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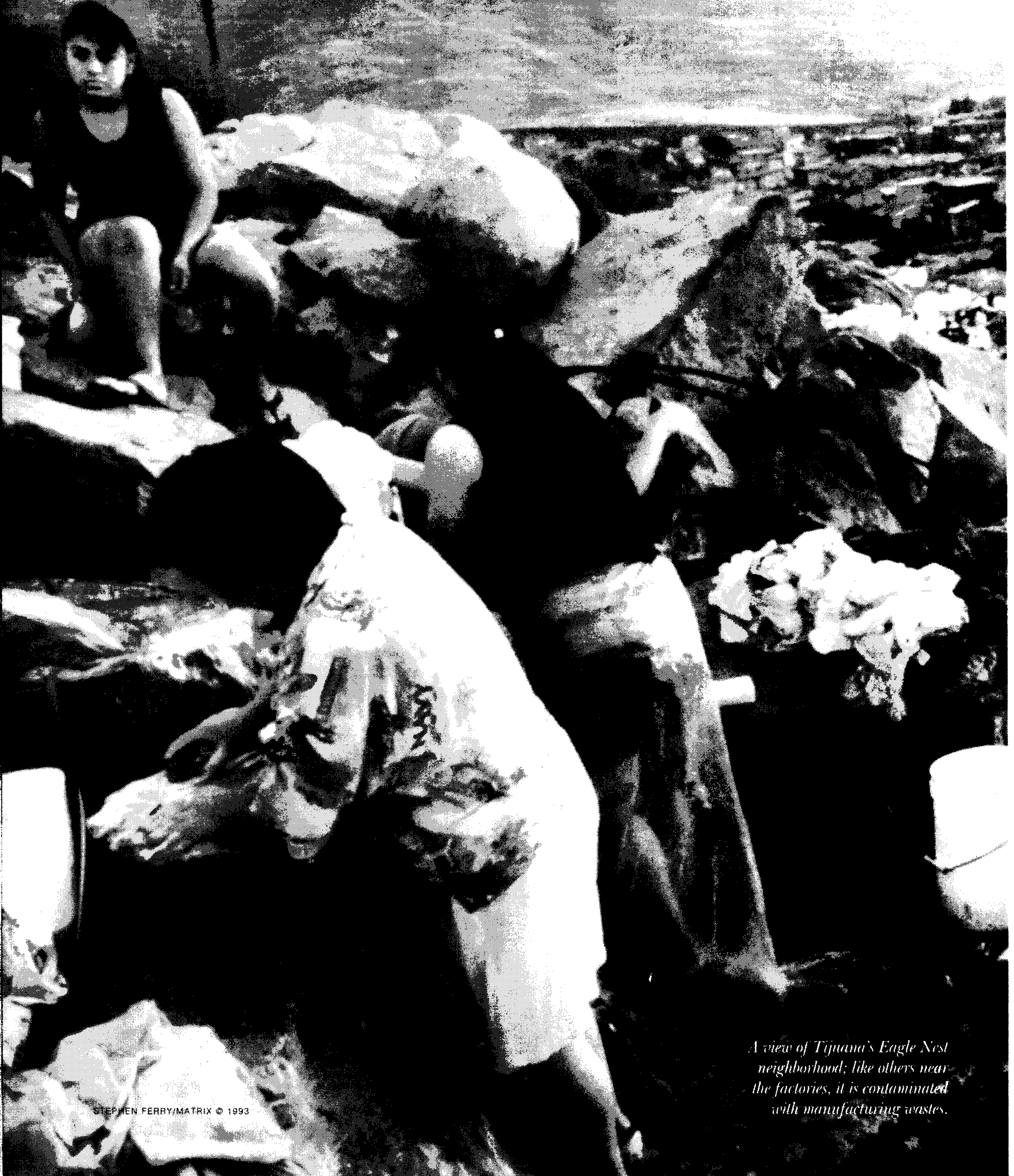
Ms; Jan 1994; 4, 4; Research Library
pg. 10



A view of Tijuana's Eagle Nest neighborhood; like others near the factories, it is contaminated with manufacturing wastes.

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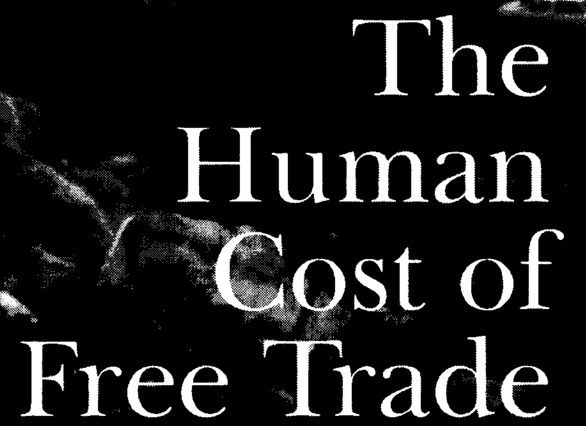

The Human Cost of Free Trade

On the Mexican border, NAFTA offers little hope

By Elizabeth Kadetsky

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To see Luz Elena Corona Calderón climb the Tijuana hillside separating her shanty from the factory where she used to work is to see in one sweep both the promise and the failure of trade relations between the United States and Mexico. On one side, Corona can peer down to the 11-by-18-foot handmade structure she, her husband, their three adolescent daughters, and seven-year-old son call home. It is a monument to ingenuity, pieced together from scraps of old tires, corrugated tin, and fragments of old clothes. On the rise in front of her: the luminous towers of the Parque Pacífico industrial compound, part of the free-trade zone where factories (or *maquiladoras)* owned by U.S. companies have been exploiting Mexican workers and polluting the border area under little scrutiny for 29 years.

Not until debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) heated up last year did the attention of most U.S. politicians, business leaders, and environmental and labor activists turn toward the *maquiladoras*, which crowd most of the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border. NAFTA, which was passed by Congress in November, phases out tariffs inhibiting the movement of goods between Mexico, the U.S., and Canada. Its opponents have pointed to cities like Tijuana as microcosms of what the rest of the country will look like now that U.S. corporations can move into Mexico without restrictions.

Here on the border, the legacy of unchecked U.S. investment is palpable: workers labor in production rooms with few accessible fire exits and almost no ventilation, often spraying industrial lacquer and soldering with hazardous substances that are illegal in the U.S. Menstrual irregularities and miscarriages are common. In one factory, employees describe bathrooms without water, where human excrement covers the floors. In Tijuana alone, industrial accidents have killed at least ten workers in the last year—two after they were sent to clean a chemical-laden canister emitting fumes that mixed fatally with the hundred-degree summer heat. Managers flout labor laws requiring breaks and sick and vacation days, while draconian worker manuals stipulate that employees can be suspended for refusing to work overtime. Many women work near-double shifts and then must care for husbands and children at home.

Corona, buckling with pain, asked to go to the bathroom. Her supervisor turned her down.

Close to 70 percent of the *maquiladora* workers are female, as a common highway sign in Tijuana illustrates: *Se Solicita, Sexo: Femenino,* or Help Wanted, Women Only. Employers prize female personnel for their supposedly delicate musculature and their willingness to work for lower wages than men. One manager explained to social anthropologist Patricia Fernández Kelly, who worked undercover in a *maquiladora* from 1979 to 1980, that the distribution of fatty tissue in women's derrieres predisposes them to long hours of sitting.

Hourly *maquiladora* wages range from 70 cents to $1.25, which can buy about a quart of oil or a couple of eight-ounce cans of condensed milk. In one makeshift grocery store in a Tijuana shanty, prices can approach those on the "other side," as the U.S. is called. Here, a canister of salt costs 47 cents; a bar of soap, 60 cents; toothpaste, 90 cents. "In Tijuana, we say there is 'opportunity' for women because they pay more than minimum wage [around 60 cents]. But you can't live on it," remarks Tijuana labor activist Cármen Valadez, who is trying to forge cross-border alliances among women workers.

Even double-income border families can afford no better than shanties, usually with no heat, electricity, or running water; clean water must be bought from unreliable trucks that sell it for prices so high that many choose to bathe in the canals, where the sewage and factory runoff flow freely. In company-owned barracks, young single workers—often a hundred women—will share one double-burner hot plate for cooking.

For the 80 percent of Tijuana's 8,000 female *maquiladora* workers who are mothers, child care costs an average of $60 a week—equaling a week's total wages for most. Since the majority of women have parted with their extended families in other parts of the country, many are forced to leave small children locked in shanties to fend for themselves during work hours. Others sacrifice food to afford uniforms and books for parochial schools (public schools are distant and dangerous).

Along the border a number of communities surrounding the *maquiladoras* are plagued by near-epidemic rates of anencephaly—a birth defect that causes an infant to be born without a brain and to die immediately. Preliminary research has linked this phenomenon to the rivers of raw chemical waste known as *aguas negras*—literally, black waters—that flow from bluffs dense with *maquiladoras* and trickle down to worker *colonias*, or barrios, covering the hillsides and valleys below. Among Mexico's border population, studies have found high rates of skin diseases, respiratory illnesses, and anemia. In one Tijuana community, a mother and her teenage daughter describe collective outbreaks of rashes among residents, and they speak of children and old people

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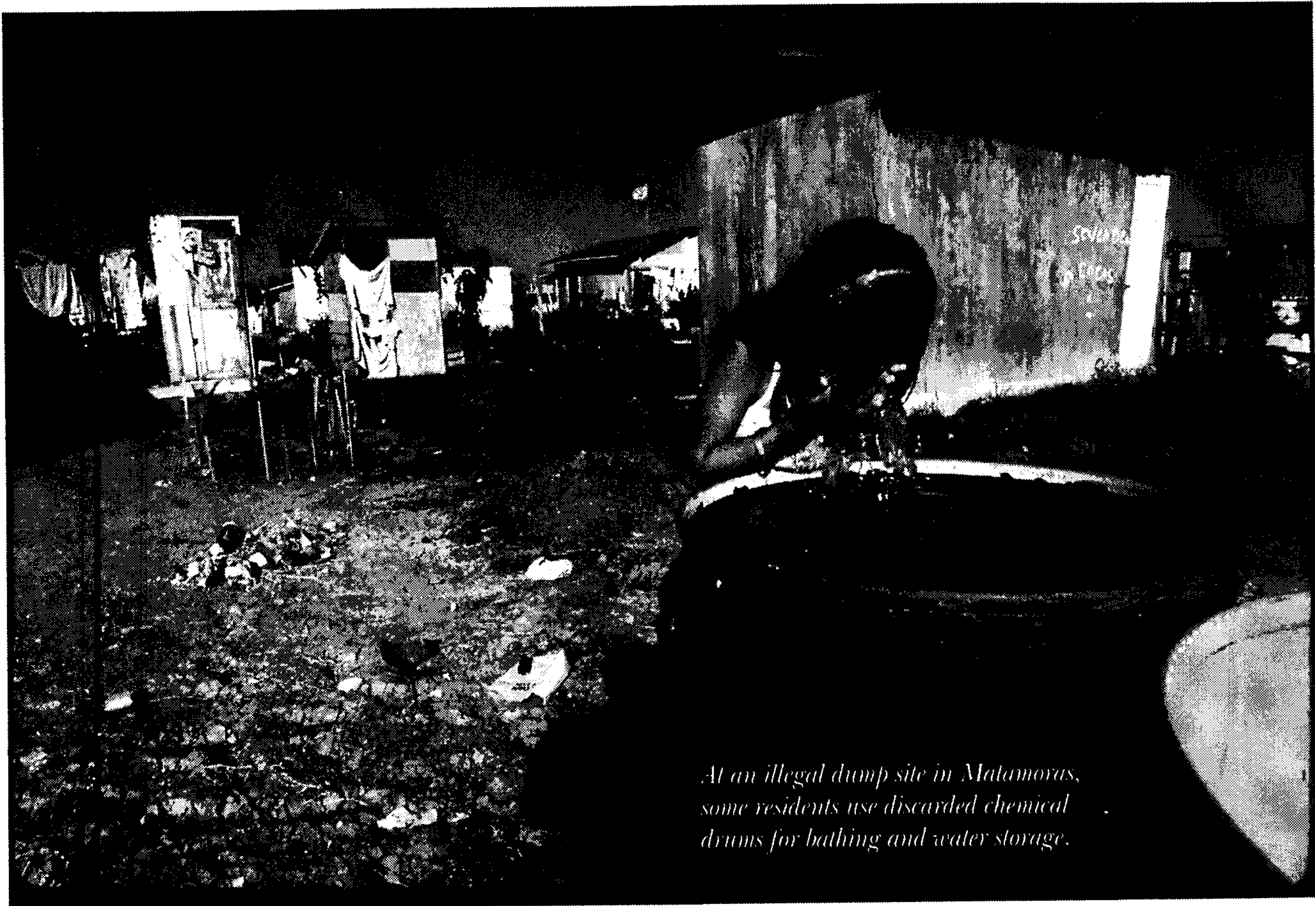

At an illegal dump site in Matamoros, some residents use discarded chemical drums for bathing and water storage.

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constantly afflicted with fevers and eye conditions.

U.S. companies have been feeding off this region since 1965, when the U.S.-Mexico Border Industrialization Program established a limited free-trade zone to discourage immigration to the U.S. by creating jobs for Mexicans (also one of NAFTA's most trumpeted selling points). In the last three decades, some 2,000 U.S. factories set up shop here, providing half a million Mexican jobs. Thus, part of the pro-NAFTA argument has been borne out: free trade, by opening up Mexican markets to U.S. goods and encouraging U.S. investment in Mexico, stimulates economic growth and creates jobs. That Mexico has seen the rise of 11 new billionaires in the last two years has also bolstered the case of NAFTA's proponents.

But for many of Mexico's poor, the last 29 years of U.S. investment in their country has not meant rising wealth; *maquiladora* wages have dropped by half over the last decade. Mexico's elite may be getting richer but the *maquiladora* worker still can't feed and shelter her family. And among most of the workers and their advocates in Mexico's border communities, there is little faith that NAFTA will either raise wages or improve working and living conditions, as its supporters have promised. "Labor conditions are getting worse, and we'll see if NAFTA just continues the trend," says Patricia Mercado, of Mexico's Mujeres en Acción Sindical (Women in Labor Action).

In Tijuana, there was a fateful synchronicity to the fact that just as the NAFTA debate reached the general public in the U.S., life in this border city took a drastic turn. Exactly one year ago, in January 1993, Tijuana endured three weeks of heavy rains, floods, and mud slides; hundreds of residents died when workers' shanties washed off the *colonia* hillsides. *Maquiladora* operators fired another several hundred workers for refusing to brave the often fatal torrents—"soups of rocks" as people called them—to get to work. "With the floods people just lost faith," recalls Lucila Conde, a Tijuana native who now works out of San Diego as a cross-border labor organizer. The Mexican government failed to intervene when employees were fired or were refused pay as a result of lost work, Conde says. "People realized the companies don't care about us. The government doesn't care about us. The United States doesn't care about us."

During the floods Luz Elena Corona Calderón was earning $7 a day at Plásticos Bajacal, a factory owned by Carlisle Plastics, a Boston-based manufacturer of coat hangers and garbage bags. As she tells the story of what happened to her community, Corona punctuates every third fact with a habitual "*¿Crees?*"—"Can you believe it?"—a verbal tic revealing her growing indignation. Corona's rage stems in part from a series of events that unfolded a few months before the floods, starting when she witnessed an on-the-job accident in which a drill bit split, spitting a piece of hot metal into a coworker's eye. The man lost his eye; Plásticos refused to cover the portion of disability that Mexican social security laws demand of an employer. No one in Carlisle management would comment for this story.

The same week the floods began, Corona and 11

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coworkers had planned a meeting to discuss forming a union that would respond to the accident and other abuses—among them, the company's failure to provide adequate safety equipment despite employees' close contact with carcinogens and lung irritants such as benzene and formaldehyde. The workers were among a small but growing number who have shunned Mexico's ineffective government-affiliated unions and tried, often unsuccessfully, to demand accountability of U.S. companies and the Mexican government by organizing independently.

In the United States, the six plants owned by Carlisle Plastics can be counted among the self-styled "progressive" factories of the 1990s. The company's majority owner, William Binnie, professes an entrepreneurial appreciation of the "green" or ecology-minded market. Carlisle's "environmentally sensitive" trash bags now sell under in-house labels in stores from Thriftys to Kmart. In a laudatory profile in *Forbes* last year, Binnie brought a reporter into the workers' rest room at a Texas factory. There, he boasted: "The first thing I do whenever I visit a plant is use the hourly workers' bathroom so I can see how the company's treating them."

But observers can't get close to Carlisle's Tijuana factory, a workplace that has proven especially hostile to women. When 37-year-old Corona discovered she was pregnant for the fifth time, she asked to transfer out of the plant's operation assembly division, where she had to lift heavy boxes. In a region where many factories re-

"The point of NAFTA is to keep Mexico poor, because that's the advantage for U.S. companies."

quire quarterly pregnancy tests and fire those who test positive to avoid paying state-mandated maternity leave, she knew she had jeopardized her job. "They told me I was lazy and was lying to get easier work," Corona recalls. So she stayed put.

While working her habitual graveyard shift a few weeks later, Corona felt cramps and knew that she had begun to bleed. At 3:30 A.M., buckling with pain, she asked permission to go to the bathroom, but her supervisor turned her down. (The company workers' manual lists "undue" visits to the bathroom as cause for suspension.) Corona asked to switch positions to one where she could sit but was refused again. Finally, she pleaded to be taken to a hospital but was told that the company had no way to transport her and that there was no one to replace her. When Corona's shift's ended five hours later, her husband took her in a taxi to a nearby hospital, where what she already knew was confirmed: she'd miscarried.

Plásticos denied Corona disability payments and docked her wages for time off after the miscarriage. Soon the company fired her and the coworkers with whom she had organized the union. "I've been angry, desperate about my future. But it's made me feel more powerful, too. I tell my daughters, 'You're never going to set foot in a *maquila*,'" says Corona, who is now on staff at a local labor advocacy organization. "All the *maquiladoras* are a deception. They have me on a blacklist and I can't find work in another factory. *¿Crees?* It doesn't matter. I'd never go back anyway."

In the Tijuana neighborhood of Chilpancingo, many are just as bitter. This community has seen the births of six anencephalic infants since 1991. "Nobody has to tell us about the problems," notes resident Graciela Villalvazo García, who attributes her one-year-old son's hydrocephalus (a birth defect that causes brain atrophy) to the chemical streams near her house. "Newcomers don't know the problems, and you see them bathing in the canal," she says. "The contamination is everywhere. The waters run all the way to San Diego. Where am I to live? The contamination may go all the way to the moon."

Villalvazo touches on the key to the entire free trade debate. Contamination is global—as are the ramifications of declining wages and health and safety on the border. Some residents of San Diego, however, have responded to encroaching toxic ocean pollution and raw sewage by suggesting, as County Supervisor Brian Bilbray did, that a barge should come and push it back over the border.

Bilbray's barge solution reflects the vacuum of sincere interest in the border communities that characterized last year's debate over NAFTA. Such indifference resulted in an agreement that, rather than redressing the human cost of free trade, does little more than codify the status quo. In essence, the Bush/Clinton NAFTA is a missed opportunity; a good NAFTA could have improved wages, environmental standards, and labor protections, using the European Economic Community's model of slow economic integration of rich and poor countries. Instead, most of NAFTA's 2,000 pages, originally drafted in secret by the Bush administration and hundreds of U.S. corporate leaders, merely addresses the interests of big business. Ten of the worst U.S. corporate polluters in Mexico were among the heads of NAFTA's best endowed lobby.

As a result, Clinton's labor and environmental side agreements failed to sway most of NAFTA's grassroots opposition. The agreements call for trinational panels to consider environmental and labor infractions, but they offer no real enforcement mechanisms and don't address

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Former factory worker Luz Elena Corona Calderón vows to keep her daughters out of the "maquiladoras."

RAFAEL WINER

key issues—such as the right to strike. "The point of NAFTA is to keep Mexico poor, because that's where the advantages are for U.S. companies," says Thea Lee of the Washington, D.C.-based Economic Policy Institute, a leading NAFTA critic. "They [NAFTA's corporate sponsors] make a lot of money paying people two dollars an hour to dispose of toxic waste. When they talk to business people they're honest. They want to go where there are low wages and where there are no overzealous environmental inspectors. To the public they say, 'We'll have new markets and we'll get rich.'"

Organized labor, NAFTA's fiercest U.S. opponent, feared the kind of job loss that hit Canadians in the wake of that country's 1989 free trade agreement with the U.S. In the pact's first year, 152,000 manufacturing jobs were lost to the U.S., where wages are lower; 51 percent of the lost jobs came from industries that employ mostly women. As figures gathered by Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur (D.-Ohio) illustrate, women also dominate the U.S. industries most likely to lose jobs to Mexico. The apparel and textile workforce, perhaps the most often cited potential casualty of NAFTA, is 95 percent female.

So it is surprising that the mainstream women's movement in the U.S. has had little to say about trade relations with Mexico. The reality is that women—who fill most of the world's low-pay, low-skill jobs—are most often exploited as a result of unchecked global economic integration. In all three North American countries, women also dominate the organizations pushing for improved work conditions and job protection, yet the National Organization for Women never offered any comment on last year's crucial NAFTA vote.

NAFTA has, however, prodded parts of the U.S. women's, labor, and environmental movements toward a new commitment to organizing across borders. While trade issues may have once intimidated all but those with calculators in their pockets, "with NAFTA, people seem to have broken through," says Karen Hansen-Kuhn, an analyst with Development GAP, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that researches global economic integration. Development GAP is participating in the trinational Alliance for Responsible Trade, which hopes to keep the heat on all three governments to raise wages, improve living standards, and provide real labor protections as NAFTA goes into effect. On a smaller scale, U.S. labor groups joined a picket line at the Boston headquarters of Carlisle Plastics to demand better conditions at the Plásticos plant in Tijuana. Such coalition efforts repudiate the chilling cynicism offered by the editors of the *New Republic* in their argument for NAFTA last winter: "For Mexicans," they editorialized, "the one thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited."

Economic integration, according to Hansen-Kuhn and others, doesn't have to mean exploitation. "As a result of trinational work, people are seeing that we have common interests. We don't have to be pitted against each other." Patricia Mercado of Mujeres en Acción Sindical agrees: "This is one of the most positive things about the pact: finally we're getting to know each other." Ms.

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