



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

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



Home > CFO in the Media 2004

Spanish Version

Arriving with "Manos Vacias"

AFSC – Austin Area Newsletter

December 2004

By Greg Norman, ATCF Volunteer

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." - Lilla Watson, Mirri Aboriginal artist and elder

Throughout the six-year history of *Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (ATCF)*, defining solidarity has been an evolving challenge. In our work with the *Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (CFO)* in Mexican border towns, we have learned that solidarity does not equal charity, even though our solidarity commitment does include financial support.

However, if our solidarity reproduces the model of northerners as the "wealthy experts" and southerners as the "needy exploited," this not only undermines our mutual goal of progressive change in the *maquila* system, but it also establishes a relationship based on inequality. Instead, Austin participants have relied on face-to-face friendships to develop the trust and confidence necessary for an open exchange of ideas, strategies, and hopes for the future.

We learned that the CFO developed a solidarity model based on women-led, non-hierarchical, mutual empowerment. The CFO describes their model as "*manos vacías*," which literally translates as "empty hands" but carries the meaning of "open minds." Excerpts from their organizing document provide insight to their model:

- Arrive with empty hands: without an agenda, nothing to offer....Starting with humility can lead to a powerful movement.
- Listen, learn, dialogue, search for clarification and participation through soft questioning; emphasize the positive; inspire confidence.
- Decisions that are imposed divide, discourage and weaken groups. Work in such a way that allows the workers to be able to say of their successes, 'We did this all by ourselves.'
- There are no limits to what can be done as long as it doesn't matter who receives the credit: the best organizers don't let their egos ruin the organizing process.

Our solidarity activism can actually undermine powerful grassroots change if we automatically assume a leadership role based on our "superior" education or access to resources. Following the patient outlines of the "*manos vacías*" model forces us to listen to the workers and respond to their requests for assistance when and where needed, rather than imposing what we think is best. We must always remain aware of the dangerous environment in which workers organize, when blacklists, firings and abuse are common. We must make sure our well-intentioned interventions do not dis-empower grassroots organizing or cut off an organizing opportunity.

Here are a few examples from ATCF's history of solidarity in action:

When the CFO initiated their international campaign to call attention to Alcoa's abuse of labor rights, they relied on us to put pressure on labor executives in San Antonio, but not to make contacts with organized labor, showing that they are sophisticated enough in their strategies not to ask us to do too much.

We have celebrated Dia de los Reyes with our CFO hosts, a Mexican holiday following Christmas. Our participation in this gift-giving celebration allows us to experience the difference between charity and solidarity. We acted out of our desire to respond to people in need, but we also recognize that there will never be an end to this kind of material need. Our gift-giving largesse can even cause resentment within communities, as only some have access to outside support. In our ongoing *promotora* fund, we give in support of a principle (the CFO's organizing around the Mexican Labor Law) rather than to meet a specific material need of the people involved.

In one instance we gave money and food to feed fired workers who had refused to take the settlement deal their former employers offered and were instead leading a strike outside the factory. We responded not because these workers deserved our charity, but because we support their principled stand against labor exploitation.

Most importantly, we must continue to promote a vision of human justice that confronts inequality through personal relationships and refuses to allow differences in class, race, education, or nationality to divide us. Please join ATCF during 2005 for a solidarity delegation, a unique opportunity to hear directly from people affected by US-led free trade policies.

Greg has worked with ATCF since 2001 and also works closely with a women's cooperative in Guatemala City (www.upavim.org). He is a recent graduate of UT's Latin American Master's program and can be found serving up enchiladas at Trudy's South Star. He can be contacted at goyornorman@mail.utexas.edu.

Top

www.cfomaquiladoras.org is produced in cooperation with the
Mexico-U.S Border Program
of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (CFO)
Monterrey #1103, Col. Las Fuentes
Piedras Negras, Coahuila
C.P. 26010, México