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**Shaila Toledo Balderas, Gender and Culture
Worker Assistance Center, Puebla, Mexico
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Good afternoon, my name is Shaila Toledo Balderas. I'm 24 years old and I'm a member for the Center for Workers Support, AC. I have been a member for a year and a half approximately and I am in charge of cultural and gender outreach.

I'm here to testify on what to me are clear examples of violations of human labor rights by the Mexican Government. I have been a witness to genuine union forming processes especially in the sector of garment production factories in the country and during my experience in the organization, I have participated actively with two organized workers groups from Matamoros Garment and Tarrant Mexico and they were trying to form union. And these groups come up due to the need to fight against the terrible working conditions in the Maquila industry in garments for exports.

The environment is very hostile, the damage to workers is incalculable since they are effected economically, psychologically, and physically. The rate of work is extremely high which causes severe damage to their joints and muscles. The lint that comes from the fabric causes chronic diseases in the respiratory -- respiratory disease. They are yelled at constantly, insulted. They are against their will and this with very low wages that are not enough for an individual to support himself much less a family.

We have visited them and we have been in direct contact, not only with the workers, but with their families and we have seen how they live and the relationship between how they live and the work they do. Why do they continue to go to these sources of work, because of the lack of jobs in the country and the tremendous economic necessity of which employers take advantage, creating an atmosphere of fear of being fired. And this makes it more difficult for the workers to organize. And in several occasions the workers expressed fear of losing their job due to the employers' practices of firing workers at the first attempt to organize.

In spite of these circumstances, the violations are so many and so serious that the workers risk being fired and they organize to form independent unions, since the unions that already exist for many of these companies are protection union, which are really fictitious. They just are limited to a document that calls them a union. They are recognized legally but they don't really represent the workers at all.

And on many occasions the workers are not even personally -- personally have no knowledge of these so-called unions. In the case of { }, a former worker of Matamoros Garment, is it obvious that the situation is so terrible that workers will run the risk of losing their jobs even if this might effect their companies -- their families directly. { } is

approximately { } years old. She has much experience in sewing. She is a single mother of three children who are in secondary school and prep school and junior high school and her economic pressures are tremendous with her salary of 400 pesos per month.

And on many occasions she's said that she could only buy one thing. If she buys food, she cannot buy shoes for her children and if she buys shoes, she cannot eat. { } is a former worker, as I said, of Matamoros Garment and she was one of the workers who were suspended, supposedly by the company. That's how she was removed from the factory. They said it was just a suspension but she was never rehired, so it was really actually an unjustified dismissal.

There's another case, { }, who used to work for the same company. He's young and single but he lives in a community where there are very few options for employment. So his salary is very important for himself and for his family, for these families. Each member -- the fact that each member has a salary is vital. And I'd like to mention here some of the violations that they told me about personally as I conducted these home visits that I conduct as part of my job with the CAT.

In the case of Matamoros Garment, we found cases such as where they're kept there against their will. { }, { }, { }, several people from this company told us that on several occasions they were literally locked in the company and were not allowed to leave until they had produced their quota for that day. That was for an undetermined period of time until they were done. And another violation was that their dining room had a leak of polluted water, of waste water. It was very -- there was a very foul smell and they also talked about physical and verbal abuse by the employers. This was { } and previous boss they had. These people would yell at them, insult them and even he struck some of them on the head or on the back on a couple of occasions. The area where Matamoros Garment is located is a very hot area and the last weeks that it was working, a measure they took against the workers was to not give them water, not allow them to drink water. This was a way to control them, or if they gave them water, it was water that was obviously dark, that was obviously not clean.

And one of the things that set off this process of trying to organize by the workers was the fact that they weren't being paid. The workers were not getting paid. Their payday came and after all these violations of their rights, after these very long work days and they were not getting paid. They were told or they were being paid through a direct system where it was deposited at the bank. They made them sign that they had been paid, but when they went to the bank to withdraw the money, it wasn't there. So they spent three weeks not being paid and we're saying that if these workers are dealing with a situation such as this one, it's because they are tremendously dependent on this job and a huge need for what this job can give them.

Some of the salaries were under the minimum wage level. They were being paid wages that were less than minimum wages for sewers. On many occasions also they told us that there were minors who were working at the company and that the company was resorting to these practices. We've heard of making them hide when inspectors came so they

weren't seen. { }, who is a former worker at Matamoros Garment, she told me that sometimes they would hide them in cabinets or in some kind of a closet so that they weren't seen when the American companies, the brand name companies would come to do their inspections.

Now, talking about Tarrant, we should mention also that they also engaged in this practice of hiring underage employees and we should talk about the impact that these companies have had on the life of each one of these workers but also on the lives of their families and their communities and also on the environment. It's common place in Tehuacan to see that after 6:00 p.m. people are going back home from their jobs with their hands completely dyed blue as Maribel said earlier. So they get no protection and they're getting sick because of these chemicals and because of the lint.

And there's also the issue of the water. This water is blue because again, as I said, the dye from the jeans and sometimes it makes its way to their corn crops where they've planted their corn. So we see that the effect of these companies really is -- has many different aspects to it and that there is some impunity in the case of their activities. Tarrant is a clear example of what the Mexican Government has done when faced with the workers' attempts to defend their rights.

The government and the company used time as a way to put pressure against the SUITTAR movement deferring hearings and delaying the administrative processes, trying to exhaust the workers and favoring the employer which also had a campaign of economic pressure against the workers, firing them and denying their right to work. And the local boards also acted in a way that was totally biased and was a result of a clear strategy and makes quite obvious that there is a relationship between the authorities and the companies. The scenario of the struggle of the workers has been clearly adverse towards them.

The government not only fails to promote their defense, rather it creates obstacles. It makes an effort to maintain foreign investments at the cost of a good environment for the reduction of production costs. And this, of course, results in low wages, exploitation, lack of benefits, violations of rights and work for minors.

In many places they don't have -- in many rural areas they really don't have anyone to resort to, to present their complaints. Also there is an environment of fear, how can they do this if there's direct communication between the boards and the employers, and the other unions? To them, this is like going to someone who is against them. So as I was saying in communities such as Aldapahe (ph), Delapa Hap in San Diego (ph), Cos Scotia (ph), Mautla (ph), De Singo (ph), Quat Singo (ph) among many other rural communities where these workers come from, information about the rights of workers is practically inaccessible. There are no organizations or government organizations rather in charge of improving their standard of living and there is no one to protect their right to associate.

The work that is being done is done through several associations and NGOs and these are the only alternative for workers who want to receive any kind of advice on labor issues.

The government agencies, labor agencies, do little or nothing to find a solution and the cases that we have seen here are a clear example of this. When a group organizes works, gets training and does this all after many hours of hard work and devotes its holidays or weekends to trying to solve these problems at the cost of their family stability, their economic stability, repression, frustration, et cetera, when they take their children to the marches, to the demonstrations, to appointments with authorities and when we see that they still try to defend their rights, we see that we are witnessing a clear and absolute violation of the right to free association.

The violations are really of huge dimensions. It's not just the workers themselves. It's the families, their children, the communities and the social impact of these companies and their labor policies are truly devastating. Sometimes these companies close permanently, sometimes only temporarily and this is after a number of strikes and they leave the workers with nothing. In some cases some of them are given a severance but not what the law demands and these companies have really not helped improve the life of these workers and it's not being an engine for development in their communities. It's an emergency solution for the problem of unemployment but eventually they end up in a situation that's worse than they had before due to the impact on the environment over exploitation of natural resources and human resources, unemployment after awhile since they always go to where it will be easier to find cheap labor. And this is in addition to an environment of hostility towards the workers, individuals and organizations who are trying to promote their human rights.

In the case of the workers, they have been listed and they are labeled as undesirable workers for the companies and this goes against their right to work. We have also seen very unpleasant experiences during the Matamoros Garment movement. Workers such as { }, { } and { } were harassed by suspicious individuals and this was so alarming for them that they resorted to several agencies trying to guarantee their own safety. We went to the Procuraduria General of the State of Puebla and other municipal authorities and their response was that they would just have more police patrols in the area of the Maquiladora which was the place where the workers were meeting for their movement, but these promises were never fulfilled.

Also the organizations also suffer the effects of this repression. In the case of the CAT, we were victims of persecution in the City of Tehuacan where a vehicle was waiting for us at the door of the house we were using at that point. The behavior of the individuals who were in the car was clearly intimidating even though they were not in direct contact with us. And this is why we decided to talk about this experience publicly. We talked to the Proud Center (ph) for Human Rights in the City of Mexico, also the Labor Attache of the United States in Mexico, Alice Tidball and several organizations that are working with USIS, WRC, MSN and we also implemented security measures in our activities and our daily habits.

Recently, in the area of Tehuacan, { }, leader of the Commission for Labor Rights for the Valley of Tehuacan, who also does very important work in defending human rights in the area, was brutally attacked by an unknown individual who, at the door of his house,

struck him on the head and the stomach using a piece of a brick and this is evidence that circumstances or the situation for human rights activists in the area are very violent and this is why we have made this public and sought recommendations for the Mexican Government so it can put an end to the impunity regarding the enforcement of laws on the rights of workers, especially regarding the rights of free association and unions.