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INTERVIEW OF JOSEFINA CASTILLO WITH JUAN PABLO HERNANDEZ*

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Piedras Negras, Coahuila, México

What has been your role as a worker of Dimmit and as an organizer for the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO)?

As organizer for CFO, I tried to coordinate the elections to renew the Union and to elect new plant delegates. The moment my partners and I started organizing we were fired. And there was no turn back, ten people were fired. This was a year ago. The owners did not want an independent union aside from the official Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM) which is a corrupt union that worked hand in hand with the Mexican government for 70 years. If the workers demand transparency to the CTM this behavior is considered conflictive according to the union as well as to the management's point of view. Management said they did not like the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) because they destabilize labor. This version is used to frighten people. In reality, this strategy has been counterproductive because it has helped to boost publicity of the CFO among workers. Some of the workers did not know the CFO, but when they were fired they started inquiring what CFO did and they joined the group. We insisted that we would follow up with the movement because it is very important for us to organize and to know about our rights. Ordinarily the workers don't trust the official union, but when they join the CFO they did not have any other option. The plant is going through a crisis because lately they have been firing a lot of people, we do have connections with the people inside but we don't want to stir the waters against the workers. Although we know that if the plant is closed, this will happen regardless of the workers organization. As organizers for CFO, we provide information on the Federal Labor Law, its regulations, its statutes regarding workers' rights.

Dimmit was established 23 years ago, it belonged to Galley & Lord (Check this name). Today Galley & Lord say that they are leaving because it no longer is a profitable business. We know this is not so, since they opened a plant in Monclova with four thousand workers and several others in Hidalgo and Puebla. What they don't want is to pay a good salary which we used to have through our initial collective bargain agreement, and the Union (CTM) doesn't do anything to defend this agreement. This is what we call swallow investment: they don't actually invest their money, but they just come, set the plant and when they find a better deal they move quickly without any previous notice. So we have tried to educate and organize the workers on severance packages, fair salary, and so on so that they demand their rights. If the supervisors see that someone is distributing fliers, they immediately target the person and start questioning him as to whether he belongs to the CFO. So the worker is constantly in fear of being fired. The need is so that the workers prefer to keep the work than to be fired. And if any of the plant is closed, they prefer to receive meager severance payment than to demand what is fair according to the Labor Law because at least they are receiving something. This is what makes it so difficult to organize workers, and it's a sad reality. Now Dimmit is trying to fire as much labor force as possible. In case the factory declares bankruptcy they will close the local factory but they will continue in Monclova paying less wages. Dimmit is no longer what it used to be when it was owned by Fara. They took advantage of the cheap labor and now they fly somewhere else. If the workers talk with the City Mayor he advises the workers not to file a demand because it's better to keep the workplace than to have nothing. Some years ago a worker earned \$1200 per week (approx. \$122). Today he earns \$300 (approx. \$31). This is totally unfair, because what every person wants is upward mobility not downward.

When a worker is fired, he suffers not only because of the lack of job, but his health is also affected. For example Dimmit makes pants for Levi's, Liz Claiborne, Polo, Calvin Klein. So someone that has worked

for 8, 10 years or more, his lungs are already damaged because of the fine dust that he has inhaled for years without proper protection. The worker is not informed about his rights, he just works, because normally he is uneducated person that comes from the Mexican countryside, he is just worried for his survival and that of his family. The management is only worried on making profits, trying to disregard national and even international regulations, related to salaries, benefits and even the environment. What we want the worker to know is that his rights should be respected and that these are protected by national and international laws. His work is important because he works in a border zone, and the product he manufactures requires good quality control since it will travel long distances. We always highlight the value of this.

It is important to mention the impasse that Mexico is going through at this moment: the official PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) was finally defeated last year by the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) after 70 plus years of institutionalized corruption. So now the game has switched, the system of the PRI is in a downward fall and the CTM is not as strong as it was before. There's a space for worker organizing, more so, knowing that the Mexican Labor Law is one of the fairest and most comprehensive laws written on behalf of workers. It is a shame that the Mexican worker doesn't know the Labor Law, but this is because there hasn't been a labor culture in this country, we have not been educated about it. We don't learn about it in school. It would be another story if we'd learn about it when we were kids, we'd learn about our rights and responsibilities and would be better prepared when we joined the workforce.

The importance of the organizer is to let the workers know that every worker has the right to the same labor guarantees be it at the border or in the US or in any other country. We all have the right to work and should organize to defend our rights with the support of the international community.

(*) Juan Pablo Hernández (alias Paola) is an organizer for Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, (Border Committee of Women Workers) a group that has dedicated itself to educating the workers of the maquiladora industry for approximately 20 years along the Mexico-US border. Currently, it is made up of groups and committees in six cities of the Eastern Mexican border states.