

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

“Are We Exporting American Jobs?”

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My name is Martha Iris Alberto. I am 29 years old and I am from Honduras. I am a single mother with three children. I began working when I was seven years old, selling bread in the street to buy my books for school. I began working in the maquila factories when I was 17. For the last 3 ½ years I have worked for the AAA maquila company.

In AAA we sew t-shirts for Gildan. Currently the Gildan label is 75 percent of the production. The other 25 percent is Fruit of the Loom. We have also produced t-shirts for Nike, Adidas and Hanes.

Each production module has 15 people, and the company gives us an impossible production goal of 250 dozen pieces—that is, 3,000 Gildan t-shirts a day. The work day is from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. They give us a 10-minute break at 9:00 a.m. but nobody takes it. We have a half hour for lunch, and we only take 10 minutes to try to make the production goal—but it is impossible. The supervisors are always walking around behind us yelling at us and pressuring us to work faster to complete the quota. The factory is very hot and you sweat a lot.

Workers who are 30 years old or more are harassed and pressured even more, because they prefer young women from 17 to 25 years old. So they look for ways to make older women quit. I am very worried because I am about to turn 30 and it is going to be very hard for me to find a job.

Our work shift is from 7:00 in the morning to 6:00 in the afternoon from Monday to Thursday. But I always work on Friday and Saturday because it is impossible to make the production goal in those four days. Even so, it is very hard to make the goal, and with Gildan we never could because they demand very high quality. The auditors inspect stitch by stitch, and for one small mistake, they reject the garment and we have to unsew and re-sew it. So we have to spend a lot of time on repairs and can't earn anything, just the base wage. When Charlie showed me the price of the Gildan t-shirt, \$18 to \$20, I was very surprised, because two or three of these t-shirts would pay my wage for a week. But we produce 1,800 to 2,000 shirts a day, with great effort. This doesn't seem fair to me.

I get up at 5:00 a.m. and I get home at 7:30 at night. I am even more tired than hungry, and I just want to go to sleep. I don't have time for my children.

We earn 75 cents an hour. Making production I can earn \$1.00 an hour, which is one of the highest wages in the factory. But even when I can earn that it is not enough to live in a dignified

way.

In the three and a half years that I have been working on Nike, Adidas and Gildan, I haven't been able to save anything; I don't have my own home, I haven't even been able to buy a piece of furniture. We can't even buy new clothing. We can only buy second hand clothing. Really one just works to eat.

I live in very terrible conditions. I rent a very small room and I pay 500 lempiras a month [\$28.40]. When I have to pay, I have nothing left to buy food. I live here with my three children and my sister. We use a toilet which is like an outhouse, which we have to share with three other households. We have to wash out in the open, with water from a wash sink, where we take water in a bowl to wash ourselves. We use this same sink to wash our clothing, to wash dishes and to bathe, and this too we share with three other households.

My children don't have toys at Christmas, nor presents on their birthdays or for Children's Day. I don't even earn enough to buy a special meal at Christmas, or to buy them new clothes.

They fired me on July 14 for having asked for our rights. We organized a work stoppage, where not one person worked. This was the only way to talk with the owner, to get him to listen to us—because he had started to pay us with a card. Every time we stuck that card in, they would deduct 6 lempiras [\$0.34], which we were in no condition to lose, we would miss that six lempiras to buy a pound of beans, since we were earning so little. We won. We spoke with the owner and succeeded in getting him to pay us in cash, and he said that he would speak with the supervisors so they would treat us better. He also promised not to take reprisals against us. But the next week, they were firing 40 of us, with no severance, those of us who were organizing a union to defend our rights. In AAA we have no right to complain. If someone protests or tries to claim their rights, they are immediately fired.

We need these jobs. But we also want them to respect our rights and to be treated like human beings. We think that only with a union will we reach this goal. Everything I am doing now, I am doing for my children, because I want them to have an education and a better life—not to have the life that I have had to live.

Now I and all the others who were fired cannot work in any other factory because they have put us in a computer system, a black list, where we appear as “special employees.” So when we seek work in other factories, they won't give us a job. But what we really want is reinstatement, to return to our jobs at AAA, but with better conditions, and with our union. That is what we are fighting for, because in this way we will also be able to help all of our compañeros who are still in the factory.