

# FEMALE WORK FORCE IN TIJUANA

**Tijuana, a Mexican city placed on the very border with the United States, has constituted a settlement of industries, mainly from the northern neighbor but nowadays also from the expanding Japanese economy.**

**At first glance, it seems to be a paradise of jobs, since the *maquiladoras* employ armies of workers, but when we look deeper, such workers (the majority of them young women) suffer low wages, high cost of living, lack of services and housing, according to Elaine Burns, whose article examines that reality.**

Elaine Burns

The Rising Sun, the Stars and Stripes and the Mexico's own red and green flanked eagle cut the sky over the Mesa de Otay Industrial Park in Tijuana. Behind one side of these acres of windowless whitebrick buildings, a U.S. immigration van keeps vigil over a lonely vegetable field. Behind the other stretches a white dirt valley filled with housing fashioned out of old cars and scrap plywood. The air is hot and thick with the smell of glue.

Tijuana, only a step away from the most coveted market in the world, is booming. Here, U.S. and Asian capital meet economic refugees from every last corner of Mexico under a new game plan, the cornerstone of which are the *maquiladoras*-assembly lines for export production. With the announced "maquilization" of Mexico, this city holds clues to the entire country's future.

Not so long ago, *maquiladoras* were merely a Mexico-US border phenomenon, an exception. They date back to the 1965 "Border Industrialization Program", which punched loopholes in the protectionist import-export laws of both

countries. It opened the door for U.S. companies to shift labor-intensive portions of their manufacturing to plants along Mexico's northern border.

Once considered a "necessary evil" by the Mexican government, the *maquiladoras* are now held up by the Salinas administration as the model for Mexico's future: as rapid-growth, high tech industries of international quality, which bring in foreign currency and are free of labor conflict.

What began with jeans, microchips and blenders, assembled by the daughters of deported *braceros* is now taking deep root, having transformed even the country's auto industry. According to Northern Border College investigator Bernardo Areaga González, by the end of the century, 4 of every 10 industrial workers in Mexico will be employed by *maquiladoras*.

The landscaped drives of Tijuana's 30 industrial parks are the mere tip of an iceberg which includes some 500 registered factories spread throughout the city, employing nearly 75,000 workers. Only 1% of them (Matsushita, Video Tec, Sanyo) employ more than 2000 workers. But they are the ones which set the stage for all the rest.

Inside Sanyo at Mesa de Otay, Industrial Relations Manager Dr. Ignacio del Rincón walks leisurely along the production line as it zigzags the length of the brightly lit plant. He points out the sealed room where metal sheets are spray-enameled by programmable robots, the computer-adjustable laser dies. Along the way, women solder, glue and prepare packing materials.

He explains: "Unlike the U.S. *maquiladoras*, when Sanyo came to Tijuana in 1982, they bought the land, built their own buildings, learned Spanish, trained Mexican management. They came to stay."

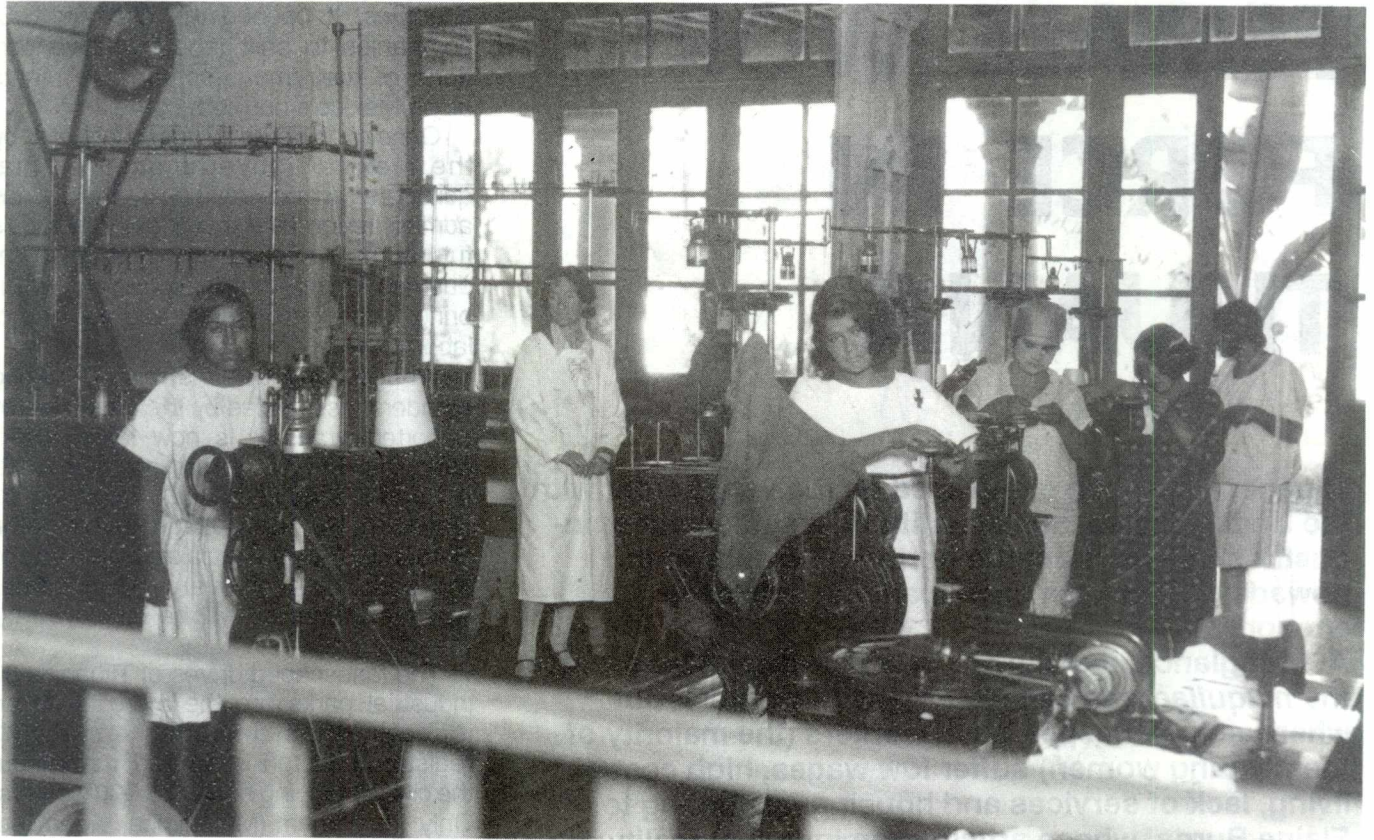
Six new refrigerators are on display at the far end of the plant:

Frigidaire, Westinghouse, General Electric, Kenmore "colonial" and "contemporary", and Sanyo. This plant produces them all. The machinery is easily reprogrammed to be always and only "just in time" for the demands of the market.

"This plant is not an assembly plant, it is a manufacturing plant. And it is highly automated—not so much to save on labor as to ensure flexibility and zero error."

Del Rincón is training 25 workers today. Every month, 300 of the company's total work force of 2500 quit. "They can't find housing here, so they head north or go back home. But for everyone who leaves, there's another to take her place."





Maquila exploitation, an old story.  
Photo from the Casasola Archive.

The *maquiladoras* in Tijuana have access to a labor pool which is actually more like a river. Each morning, dozens or hundreds of young men, women and children arrive at the Tijuana bus station, often penniless, with only cardboard boxes and dreams of heading further north. The giant "Now Hiring" banners of the Mesa de Otay Industrial Park are only a twenty-minute walk away.

With the current labor shortage (the unemployment rate in Tijuana is 0.6%), companies no longer require that women be under 22, only that they "pass" three-monthly pregnancy tests. And now that assembly-for-export has broken through to the other side of the sexual division of labor (cars, furniture), one out of every three maquila workers are men.

Whether one's work is tending a half-ton laser cutter or handling a pair of scissors, training takes no more than a day, and the pay is always the same—56 cents an hour. Though the cost of living in Tijuana is one of the highest in the country (due to its proximity to the U.S.), maquila wages are half the average national wage. And they have been falling. In 1965, women earned \$2 an hour (paid in U.S. currency); in 1975, they earned the peso equivalent of \$1 an hour.

Thus workers are increasingly dependent upon company "bonuses"—usually around \$1 a week in food coupons—for perfect punctuality and attendance.

Promotions, raises, seniority rights, year-end bonuses, overtime pay and pension plans are off the map.

Women cope by changing jobs frequently. Long-time maquila worker Irma Oliva García explained: "At Mexon [Surgical Supplies] the silicone made my hands so sore my sister-in-law had to do my wash. I switched to Video Tec, but the acetone there gave me anemia...You should see the women coming out of Matsushita, where they do welding under a microscope—their eyes look so bad we call them the *marijuaneras*!"

#### U.S. Japan Competition

The Japanese plants have brought "friendly" management techniques to Tijuana, causing U.S. plants to soften their style. Recounts Irma, "Señor Carlos [at Mexon] started coming down to eat lunch with us to ask us how the factory could be improved. When we told him our idea of using Q-tips to clean the extra glue off the pieces, we were treated to a free dinner."

Mexon corporate wives bring in used clothes which workers can choose from during their 30minute lunch break. Each month's top quality, top production line is awarded a donut breakfast. At Christmas a Santa Claus from Houston hands out \$20 bills. And each year, a contestant is selected to participate in the city's "Señorita Maquila" pageant.

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"There's no sense of unity in the plants," explains her daughter Marilu, who has worked at Swith Craft and Krantz. "Everyone is always gossiping about who the line manager is going out with, who got pregnant. If you complain, someone is sure to turn you in."

But women do resist. According to Marilu, one month before my visit, some 30 women from Jugueterama secretly began organizing. Before they could take any action, they were all fired. Word has it that they've been refused jobs at all the other plants.

In the last years, in cities with a more stable population, maquila women have managed to organize important but ephemeral strikes: at Acapulco Fashions in Ciudad Juárez (across from El Paso), at Crescent Designs in Zacatecas, and in various factories in Reynosa and Matamoros. Women from these cities met early this year to begin working towards a na-

tional conference of maquila workers. Attempts to organize a similar meeting in Tijuana, however, have not yet been successful.

Tijuana's labor force is officially presided over by a generation of "modern" unions so pale and passive that few workers are even aware they exist. Born out of the ashes of the massive union-busting which took place during the recession of 1975-80, they negotiate contracts before new plants are even built, with less benefits than those required by law.

Even the most optimistic activists in Tijuana, like José Luis Pérez Canchola, who participated in maquila organizing in the 70's ("when unions were still big and maquiladoras small") do not foresee gains for workers for a long time yet.

Yet everyone talks about how the *maquila* workers have changed, especially the women themselves. Says Irma, "When we first came to Tijuana, most of us saw the maquiladoras as a godsend, we'd never been paid for our work before. But things are changing, especially among the women who grew up here." Her daughter listens attentively in the close space of the house the two of them are building. "They stand up for themselves more..."

In the candle-lit dawn, hundreds of women descend the dusty ravines of the suburb Mariano Matamoros. As they wait in clusters for the buses, they remove the rubber bands and plastic bags which kept their legs clean for work.

The *maquila* plants where they spend 48 to 60 hours a week are modern and bright. But these dirt hills held in place with used tires are where life is. The kids. The husband who batters or who dances a fine *norteño* or who just left for *el otro lado*. The struggle to defend one patch of squatted earth and call it "home".

In 50 years, Tijuana has grown from a town of 16,000 to a sprawling city of over a million, fed by immigrants heading north, or deported south. Its varied neighborhoods tell its story.

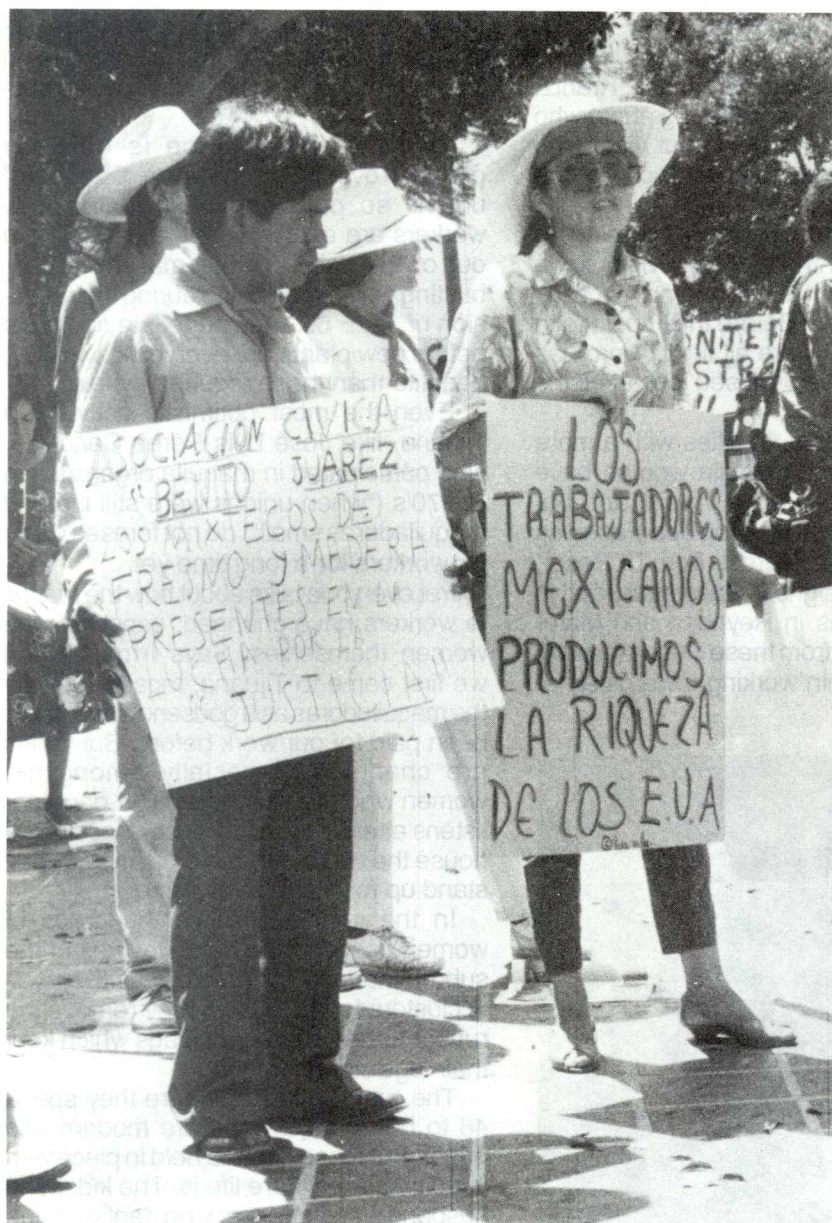
*Avenida Revolución*, tucked right up against the border, is a choice example of the quaint ugliness of U.S. tourism. Its discos, 'Mexican curios' stores, and rooms-by-the-hour hotels (now serving San Diego's military bases) are a living memory of the town's birth as a U.S. liquor and gambling haven during Prohibition. (Las Vegas was supposedly founded as a result of General Lázaro Cárdenas' "cleanup" of Tijuana in 1935.)

Ten minutes and a world away, Zona del Río's "almostlikeDallas" pastel malls and theme discos serve the city's small but growing consumer class. Eleven

Her best years...







"Mexican workers produce U.S. wealth". Photo by Antonio Ortuño.

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years ago this very ground was home to some 20,000 squatter families.

Then, at 2 am January 30, 1980, through a "mechanical error", the floodgates of the dam upriver opened. Within hours, chickens, dogs, roofs, mattresses, children and adults were swept up by the muddy torrent. Dozens or hundreds of people were killed. No one was allowed to rebuild there.

Squatting has a long and honored tradition in this mushrooming city where rent is charged in dollars. Even the PRI has organized land takeovers-recruiting among families camped out at the bus station-in an attempt to gain control over the movements of the homeless.

The current movement dates its birth to the "Zona del Río" tragedy. In its wake, formerly isolated squatters' organizations came together, becoming the strongest, clearest voice of the city's poor majority.

That movement is still a powerful force today, but, according to leading activists, it is ridden with political conflicts between leaders and lacking in vision. "People's desperation has made organizing almost too easy in Tijuana. It is easy to become a leader, hard to build a movement," explains Magdalena Cerda of the Guadalupe Victoria neighborhood committee.

More families are always arriving-finding refuge under tarps strung up behind a relative's plywood dwelling, setting up camp along the highways, river banks, or near the bus station. Rarely does anyone find work that pays well enough to build a permanent home.

### **Lack of Services**

The housing crisis has grown to such proportions that even the maquila industry is concerned. According to National Maquila Association spokesperson Ignacio Pérez, "The lack of housing is the number one cause of our number one affliction: high turnover. Jimmy Carter came in last year and built 3000 units, but we need 50,000."

Yet this town of monstrous tax-exempt industries is cash-poor. Sanyo, for example, was only able to get government support for 40 low-interest housing units this year, to be sold by lottery among its 2500 employees.

This beleaguered city-of-the future is one of the first in Mexico to be run by an opposition government-the rightwing National Action Party (PAN). Government by businessmen rather than the long standing Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI) is a new experience for everyone.

Until last year, land purchase, water lines and electrification were grudgingly accomplished in response to marches, land occupations, building takeovers and negotiations with movement leadership. Now squatting has been brought to a violent halt, and officials have announced that applications for lot purchase will be dealt with on a family-by-family basis. Organizations are re-grouping, seeking new strategies.

Urania Nolasco rushes in late. She's just returning from the jail, in response to an unexpected call from a group of prostitutes organizing a day care center in the city's red light district. Her energy is attractive, catching, as she centers rapidly on the theme at hand.

"Our major task now is education-it's the only way we'll be able to develop a movement led by the people themselves. We've been dependent on protest actions





Young labor. Photo by Herón Alemán / Imagenlatina

headed by charismatic leaders for too long. We haven't built anything that can last." Her organization, CERCO, is promoting literacy groups, leadership development workshops, and women's community loan groups.

Later, in Colonia Mariano Matamoros, where 15,000 families live without electricity and buy water for \$1.50 a barrel, Mary Luz Velázquez, also of CERCO, explains how the loan groups work.

"Women organize themselves in groups of 25 to manage a revolving fund to open their own food stands, vegetable stalls."

Many of the women have arrived recently from the countryside, and "have too strong an accent" to get maquila jobs. Their only other options are service jobs downtown or "home work"—such as this week's offer to clip and tie off tiny copper cables for \$50 per 5000.

When the loan groups decided to discuss issues of concern to them, women chose domestic violence, alcoholism and teenage drug abuse. Each woman describes her own struggles to make ends meet on a maquila salary, and to hold a life together with her battering, alcoholic husband. "We're working now towards building a women's meeting space and temporary shelter here in the neighborhood."

Says Urania: "We're having to develop new tactics, because the city has no

money. We just did a survey, and found that a great number of our families have members working at Jugueterama, Matsushita and Mexon, all nearby. Though the women employed there can't be involved directly, we decided to go to these companies as a neighborhood organization, to demand recreational facilities, childcare centers, employee lunchrooms. This is new for us, and we're not sure where it will lead us."

Carter's Habitatat for Humanity is building in Mariano Matamoros, coordinating closely with the local neighborhood organizations.

Urania, her husband and her daughter have all worked in the maquiladoras. As they talk, they are approached by the leader of the local PRI neighborhood organization who, with refreshing though dubious humility, urges joint action to remove the PAN appointed official assigned to their district. They agree to work together to pressure for an election.

The gullied street suddenly fills with dust. It soon settles, revealing a blue pickup truck with two blonde teenage boys. They are rapidly surrounded as they begin handing out used clothes and garish end-of-the-world pamphlets. Urania smiles, looks down and then up again, "It's easy to gather a crowd here, but real organizing takes a very long time." ■

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