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Maritza Vazquez, Puerto Rican Mother: Unsafe workplace, unfair workloads, and resistance to unionizing

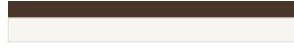
THIS STORY IS PART OF ILRF'S MOTHERS' STORIES SERIES. EVERY DAY BEFORE MOTHER'S DAY, A WORKING MOTHER AROUND THE WORLD WILL BE HIGHLIGHTED. To read other stories, click [here](#).

My name is Maritza Vazquez and I am a mother of four. I am recently divorced after 28 years of marriage. I work at Propper International in Lajas, Puerto Rico. We make uniforms for soldiers under a U.S. government contract. I'm a sewing machine operator and I've worked at the factory for five years. I decided to work here because I like sewing. I'm paid around \$7.50 - \$8.00 per hour and I work 8 hours a day, 40 hours a week, 12 months a year. I receive the minimum wage with additional pay based on meeting production goals. When we have to wait around in the factory for work to come down the line, we only receive the minimum wage (\$6.55). Almost every day we have to wait around a bit and that affects our pay. Sometimes we sit around in the factory for a whole day waiting and receiving minimum wage only. Sometimes the production quotas are too high and we can't complete the quotas in time. When that happens, I have to stay longer at the factory until I've fulfilled the production goal. In that case, they pay less per hour (\$6.50) but we do get paid double for the overtime. On an average day, I wake up at 5am. Work is from 7-3:30pm. I return home at 4pm. My salary isn't enough to cover my household expenses. Two of my three children that live at home are working to help with family expenses.

There's not a lot of safety in our factory. There's not enough space to walk down the aisles. We're almost sitting on top of each other. The walls, fans, and lamps are dirty. The bathrooms aren't in the best conditions - the toilet seats are broken and many of the toilets don't work. Sometimes there isn't toilet paper. We are lucky to get paid maternity leave that ranges between 20-60 days. We are offered a medical plan but it's expensive; for me the family medical plan costs me \$150 per month and it doesn't even cover pharmaceuticals. We don't have paid sick leave: right now we're organizing to have our legal rights to 12 paid sick days per year.

We're trying to form a union right now but we're facing resistance from the company. They are threatening to close the plant should we unionize. However, I don't think that will happen because legally U.S. military uniforms must be made within the United States or its territories. I don't think it would be cheaper to produce the products that we make in any other part of the U.S. other than Puerto Rico. If I were to change the situation, I'd like to have a better medical plan and lower production quotas.

Maritza is a leader in the organizing effort at her factory with Workers United Puerto Rico. Maritza and her co-workers have been organizing at the Propper factories since spring of 2008. Maritza recently traveled to the U.S. for the SweatFree Communities Economic Stimulus Worker Tour. This tour led up to a report [Subsidizing Sweatshops II](#) which highlighted the labor rights violations at Maritza's factory. More information about Maritza's visit to the U.S. can be found at <http://www.sweatfree.org/tour>.



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