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MEXICO



RICK MCKAY/COX NEWS SERVICE

TEXTILES: Workers fold and stack shirts being readied for shipment at a textile factory in Merida, Yucatán, Mexico. Some Mexican textile factories have forced long hours, low wages and invasions of privacy on their workers.

Workers fight for rights as firms threaten to leave

■ Some textile factories accused of denying their workers basic rights threaten to relocate the work to China, where labor is cheaper.

BY SUSAN FERRISS
Cox News Service

AJALPAN, Mexico — Martin Zacatzi Tequextle can recite the names of trendy jeans like an American mall rat: "Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Levi's, Guess."

He ought to know. Before he was fired this summer, Zacatzi alleges that he and 1,300 other employees at a textile factory in southern Mexico were forced to sew together thousands of jeans a day with little or no overtime compensation to augment base wages of little more than \$1 an hour.

Sometimes they were ordered to sew from 8 a.m. on Fridays until 4 a.m. on Saturdays, say former and current workers at the factory in Ajalpan, a small town in Puebla state about 175 miles southeast of Mexico City.

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

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 also 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 Mexican *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 to employees on paper.

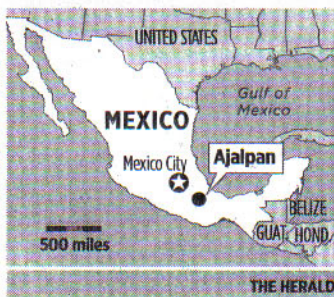
A GLOBAL SQUEEZE

In today's Mexico, workers who try to exercise their rights are feeling the squeeze of global competition.

At the Ajalpan factory, some of the workers say supervisors are warning them to acquiesce to excessive demands that they work harder and faster — or else the U.S. companies that once flocked to Mexico will go to China, where workers earn even less.

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 of this year, 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.

The threat of China "is used a lot as a pretext now at factories," said Zacatzi.

The 37-year-old said he turned down nearly \$3,000 in severance pay offered by Tarrant, opting instead to challenge his sudden 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," added Zacatzi.

CONTINUED RESISTANCE

The dispute at Tarrant Mexico began in June, when about 800 workers staged a Norma Rae-style work stoppage. Then they gathered about 750 signatures demanding they be allowed to form an independent union.

The employees claim they collected enough signatures to require the state labor board to approve their union. But in early October, the board

rejected the petition on grounds the employees believe were flimsy excuses to thwart them and protect the influential Nacif.

Since their work stoppage, employees also say, Tarrant has fired workers in waves, starting with all the leaders of the union drive, including Zacatzi.

"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.

Nova's group produced a damning report on the Ajalpan plant, and in September sent copies to Levi's and Tommy Hilfiger, two top Tarrant Mexico customers.

Levi's asked Tarrant Mexico 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 Levi's internal labor standards at its suppliers' plants.

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