

# Defense of maquilas whitewashes hell

by Peter Rush

---

## **Maquila, Assembly Plants in Northern Mexico**

by Ellwyn R. Stoddard

Texas Western Press, El Paso, Tex., 1987

91 pages, paperbound, \$10

---

According to the author of *Maquila*, the only reason why anyone in the U.S. would be against *maquiladoras*—the Mexican assembly plants along the U.S. border—is because of the propaganda campaign from “Mexican Marxists, U.S. liberal journalists, and feminists.” This “explanation,” related to this reviewer in an interview with Mr. Stoddard Aug. 5, easily confirmed that this book’s peculiar message was not the result of incompetence or inadequate research, but part of a calculated campaign by those advocating Mr. Bush’s “free trade” road to destroy Third World economies.

Although written in 1987, before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was on the official agenda of either the U.S. or Mexico, the book was clearly reissued to promote what is both the fulcrum for the free trade operation, and also its weakest link: For the *maquilas* are slave-labor camps, whose effect is nothing short of disaster for both the U.S. and Mexican economies. In a nutshell, what Stoddard leaves out, or misrepresents, of the arguments that the *maquiladoras* are hell-holes, makes clear the weakness of his position that they are quite beneficial and are being wrongly attacked.

While *EIR* has documented in depth the disaster represented by these plants, stories have appeared in the press of all political persuasions, including U.S. organized labor, on the unsafe working conditions, including unprotected exposure to toxic chemicals and dangerous machinery; on the environmental disaster the plants have spawned; on the slave-labor wage levels that prevail; on the hellish living conditions of the *maquiladora* workers; on the failure of the plants to pay local taxes to help provide services; on the large-scale use of young, female labor, much of it under legal age; on the extraordinary rates of turnover (“labor recycling”); and on the absence of effective unionization and the total dictatorship exercised by management over the workers. Stoddard’s

attempt to dismiss these stories as coming from fringe groups is due to his inability to address any of them any other way.

Stoddard chooses to set up a series of straw men, and to knock them down, carefully avoiding all of the real issues raised. He admits that wages are abominably low—50-90¢ an hour—but says that kindly, U.S.-run *maquiladora* owners try to make up for that by fringe benefits, such as bonuses, and even corsages, that supposedly double the effective wage. Doubled, these wages are still unspeakably low.

He says that the preponderant employment of women mirrors the same ratios in the U.S. economy, making no mention of the well-documented prevalence of 14-year-olds, and even 12-year-olds, working. He even digs up surveys that he claims show supposed worker satisfaction, which don’t even make his case; in any case, one could have found any number of black slaves in 1855 who would have told an interviewer from the North that they were happy and “Massah” was a most benevolent man.

Every other point made is equally tendentious, aimed at answering an imaginary criticism and responding to none of the real issues cited by those opposing the spread of the *maquiladora* system. Asked by this author about the amply documented living conditions, with open sewers running through the shantytowns, Stoddard said the *maquiladoras* have no responsibility whatever for these conditions. But in fact, the people who live in them do so only to get *maquiladora* employment, where the wages are so low they cannot afford or construct anything better. Moreover, the polluted canals that criss-cross many of these settlements come straight from untreated wastes from the same plants Stoddard denies have responsibility for *maquila* workers’ living conditions.

Asked about poor safety conditions, which, again, have been fully documented, he berated this author for “imposing” U.S. standards on a developing country, while not denying that conditions may be far from satisfactory. On other working conditions, Stoddard claims that he and his students have visited several hundred *maquiladoras*, and most have air conditioning and are not sweatshops. Air conditioning as an issue has never been the cutting edge of the attack on the *maquiladoras*: The long hours for pitiful pay doing repetitive motion jobs is at the heart of the criticism of working conditions, and Stoddard admits that workers often must put in 48-56 hours a week at these jobs.

Finally, Stoddard claims that the *maquiladoras* make a significant contribution to Mexico’s economy and development, overlooking how little they leave in the Mexican economy—nothing at all besides the slave wages they pay—and refusing to address the lack of integration between *maquiladora* production and the rest of the Mexican economy. Stoddard is expected to come out with a second volume along the lines of this one in early fall. If this is the best that the proponents of *maquiladoras* and “free trade” can come up with, the case against them is very strong.