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Workers at U.S. plants in Mexico seek rights

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AJALPAN, Mexico - Martin Zacatzl Tequextle can recite the names of trendy jeans like an American mall rat. He should know.

Zacatzl says he and 1,300 other employees at a textile factory in southern Mexico were forced to sew together thousands of pairs a day with little or no overtime compensation to augment base wages of little more than \$1 an hour.

He says they were ordered to sew from 8 a.m. Friday until 4 a.m. Saturday at the factory in Ajalpan, a small town in Puebla state 175 miles southeast of Mexico City.

The factory is co-owned by Tarrant Apparel Group of Los Angeles and Kamel Nacif, the wealthy Mexican textile magnate who has made headlines in Las Vegas for high-stakes gambling. Workers have dubbed Nacif, "The Denim King," because he owns multiple factories that assemble jeans.

Different border dispute

Labor activists on both sides of the border regard the Tarrant dispute as the latest test case for Mexico's willingness to enforce maquiladora workers' rights. Allegations of sweatshop conditions are putting pressure on big-name U.S. brands to oblige foreign suppliers to abide by codes of conduct and local labor laws.

In the past, workers at maquiladoras have been subjected to forced pregnancy testing and other invasions of privacy, or fired for protesting abuses, despite Mexican labor laws that appear generous.

At Ajalpan's factory, workers say supervisors are warning them to acquiesce to excessive demands to work harder and faster or else the U.S. companies that once flocked to Mexico will go to China.

Because import tariffs were lowered by the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, Mexico's textile maquiladoras mushroomed to 1,092 factories by 2001. By June 2003, because of the U.S. economic slowdown and an increase in textile assembly in China, Central America and other poorer regions, that number had fallen to 796.

Job flow to China

"(Threats are) used a lot as a pretext now at factories," Zacatzl said. "China needs work. It's got a huge population. Mexico needs work, too."

The 37-year-old, who was fired last summer, says that he turned down \$3,000 in

severance pay, opting to challenge his dismissal before a state labor board.

"We're not against transnational companies coming to our country. We welcome them. But we want people to know that Mexican workers are being exploited," he added.

The dispute at Tarrant began in June, when 800 workers staged a Norma Rae-style work stoppage. They gathered 750 signatures demanding they be allowed to form an independent union, rare in Mexico because unions were for so many decades controlled by Mexico's former one-party government.

The employees claim they collected enough signatures to require the state labor board to approve the union. In October, the board rejected the petition on grounds the employees believe were flimsy excuses to protect the influential Nacif.

One of the reasons the board cited: The name of a woman union supporter was listed as "Maria" on one document and "Maurs" on another.

Since their work stoppage, employees also say, Tarrant has fired workers in waves, starting with all the leaders of the union drive, including Zacatzi. So far, more than 300 employees have been dismissed.

"There are imbalances of power in every country, but Mexico is pretty extreme," said Scott Nova, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Workers Rights Consortium, a non-profit group that investigates sweatshop allegations and is respected by big companies like Levi's.

Nova's group produced a damning report about Ajalpan's plant, and in September sent copies to Levi's and Tommy Hilfger, two top customers.

Other side of border

Levi's asked Tarrant to become more active in addressing workers' grievances and allow an independent auditor to investigate allegations of abuses at the plant. Tarrant refused, angering Levi's.

"To our surprise, the company was not willing to work with us. It's a very rare case," said Michael Kobori, director of Levi's "global code of conduct" section, which oversees internal labor standards.

Levi's stopped placing orders with Tarrant in September and wrote a letter to Puebla's governor, Melquiades Morales Flores, urging him to uphold Mexico's labor laws.

Also in September, a U.S. college group called United Students Against Sweatshops filed a complaint related to the Tarrant dispute before a three-country labor review board NAFTA established. Mexican activists join students to accuse Mexico's government of failing to uphold its laws.

Blame for Tarrant dispute ricochets among the players at the top of the production chain. Nacif's office in Mexico City referred calls to Jorge Echeverria, plant spokesman who said the 300 layoffs were necessary because U.S. companies don't want to pay enough. Because of the economy, he added, production at Tarrant's various Mexican plants has fallen by 50 percent or more.

"Don't you know the United States doesn't buy from us anymore?" he said. "That you buy everything from China now? Then you send people down here to dare to investigate human rights abuses."

The new North, South

Tarrant, he said, rejected business because of Levi's "hunger wages."

In a statement, Levi's wrote, "We can tell you that we have reached mutually satisfactory agreements with over 500 contractors throughout the world who are

willing to meet our requirements for service, time, and cost of production, as well as meeting our code of conduct requirements."

Ajalpan's plant now churns out Express jeans for The Limited. The brand responded to inquiries about its position on the Tarrant dispute with a statement: "Limited Brands holds its employees, suppliers and vendors strictly accountable for compliance with all applicable laws and our own business policies, including those relating to labor standards."

The state labor board did not return repeated phone calls for comment.

The Tarrant conflict is reminiscent of a fight nearby at Puebla's Mexmode factory, a Korean-owned plant where employees rose up in 2001 to demand a union and to protest abuses.

After the intervention of the company's major buyer, Nike, and United Students Against Sweatshops, the independent union was installed.

Today, more than 700 assembly workers at sewing machines piece together T-shirts and sweatshirts emblazoned with Nike, Disney or the names of U.S. college sports teams. Every Monday, manager Steve Kim or others sit down with union leaders to talk about problems.

"The union is like the face of the company now," Kim said.

Mexmode's workers are happier, union leader Josefina Perez said. The wages still aren't high enough to dissuade some from joining the trail of illegal immigrants to the United States that flows heavily out of Puebla. Yet, many feel they have a stake in the company now, and for the first time in years, Kim said, he expects to make a profit next year.

What happens at the Tarrant plant, U.S. activists say, depends on whether brands like The Limited will follow Nike and Levi's and use their leverage to pressure the company.

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