Autumn in Ithaca

"Every day we can touch, feel and see the consequences of privatization in Nicaragua. We had a 51 percent illiteracy rate in 1996, and it is rising. There are more people without access to schools. Epidemics and sickness are rampant - polio, measles, cholera - diseases we had nearly eliminated are making a comeback. The suicide rate is up. In Nicaragua we suffer from the loss of hope; the people feel they have no future...this is grave."

- Cirilo Otero, October 20, 1997

CUSLAR brought Cirilo Otero to speak at Cornell in October. Before his talk we walked around the Cornell campus, looked out over Ithaca, and drank in the beauty of the vista before us; I felt joyful to be alive on such a day. He and I discussed the natural beauty around us, we discussed the weather, the heady smell of wet leaves and the contrast between the blue sky and the yellow trees. As we walked, I felt proud to share a piece of New York State with Cirilo.

Cirilo was not in Ithaca, of course, for the purpose of enjoying the weather, or the trees, or the brilliance of the sky. He was here to share with us a piece of his reality, the reality of the Nicaraguan people in 1997. We reluctantly left nature's beauty outside, and Cirilo came in to speak to the people already assembled for his presentation. As Cirilo's story unfolded, a question came unbidden to my mind, "Why, on such a rare and lovely day, have I chosen to stay inside to listen to a tale of sadness and human despair?" I knew the answer as soon as I formulated the question. I stayed because CUSLAR helps represent the voice of millions of people who have no voice of their own in determining U.S. policy.

Latin American people do not vote in the elections of the United States, but they are affected by the consequences as much as we are. U.S. foreign policy changes are life and death issues in Nicaragua, Colombia, Cuba and throughout the western hemisphere. From pushing privatization, to free trade agreements to fighting the "war on drugs," our lawmakers directly influence the living conditions of our brothers and sisters to the South. As citizens of the United States we have influence: we stopped "Fast Track" in Congress and we can do more!

As fall has slipped into winter, I still take a moment to enjoy beautiful days, but I find that the work of CUSLAR draws me indoors every time.

- Erin Sheehan
A Working Alliance: The UE and The FAT

By Jeff Vogt

At Cornell University on October 29, 1997, Robin Alexander of the United Electrical Workers and Mario de los Angeles Lopez Garcia of the Frente Autentico del Trabajo presented their experiences and research on international labor in the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement. This article is a result of an interview conducted with them the following day.

The Mexican labor movement has been revitalized as independent unions break away from their traditional relationship with the state. This is due in part to the increasing "liberalization" of the economies of Latin America and the financial crises which have plagued Mexico throughout the decade, and lead to a severe devaluation of the currency in 1993. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has maintained a stranglehold on the political forum since 1929. In the recent elections, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) broke the hegemony of the PRI in a surprise victory, offering hope to many individuals and groups.

Who is the UE?

The Pittsburgh based United Electrical, Radio & Machine workers of America (UE) unites a diverse membership - from assembly workers and welders to social workers and scientists - on the basis of working together in a democratic, rank and file union. The Union's commitment to democracy is encapsulated in its slogan, "the members run this union." The same principles of solidarity and democracy have joined the UE and an independent Mexican labor federation, the Frente Autentico del Trabajo (FAT) in a unique, collaborative venture. The UE has been on the cutting edge of the effort to establish meaningful relationships between U.S. and Mexican workers.

As a result of the fight to oppose NAFTA, the UE first came in contact with the FAT, a federation of Mexican labor unions, worker-owned cooperatives, farm worker and community organizations. The FAT, founded in 1990, now represents workers in over half the states of Mexico in manufacturing industries including textiles, garment, rubber, and auto parts, as well as in agriculture and construction. Although modest in size, the FAT has an influence which greatly exceeds its size due to its principled determination to create independent, democratic unions under extremely adverse conditions.

The UE-FAT Strategic Organizing Alliance is an effort to build a new kind of international solidarity focused on organizing. The FAT and its affiliated unions are working to develop democratic, independent unions in Mexico, and the UE, numerous individuals, and other unions are providing support for this work in a variety of ways. Although organizing is extremely difficult, the unions report a number of accomplishments directly related to this dynamic new relationship. For example, FAT obtained the first secret ballot election in Mexican labor history in the course of a campaign at a Mexican plant of the General Electric Company. UE and the Teamsters filed the first complaints under the Labor Side Agreement of NAFTA, acting on behalf of Mexican workers who were fired while organizing FAT-affiliated unions in their plants. The complaints focused attention both on the egregious company violations and the deficiencies in the labor side agreement. Similarly, the FAT has provided critical support for a successful UE organizing campaign in a Milwaukee foundry.

The work is reaching new levels with many exciting projects. A recent accomplishment was the establishment of a workers' center in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez. On the artistic front, beautiful labor murals have been completed in Mexico City and Pittsburgh. Finally, UE's international work is on the internet at http://igc.apc.org/unitedelect. Labor news from Mexico is posted twice a month.

Continued on page 10

Jeff Vogt is a Cornell Law student and a CUSLAR member

WINTER 1997/98
Sewing Discontent in Nicaragua

By Leia Raphaelidis

Since the U.S.-backed UNO coalition defeated the Sandinista Party in 1990, Nicaragua has careened down the neoliberal economic path. Nicaragua has privatized state-owned industries, reduced protective tariffs, restricted credit availability and adopted a host of other measures designed to lure foreign investment to the country. The result has been skyrocketing unemployment - 60 percent, according to the Nicaraguan research institute The International Foundation for the Global Challenge (FIDEG).

Despite the policy reforms, foreign investment has not flooded into the country. A significant proportion of these foreign investors who have come to Nicaragua are Asian garment makers who sell their wares to U.S. apparel companies and retailers.

Asian companies make up half of the 18 companies housed in the Zona Franca Las Mercedes, Nicaragua's main free trade zone. Five of the companies are Taiwanese, three are Korean and one is from Hong Kong. All but one produce garments for export to the U.S. market. They work on contract for U.S. apparel companies and retail giants such as J.C. Penney, Sears & Roebuck, Walmart and Montgomery Ward. While some have had the same client for years, others change contractors more frequently.

Nicaragua offers tremendous incentives to foreign investors in Las Mercedes - though other poor countries in the Caribbean and Central America offer similar packages. Among the benefits Nicaragua provides are a 100 percent exemption on income tax for the first ten years of operation, exemptions on sales and capital gains tax, tax exemptions on the import of raw materials and machinery, no duties on exports, a U.S. waiver of quotas on textile imports from Nicaragua, and the lowest minimum wage in Central America, approximately $4.1 an hour.

Leila Raphaelidis is a member of the Nicaragua Long Term Team of Witness for Peace. This article is reprinted from the Multinational Monitor, September, 1997. To find out more about upcoming Witness for Peace delegations to Nicaragua, contact their office at 110 Maryland Ave, NE, Suite 304, Washington DC, 20002. E-mail witness@w4peace.org
An Official Perspective

These are excerpts of an interview conducted by Witness for Peace with Gilberto Wong, Executive Secretary of the Free Zone Corporation, the government agency that oversees Nicaragua's maquila sector.

Q: How will the expansion of the maquila sector benefit Nicaragua?

One of the priorities of [President Arnoldo Alemán]'s administration is to solve the problem of poverty in Nicaragua, which is caused primarily by unemployment. One of the most effective and immediate ways to solve it is through the creation of new sources of employment, especially in the Free Trade Zone, which creates many jobs because of the nature of the industry.

Q: What is the Corporation's strategy for attracting investment into this country?

We need to sell this country as a place of opportunities. We have an abundant and qualified available labor force. We have the advantage of having the lowest rents in all of Central America. We have everything that investors want to see.

Q: Is it easy for workers to unionize?

Every company has its own attitude towards unions. We do not have any influence over that. It is something that needs to be resolved between employers and employees. Obviously, Nicaragua's laws permit unions and we respect the law. That is the position held by the Corporation.

Q: Do you believe that unions can really help workers better their conditions?

Personally, I believe that unions are a thing of the past. Now that all countries have labor codes, labor authorities, and human rights organizations, unions don't have a purpose. Furthermore, in countries like mine, where democracy is still young, unfortunately unions have been manipulated to attain other ends. The danger is that unions get formed for political ends and not really to protect workers' rights. That is just my personal opinion, but in a free and democratic country, everyone is free to make their own decisions.

Q: What is the Corporation's strategy to attract investment but at the same time protect workers' rights?

The Labor Code is supposed to protect the rights of the employers as well as workers. Our mission is to assure the existence of appropriate conditions to attract investors and create jobs that will help alleviate the degree of poverty our country faces. The Ministry of Labor and other organizations are supposed to look after workers' rights. Here [in the Free Trade Zone] the levels of abuse are often exaggerated. The problems we have here are similar to those of any other workplace outside the Zone.

Continued on page 12
Labor Briefs

ECUADOR: Electrical workers in Paute, Ecuador have been occupying the Paute power works since early September. They seek to stop the privatization of the plant and the privatization of much of the Ecuadoran economy. A nationwide strike of electrical workers took place September 30. The workers issued a statement calling for the government to "break with the IMF and the World Bank, and defend the nation from the attacks of the sell-out local oligarchy and the institutions of international finance capital." They also seek a government "of workers, indigenous populations and the people... that will stop paying the foreign debt, while prioritizing social and economic development."

PUERTO RICO: On October 1, more than 100,000 demonstrators marched to protest the sale of the Puerto Rico Telephone Company. This was the largest march against privatizations in the history of the island. More than 40 labor unions and a dozen non-governmental organizations sponsored the protest. The strike shut down most transportation across the country, and 90 percent of schools and universities. The evening before the demonstration, saboteurs cut telephone service to the governor's office and the Capitol. Repressals against strikers have begun; Fomento Bank has suspended 138 unionized workers who were absent from work on the day of the strike.

CUBA: More than 1,300 union activists from 61 countries met in Havana, Cuba for the International Workers Conference Against Neoliberalism and Globalism on August 6 to 8. The stated goal was to create a "minimum program" to challenge privatization, downsizing, union-busting and the elimination of social programs. The gathering was one of the largest of its kind since the end of the Cold War. The stories from each nation sounded increasingly familiar as participants discussed radical assaults on workers' rights and ongoing strikes and demonstrations. Some delegates complained about U.S. intervention in their national affairs via unequal trade relations, the "War on Drugs," and military aid. The "minimum program" condemns the "inhuman social cost

These labor briefs were compiled by CUSLAR volunteers from reports from the United Electrical Workers, NACLA, Connection to the Americas, Latinamericana Press and PeaceNet.

Moosewood restaurant
fine international & original cuisine
- ethnic night on Sunday
- soup & salad
- fresh fish on weekends
- gourmet vegetarian

DeWitt Mall • Seneca & Cayuga Sts. • 273-9610
extracted by the neo-liberal model," and calls for a living wage, a shorter work week without a pay cut, respect for collective bargaining, and improvements in health care, education, social security and housing. Conference participants went on to endorse a worldwide day of action against neoliberalism to be held in May, 1998. The event was particularly noteworthy due to its broad group of participants and the commitment made by unions throughout the world to work together to fight neoliberalism. The next international conference will be held in Brazil in two years.

GUATEMALA: After six years of campaigning, the 500 workers at Phillips-Van Heusen's Camisas Modernas plant in Guatemala City ratified a contract August 14. This is the only contract in Guatemala's maquiladora sector, and one of just a few in the entire Central America maquila industry. The contract raises wages 11 percent the first year and 12.5 percent the second. "We are now the best paid workers in the maquila sector," said Monica Felipe Alvarez, the union's general secretary, "but the most important thing is that this contract opens a new space for us and the workers in other maquilas." The contract is due partly to a highly coordinated cross-border campaign. The pressure culminated this spring with a Human Rights Watch report that criticized Phillips-Van Heusen, as well as leafletting at U.S. retailers.

MEXICO: Workers in the Han Young factory in Tijuana are engaged in a labor struggle which has U.S. support committees calling for a boycott of Hyundai Motors. The Han Young factory produces chassis and platforms for Hyundai's tractor trailer truck division. Employees began to organize in May to form their own union. Workers' concerns include tremendous health and safety problems: burns, loss of vision, broken bones and other injuries as a result of welding without basic health and safety protections. In addition, most were being paid less than four dollars per day. Although the company fired eight union leaders and pursued an intimidation campaign against the workers, on October 6 the workers voted overwhelmingly to affiliate with the Frente Autentico del Trabajo, an independent union federation. Company management had endorsed the CTM, the "establishment" union in Mexico, whose representatives had never met with the workers. The Mexican Labor Board has not yet certified the election, giving the company time to fire union supporters and replace them with workers being relocated from southern Mexico.

COSTA RICA: A report released in September by the International Labor Organization (ILO) says that Latin American agricultural workers are endangered by excessive pesticide exposure. In Latin America 25 percent of the workforce is employed in agriculture. According to the ILO, during the 1980s the use of agrochemicals in Central America reached an annual average of 53,600 tons. Well over 2,000 cases of acute poisoning were reported each year from countries in the region. In Costa Rica, as much as 4 kg of pesticide per capita was used annually during the last decade, eight times the 0.5 kg average for the whole world population. In 1986, Costa Rica's National Social Security Institute received a total of 1,860 reports of acute injuries due to pesticide exposure. In the period from 1980-86, the official annual pesticide poisoning rate for the total wage earning population was 3.3 per 100,000 workers and the average annual fatality rate was 1.7 per 100,000 compared with 0.3 per 100,000 in the U.S. during the 1980s. Due to suspected underreporting by government agencies, the ILO found it difficult to assess the situation in other Central American nations.
In Review...


"Colombia...has managed to compile the worst human rights record in recent years, no small achievement when one considers the competition."
- Noam Chomsky

*Colombia: The Genocidal Democracy* details the current and historical political situation in Colombia. Noam Chomsky's introduction summarizes the Colombian socio-political climate, noting that while Colombian military officials claim to target guerrillas, their primary objective is to subdue popular elements, including labor organizations, peasant movements, student groups and opposition political parties. Chomsky emphasizes the relationship between the Colombian government's campaign of intimidation and the country's social and economic inequality. Three percent of the population control 70 percent of the land, and the poorest 57 percent of the population own only three percent of the land.

Giraldo looks at the War on Drugs, explaining that 'On the other side of the War on Drugs is the 'Dirty War',' a proliferation of human rights abuses by what he calls the Democracy of Colombia. Giraldo highlights the suffering of the victims of the Dirty War. He attributes 28,332 political killings over seven years to the Colombian "democracy" in comparison to a combined 12,254 in 73 years under the military dictatorships of Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Chile. Many of these killings came at the hand of paramilitary organizations which shield the Colombian military from culpability for death squad activities and egregious human rights abuses.

In addition to his analysis of the political situation in Colombia, Giraldo retells stories related to him by the Colombian people. He includes stories of torture, murder and disappearance. These stories open our eyes to the horrors which occur daily in Colombia. *Colombia...* is not pleasant to read, but it is necessary in order to understand the situation in a country where many fear "disappearing."

- Guillermo Proano


"The cordilleras of the Andes will be the Sierra Maestra of South America."
- Fidel Castro

Che Guevara's brand of revolutionary humanism inspired him to write and speak to ordinary people. His works range from *Guerrilla Warfare to Socialism and the Man*, encompassing philosophy, battle strategies and political history. *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War: 1956-1958* is a personal account of the Rebel Army's fight to liberate Cuba from the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Each section first appeared as a series of articles printed in the Cuban magazine *Verde Olivo*. The stories are a firsthand account of the crucial years of the Cuban Revolution, starting with the Granma's landing and ending with the climactic Battle of Santa Clara in the closing days of the war. Guevara retells the stories using pages from his own diary and firsthand accounts from those who fought alongside him.

In addition to the detailed account of battles and events, the book also includes maps and charts as well as a short introduction to key figures in the Cuban struggle. The book opens with Fidel Castro's speech "Men Contribute to History, but History Also Makes Men," given before the working-class community of San Miguel in Chile, where residents had erected a statue of Che. The following chapters include letters written by Che to numerous people, including a letter written to his father from Che's prison cell in Mexico, and Che's final letter to Castro before embarking on his mission to the Congo.

*Episodes* is interesting as both a historical document and a profile of the personalities involved in Revolutionary Cuba. It shows us how the men and women of the Rebel Army were transformed by their experiences and how the rebels forged a political leadership capable of guiding the first socialist revolution in the Americas.

- Guillermo Proano

This book describes a world some of us may not want to know exists, a world that is easy to ignore, and even a world we would like to pretend we have no responsibility in creating. It is the world of dedicated and persistent guerrilla fighters in the highlands of Guatemala. As Noam Chomsky points out in the introduction, the comprehensive history of Guatemala, the people of the United States have an enormous responsibility to know about this world, and to right the wrongs in Guatemala.

Jennifer Harbury introduces her beloved Guatemalan compañeros and compañeras to the reader. Her love for these people, their culture, and their way of being is impressively conveyed. The stories illuminate a people so strong that however they have survived more than 500 years of oppression. Harbury’s translation of their own words gives us a partial understanding of how they were able to move forward. One Ladino described his experience working with the Mayans: “I had come [to the mountains] with so many ideas about community organizing, community spirit, but these people were far ahead of me. I had not known these things about the Mayans - the way they think and act as one united people, the way they stick together and care for each other, the remarkable level of commitment they have for one another. And as time passed my paternalism had to crumble. I fell wildly in love with these villagers, with their kindly, gentle ways.” (48)

Harbury gives us a diverse portrayal of the fighters, from rich to poor, Mayan to Ladino, women to men, young to old, Mayan priests to Guatemalan soldiers. Each person reveals a story that will leave you in the depths of sadness, on the verge of tears, yet with a heart so full of love for these people, you’re ready to join them.

Harbury went into the mountains to gather these stories. She has put her own life on the line so that we can better understand what is happening, how we have had a part in it, and our responsibility to fix it. Chomsky enlightens us at the end of the book, “If you assume that there’s no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for human freedom, that there are opportunities to change things, then there’s a chance you may contribute to making a better world. That’s your choice.”

- Carly Fox


“Gómez-Peña’s commitment to force North America to adjust to the South, to acknowledge the hemisphere’s cultural imbalance, places him among the most significant of late-20th-century performance artists.”

- Voice Literary Supplement

The *New World Border* is one person’s reflections on the contemporary trend to transform the global community. We are taken on an artistic journey through Gómez-Peña’s self-struggle in search of self-identity in a world where the notion of borders is rapidly changing. Gómez-Peña, a “nomadic Mexican artist in the process of Chicana/oization,” describes his own book as a “narrative ode to hybrid America - a new country in a new continent yet to be named.” It is written for “anyone who is currently thinking out loud and fighting to recover the freedoms that our political and corporate classes have stolen from us so efficiently over the last 15 years.”

Perhaps the most enjoyable quality of this book is its refreshing approach to multicultural issues. Gómez-Peña presents his views on “the new world border” in the form of plays, poetry, soliloquies, and personal essays. He frequently uses words or phrases in Spanish to illustrate his belief about the importance of cross-culture exchanges.

Instead of negatively portraying the conflicts that arise as a result of migration movements and diversification, Gómez-Peña celebrates these exchanges. As he exclaims “I toast to a borderless future!” he gives rise to feelings of excitement, hopefulness, and adventure regarding the mass migration movements worldwide. He rewords and then redefines phrases to which we have become accustomed to serve his own personal desires, such as a “Free Art Agreement” instead of the “Free Trade Agreement.” He uses satire to humorously explore the destructive tendency to capitalize and exploit the world for profit.

The *New World Border* is a joy to read. Gómez-Peña presents a creative response to the diversifying world we are all struggling to understand. He draws on popular culture, media, mainstream thinking, economic trends, political jargon and universal myths to present a moving performance; the pages are the play and the words are the actors.

- Carly Fox
Continued from page 3

seeking reform in Mexican politics. Further, the death of 97-year-old Fidel Velazquez, longtime labor boss of the Federation of Mexican Workers, (CTM - Mexico's largest labor confederation), has signaled the disintegration of its central role in Mexican labor policy.

I asked Ms. Garcia, of the FAT, an independent, democratic federation of labor unions, what the recent elections meant for the union, given the tremendous influence of the PRI and the CTM. Ms. Garcia commented that while it is true that the CTM maintains strength through its alliance with the state, it is not supported by a majority of the workers.

To illustrate her point, she cited a recent case in Aguas Calientes where the FAT represented workers in a transnationally owned plant. The CTM filed a demand to represent the workers there and to enforce the current contract with the company. Despite the involvement of the local government in labor relations within the company during factory elections, the CTM received only one vote in its favor. Elsewhere, however, the CTM maintains its position through a practice of threats against workers and violence against dissidents.

When asked if the FAT was interested in pursuing a dialogue with the PRD, Ms. Garcia responded, "We believe that the change in government means that there will be an opportunity to hear other voices. It is not so simple to say that because the PRD has gained as hard as possible to form an alliance with the PRD. If it turns out that such a strategy is not working for us, then we will move on."

Due to the long history of corporatist, authoritarian regimes in Latin America, it is no surprise that unions suffered a loss of political agency, particularly among more independent and/or democratic unions. Unions in some countries now seek alternative strategies for the articulation of their demands in both the workplace and in their communities. I asked whether the FAT works through the traditional political sector or through worker cooperatives, credit unions and grassroots organizing.

Ms. Garcia reported that the FAT pursues both strategies. "On the one hand, we seek to organize, but on the other we seek to influence national economic policies. We understand that workers do not simply exist within the plant. That is why we are emphasizing the formation of credit unions and consumer cooperatives. We try to attend to all the needs of the workers as well as look at the inter-relationship of the different sectors of the economy." She explained that, as a result, many union members are also members of these community cooperatives. In situations
cooperatives. In situations where that is not the case, members of the cooperatives will assist members of the union and vice versa.

The FAT has created some cooperatives which are worker owned and managed factories. There have been some instances of major union struggles where large companies have closed down. One large cooperative is the result of a three year strike over the non-payment of wages. When the struggle ended with a union victory, the workers were found to be entitled to a significant amount of back pay. Instead of forcing the company to sell off equipment to pay the workers, the workers accepted the machinery as payment. They formed a plate-glass cooperative which has been very successful since it began production under the leadership of the FAT.

Currently, the FAT has concentrated its organizing efforts in the maquila sector of Northern Mexico. Maquilas have received much U.S. media attention for a number of reasons, including the deplorable working conditions within the factories and the extreme poverty of the employees. The maquilas directly affect the U.S. as domestic corporations move to Mexico can be effective in quelling union activity in the U.S.

The North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC) was developed as the legal instrument by which claims of unfair labor practices could be articulated in a forum including the labor secretariats of the NAFTA signatories. It is the opinion of some, however, that NAALC, also known as the Labor Side agreement, has been rejected out of hand as ineffective without realizing the potential for the document to create a politico-legal space for unions to participate in the international labor discussion. Ms. Garcia remarked that while the conditions are inadequate, however, it is an existing institution that must be utilized to the fullest extent possible.

I asked Ms. Alexander what she thought the North American labor movement could learn from the strategies utilized by the FAT. She gave two illustrations of changes within the UE which were a direct result of the exchange between the unions. First, she noted that for the first time in recent history, the UE facilitates an exchange of women's delegations focused on the particular issues of women in the workplace. Years earlier, the FAT developed a forum on women's issues and instituted a full-time staff position to address these concerns. They have held two national women's conferences. The fact that some women from my union attended the conference in Mexico, and later the FAT sent a women's delegation to the U.S., has spurred the initiative to organize and educate the members on these issues. There will be another delegation from the UE heading down in a few weeks," explained Ms. Alexander.

Changes within UE strategy include the opening of discussions with a number of the cooperatives and credit unions in Pittsburgh. Ms. Alexander noted, "I just had a meeting with some members of the FAT in Pittsburgh and members of the credit union board who were exploring different ideas about how to work more closely. While there are no specific projects yet, I would suspect a year from now that we will have a number of pilot programs under way."

The UE and the FAT set an example of what can be accomplished through cross-border union alliances. As they are discovering, both sides can help each other in this very serious fight when workers come together cooperatively rather than competitively.
Continued from page 4

Asian-owned maquilas have the worst reputation among the workers for the tremendous pressure put on employees to keep up the pace of production. "We're not allowed to stand up [from our machines] and we're not allowed to talk, even if we're sitting next to each other," reports an employee of Chentex. "If [a supervisor] sees our lips moving, she immediately comes over and tells you to be quiet." She adds, "Since production goals are so high you have to work and work and work and never take a break. ... If you want to take home a halfway decent wage, you have to work from seven in the morning till seven at night and on Saturdays too."

It is difficult to estimate the average wage for workers on the assembly lines, since they are paid according to a piece rate. Their earnings depend on their speed, the price the company pays for their particular operation and the number of hours of overtime they put in, whether voluntary or forced. Another factor is the availability of work, which varies according to season. A couple of months before major shopping seasons in the United States, such as back-to-school and Christmas, there is more than enough work to keep every assembly line moving at a near-frantic pace. During slow times, however, workers sometimes are forced to sit at their machines with nothing to do for hours or days at a time. In this case, they are paid a flat rate that tends to be much less than their piece rate earnings.

When on the piece rate, workers report earning anywhere from about three to five dollars per day, though during peak periods some can take home as much as $10 for a long day's work. The Chentex worker quoted above reported that she was paid $1.35 for every 100 pairs of jeans pockets she attached. If she worked nonstop she could attach 500 in a day, taking home about six dollars, after deductions. Some co-workers, she said, only reached 300. New workers often earn a set wage during an initial training period, after which they graduate to the piece rate.

According to conservative government estimates, a Nicaraguan family needs about $150 a month just to cover its most basic needs. Though the wages paid to workers in the maquilas are equal to or above the minimum wage, they are usually well short of a "living wage."

When asked about wages rates, the assistant manager of a Korean-owned maquila responds that the complaints about low wages come mostly from "workers who do not work hard." He adds that his company pays the standard wage in the Zone and that his workers are paid well compared to people outside the maquilas.

This latter point is valid to a certain degree; in Nicaragua's cash-starved economy, maquila workers do earn more than maids, teachers or even doctors. However, wages for manufacturing jobs tend to be higher outside the Zone. Unfortunately, competition from abroad and lack of credit have wiped out many of the industries that existed in the 1980s, while the Nicaraguan private sector (read: the oligarchic class) has failed to fill the investment vacuum created by the government's downsizing of the state. To his credit, the assistant manager at the Korean maquila admits that he cannot understand how his workers manage to survive on the wages they earn.

Besides the wage levels, other common complaints from workers include: verbal abuse and occasional cases of physical abuse on the part of supervisors; timed bathroom breaks; forced overtime; firings for minor infractions (such as being caught eating or missing a day's work); unhealthy working conditions (including clouds of lint in the air and seats with no backs); limited access to the Zona Franca's health care facilities and widespread violations of the...
right to organize.

Workers consistently report that going to the Ministry of Labor to lodge a grievance is a waste of time because the "Ministry does nothing." Furthermore, if the company finds out about the visit to the Ministry, the individual runs the risk of being fired. Workers are well aware of how easily they can be replaced and that awareness helps keep them "in line."

Without a doubt, the proliferation of maquilas has been a mixed blessing for Nicaragua. On the one hand, given the country's shockingly high unemployment rates, Nicaraguans desperately need the work. For many people, a job at the Zona Franca is better than none at all. Maria, a worker at a Taiwanese-owned maquila, indicates the desperation of Nicaragua's workers. "The [Asian investors] are doing a great thing," she says, "They're exploiting us but they're giving us jobs. Who knows where Nicaragua would be without them."

On the other hand, the maquila model is of very limited long-term benefit to the country. The kind of foreign investment it attracts can leave as quickly as it appeared. The maquilas have almost no linkages to the local economy, since the garments are made exclusively of imported raw materials. There is virtually no technology transfer; the textile industry is not new to Nicaragua and most of the equipment used in the plants are simple sewing machines. Furthermore, other than for some administrative personnel and a few industrial mechanics, the maquilas generally do not require a highly skilled workforce, nor do they make any long-term investment in their employees.

Despite the many drawbacks of the maquila model, Nicaragua's government, led by President Arnoldo Aleman, is committed to expanding the maquila sector. This commitment is based on political interests: during last year's presidential campaign Aleman promised to create 100,000 new jobs, and promoting maquilas represents the fastest way to create at least some jobs without straying from the free market policies required of the Nicaraguan government by its international creditors.

To further this aim, the Aleman administration is cultivating elaborate ties with Taiwanese investors and the Taiwanese government. In addition to the maquila operations, Taiwanese investors in Nicaragua have interests in shrimp production and tourism. Meanwhile, the government of Taiwan has promised Nicaragua $150 million in foreign aid, designated to help with the balance of payments and to fund a number of development projects. Not surprisingly, one of those projects is to be a center for training people to work in Taiwanese-owned maquilas. The foreign aid also helps buy Taiwan political support from Nicaragua in the United Nations General Assembly.

It is easy to see that within this great, convoluted scheme, the foreign owners of the maquilas and the U.S. apparel companies and retailers that contract them emerge as the clear winners. With almost complete immunity, they are boosting corporate profits at the expense of workers' rights, while at the same time they are lauded by the government and the press for having created jobs. Nicaragua's workers are not demanding that the maquilas go away. But they are demanding dignity.
CUSLAR NEWSLETTER

You're in good company... when you support CUSLAR

CUSLAR Supporters (August 1997 - November 1997)

Raymond Aasen  
Barbara Barry  
Mary Jo Bauer  
Carolyn M. Byerly  
Alicia Calahorro  
Cory Carter  
Steven and Barbara Coffman  
Maria Cook  
Martin Cunningham-Perna  
Gwen & Paul Curtis  
Doug Dahl  
Ed Dvorak  
Linda Farthing  
Dan Fireside  
Harvey & Bryna Fireside  
Ellen Grady  
Teresa Grady  
Michael Gulachok  
Kris Gunsalus  
Robert Hackman  
Wes Hiers  
Leni Hochman  
Hillel Italie  
Shishir Jha  
Robert Johnston  
Ben Kohl  
Denise & David Kooperman  
Julien Koschmann  
Rachel Kreier  
Maria Kunkel  
Michael Latham  
Henrietta Levine  
Jack Lewis  
Jonathan Mawdley  
Cris McConkey  
Charles Mohler  
Alejandra Molina  
Carol Newman  
Ben Nichols  
Marjorie Olds  
Pilar Parra  
Stephen Peggs  
Burnett & Jessie Rawson  
David Shapiro  
Bob & Yvonne Sheehan  
Lynn Shoemaker  
Nohemy Solorzano  
Fran Spadafora  
Andrew Timm  
Judith Van Allen  
Zellman Warhaft  
Mary & Bill Webber  
Deb Whiter  
Lyn S. Willwerth

Thanks!

The Women's Studies Program and the Program on Gender and Global Change at Cornell University are pleased to announce the following:

Call for Papers

Conference Title: "Genders and Nations: Reflections on Women in Revolution"
April 4, 5, and 6

Possible topics include:

- Genders and Nations
- Representations of Revolution
- State, Ideology, Education
- Religion, Law, Gender
- Land, Labor, Gender
- Regulating Sexuality
- Domestic Violence

Submission Deadline: January 1, 1998

If you are interested in submitting a paper please contact the Women's Studies Program for further information at: (607) 255-6480 or womens_studies@cornell.edu.
"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

... What the mainstream media
can't fit in, you'll find in the

CUSLAR NEWSLETTER

Human Rights in
Guatemala

Women in Latin
America

Rights of
Indigenous People
in the Americas

Environmental
Destruction

Peace and Justice

If you like our views
please pay your dues....

I'm enclosing $10  $25  $50  $100  Other

to keep the CUSLAR Newsletters coming

NAME:

ADDRESS:

(All contributions are tax deductible and will be acknowledged in print)

Send your donation to: CUSLAR, G-29 Anabel Taylor Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853

WINTER 1997/98 15
Spanish Classes
Now being offered through CUSLAR!

*Small Group
*Experienced Native Speaker
*Very Reasonable Rates
*Conversation Oriented
*Beginner and Intermediate Classes

For more information call the CUSLAR office at 255-7293.