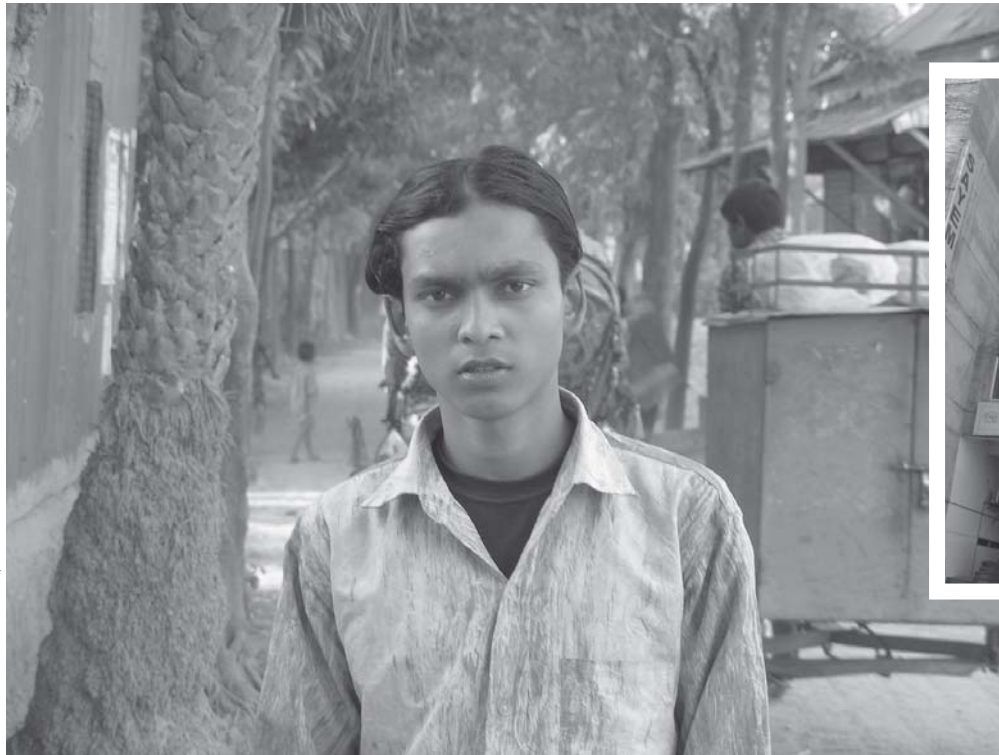


maquila network update

June 2006, Vol. 11 No.2

Conditions
worse for
Mexican
workers

4



PHOTOS: CAROLE CRABBÉ - CAMPAGNE VÊTEMENTS PROPRES



Liton, 18, left, has been a garment worker since he was 16. For the last six months he worked at Sayem Fashion, above.

International Day of Action:

No more factory deaths in Bangladesh!

On April 11, garment workers and labour rights activists in Bangladesh, Europe and North America commemorated the first anniversary of the Spectrum tragedy by staging street actions, public events and a symbolic hunger strike.

Shortly before 1:00 a.m. on April 11, 2005 workers in the Spectrum-Shahriya garment factory in Savar, Bangladesh, found their workplace suddenly crashing down upon

them. Sixty-four people died, at least 74 were injured, some of whom are handicapped for life, and hundreds were left jobless as a result of the collapse.

One year later, the victims of the tragedy have still not received the full compensation to which they are entitled.

Due to the failure of the industry and the Bangladeshi government to seriously address the widespread health and safety problems in the industry in the wake of the

Spectrum incident, four more preventable tragedies took place in February and March of this year, in which an estimated 88 workers were killed and more than 250 injured.

inside

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Protest actions

On April 11, 2006, the National Garment Workers' Federation of Bangladesh (NGWF) organized a symbolic two-hour hunger strike in which more than 1,000 workers reportedly participated.

In Brussels, approximately 100 activists from a variety of organizations staged a protest outside the Bangladesh Embassy, demanding improved

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maquila network update

is published quarterly in English and Spanish by the Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN). The MSN includes over 400 organizations and individuals across Canada. The MSN promotes solidarity between Canadian labour, women's and social movement groups and Mexican, Central American and Asian counterparts organizing to raise standards and improve conditions in maquiladora and export processing zones. The MSN acts as the secretariat for the Ethical Trading Action Group and is active in Stop Sweatshops campaigning.

Editorial Staff

Priscilla Claeys
Bob Jeffcott
Georgia Marman
Kevin Thomas
Lynda Yanz

Translation

Anibal Viton

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Maquila Solidarity Network
606 Shaw Street
Toronto, ON, M6G 3L6 Canada
Phone: 416-532-8584
Fax: 416-532-7688
E-mail: info@maquilasolidarity.org
web: www.maquilasolidarity.org

Canada's Largest City Goes No Sweat

On April 25, Toronto City Council unanimously approved a No Sweat purchasing policy for all the apparel products it buys.

With that vote, Toronto becomes the second major Canadian city to adopt an ethical purchasing policy. Vancouver adopted a No Sweat policy and Supplier Code of Conduct in December 2004. The policy applies to the City's purchases of apparel products and fair trade agricultural products, including coffee.

Ottawa, Calgary and Halifax are also considering approving similar policies. In the United States, approximately 60 cities currently have "No Sweat" purchasing policies.

Also in Toronto, both the University of Toronto and the Toronto Catholic School Board

have adopted No Sweat licensing policies for apparel and other licensed products.

What's in the policy?

The City of Toronto's "Responsible Garment Manufacturers (No Sweatshops) Policy" requires manufacturers of city apparel products and their subcontractors to pay fair wages, respect freedom of association, women's rights, and health and safety standards, and forbids the use of child labour, forced labour, excessive hours of work, and discrimination.

The policy also requires manufacturers to publicly

disclose the names and addresses of the factories where City apparel is made so that any worker rights violations at those factories can be brought to the attention of the City.

The City of Toronto buys almost \$4 million in apparel annually for police, firefighters and TTC (public transit) uniforms, as well as licensed apparel bearing the City name and logo and other bulk-purchased apparel products.

Collaboration on implementation

As a growing number of public institutions across Canada and the US adopt No Sweat purchasing or licensing policies, attention is now shifting to collaboration among these institutions on the implementation and enforcement of their policies.

In Canada, the University of Toronto is taking the lead in organizing a collaborative effort among Canadian universities to share information on suppliers and coordinate their participation in two US code monitoring bodies, the Fair Labor Association (FLA) and the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC).

Currently Guelph, Queens and McMaster universities are members of the WRC and the University of Alberta is a member of the FLA. U of T and Ryerson University are members of both the FLA and the WRC.

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Mexican human rights promoter receives support from unexpected sources

Six major US apparel brands have come to the defense of Mexican human rights promoter, Martin Barrios, as Barrios and other members of the Human and Labour Rights Commission of the Tehuacan Valley continue to face threats to their safety.

On March 20, American Eagle Outfitters, Gap Inc., Levi Strauss, Phillip-Van Heusen, Polo Ralph Lauren and Warnaco, all of which have clothes made in

Mexico's Puebla State, released a joint letter addressed to the state governor, calling for "proactive steps to ensure the physical safety of Mr. Barrios, his family members, and other members of the Commission."

The letter goes on to say: "As companies that seek to source in countries and from suppliers that share our commitment to ensuring the respect for workers' rights, we believe that local labour rights

non-governmental organizations can play an important role in working with manufacturers, government and buyers to help improve labour practices and working conditions in the apparel industry. They should be able to express their views freely and operate without fear of

violence." (See MSN website for full text.)

Arbitrary Detention

In January, Barrios was arbitrarily detained for two weeks in a Puebla state prison based

on unsubstantiated accusations of garment manufacturer Lucio Gil that Barrios had attempted to blackmail him. The arrest came as the Commission was defending the rights of 163 workers who had been illegally fired by Gil for participating in a one-day strike.

In the face of growing pressure from human, labour and indigenous rights organizations in Mexico and internationally, on January 12, the state government released Barrios

under the pretext that Gil had agreed to "pardon" him.

Although Barrios was now free, the threats and intimidation continued.

Death Threats

On February 12, Barrios, received warnings that a local maquila owner had hired someone to kill him.

On the evening of February 26, Barrios' co-worker Rodrigo Santiago was stopped on a street near Barrios' house by an armed man in civilian clothes and two municipal police officers.

According to Santiago, the man pointed a gun at him and tried to put a package in his backpack. When Santiago resisted and demanded that the armed man identify himself, he refused and sped away in a police cruiser with the two police officers.

Protective Measures

On February 21, the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR) granted protective measures for Barrios, as well as for the other members of the Commission and Barrios' family. The IACHR then directed this recommendation to the Mexican Federal Government.

In a March 6 meeting with the Ministry of the Interior, at

which the Mexican Human Rights Centre "Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez" and representatives of the Government of Puebla, the Federal Police and the Ministry of Foreign Relations were also present, the Commission requested that the safety of its members be insured not by state or municipal police bodies, but by the Federal Government directly.

At the meeting, federal authorities agreed to provide Commission staff mobile phones and a security camera to be installed in the

"We believe that local labour rights non-governmental organizations should be able to express their views freely and operate without fear of violence."

entryway to Barrios' house. It was also agreed that the federal police would have a "continuous" presence outside their houses and would accompany them if they were to

leave the Tehuacan area.

However, according to the Commission, to date the federal police presence has been limited.

Despite the threats and intimidation, the Commission is continuing to press forward with the case before the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board, charging Barrios' accuser, Lucio Gil, with the unjust dismissal of the 163 workers.



Working conditions in the
maquilas have gotten

WORSE SINCE NAFTA

says Mexican labour
rights activist

PHOTO: TAYLOR JONES



The following is an edited version of an interview by US journalist David Bacon with Julia Quiñonez, the coordinator of the Border Committee of Women Workers (Comité Fronterizo de Obreras).

David: *Julia, perhaps you can start by telling us what the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras is. Why is it called “obreras,” which means women workers?*

Julia: The CFO is a grassroots organization that’s led by women and men who work in the maquiladoras. It was born out of necessity, particularly among 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 the leadership level.

David: *What does the Comité actually do?*

Julia: The CFO is working in three Mexican states, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Chihuahua. Its purpose is to educate and organize workers around their labor rights. We also have a focus on dialoguing about the impact of free trade. And we focus on gender, particularly on violence against women. Finally, we have a program promoting economic self-sufficiency and fair trade and we’ve created our own maquiladora making prod-

ucts and providing employment for women.

David: *When you say that you do education around the effects of free trade, what are the effects of NAFTA 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. Even plants that over the years had achieved better wages and benefits began to move south into the interior of Mexico where wages and conditions were 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 that there would be more jobs, and that those jobs would pay more and Mexico would become a first world country.*

Julia: We the workers at the border think that 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. It's a disgrace. There are large transnationals such as Alcoa and Delphi operating in these cities yet workers are living in conditions where they have to construct their houses out of cardboard, out of materials taken from the factories.

David: *I know that the CFO 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.*

Julia: 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. In fact, they were successful. The workers formed an independent union and then they left the CTM union. The next problem

was to get their union 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 the leaders were fired. But others 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, to have an opportunity to negotiate improvements in their salaries and benefits, and they were seeing that the CTM leadership was partial to the company and was not

representing the workers. In fact, they had been elected to the union leadership at the plant level, but they found that everything they were trying to do was being undone by the CTM leader 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 union structures that represent them.

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. NAFTA had a labor side agreement that was supposed to guarantee people's labor rights in Mexico. Could the workers use that process to stop the kind of violations you're describing?

Julia: No. We're familiar with the labor side agreement and we understand that it also contemplates the principle of freedom of association. But, these parallel 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 could 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 NAFTA. Effective obligatory means of enforcing workers' rights and holding transnational corporations accountable to comply with the law would be helpful for workers. At the same time, even if you have such trade agreements, the organizing of workers at the grassroots level is vital. Otherwise, we can't enforce these rights that are recognized by the trade agreements.

Even plants that over the years had achieved better wages and benefits began to move south into the interior of Mexico where conditions were much worse.

For a copy of the full interview and for more information on the CFO, visit: <http://cfomaquiladoras.org/>

news & notes

Gildan agrees to do more

The Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), the Honduran Independent Monitoring Team (EMIH), and MSN have released an interim assessment of the efforts of Canadian T-shirt manufacturer Gildan Activewear to comply with a January 2005 agreement between Gildan, the WRC and MSN to rehire former employees of a Honduran sewing factory that the company closed in September 2004.

After being roundly criticized for closing its Gildan El Progreso factory in the midst of a third party complaint about the unjust dismissal of 78 workers for union activity, Gildan agreed to give the 1,800 laid-off workers first-hire preference at its other Honduran sewing facilities, to not discriminate against union supporters in hiring, and to allow the Honduran Independent Monitoring Team (EHIM) access to company records and personnel to verify compliance with the agreement.

The report shows that while Gildan did facilitate new employment opportunities for a significant number of laid-off workers at factories owned by other companies in Honduras, it did not rehire as many former Gildan El Progreso workers at its own factories as was expected.

The report also criticizes Gildan for not providing EMIH sufficient access to company records or personnel to conclusively determine whether laid-off workers and fired union supporters were given preference in hiring over other job applicants.

In response to the report, Gildan has agreed to provide EMIH the information needed to verify compliance with the agreement and to take additional steps to inform former Gildan El Progreso workers of the first-hire opportunity.

For a copy of the report, visit: www.maquilasolidarity.org.



PHOTO: INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

Above: Haitian workers attend a SOCOWA union meeting

IFC adopts worker rights standard

On February 21, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank adopted a new performance standard on labour rights and working conditions that requires IFC loan recipients to comply with the core labour standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO) on child labour, forced labour, discrimination, and freedom of association.

The IFC standard, which came into effect on May 1, also includes provisions on health and safety, protection for contract workers, and managing reductions in the workforce.

The potential benefits of the new performance standard have already been demonstrated in a pilot project in Haiti.

In January 2004, the IFC granted a US\$20 million loan to the Dominican apparel manufacturer Grupo M related to its investment in Haiti's Ouanaminthe Free Trade Zone (FTZ). At the insistence of the International Confederation of Free Trade

Unions (ICFTU), the loan agreement included a condition that the company respect its workers' right to freedom of association.

When Grupo M violated that agreement by firing workers at its CODEVI factory for attempting to organize a union, the workers were

able to leverage the agreement to pressure their employer to reinstate the

fired workers and recognize their union.

After a long and difficult struggle that included work stoppages, an effective international solidarity campaign, pressure from brand buyers, and the intervention of the IFC, in December 2005, the workers' union, SOCOWA, and Grupo M signed the first collective agreement ever negotiated in a Haitian free trade zone.



Hermosa workers left hanging

One year after their employer closed the factory gates, 190 former employees of the Hermosa garment factory in San Salvador, El Salvador are still waiting to receive their outstanding wages and severance pay. The workers' legal representatives estimate that the amount due in outstanding wages and various other payments (excluding pension funds) amounts to, at minimum, US\$127,823.

The announcement of the factory closure came shortly after union members filed a complaint with the Salvadoran government concerning unpaid social security (health care) and pension fund contributions. After the factory closed in May 2005, workers learned that the factory owner had failed to pay US\$353,000 in premiums, and that the debt dated back to 1996.

The Hermosa workers have exhausted all legal channels to pressure the factory owner to pay up, and workers who complained about their employer's practices say they are now being black-listed and denied employment in other maquila factories.

The workers are now calling on the brand buyers whose clothes were made in



PHOTO: CLEAN CLOTHES CAMPAIGN

the factory, but who failed to detect the violations, to contribute to a fund to compensate the workers and to provide job opportunities for the workers in their other supply factories.

Buyers at Hermosa have included Adidas, Nike, Russell Athletic, Wal-Mart, Kids Connection, and Speedo.

Although some of the buyers have agreed to encourage their other Salvadoran suppliers to provide employment opportunities for the workers and have met with representatives of Hermosa and the Salvadoran government about the unpaid compensation, to date, none of them have been willing to assume responsibility for the monies owed to the workers.

For more information, visit: www.maquilasolidarity.org



PHOTO: CLEAN CLOTHES CAMPAIGN

Above: Workers wait outside Hermosa factory to demonstrate for their rights.

Left: Workers block the door of the Hermosa factory to prevent bank representatives from entering.

Forced labour in Argentina

A fire that killed four children and two women in a clandestine garment factory in Buenos Aires, Argentina on March 30 has alerted the country to the slave-like conditions in approximately 400 underground sewing factories employing tens of thousands of undocumented immigrants from Bolivia and Paraguay.

According to the Union of Garment Workers (Union de Trabajadores Costureros), the immigrant workers are often lured into the sweatshops by radio or newspaper ads in their home countries promising a better life in Argentina. They are transported illegally across the border in trucks, then forced to work 16-18 hours a day under abusive conditions.

According to the UTC, some of the undocumented workers have not been paid anything for their labour, and are owed 2-3 years wages. Many workers are reportedly forced to live in the factories and some are locked inside their workplaces, making it impossible to escape if there is a fire.

Workers are told that if they complain, they will lose their jobs, and some workers who have complained to the media have reportedly received death threats.

In the wake of the factory fire, the Argentine government has initiated inspections of the clandestine sewing factories, and over 100 have been shut down. However, a number of factories have reportedly been moved to the suburbs to avoid the inspections.

Since the fire, the UTC has organized a series of marches, demanding the prosecution of the factory owners, an end to sweatshop abuses, and legal status and housing for immigrant workers.

International action on deadly conditions in Bangladesh

—continued from page 1—

health and safety practices in Bangladesh's garment industry.

In Amsterdam, Clean Clothes Campaign activists staged street and store actions in which they checked clothing labels and confronted store managers and informed the public about the struggle for safe and healthy workplaces in Bangladesh.

In Canada, MSN called upon all Canadian retailers that have apparel products made in Bangladesh to work with other buyers and local and international unions and NGOs to support the creation of a credible and comprehensive workplace safety program so that tragedies like Spectrum never happen again.

Canadian complicity

MSN is also demanding that two Canadian companies, La Senza and RD International Style Collections, take immediate action to ensure that workers injured and families of those killed in a recent tragedy at the Sayem Fashions

garment factory receive fair compensation and that there are major improvements in health and safety practices at the factory.

On March 6, three workers were killed and approximately 50 injured in a stampede when Sayem Fashions workers attempting to flee a fire found their exit route blocked by boxes.

MSN is urging La Senza and RD International Style Collections to not cut and run from the factory, but to work with the supplier and other buyers to improve health and safety practices at this and other factories they use in Bangladesh.

To date neither company has agreed to take any action to help ensure that the factory is a safe workplace.

"Because health and safety violations are a sector-wide problem in Bangladesh, we believe all Canadian companies whose apparel products are being made in that country must take immediate action to ensure that all the factories they use have safe and healthy working conditions," says MSN coordinator Lynda Yanz.

Recent factory tragedies in Bangladesh

February 23: **A fire caused by an electrical short circuit at the KTS Textile Industries factory kills 61 workers (including girls 12, 13, and 14 years old) and injures approximately 100. Locked emergency exits prevent workers from escaping.**



Deadly fire at KTS Textiles, February 23

February 25: **Twenty-two workers are killed and 50 injured when the five-story Phoenix Building collapses following unauthorized renovations to convert the upper stories of the building into a private hospital.**

February 25: **Fifty-seven workers are injured when a transformer explodes at the Imam Group building and workers are unable to get out through the narrow exits.**

March 6: **Three workers are killed and approximately 50 injured when a fire caused by an electrical short circuit at a building housing Sayem Fashions and two other garment factories provokes a stampede and workers find their exit route blocked by boxes.**

No Sweat Toronto

—continued from page 2—

Meanwhile nine Ontario Catholic school boards that have adopted No Sweat purchasing policies for school uniforms and other apparel products they purchase are working together on a two-year pilot project in which the WRC will monitor their suppliers' compliance with their policies.

Collaboration south of the border

In the US, the Mayor of San Francisco has sent a letter to 60 US mayors proposing that they cooperate on implementing their No Sweat purchasing policies. While the invitation has not gone out to Canadian mayors, the Mayor's liaison officer has expressed a willingness to discuss cooperation with cities north of the border.

In addition, the Governor of the State of Maine has invited all US state governors to participate in developing a No Sweat purchasing consortium to assist with implementing No Sweat policies.

One sour note in the chorus of support for effective implementation of No Sweat policies was recently sounded by the newly-elected Vancouver City Council. On April 10, Council voted to cut funding for the one staff position charged with implementing its Ethical Purchasing Policy, despite the fact that the cost for apparel purchases had actually decreased by \$14,000 in the first year the policy was in place.

The BC Ethical Purchasing Group, which campaigned for and helped develop the Vancouver policy, has responded with a lobbying and a letter-writing campaign to convince Council to reverse its decision.

For more information visit:
www.maquilasolidarity.org/nosweat/index.htm