

**Testimony to the US National Administrative Office (NAO) – Public
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Maribel Ramírez Torres
Former Employee of Tarrant Ajalpan
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I am Maribel Ramírez Torres. I'm 21 years old, single. I live in San Diego Chalma in Puebla State. I work in the final checking in the Maquila industry. I found out about this job through people who were already working at that company and I started working at the company on January 3rd, 2000 when its name was still Confecciones Jamil. I was asked for my birth certificate, proof of residence and my pink slip from IMSS.

I was hired by a secretary, { } and she gave me a contract three days after I started working and all the benefits except for profit sharing with a salary of 600 pesos per week and eventually that went up to 750 pesos per week, because I was producing more. In the factory it was very hot because the air conditioning was not sufficient for such a large place. When we wanted to use the rest rooms, they would take our time, they would time us and we had very few rest rooms for so many workers.

The work load was excessive. I had to check 850 garments per day. This is work for two people because it involves checking and taking the threads out and the material was not in good condition and we had to rush to get the work done and all day we had to stand. And at the end of the day, I was very tired and I had a lot of pain in my feet and even today, I have problems with my legs. When we finished our production, we were forced to stay all night and if we went out before morning, there was no transportation and so we had to wait until there was public transportation, so we could go home. So we were working 26 consecutive hours without a break.

And in those work days there was sexual harassment of women. It never happened to me but it did happen to my coworkers and some of them would tell me sometimes that they would get called into the office and they would be told that if they stayed there with the men in the office, they would no longer have to work at night. And all these hours were unpaid. We were paid as if it had been a normal work day.

Overtime was also not paid. Salaries were at the minimum wage level even if we stayed day and night to work, it was always the same. We never got dinner and we never got a break. And it was very tiring work because it was all day long, all night and part of the morning of the next day. They would not allow us to go to the bathroom. If we wanted to drink water, we would get timed. We had a specific amount of time and if we went over, they would yell at us and we would have to stay later, even if we had finished all our work for that day. There was no consideration, even for pregnant women.

Because of all this abuse, there were accidents. On one occasion a coworker had a miscarriage because of excessive work. I was with her when she started feeling sick and

the supervisors did not believe her. They told her that she could not leave yet because there was a lot of work to do. And then they saw that she started bleeding and that's when they took her to a doctor. I don't know where but when she came back she was no longer pregnant. It was a very ugly thing, very difficult because she could never say anything for fear of losing her job, especially because she was a single mother and she had a girl to support.

We had no protection, no dust masks, no ear plugs but we were forced to go to work because we have no other alternatives and if there are any, there are a lot of requirements that most of us cannot comply with. I realized that my worker's rights were being violated when I was forced to start working nights without payment, even holidays, not respecting that these were not business days and that was for everyone. And that is why on June 10th, 2003, we decided to stop working, all the workers. We had been told that there would be no profit sharing as in previous years and this happened since the company was registered as Tarrant Mexico. This was starting in 2000.

When Tarrant came in, it made a commitment to respect seniority and profit sharing and that was something it did not fulfill. During the strike the company began to take reprisals against the workers who had stopped working. We were approximately 80 percent of the workers, so they said that they would not pay us for those works -- for those work days or profit sharing even if we spent entire weeks struggling for our human rights and workers' rights, and we agreed then to form a coalition that would represent all the workers. This was six coworkers who agreed this and on July 8th, they went to the local Conciliation Board of Tehuacan and the Coalition and two representatives of the company met. These were { } and { }. She was the general administrator, general manager of the company.

An agreement was signed based on a list of our demands and the company made the commitment to satisfy all our demands, but the next day the company continued with the same attitude, violating our rights and it made us very angry to realize that the very local board was favoring the company and not us as workers. And this is why we decided to form an assembly and organize our union, so that we could protect ourselves as workers because we saw that we could not trust the authorities.

We saw that already our signed agreement had not been respected, so we organized our union on July 12th, 2003 and more than 400 workers out of 1,100 were there and they agreed that the members of the committee would be elected and most of the workers brought with them a copy of their ID from the company and their pink sheet from the IMSS, the Social Security Institute. They left us all their information, their full name, their fingerprints and their signature and the people who were not able to attend the assembly would find us later and give us their documents and their signature so they could be a part of the union, too. And then for this reason, the company starting firing the first members. The first six coworkers who had also become part of the committee. We were a total of more than 700 workers in the union and that's why when we saw that the leaders were being fired, we tried to have another strike and we were asking for an explanation of why t these people had been fired, but instead of explaining it to us, they began to threaten us trying to get us to go back to our work area.

Otherwise they said they would fire all of us so we decided to return to our work, but the following day a report came out in the newspaper saying that Tarrant was going to fire more than 4,500 workers from the plants of Ajalpan and Tehuacan and that's why on August 4th we decided to march from the company to the Municipal Palace of Ajalpan and of Tehuacan and to the local conciliation board. It was a distance of over 20 kilometers under hot sunlight and the warmest season in the region and this is how the company knew who the people were who were participating and we -- and they started firing the people, mainly the people from the committee.

It was over 50 people a day who were being fired. Then on August 7th we filed our papers for the union with the Board and after that we tried many ways to put pressure on the local board of the State of Puebla so that we could obtain the registration since we already had experience with the Board of Tehuacan that did not support the workers, we did not want to go through this again. And that is why we went to see the Governor, { }. We demonstrated in front of Casa Agüero (ph) and we also talked to { }, Secretary General of the local board.

We also went to demonstrate at the office -- the Tarrant office is in Mexico City and we also contacted the companies that had the brand names produced in our company. We had help from the CAT and also legal support from them so that we could file our registration and to start making our demands for reinstatement because by that time many had already been fired. I was one of the last members of the committee to be fired. I had been selected as the treasurer for the union by my colleagues.

On October 6th, we went to the local board and { } told us that our registration had been rejected. He gave us some explanations which, when we were talking later to the lawyers we found out were reasons that the board had given but they were not valid because the federal law, labor law does not say that it has to be that way. The board said that we were missing a copy of the papers but they had not said anything about that. And the federal labor legislation says that they have to let us know if there's anything missing before they issue their resolution.

So we all felt very discouraged because we had already been fired and the company did not want to reinstate us. That is why we thought that if we were able to succeed with this union then we could fight for our reinstatement and for me it's very important to have a job because I pay the expenses for my younger sisters. I pay for their schooling because I don't want them to have to stop going to school because of lack of money.

It's for girls that I support and we need everything because we are orphans. I have to protect them and for those reasons we were fighting for our rights. And that is when the company starting putting more pressure on us to try to get us to leave and I was pressured several times. And when the company closed, { } said to me and to my coworker { }, that we should sign and be liquidated because we were their only headache before they could close the company.

Also on another occasion, I received a call from a lawyer from the company and she said she had my documents ready and that I should sign them. Now that the company is closed, it's more difficult for us to deal with this situation. That is why we are asking that this type of injustice not be allowed any longer because companies come here and it is good that they give us jobs, but they try to profit at our expense. They try to take advantage of our needs because we have no other choice and then when we try to defend ourselves through the law, the government closes the doors on us because the government has given many advantages to the companies and then they say in their reports that there are jobs in the country.

I think that is useless to us. We did not get the registration for our union because it did not suit the companies for us to have an independent union in Tehuacan. It's just not convenient for them. And the government wants companies to keep coming in and it will do anything to get them to come in, even violating people's labor rights. In Tehuacan the water is very polluted because they wash the denim pants there. The Maquiladoras are our source of employment. That's what feed us, but it is also killing us because it's making us sick.

We're running out of water and what little water we have left is polluted. So I ask that these injustices be resolved, that the government and the companies respect the right of free association and unions. I want them to stop breaking Mexican law. I want my right to work to be given back to me. All we want is to work but we also want to be treated in a dignified manner as we deserve as workers.