increased use of third-party employment agencies and short-term employment contracts, which were previously used only by a few big companies such as Flextronics, Foxconn and Electrolux.

"With the recession came the argument that nobody could offer permanent contracts ... Now it seems that temporary contracts and employment agencies are here to stay."

"With the recession came the argument that nobody could offer permanent contracts, since no one knew if the world market would recover. Now it seems that temporary contracts and employment agencies are here to stay,"

explains Avalos.

CETLAC continues to do its work of organizing and supporting maquila workers who want to democratize their unions, and supporting workers in the informal sector, but given the difficulty of such work in the current climate in Juarez, the centre has also been looking at new approaches, such as setting up savings and production cooperatives, in part as a way to bring workers together to maintain a sense of community and mutual support.

Now more than ever, labour rights organizations in Juarez like CETLAC need international support and solidarity to continue their critical work. ■