

The Life of a Maquiladora Worker

Maria Ibarra (with David Bacon)



OVERVIEW

In the excerpt below, Maria Ibarra, a worker in a foreign-owned factory (“maquiladora” in Spanish) speaks of low wages, bad working conditions and oppressive fear. She also talks of her desire to keep her family together in seemingly hopeless living conditions. Ibarra is about 40 years old. She works in the maquiladora of Maxell of Mexico, one of Tijuana’s largest factories. Maxell manufactures tape cassettes and magnetic disks for computers. Ibarra lives in a barrio on a dirt street. She shares her home with another family. Her home is made of castoff materials from the factories—a wooden frame salvaged from industrial pallets, with interior walls made of unfolded corrugated boxes. She provided this description of her life to Pacific News Service associate editor David Bacon.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- In what way does Ibarra fear the company?
 - What seem to be the main concerns of Ibarra’s life?
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I’ve worked in the factory where I am now for three years. Three years is a long time, and what I have to show for this time is very little. You connect all the parts, do your job and try to keep up with all the things the company demands. But the benefits are very small, especially in terms of money.

I make 38 pesos a day—264 pesos a week. Our wages are so low the company gives us a weekly bonus of food coupons worth 55 pesos. (One dollar = 7.50 pesos).

I have two sons who live with me. My oldest is 19. He has been working in a maquiladora for four years, since he was small. He couldn’t continue going to school because we couldn’t get by on what I was earning. The younger one is 16, and just started in a small shop where they’re teaching him the job. Because he’s still small, and just learning, he’s earning enough for his bus fare and his food, and that’s all.

As their mother, I felt very bad when they first went to work. Children should be in school. I wanted something so different for them. When they were babies, I thought they were going to study and become something in life. But the economy failed. I was forced to send them to work so we could survive. I can’t say this really solved anything. It was just so that we could live a little better. And it’s not just my children—they’re just two of many others.

Between my oldest son and myself, we bring in about 410 pesos a week. Water is very expensive. Gas (for cooking) is very expensive. Food is very expensive. If we want to eat meat, it can't stretch that far. It's more like we eat bones than we eat meat.

At the beginning of the year there's always a general wage increase, but before the increase takes effect, you see the prices going up on everything. Everything. Last January, sugar went up a peso. Milk, which cost 15 pesos, went up to 17,50. I only make 38 pesos a day, so I work half a day for a gallon of milk.

When I talk to my friends at work, everywhere it's the same. When people get married, they both have to work. Young couples leave their small children with a neighbor, or with their parents. The salary of a single person isn't enough to live on.

I have hope that things can change, but I see it as very difficult. We tried to change things once in my factory. We didn't have any transportation to work. At first, we talked among ourselves, undercover, because we were afraid. Normally, the majority of the people don't really participate in anything. We always fear we'll be discovered and fired. Everything has to be done undercover.

But we screwed up our courage, and we said, well, whatever happens, we're going to see what we can do. We got together a group of four or five people. To show the company we weren't just by ourselves, we put it all in writing, and everyone signed what we wrote. We went to the offices of the company and said we wanted busses. We made ourselves brave, and we talked, and thank God, we got them.

Sincerely, I was afraid something would happen to us. The company doesn't like people like us—they call us crybabies. But winning really lifted our spirits because even though getting a bus is not a lot, it's something. And we save enough at home to buy another container of water or a kilo of tortillas. We won something real.

I asked the assistant manager of our shift why they can't pay us a little more. On the other side of the border, people working for the same company earn in an hour what we earn in a day. He told us that the company came here because we work so cheap. If we pressured them to pay more, they would just take the work somewhere else and we would be left without jobs. I think this is really just an excuse, to make us grateful for our jobs.

Still, it's difficult to think about my future. I have to take care not to lose my job. Once you get to be a certain age, they don't want you anymore. I've

thought about going across the border, but I'm scared to do it. I have my sons. What would happen to them if I left them by themselves? There's vagrancy, there's delinquency, there are lots of dangers. It could be even worse.

But the younger one is desperate, and he says he wants to go across. I tell him he has to be 18 but he's free. How could I stop him? Here or there, who knows what could happen? And over there, it's very bad. Because of lack of schooling, he doesn't know English. So what would he be going to? To be humiliated? To work? No, no, I tell him, better here. But he just says, well, maybe later on then.