

“ INSIDE IT’S PACKED...
WE DON’T EVEN HAVE SOAP
IN THE WASHROOMS.”

MAQUILA WORKERS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Border Committee of Women Workers (*Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, CFO*)



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Translated into English by the Maquila Solidarity Network

“Then they [management] came to try to create space between us, one meter to each side. But the worker standing behind me stayed at the same distance as before.”

This document presents a small sample of the situation that maquila workers on Mexico’s northern border are facing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the information was gathered by CFO in conversations with workers we’ve worked with in the past and who shared this new information directly with us. We’ve also drawn from reports in the media to provide wider context. The situation narrated here is a sample of what has been happening as of mid-April. Due to the changing nature of the situation, this document may undergo revisions as things develop.

The answers to the following questions represent the collective voice of the workers interviewed.

1. How has the maquila industry in Coahuila and Tamaulipas reacted to the COVID-19 crisis?

The maquila industry in the border region has been slow, and even irresponsible, in its response to the crisis. Many factories have put business and their profits ahead of the health of their workers. Even though some factories began to suspend work in mid-March, this was only because they were supplying large auto plants in the United States, such as Ford and others, that had already halted work in previous weeks.

Incredibly, maquilas did not abide by a federal order issued by the Mexican government when it declared a health emergency on March 31 and suspended all non-essential manufacturing throughout the country. Many factories in the border region resisted the order, and two weeks later, many were still operating. This created confusion for workers, who sometimes gathered by the gates of their plants, wondering whether they should go inside or go home.

The factories that are still open argued that they are producing essential parts for an “essential” product or service. National newspaper La Jornada reported a similar situation in Ciudad Juarez. To demonstrate that they are essential and avoid being shut down, some companies have argued that they are making components for hospital equipment. Even in cases when some medical parts are indeed made at these factories, it does not warrant keeping the entire plant open. Factories could respond to specific orders from hospitals to fix or replace equipment, and bring in only the number of workers necessary to do that specific task, keeping production within a limited timeframe while applying all required health and safety precautions to operate specific sections of the factory.

In his daily press conference on April 11, Dr. López-Gatell, Mexico’s Undersecretary for Health and head of the COVID-19 task force, criticized maquila factories that were still operating, shielding behind the argument that they were an essential sector.

Maquila factories that have suspended operations are generally paying workers 50% of their basic pay. Some, like Hendrikson Spring, have added 15% of workers’ usual production bonuses and 100% of their weekly grocery vouchers (which usually comprise a significant proportion of workers’ weekly pay check). Some factories encouraged workers to use accrued vacation time, or offered an advance on their vacation days so that they could make 100% of their wages. If workers refused, factories suspended them at 50% pay.

Workers with reduced incomes will have an even harder time meeting the basic needs of their households (the real income for workers during the pandemic will depend on each individual, based on factors such as whether they are servicing a loan from Infonavit for social housing, and the size of bonuses provided by companies). For these reasons it is difficult to estimate an average weekly income during the pandemic, but workers will probably be receiving somewhere between 700 and 800 pesos per week (US\$28-US\$32). On April 15, Infonavit announced that they will postpone credit payments until June 15, which could alleviate the situation for some families.

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2. **At the beginning of April, the business association of Piedras Negras, Index, reported that 65% of workers would stop working due to suspensions of operations. That should be roughly 22,000 out of a total 37,500 workers while the rest would continue to make supplies for the medical industry. Other maquila factories were starting to “prepare to shut down” for a month to fulfill the federal order from March 31, which only excluded production of essential products for the healthcare sector from the suspension.**

By the beginning of April workers had seen no, or in some cases only minor, changes inside their factories. Production lines continued to operate at high speed to fill orders from buyers. This inevitably requires workers to brush past each other and to be in close contact with each other, rendering safe physical distancing recommendations ineffective. Workers in some companies reported that even towards the end of March, soap was not available either in factory washrooms or cafeterias. Most of these factories cannot keep production areas ventilated because they do not have windows.

Workers complained that “Inside it’s packed... we don’t even have soap in the washrooms.” They also mentioned that “Then they [management] came to try to create space between us, one meter to each side. But the worker standing behind me stayed at the same distance as before.”

The first COVID-19 positive case in Piedras Negras, in mid-March, was an engineer from one of the maquila factories. The company disinfected the plant and carried out a general cleaning, but did not suspend production.

The situation for maquila workers is chaotic, in all areas of their lives. Those who are still working are doing so without the appropriate health and safety precautions. Their temperatures are taken at the factory entrance and they get some hand-sanitizer, but that is all. Some factories did not even want to implement the order that mandated no one over 60 years old, with chronic health problems like high blood pressure or diabetes, or pregnant women should be working. One factory tried to deny permission for time off to a worker over 60 years old who had a work-related accident.

Given the difficult financial situation for many workers, they hesitate whether to stay home at 50% pay or go to work, with all the risks that this entails. CFO witnessed many factories take almost three weeks (following the contingency) to provide hand sanitizer, and only at the main entrance.

In addition to this, since all schools have been closed since March 15, workers’ children are at home, needing attention from parents, with mothers taking on much of this additional work. On top of that, workers houses are usually small Infonavit (social housing) homes.

3. There are reports that some municipalities are inspecting factories to make sure that they are applying appropriate health and safety measures, and to correct them if they are not.

We heard this public announcement, but we do not know of any company that has been inspected so far.

4. How has the Secretariat of Labour and Social Security (*Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, STPS*) performed?

Overall, STPS at the local and state level has been very weak. The Conciliation and Arbitration Boards (*Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje*) closed down. We hear more about what the Labour Secretary (Luisa María Alcalde Luján) has recommended at the national level, but details are missing. For example, she said: “[T]he Federal Labour Law establishes that in case of temporary suspension of work due to force majeure the authorities will determine the level of wages to be paid to workers for up to a month.” This statement is not encouraging because the STPS has always been on the side of employers.

At the same time, Ms. Alcalde and Dr. López-Gatell gave a joint message on April 1 asking people to “stay home”. Alcalde clarified that “the general obligation for employers is to pay the full wage”, although she added that that there could be “circumstances that oblige both parties to reach an alternative agreement.”

5. Women are used to working in the factories for 10 hours a day, five days or more per week. How are they doing now that they’re staying at home for all or most of the day? The Secretary of Governance reported on April 9 that calls to helplines for domestic violence had increased between 30 and 100%, depending on the State.

Women workers are calling CFO to talk about different issues related to the current situation. We are paying special attention to cases that workers know of domestic violence to see how we might be able to help the women out. Even though there are government agencies and NGOs dedicated to fighting violence against women, workers often don’t know about them, or are unlikely to call or go to them. Many do not have the money to buy a smartphone, and may have only a basic one. Many have legitimate fears regarding their partners’ reactions, and now they are supposed to not leave their homes. In other cases, they do not trust the authorities or do not know what an agency to protect women could do to help them.

Because of the trust we have built with workers we can reach these women, and if they ask us to, we channel their cases to people in the agencies that we know and trust, and can help them.

6. You live on the dividing line between Mexico and the United States. The states of Texas and California share the border with many important Mexican cities. How has the crisis, that is even bigger in the US, affected Mexican workers?

There are many ‘twin’ cities along the border that are effectively the same city, their communities on each side connected through family, friendships, business and services. In the case of Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass, border crossings have been closed since mid-March. Authorities in the United States only allow entry from Mexico to those who are residents or citizens working in Eagle Pass and living in Mexico.

For about two weeks, they also stopped workers from going to labs in Eagle Pass to donate plasma for extra income. This changed at the beginning of April when the plasma centres convinced the US border patrol to let people cross the border to donate. From then on, workers can cross if they have an appointment at a lab. At the bridge, border patrol agents verify that person's registration and appointment, and then let them cross.

Another problem that has resulted from closing the border, affecting workers who have border visas that cover Eagle Pass, is that they cannot buy groceries in supermarkets on the other side. For decades, some basic products, including fruit and vegetables, have been cheaper there than in Piedras Negras. Additionally, and for different reasons, prices for these products have gone up considerably on the Mexican side.

7. Given the situation described above, how have you at CFO changed the way you are doing your work?

Demand from workers has gone up given the irresponsible behaviour of the maquila factories and other problems workers are facing in their families and surroundings. But we are limiting the number of house visits we do, as well as our face-to-face contact with workers. We have suspended workshops and public events. We only come to the office to deal with concrete issues.

We're staying in contact with workers through WhatsApp, Facebook, email and by phone. We are documenting the situations that workers and their families are experiencing.

We have also been contacted by different news outlets, journalists and organizations that want to know how maquila factories are behaving during the pandemic.