

Dateline Mexico by Carlos Cota Meza

'One big maquiladora'

The maquiladoras are increasingly being called by their new name, "aniquiladoras"—"annihilators."

In a late-May interview with the *Journal of Commerce*, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari took up the question of the *maquiladoras*, the slave labor assembly plants currently centered along the Mexican-U.S. border. Within the framework of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), he stated, "we will seek to have *maquiladoras* installed in other areas in the interior of the country, and not only in the border with the U.S., because we don't want people to move to the *maquiladoras*, but that these industries be located where the people are."

According to the newspaper, Salinas de Gortari "rejected the idea that cheap labor would remain Mexico's principal advantage vis-à-vis the United States."

His statements were evidently intended for foreign consumption, since no one inside Mexico believes them. *EIR* has sampled numerous businessmen in Mexico, and almost to a man, they oppose NAFTA, saying that already, free trade is wreaking havoc with their businesses.

Even the anecdotes indicate the Mexican people know that the *maquiladoras* are nothing but the *aniquiladoras* or *troqueladoras* (stamping presses) of Mexican workers.

The London *Financial Times*, delirious that under the NAFTA accord "the whole country would eventually have duty-free status, allowing Mexico to exploit its labor cost advantage vis-à-vis the United States," was forced to recognize on June 3 that the "transformation of Mexico into one big *maquiladora*

provokes fears among Mexicans that low wages, environmental degradation, and domination by foreign capital will be perpetuated."

In 1990, of the total number of *maquiladoras*, 21.4% were producers of electrical materials (electronics and domestic appliances principally), employing some 221,000 workers, 46% of the total *maquiladora* work force.

The soldering of microcircuitry is done at high temperatures in so-called "hot rooms." In precarious working conditions and without adequate protection, the majority of these workers soon suffer from severe myopia or even blindness, as the soldering points are worked on while looking through powerful magnifying glasses. Many also suffer arthritis or rheumatism as a result of the frequent changes in temperature. Lung illnesses also are prevalent from constantly inhaling the fumes emitted by the hot solder.

Textile products are produced in 15.2% of the firms, which employ 19,000 workers, 4% of the total. Here, the most frequent accident which occurs is that workers' hands become trapped in the needles of giant sewing machines.

The social security offered by Mexico's Federal Labor Law is nonexistent for workers in the *maquiladoras*, and trade unions—where they exist—serve to suppress labor rights instead of defending the worker.

The lack of protection suffered by the *maquiladora* worker is such that the institution which has "the best statistics" of what occurs in these cheap-labor concentration camps is the Cath-

olic Church, the only institution where the mistreated worker can turn to at least take refuge in Christian charity.

A study carried out by Mexican businessmen in the state of Baja California Norte on the health of *maquiladora* workers, found the following results. In the case of those who do not suffer any accidents or quit work, the "useful lifespan," as it is euphemistically described, for any worker who remains in the *maquiladoras* is 1,825 working days (five years). After this period, virtually all are fired for illnesses which result from the hard, lengthy working day; the most frequent of these illnesses are deafness, blindness, varicose veins, rheumatism, and muscle pain.

Under these conditions, it is impossible to accumulate seniority and obtain a pension. According to the law in Mexico, retirement benefits are granted only after between 15 and 25 years of work.

An analysis of the composition of the *maquiladora* work force, shows that two-thirds of it are women, whose average age fluctuates between 16 and 19 years. The case of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, is eloquent. There are 315 *maquiladoras* employing a total of 135,000 workers in this city, and 65% of them are women with an average age of 16 years!

Thus it is not an accident that statistics deal with the "useful lifespan," in which the working man or woman is treated like an animal or a machine. An adolescent of 16 years with a "useful lifespan" of five years, will become one more womb which will not reproduce itself.

The *maquiladora* is one more means to reduce the rate of demographic growth, except that with this method, before the women are annihilated, a certain amount of work can be extracted from them.