

AfD, The Border and *Maquiladoras*

After the AfD Convention in Tucson last Fall, Terrie Brady and 9 other AfD members journeyed with BorderLinks to the Mexican town of Nogales for an inspection tour of life in the immigration zone. This is her story.

by Terrie Brady

The serene hillsides of Nogales belie the fact that cancer rates increased since *maquilas* arrived in the '40s. Begun as an attempt to slow immigration into the US, *maquilas* are primarily assembly plants of medical items, plumbing fixtures or garments for multinational corporations.

They pollute and injure people with lead and solvents. Workers without protective gear are exposed to airborne glass and metal. Workers often fall seriously ill after six years of this work. Mothers who work while they are pregnant, often have children who have breathing difficulties and neurological problems. Some *maquilas* have been closed due to these unsafe working conditions, only to move their operations to China.

In 1996 the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ordered Price Pfister, operating in Paoima, CA, to use sand instead of lead in casting water faucets, as US laws require. The company, with its 400 jobs, chose to move its lead-polluting industry across the border. Now they can continue to use lead to the detriment of their workers and consumers, and pay lower wages, without any danger of penalty.

Maquila workers earn about \$80 a week. This is for long 8-9 hour days, often piece rate. Overtime leads to an extra dollar a day.

Workers in *maquilas* are unorganized by the unions, and only human rights groups work to provide the workers with information about their rights. The national union called The Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos, (Confederation of Mexican Workers—CTM) does not protect the *maquila* work-

ers. A CTM organizer said he can not organize them due to the trade agreements. We questioned that statement when we were later told that the CTM receives \$1 per worker from the *maquilas*

Paulita from Nogales advises *maquila* workers about their rights and responsibilities. She works for La Coalición por Justicia en las *Maquiladoras* (The Coalition for Justice in the *Maquilas*). They advise and publish pamphlets to further their educational efforts.

She worked in a *maquila* from age 14. She was exposed to lead and solvents while she was pregnant. She said that this often causes babies to be born with brain injuries and pulmonary problems. She said her own child had some trouble breathing and speaking. Workers have medical coverage, but this insurance does not include children of the workers.

We met a man named Mario who had recently been deported. After working for years in the US, he returned to his home in Puebla to see his parents who are in their seventies and eighties and his children who were ages two and five. While returning to his job, he was caught in Tucson and was sent back Mexico. He signed a form pledging not to return to the US. He did not have the money to get back to Puebla, so he got a job in a *maquila* in Nogales earning \$80 a week. He needed \$50 a week to eat and send money to his family. This left only \$20 for all other expenses including trying to save up for a bus ticket back to Puebla.

Young José, from Sonora, had been trying to reach his father in Texas. In Sonora he had worked full-time as a farm worker earning \$70 a week for working 12-hour days, 6-days a week. This money was needed by his mother to support their family. This boy's dream was to be able to pay to go to middle school. He was caught crossing the border. "Who will pick the food but us?" he asked. "We only want to earn a little more money."



AfD members, hosts and guides in Nogales

photo: Ralph Schmoltdt



Terrie Brady makes a point to a CTM Union Representative

photo: Jim Tarbell



No Mas Muertos soup kitchen for deportees at the border

photo: Jim Tarbell



Paulita, C J M advocate

photo: Jim Tarbell