

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

“Are We Exporting American Jobs?”

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My name is Lydda Eli Gonzalez and I am from Honduras. I am 19 years old. I started working when I was 11, and when I was 17, I entered the maquila factories. For 13 months, until August 15, I have sewn the Sean John label at the SETISA factory in San Miguel Free Trade Zone.

The free trade zone where I work is surrounded by very high walls, with a locked metal gate, and armed guards. I enter at 6:45 a.m. Our regular shift is supposedly from 7:00 a.m. to 4:45 p.m., but since the production goal they give us is so high, we are almost always kept working for 1½ or 2 hours of overtime until 6:30 p.m. We are not paid for these extra hours. It is especially toward the end of the week, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, that they make everyone in the factory stay working, because they say the exports have to go out. The overtime is mandatory. They threaten or punish us if we cannot stay. The supervisors say we will be fired, or that they will change us to a line where we will earn even less.

My job is attaching the sleeves to the shirt. There are different styles of Sean John shirts, but for long-sleeved shirt, a production line of about 20 workers has to sew 190 dozen shirts a day—that's 2,288 shirts. Management demands we reach this goal, but it is impossible. With luck we can do 90 or 100 dozen in a regular shift. So the company demands overtime and we must stay. The supervisors stand over us shouting and cursing at us to go faster. We are under constant pressure. They call us filthy names, like maldito, donkey, bitch, and worse things. You can't answer the supervisors or they will fire you.

It is very hot in the factory and you are sweating all day. There is also a lot of dust in the air. You breath it in, and you go into the factory with black hair, and come out with hair that is white or red or whatever the color of the shirts we are working on.

It is forbidden to talk, and you have to ask permission to use the bathroom. We have to get a pass from the supervisor and give it to the guard in front of the bathroom, who also searches us before we go in. You can go once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Also they watch the time, and if you are gone more than three or four minutes, they call you on the loudspeaker. Another thing, the bathrooms are very dirty and there is almost never any toilet paper or soap. They also don't permit us to get up to get water – if the worker next to you goes, you take advantage and ask her to bring you water too. You can't move or stretch, or even look to the side. You just have to focus and work as fast as you can to complete the production goal, always under pressure. Because of this, and because the benches are just wood with no backs, by the end of the day your whole body aches, your back, arms, shoulders, everything, and one feels

exhausted.

All the new employees are required to take a pregnancy test, and if it comes out positive, they are fired. Older workers also suffer a lot of harassment and discrimination, because the management prefers workers between 17 and 25 years old. When a woman gets to be 30, she can't get work in the maquila factories, and if she is working, often she is harassed and sent to worse positions to make her quit.

They search us physically when we enter the factory and if one has candy or gum or lipstick, they take it away because they think it could stain the clothing. Like I said, they search us at the bathrooms too, and also leaving the factory.

We have no healthcare. For the last two years our factory has not paid the Social Security fees, and because of this, we have no access to healthcare. This is illegal.

The Chief of Personnel and the other managers constantly threaten us, telling us that if we organize a union, they will shut the factory down and throw us out on the street. They fired me on August 15, just because they suspected I was part of a group that wanted the rights of the workers to be respected. That was true, since we wanted to form a union to end the abuses and bad treatment in the factory. The supervisors tell us we don't have rights, that we have to shut up and work, or leave.

When Barbara and Charlie showed me the price of a Sean John shirt, I could not believe it. That is, we know they are very expensive, and very pretty. But what a surprise to find out that they cost \$40. In Honduras, we workers never imagined that they could cost so much. We produce more than a thousand of these shirts a day, and just one shirt would pay more than my wage for a week!

It is difficult to make the Sean John shirts. Seeing this label we get nervous, because there are the same very high production goals – no matter what label – but they demand really high quality. The quality inspectors check every little stitch. For us, the pressure increases with the Sean John label and we earn less, because we can produce less. With Sean John, we can only earn the minimum wage of 576 lempiras a week-which is \$33. This would be around 13 lempiras an hour [\$0.74]. But really we are earning less, because they make us work a lot of overtime hours, which are not paid.

If it is a short sleeved shirt, which is easier, and we know the style-something like Nautica, we can earn between 800 and 830 lempiras a week [\$45.45 to \$47.16].

You cannot live on these wages. Really you work just to eat. It's impossible to save. You can't buy anything, it's just to survive. I am lucky because I live with my mother and an uncle. So we share expenses. But I'm no better off than I was two or three years ago. We workers are always stuck in the same place, without being able to go forward.

I get up at 5:00 a.m. to get to work at 6:45. I take two buses, which costs 8.50 lempiras-a total of

17 lempiras a day, round trip [\$0.97]. When I get to the factory, I have a tortilla with beans, the cheapest breakfast, which costs 9 lempiras [\$0.51]. I also buy the cheapest lunch, which includes a small piece of chicken, rice, beans and water. This costs 21 lempiras [\$1.19]. Just these small daily expenses for transport and food come to almost four hours of wages a day.

Fifteen of us are fired now, because we wanted to organize a union to end all the maltreatment and abuses. We wanted to have a voice to end the mandatory pregnancy tests and overtime, to have the right to use the bathroom when we need to, and so the supervisors would not scream at us any more, and we want access to healthcare like the law says.

Right now we are in a trap. There are no rights in the factory, and we who were fired are probably on the companies' blacklist.

We don't know much about the labels, that is about who owns the labels. So the label "Sean John" didn't mean anything special to us. When we came to the United States, they told us that it was Sean Combs. But that still didn't mean anything to me, until it was mentioned that he was the boyfriend of Jennifer López. Then, yes! – I've seen him on television in Honduras. Knowing this, I felt happy, because since he is a very famous and very powerful person, he can help us end all the humiliating treatment that they give us in the factory. I want to ask Mr. Sean Combs for his help so we can win our rights and be treated with dignity and not in a humiliating manner, because we are human beings. We do not want him to take his work from the factory. On the contrary, we need these jobs, and we are willing to work very hard. But the maltreatment and the abuses are too much. There is too much injustice in the factory, and that is why I came here, to ask Mr. Combs and the American people for help, in the name of all the workers. We sew your clothing. Please demand that the companies treat us with respect.

Thank you.