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Evelyn Encalada Grez

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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COMMENTARY

ORGANIZING FROM THE *MAQUILADORAS* TO THE UNIVERSITY: DIALOGUE AND REFLECTIONS AMONG WOMEN MIGRANT AND *MAQUILADORA* WORKERS IN MEXICO¹

*Evelyn Encalada Grez*²

Founder and National Organizer,
Justice for Migrant Workers, (J4MW)

twitter.com/j4mw

and

Doctoral Candidate,
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,
University of Toronto,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada



Mexican women at work in rural Ontario and Johnson Controls *maquiladora* workers in Mexico.

In February researchers from the International Migration Research Centre (IMRC) participated in “the First Forum on International Migration and Transnational Studies” hosted by the “*Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla*” (BUAP) in the capital of the state of Puebla in Mexico.³ This forum was part of a joint initiative with the centre through a Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) “North American Research Linkages” grant. The forum convened researchers from all over Mexico, as well as Europe, Canada and the United States, to discuss points of interest in the ample field of transnational migration studies.

The IMRC sponsored a community *mesa* (round table) that bridged the divide between researchers and “the researched” that powerfully closed the forum. The community *mesa* in turn was organized by “Justice/Justicia for Migrant Workers” (J4MW) and the “*Centro de Apoyo al Trabajador*,” Puebla (known as *el CAT* in Spanish) by bringing together women from the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) and women *maquiladora* workers in the auto-parts industry along with activists from grassroots organizations for much needed dialogue and reflection. This community *mesa* attests to the longstanding transnational work and networks established by J4MW in Mexico and Canada. These spaces and exchanges are crucial to building new alliances and strengthening movements for transnational change. They also speak to the importance of activist based scholarship that seeks to democratize academic spaces with the voices and representations of the very people and movements that inspire our academic and political commitments.

From the onset, it may appear that women migrant farm workers to Canada and *maquiladora* workers in Puebla and Tlaxcala, Mexico, have little in common. Yet both groups of women are integrated in the global economy through their work as transnational/internal migrant workers bound to foreign capital. Moreover, it could be argued that women in the SAWP work in rural spaces that function like agricultural *maquiladoras*, with lax labour laws and an absentee state favouring employers, profit and industry over the labour and human rights of workers. The women share hardships from their low income working class status and vulnerabilities that render them disposable to employers. Furthermore, the women have similar work and life trajectories. Many women in the SAWP have worked in *maquiladoras*, and many in the *maquiladora* industry—whether in textiles, electronics or auto parts - are internal migrants from diverse regions within Mexico and at some point in their lives become transnational migrants to mostly the US and some to Canada. Essentially, they live and work in the same place; in this instance in Puebla and Tlaxcala. They work in *maquiladoras* in one form or the other. And most importantly, both groups of women face serious reprisals and repercussions when they organize themselves and resist unfair labour practices. After their testimonies and reflections, any remaining differences faded with powerful intersecting commonalities among *maquiladora* and migrant women farm workers.

WOMEN’S VOICES FROM THE MESA

The following are excerpts women offered about their lives that set the tone for the remainder of the community *mesa*. Most of the women workers had never addressed a public audience in their lives and spoke straight from their hearts about their experiences and struggles. Pseudonyms had to be used and some

parts of the testimonies had to be omitted in order to protect women's privacy to offset the very tangible threat of reprisals for speaking up and being "political".

For Justina it was important to take up the space of the university to denounce the numerous labour violations that compelled her and her coworkers to form a workers' led coalition named the *Coalición Organizativa de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de Johnson Control* (COT-JC) to counter the grip of the CROM (*Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana*), a "charro"⁴ labour union that constantly alienated them in favour of management. Many workers from her plant have been working closely with *el CAT* over the last three years in intensive training on "labour-human rights" to strengthen their leadership and organizing capacities to build a powerful independent worker coalition. Central to *el CAT's* education strategy is a discourse of labour rights as part of a series of inalienable human rights which has proven to be a powerful organizing tool from the grass-roots to the toward the international stage. Justina commenced the *mesa* with the following testimony:

[...] most of us who work at Johnson Controls [maquiladora plant in Parque Industrial Bralemex in Puebla with headquarters in Milwaukee] are from Tlaxcala, and we work under pressure, working 12 hour days and sometimes we complete two shifts, which is 16 hours, and we only get one lunch break when we work 12 hours. There are many abuses, such as sexual harassment, and pregnant women also work 12 hour shifts and they are not allowed to leave once they finish their 8 hours. Their workload is not reduced even though they are expecting and some of them have lost their babies and so, these are the reasons why we felt obligated to organize ourselves and form the Johnson Control coalition. We are fighting to have our labour rights respected. We have a union, but they mostly defend the company's rights instead of our own and this is the reason why we are currently fighting to understand our rights and face our bosses so that our rights are never violated again. A group of us were fired because of our resistance. We are in the middle of a lawsuit at the moment, and we continue to educate [others] about our rights. We are determined to affect change and we are taking full advantage of this space that you have provided to us in order to denounce the injustices we face at work.

Leticia, a migrant farm worker in Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, on the other hand mentioned certain moments of her life in Canada that were the most tragic and depressing. And in retrospect she claimed that working in Canada allowed her to have something in her life for the very first time. She also mentioned the importance of J4MW organizers in the region who reached out to women migrant workers and that among them were Canadian women who learned to speak Spanish in order to do this community work:

My name is Leticia and I am a seasonal worker in Canada. I have worked there for 10 seasons, each 8 months long. I have worked at two different places and the although I had terrible housing conditions in the first one, I had a very good experience [at the second] because when I arrived, I had nothing and eventually I got used to it, but it is very difficult to adjust

because we are from different cultures, levels of education and it is very difficult for us get used to life in Canada ...The hardest thing is to respect everyone, to have tolerance for everyone in order to avoid problems [among co-workers who they have to live and work with on a daily basis in Canada] and I like to observe and provide support [if they ask] I have worked with very young women and it is difficult because we have to leave our children and family behind... and the truth is that we have received a lot of support from organizations over there, like Justicia and Canadian students who support you very much and are interested in learning your language. I have not learned English, but my Canadian friends have learned perfect Spanish. They support us in many things, like going to the doctor where the language is a problem and then there are workshops on emotional health. Kate, [J4MW organizer] one of the compañeras and my friend knows a lot about this issue and she understands and supports us. I am very grateful to all of them [J4MW organizers] and I had nothing prepared to say today but I am happy to be here.

Citlali emphasized that her experiences in Canada have been more unpleasant than pleasant. She related becoming injured at a farm and how she did not receive any support from the Mexican Consulate. She claimed that if she continued to offer details about life and work in Canada as a migrant woman worker that we would all be shedding tears:

My name is Citlali and I come from the state of Tlaxcala and I am also a migrant worker to Canada. I have been going to Canada for five years now and I think it is a short time, but in this period I have experienced more negative than positive experiences... I wanted to quickly mention is that here in Mexico there are unions for workers but in Canada we do not have one [cannot be part of one], so when we experience injustices and are exploited as workers, where do we turn? It has been said over and over again that the [Mexican] consulate does not take responsibility [for anyone]. I had an accident and I have lived this situation in the flesh and this is why I know that the consulate does not do anything. Another thing is that we pay a lot of taxes and we receive no benefits since we are Mexican workers. As Mexican citizens we are considered inferior [than Canadians] and unfortunately there is a lot of racism. The simple fact we are Mexican places a mark that makes us inferior to them [Canadians] and this is very sad for us... if I start to tell you all the things we go through, I think we will all start crying together...so I am just trying to give you an idea... so thank you very much.

Marisela on the other hand focussed on the mistreatment migrant workers from Guatemala and Honduras confronted in another farm close to hers in Alberta. She in turn explained that the Consulate in the province was supportive when she needed to return to Mexico and that her employer was kind:

I am also a migrant worker. My name is Marisela and I am currently in the province of Alberta. Alberta is very pretty and vast, but it is very cold and there are also many injustices committed against us because they force us to work when it is snowing. I currently work in a greenhouse and the work is indoors but those who come from Guatemala, Honduras are in a farm where there are over 400 workers and they are forced to work from 6 am to 4pm even if it is snowing when they have an urgent order to fill... and they work irregularly, and cheaply, and so they may not get work for an entire month. Fortunately, the Mexican consulate and

my boss allowed me to go back to Mexico before the contract ended because my sister is very ill. They [my family] called me on Monday and I was back here on Wednesday. Fortunately, my boss is very kind but close to where I work there is injustice and they also need a group over there...

Rosita, who works in another Johnson Controls plant, echoed the same kind of issues as Justina and stressed the importance of knowing one's labour-human rights:

My name is Rosita and I also work at Johnson Control Interiors, a transnational company and it is located close to Resurrección Park. It is the same company but at a different address and production... and there are also many strange things that happen with the union that supposedly represents us. Like the other Johnson [plants] they [the union] also side with management more than the workers and we cannot say anything because they threaten with firing us... if we get sick with a cold and now, it is rainy season and there is water dripping above our heads and although we tell them about it, nothing happens, and if we get sick, they deny the cause is the water dripping and say that the cold is a general health issue and not work related but it is in fact due to the environment in the company... I am also learning to know more about our rights as workers and I think that if there are many discrepancies then the best thing is to learn more about our rights.

Leila explained how the John Controls plant where she worked managed to constantly pass official quality control and labour inspections despite the substandard conditions workers experienced on a daily basis. For Leila knowing and asserting one's rights are crucial:

My name is Leila and I also work at Johnson Controls, the first company that my compañera [co-worker] mentioned. Because we have educated ourselves about our rights as workers, when we go to conduct an inspection inside the Johnson Controls plant, they hold a meeting with the workers [before we arrive] and they tell them there will be a visit, and they tell them to say that everything is alright; for instance, the inspections are always fine and that all workers enjoy good working conditions and that there are no accidents, that they always receive quality service awards and that they have received awards for health and safety and we requested their board to do an inspection and they took a year to respond to our request for an inspection... They always say that we are workers and that we always want to defame the company, and that we are not content and that they have given us our severance pay and that we never wanted to accept it. This is why we have organized ourselves and we know that things are not like they say they are, that they are sugar-coating the facts and this is why we continue to unite forces among ourselves as a coalition so that we can truly face this company and just the same, I invite you to educate yourselves about your rights as workers so that you may deal with these situations because it is not just [a matter of fighting against companies like] Johnson Control, but it could also happen that other companies or organizations violate your rights as a worker...

Women spoke from their diverse experiences in relation to their working lives. Community organizers also intervened in the discussion to bring forth

experiences from their grassroots work with marginalized communities. Evelyne Salinas from *La Red Mujeres de la Baja* in the state of Guanajuato, for instance, talked about her work with women who stay behind in the other side of the labour migration bound to the USA and their holistic methodology for community determined development. She showed a video⁵ of a community forum her network organized about the impacts of migration in the rural communities in which they work. Luz del Carmen also discussed the plight of rural families in the *Mixteca Poblana* and the importance of aligning ourselves with the plight of our *compañera trabajadoras* [fellow women workers] whose life is much harder than our own. Blanca Velazquez Diaz, lead organizer and coordinator of *el CAT* reminded us that it has been women workers who have stepped up and led the organizing processes at the Johnson Controls plant in Puebla and that at the moment they were working towards formalizing their victory by officially defecting from the CROM. The *mesa* lasted over an hour and left the room filled with an exuberance of resistance and possibility. The discussion focused on how organizing initiatives led by *maquiladora* women workers could be a model of resistance for workers in the SAWP. The answers were not clear cut and certainly remain an open question for all workers in the SAWP and their allies. Certainly, migrant farm workers resist their life and work in Canada on their own terms. In Ontario, for instance, a new coalition of migrant farm workers recently formed named *Dignidad Obrera Agrícola Migrante* (Migrant Agricultural Worker Dignity, DOAM for its acronym in Spanish) comprised of workers who aspire finding a collective voice and analysis in their own struggle. DOAM is not waiting for legislation in the province to grant them permission to collectively bargain. Workers want to build their capacities in the here and now, organize according to their own expressions and become organizers in their own movement, perhaps one day exercising their agency as union leaders and more empowered rank and file. J4MW is currently working with DOAM and taking from lessons learned with *el CAT* in Mexico and *maquila* organizing models in Central America to support these types of worker led organizing processes and to challenge our conceptions of organizing and resistance.

FROM THE UNIVERSITY TO THE MESA – AND BACK AGAIN

As for the dialogue among our *compañera trabajadoras* the challenge to follow up on the connections and the synergies *maquiladora* and migrant women found among one another at the community *mesa* remains. I was left pondering the dynamics of these exchanges and our role as community organizers and researchers. We are interlocutors and facilitators of these encounters and we must remain self-reflexive of the privilege we have to claim spaces where marginalized voices can hear their own echoes in the hearts and minds of others.

We cannot forget that there is a very tangible power imbalance between us in the North and the women from the Global South, starting with the freedom we have to use our full names when reporting injustices or making claims without experiencing the same repercussions. There are many times when we see the world differently than our *compañera trabajadoras*, through our social mobility and particular theoretical lenses that differentiates us from where and how we live in the world. We must continue to claim spaces and facilitate collaboration in the academy with the communities we work with from the university, to the maquiladoras. Although we differ in our positions we are similarly committed to structural change and labour-human rights, and in order to move our analysis out of the university and to the *maquiladoras* it is imperative that we come together and set the community *mesa* more often.

ADDENDUM

We were recently reminded that the struggle for human-labour rights has diverse reverberations and consequences depending in the spaces in which they are waged. On April 28th two *el CAT* organizers, Enrique Morales and Coral Juarez, were physically attacked on their way to San Toribio in Tlaxcala by thugs from the CROM. Now that *el CAT's* organizing work is rendering results with the worker's led independent coalition the CROM has escalated threats and violence in order to protect its turf. J4MW is closely monitoring this situation and contacting *el CAT* organizers a daily basis to support any needed emergency responses.

The fight for labour human rights interrupts power relations between those who produce real wealth and those who usurp it. In Mexico and many countries that export workers as commodities to Canada, state complicity and impunity for perpetrators of labour-human rights violations are widespread and as common *el pan de cada día* (the daily bread). In our organizing work with migrant farm workers we know full well that Canada is complicit too.

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NOTES

- ¹ The opinions and analysis are those of the author and do not reflect the institutional position of IMRC, its staff or its board.
- ² Evelyn Encalada Grez is a National Organiser and founder of Justice for Migrant Workers, a volunteer driven transnational organizing collective working with migrant farm workers in rural Ontario and their families in rural Mexico. She is a PhD candidate (ABD) in Sociology and Equity Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Her doctoral work examines the lives of Mexican migrant farm worker women and their family kin who stay behind in Mexico. She is an affiliated researcher with the International Migration Research Centre at Wilfrid Laurier University and is grateful for their generous support to organize this community *mesa*. Her work in rural Ontario and Mexico has also been supported by Rural Women Making Change a project at the University of Guelph and *El Centro de Apoyo al Trabajador*, Puebla.
- ³ Researchers from the IMRC participating in the forum included Dr. Jenna Hennebry and Dr. Janet McLaughlin.
- ⁴ *Charro* is the term used in Mexico to denote corrupt labour unions that side with government and employers. The fight for labour rights in Mexico is often waged by community labour organizations that organize workers to counter government and charro union power.
- ⁵ Video link:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCYBx_zPC5I&feature=player_embedded