



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

**For the labor rights and all human
rights of the maquiladora workers**



Workers and Free Trade

Spanish version

Mexican workers say NAFTA was a swindle

March 2009

"NAFTA was a swindle. It didn't keep its promise of more and better jobs, but rather the contrary. Now everything is more expensive: food, school supplies, transportation, everything," affirms Teresa Hernández, a worker in Matamoros, a Mexican border town. Teresa, in her late 40s has worked most of her life in a maquiladora factory. Back in 1993, she remembers what government officials and chambers of commerce in both the U.S. and Mexico were eagerly promising as they were pushing for the passage in Congress of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA): more trade, more jobs, and fewer undocumented immigrants coming to the United States.

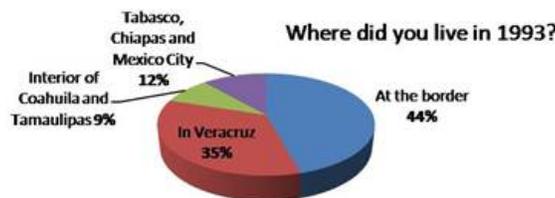
Teresa's quote is included in an [Open Letter to Mexican President Calderon](#) sent by several maquiladora workers on occasion of NAFTA's 15th anniversary on January 1 st, 2009. Writing and sending the letter was the outcome of a discussion on NAFTA held by forty Mexican workers from five border cities at a meeting of the [Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s](#) (CFO - Border Workers Committee) in Nuevo Laredo in November 2008.

Workers addressed the current economic crisis, focusing on its impacts on U.S. automakers and their auto parts manufacturers established in Mexico. The audience was very familiar with how the globalization of the economy actually behaves at its core as those workers fabricate auto parts a year before they are needed. They know what it is coming before the Wall Street Journal gets the corporate quarterly reports. The maquiladora industry is heavily dependent on both of those industrial sectors, which have been greatly affected by the current recession.

The second part of the discussion on NAFTA in Nuevo Laredo involved each worker taking ten minutes to fill out a simple questionnaire for a survey to explore workers' views on the impacts of NAFTA in their lives. This wasn't the first time AFSC and the CFO considered the question of the human impacts of NAFTA. In October 1999, the CFO and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) released the report [Six Years of NAFTA: A View from Inside the Maquiladoras](#). The English version of this report was included in the book [Women and Globalization](#), published in 2004.

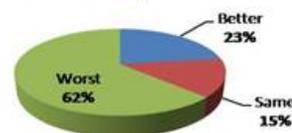
After completing the survey, the workers shared some of their answers, which they followed by offering some reflections and agreeing on recommendations for action. These included writing a press release and the Open Letter to President Calderon. One of the questions in the survey asked the workers where they were living in 1993, on the eve of NAFTA's implementation. Their answers confirmed figures indicating that most border towns have seen an influx of migrants in the last few decades from central and southern Mexico. Although the scope of the survey was quite small in terms of number of respondents, its findings are consistent with what the locals see every day in their neighborhoods.

Overall the sample showed that in the last 15 years more than half of the border's workforce moved from the interior of the country to Northern Mexico looking for a maquiladora job. Obviously NAFTA failed to create employment in their original communities.



The survey also found that only a quarter of the respondents thought their economic situation today was better than 15 years ago.

How does your economic situation in 2009 compares to the one you had in 1993?



The results of the survey were published in local newspapers in the city of Piedras Negras, where the CFO has its main office.

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Los trabajadores encuestados, coinciden que el TLC es un engaño que no cumplió las expectativas y la promesa de mejorar las condiciones de los trabajadores, sino contrariamente, lo que ha provocado es empeorarlos.

Al cumplirse el pasado uno de enero los primeros 15 años del Tratado de Libre Comercio, el CFO contempla solicitar al Gobierno federal una renegociación del tratado que fue firmado entre México, Canadá y Estados Unidos.

El estudio indica que los salarios han perdido la mitad de su valor hace 30 años, por lo que para subsistir un trabajador necesita cuando menos dos salarios mínimos para hacer frente a los gastos mínimos del hogar.

"Es necesario que el Gobierno federal revise y establezca estrategias económicas que no sólo sirvan a las corporaciones globales, sino que beneficien a la clase trabajadora".

Complicó la crisis el TLC

El Comité Fronterizo de Obreros (CFO), consideró aquí que a 15 años de firmado el Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte (TLCAN), las condiciones económicas y de vida de los mexicanos han empeorado.

LOS SALARIOS HAN PERDIDO la mitad de su valor de hace 30 años, y ahora los trabajadores ganan la mitad de lo que se desearían hace años.

La presidenta del CFO, Julia Quiñones Amargán, consideró las condiciones de vida de los trabajadores son cada vez más difíciles, de acuerdo a lo expresado por 40 trabajadores de maquiladoras durante una encuesta para evaluar los impactos del TLCAN.

Dijo que los trabajadores son miembros del Comité Fronterizo de Obreros (CFO) y represente a miles de trabajadores de cinco ciudades fronterizas: Matamoros, Río Bravo, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo y Ciudad Acuña en el estado de Coahuila.

Aseguró que al cumplirse 15 años del TLCAN, el Comité Fronterizo de Obreros hizo llegar al Gobierno Federal una carta en la que demanda la renegociación del tratado que México firmó con Estados Unidos y Canadá.

"El TLC fue un engaño. No cumplió con las promesas de más y mejores trabajos, sino al contrario. Ahora todo está más caro: los alimentos, los útiles escolares, el transporte, todo", consideró.

Afirmó que los salarios han perdido la mitad de su valor de hace 30 años, y ahora los trabajadores ganan la mitad de lo que se desearían hace años, por lo que ahora se necesitan más de dos salarios para completar los gastos mínimos de un hogar.

In their letter to President Calderon, the workers said:

"In 1993, even with a single salary and two children in school, I could buy more. It used to provide enough to send your children to school and eat better. Now it isn't enough to do anything," a worker in Ciudad Acuña told us; and "I have to take in other people's washing, and I am still only half way to meeting expenses," says a worker from Reynosa. Other workers sell lunches at the factory, or tacos or cosmetics on the weekends. Many other cross over every week to the U.S. border towns to sell their blood plasma."

"Wages have lost half their value since 30 years ago. Workers are making half what our parents made. It is an established fact that more than two full-time salaries are needed for one household's minimal expenses. That's why most maquiladora workers have two jobs, or send the entire family out to work. Wages are not keeping up with inflation."

Although NAFTA worsened the wages and living conditions of maquiladora workers, leading a race to the bottom throughout the manufacturing sector in Mexico, the agreement proved even more devastating for Mexico's small farmers. The combined failure of NAFTA in both rural and urban areas forced the migration of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans across all economic sectors to the U.S.

It is estimated that some 1 to 2 million small farmers in Mexico were displaced from their land as a result of NAFTA. To make matters worse, thousands of the approximately half a million manufacturing jobs created in Mexico since 1994 are now quickly vanishing, mainly as a consequence of the U.S. recession. Even before the economic downturn, the meager job creation attributed to NAFTA failed to keep pace with the 1.2 million young people entering the workforce every year.

Before asking President Calderon to renegotiate NAFTA to truly benefit Mexico's working people, the maquiladora workers said:

"One cannot speak of the success of NAFTA when this so-called success only exists on the charts and graphs showing the increase of trade between the United States and Mexico. Contrary to what your government has said, free trade does not create benefits for all. The growth of Mexico's international trade has not been reflected in the economy of those of us who make this commercial activity possible."

[More about CFO and NAFTA](#)

[Top](#)

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