

WOMEN'S WAYS OF ORGANIZING

AFSC Newsletter

Tere Hernández, an organizer for the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) or Border Committee of Women Workers, was standing in front of the GAP on the drag joining the picket against sweatshops in Saipan when a student with a camera approached her and started asking questions about unfair wages in Mexico. Tere turned towards me and said "please translate and tell her that I live in Matamoros, México and this is my first visit to Austin, but that I understand and want to talk more about it". Tere could understand the content of the questions and wanted to involve in a conversation. but she didn't know how to answer in English. There was a language barrier, and I thought that this was part of the several "barriers" that have hindered workers to organize worldwide. This was the first Saturday of September, when the protest was taking place at the Guadalupe location of the GAP as part of a national campaign against abuses in the sweatshops.

Tere came to Austin with Juanita and Julia to talk about the working conditions of the maquiladora plants along the Mexico/US border. Maquiladoras are foreign-owned process assembly plants that corporate America has spread all along the three thousand miles border. These companies now enjoy the advantages of NAFTA, the North American free-trade agreement that has only benefited the big pockets of the maquiladora owners with negative consequences to the workers and to the environment.

In the words of Julia, Coordinator of CFO, "this is not only a matter of social justice, but of world ethics in general". Indeed, the maquiladora industry is the epitome of what the global economy has developed during the past 10 to 20 years. increasing exploitation of workers, environmental and public health degradation, and gender discrimination.

Julia, Tere and Juanita visited four cities within the Central Region of AFSC: Denver, San Antonio, Austin and Des Moines. The night before their presentation in Austin, they delivered their testimony at the premises of Fuerza Unida in San Antonio, where they shared their stories with three other laid-off workers of one of the Levy's plants in El Paso. I was happy to see that the audience was not made up only of workers, but there were also several Quakers from the San Antonio Meeting along with scholars from some of the local Universities. The CFO organizers brought up insightful stories of the impacts of globalization in their workplace and on their daily lives, stories that we seldom hear even though we are only a few hours away from the border.

I hope that this first visit will honor the name of the event which we called "Gathering without borders or barriers", so that the barrier of race, nationality, language, that the media and the myths have built up can be overthrown by the powerful testimony that these courageous women have delivered.