



## 71. The 1985 Earthquake (1985, 1995)\*

An estimated ten thousand people died in the massive earthquake that devastated Mexico City on September 19 and 20, 1985. Despite the history of seismic activity in this area, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) government was ill prepared to handle the disaster, particularly where it struck newly constructed high-rises in the city center. Among the dead were hundreds of seamstresses who worked in sweatshops in cheaply constructed buildings. In the wake of the disaster, survivors in this industry organized themselves into the 19th of September Union. Included here is the testimony of one sweatshop worker in a series on experiences of the earthquake that journalist Elena Poniatowska first published in the Mexico City daily *La Jornada*. What indications does her account contain about why this natural disaster provoked widespread political protest? What did the tragedy reveal to both textile workers and *Jornada* readers about the paternalistic guise favored by both the state and the financial elites?

For several years, the 19th of September Union managed to function independently of organizations like the heavily co-opted Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM), although it eventually succumbed to the structural limitations that constrained organized labor under PRI rule. Also included here are excerpts from an interview with Evangelina Corona, the first secretary-general of the 19th of September Union. It was conducted in her home in Nezahualcóyotl, a working-class municipality northeast of the Federal District, and published in a book commemorating the tenth anniversary of the earthquake and the union's creation. According to Corona, what forces eventually hindered the effectiveness of the union? How did the reality that she and her coworkers experienced differ from the ideals set out in the 1917 Constitution (Source 54)? What circumstances may have had a different impact on the apparent success of the organizations of Maquila workers fifteen years later (Source 75)?

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\*Elena Poniatowska, *Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake*, trans. Aurora Camacho de Schmidt and Arthur Schmidt (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 142–145. Used by permission of Temple University Press. Copyright © 1995 by Temple University. All Rights Reserved. Gonzalo Martré and Angélica Marval, *Costureras: Debajo de los escombros* (Mexico: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1995), pp. 63–64, 80–88. Excerpts translated by the editors.

***“Eight Hundred Factories and Sweatshops  
Totally Destroyed: The Earthquake Revealed  
the Exploitation of Women Textile Workers”***

even stories were reduced to three at San Antonio Abad 150, a building that is today the symbol of the tragedy of the seamstresses.

Clandestine sweatshops existed on a great many streets: at José María Izazaga 65, just one eight-story building, fifty sweatshops; on Fray Servando, on Xocongo, on Ilesones (Sportex), on Pino Suárez; almost all second-class—if not fifth-class—buildings, loaded with machinery and heavy rolls of fabric. No wonder the floors came down. San Antonio Abad 164 was also reduced to dust. At Manuel José Othón 36, close to the corner of San Antonio Abad, the textile workshops continued to function in spite of the stench of cadavers, the rubble, and the fear.

The seamstresses at Dimension Weld, Amal, and Dedal were the first to realize that their bosses weren't going to help them. What's worse, they saw how the machinery was carried out before anybody worried about the six hundred entombed *compañeras* [coworkers]. If anyone was beaten and done violence in this year of 1985, if anyone has suffered, it is precisely these women. The earthquake showed that of all those exploited in the Federal District, none are more so than the workers of the clothing industry. Domestic service may constitute the leading employer of poor women in our country, but second place goes to sewing. Seated on the sidewalk of Lorenzo Boturini Street is Juana de la Rosa Osorno, fifty-five, who works for Dimension Weld de México, S.A., employed by Elías Serur:

Now with this disaster, she says, putting her hands under her green and white checkered apron, we're here in the street waiting for people's charity to be able to eat. The boss is not a bad person; he's just fickle. He offers one thing, then another; he changes his mind; we can never come to an agreement. He first yelled at us, "The machinery is yours with my compliments. I've lost it all, my life is buried here."

His life is not buried there; if any lives are buried, it's those of the *compañeras*. The boss came running when he heard that the building had fallen down. He drove from his house in Las Lomas. But we were here. And the dead were here, bleeding among concrete and steel mesh. Elías did not suffer a scratch. So why should he say that his life had been buried here? Maybe he meant his safe. Maybe he means that his safe is his life. That's what happens to the rich, right?

I myself didn't die because my shift starts at 7:30. I've been working for fifteen years. I have two children. My daughter is twenty-seven; the boy is sixteen, and he's in high school. I'm a widow, and here in the San Antonio Abad encampment they asked me to be in charge of the kitchen. I used to start at 7:30 and end at 5:30. Occasionally, I worked until eight and sometimes even Saturdays and Sundays. . . .

In Dimensión Weld [according to another worker], there wasn't even a first-aid kit, and if we had to be excused to go to the bathroom, and we took a little longer, we would come and knock on the door of the stall:

"What's the matter?"

"I'm taking care of my physiological needs."

"Well come now, you've been there for ten minutes or you've been there for a quarter of an hour; go back to work or I'll have to dock the time from your paycheck."

I do overlay. I was working on sport shirts. I'm a highly qualified seamstress. I was making 11,300 pesos a week more or less before taxes. I had no social security nor loans of any sort. When I had to buy my eyeglasses, it took about four months of pleading before Elías told the cashier to lend me the money. In reality, the only thing that I have to thank the boss Elías for is that when my father died recently, he gave me a leave of absence of a week, but without pay. In fifteen years of work, that week without pay is what I am grateful for.

We have seen no government aid, period—only from churches, from private persons who come open their trunk and bring out big pots of rice, tortillas, and beans, and they tell us to come and have some lunch. Young people have come; I don't know from what organization. But the boys have been here; they bring oil for me to cook with. . . .

In Dimensión Weld, there were 130 of us. Here on this avenue there are many factories. The one with the most casualties was Dedal, where a whole big bunch of women died, because their shift started at seven. They took out three bodies last night, all made mincemeat.

At Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera and San Antonio I don't know how many of them are still missing. The relatives are there, waiting in tents. Just imagine what a barbaric thing that is. We've left behind our lungs, our hearts, all our efforts, down there under that concrete. Shouldn't the boss compensate us in some way? We live in tenements, we rent small rooms, we pay rent while they, the owners, live in mansions, have cars, they travel, but we are the ones who take pains to work, to produce, to live. Of course, they started the business, but we moved it forward on our backs. That's my thinking.

I left my eyes behind in Dimensión Weld. Now I can only see with my glasses on. I used to eat by the lockers, I brought my food in a dinner pail. Then they put some tables by the entrance. There are many of us and all of us are poor. We can't afford to eat at a diner, so we'd bring our beans or whatever God had given us for that day.

***Evangelina Corona Interview***

INTERVIEWER: Doubts emerge after ten years: why didn't the Union "19th of September" not grow as was expected?

EC: . . . One of the principal reasons that the union stopped growing was that the people who played a central role in the movement, from the beginning, charged too high a price. What does this mean? It means that the people who guided us got into disagreements. They fought in front of all of the women

workers, with the result that women took sides with one or another person, group, or movement. This led to divisions, and of course, as we all know, a house divided cannot grow. I also believe that the primary reason that it did not grow was bad information, misinformation. Much was said about the union. That it shut down businesses, that it was red, aggressive. That is to say, all the characterizations we heard at the local board. And the businessmen, fearful and afraid, said: "I prefer to shut down my business, fire the women workers, before the '19th of September' comes in," all because of the negative slant of the publicity among businessmen where this sort of thing was happening. One of the principal protagonists was in fact Robert's [a major clothing store] and its owner. He was the one who made the complaint against the Federal Ministry for having officially registered the union. He asked that the registration be annulled on the grounds that an illegitimate board had requested it. Sometimes, when we were renegotiating contracts with local boards, he presented documents alleging that the union was not legal, that it had been filed by a secretary lacking legal competence. This is another reason the union did not grow.

We believe a third reason, apart from the defamation, is the struggle that the union developed. The struggle for restoration of working women's labor rights. And what was this? It was that not a single union had really demanded that the employers in the textile industry comply with the law. It was always . . . "I give you money, you say you fix things, and don't fix anything." And with us, many employers found they could not do things this way, because our commitment was with the workers, not with the bosses. This was not really strangling businesses, but saying to them: "You are earning such and such amount, and it is fair that you share your earnings with the workers." How is that? Well, with a fairer wage, more deserving, one is able to live on it and survive. This is what we asked. Our intention was not to strangle business. We, as a union, and above all when I represented the union, were of the opinion that the strangle business was to kill the source of employment for the more or less significant number of seamstresses that there were at that time. That it is better to share a bit of the work. To make progress, that was our idea. But many employers were used to "I am the only one who profits here," they kept all the profit. For us there were not even dividends. Many times there was not even Social Security. And many others did not even pay overtime. At least not in the way the law stipulates. They would in some way subsume it in the production quota demanded of us. This is what, as a union, we could no longer support and they said: "The union is what closes down businesses and finishes off employers." So it was this sort of defamation on the part of employers towards the ones who entered into dialogue with them with regard to reparations for those who had been injured; it was a serious problem. Many lawyers representing employers, well, they said that this had never occurred. They had never given severance pay, and no one had ever fought such a hard fight. When they paid severance to those of us who had lost our jobs, we earned twelve days compensation regardless of the num-

ber of years we had worked; we were able to get twenty days for a year more, and the services stipulated in the law; it was already September, just about time for Christmas bonuses and vacation for many people. We were able to secure vacation time at that moment. All this meant that the union gained in stature with the workers, but on the other hand, it grew as a threat to employers. This is one of the reasons why the union could no longer expand. But the principal reason it could no longer grow was due to the divisions that emerged among the different groups that advised the union. . . .

INTERVIEWER: At that time, 1991, were working conditions in the workshops and factories in general, and not only those belonging to the union, the same as before the earthquake, or did the workers make gains?

EC: In general there were changes. Perhaps it would be better to say advances, but in regard to the consciousness of workers; with regard to working conditions you couldn't say that there was much improvement. Since '85 many business owners established small workshops all over the place and thus avoided any compliance whatsoever with the law. This leads us to suspect that the working women, rather than improve their conditions, were going to end up worse off. Of course, the other issue is that at this time, the majority of working women were in the midst of the critical economic straits in which the country found itself because they could no longer find jobs and there was a lot more repression than before. This was the situation when Salinas came into power. A situation wherein companies are unaccustomed to sharing with workers is very strong. And then came all the changes to the law, and the creation of more taxes. This led many businesses to close, jobs decline, and to some degree the adoption of the attitude: "Either you work longer hours, or produce more for less money." That, I believe, is how women's earning capacity has gotten worse instead of better. . . .

INTERVIEWER: How might we characterize the current situation with regard to protective contracts? The CTM [Confederación de Trabajadores de México] and the CROM [Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana] continue to provide protective contracts to employers?

EC: It is as simple as this, they protect the employer more than the worker. The situation has not changed a bit. . . .

INTERVIEWER: What did Evangelina Corona do for the seamstress union during the three years she was a representative to Congress?

EC: The truth is that she did not do anything. Absolutely nothing. She did not have a chance to do so. When we wanted, for example, the thing about Social Security,

the thing about the Retirement Savings System, the senators representing the official party could not have cared less about such a discussion. They never accepted such a possibility, never understood that this represented an aggression against workers. We argued too, about the work day; however, when I objected to a production project, we argued that it was not possible because it implied squeezing even more from working women. The same with flexible work schedules. "I, the boss, need you to stay and work until two at night, and you have to do it." For working women, this is just one more form of oppression. We could not do anything. Not because we did not want to, but because we found ourselves in the Chamber of Deputies with a majority and the CTM, a Congress full of supposed workers' representatives, who did not give a hoot about workers. What they wanted was to be in good standing with their president, their patron. So really we could not do anything. . . .

## Central Themes

State formation, urban life, land and labor, gender

## Suggested Reading

- Brickner, Rachel K. "Mexican Union Women and the Social Construction of Women's Labor Rights." *Latin American Perspectives* 33, no. 6 (2006): 55–74.
- Cook, Maria Lorena. *Organizing Dissent: Unions, the State, and the Democratic Teachers' Movement in Mexico*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- Porter, Susie S. *Working Women in Mexico City: Material Conditions and Public Discourses, 1879–1931*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003.
- Preston, Julia, and Sam Dillon. *Opening Mexico: The Making of a Democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.
- Rodriguez, Victoria E. *Women's Participation in Mexican Political Life*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998.
- Tirado, Silvia. "Weaving Dreams, Constructing Realities: The Nineteenth of September National Union of Garment Workers in Mexico." In *Dignity and Daily Bread*, ed. Sheila Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter. New York: Routledge, 1994.

## Related Sources

48. The Cananea Strike: Workers' Demands (1906)
54. Land, Labor, and the Church in the Mexican Constitution (1917)
68. Eyewitness and Newspaper Accounts of the Tlatelolco Massacre (1968)
75. Maquila Workers Organize (2006)