Abstract

This paper focuses on the significance of gender in the survival and development of the "19th of September" Garment Workers Union in Mexico City, an independent union formed in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquakes with an all-women leadership and a rank and file that is 95 percent female. Drawing from 67 in-depth interviews with garment workers and labor organizers, the paper explores the Union's program of action, its projects, and its solidaristic ties with other unions and women's groups. The analysis suggests that although the Union draws great strength from its identity as a women's union, this strength has been difficult to translate into union-related gains such as new work contracts and improved working conditions. Gender is a powerful symbol and substantive factor in collective organization and political mobilization of working women who share the problems of the double work day and marginalization in low-paying, low-status jobs.

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Working Women and the "19th of September" Mexican Garment Workers Union: The Significance of Gender

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WORKING WOMEN AND THE "19TH OF SEPTEMBER" MEXICAN GARMENT WORKERS UNION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER

The two earthquakes that shook Mexico City in September, 1985, devastated the central garment district known as San Antonio Abad and left an estimated 800 garment workers dead and 40,000 unemployed; 400 shops were destroyed as well. In the midst of this tragedy, 5,000 garment workers were able to organize themselves, first as damnificadas or earthquake victims, then as women workers. One month after the earthquake, two independently organized garment worker groups united and marched to the President's house where they presented a list of demands to President de la Madrid. Included in the list was a demand that the Department of Labor grant their organization immediate recognition as an industry-wide national independent union.

The President spoke briefly with the marchers and appointed Farell-Cubillas, the Secretary of Labor, as head of a government commission whose charge was to "resolve the problems of the garment workers."[1] The garment workers and their advisors quickly drew up a constitution, union statutes, and a membership list the following day, and on October 20th, exactly one month after the second earthquake, the "19th of September" National Garment Workers Union obtained the official recognition that it sought. It is the first industry-wide union in the history of the Mexican garment industry, the first independent national union to be registered in the last 13 years in Mexico, and the only trade union that is led entirely by women.

Among the more salient characteristics of the "19th of September" Union is the fact that it is truly a women's union. It has a membership that includes 95 percent women, an all-women executive committee, and a core group of 12 female advisors. The union's distinct feminist character is reflected in its Plan of Action, in the programs the union has pursued, and through solidaristic ties with other women's groups. The "19th of September" Union, however, is more than a labor organization with peculiar organizational and political characteristics. It is also a women's organization that in both substantive and symbolic ways transcends the conventional unionist realm of politics.

This paper focuses on the significance of gender in the survival and development of the garment workers union. The gender analysis raises some fundamental questions about union organizing among women workers and considers gender as an analytical concept and a basis for collective identity. The first half of the paper examines the more implicit gender-based issues of unionization in the garment industry which, like other industries that have traditionally drawn from a female labor pool, provides an operational context that highlights the sexual division of labor and the political, social, and ideological consequences of gender hierarchies. The second half considers the more explicit gender-related aspects of the union's development such as its solidaristic ties with other women's groups, its formal and informal linkages to feminist advisors and feminist organizations, and its gender-based demands and programs. Here the independent, national industry-wide union is presented as an experiment in the unionization of women and formulation of women's labor demands. The case suggests that the union draws great strength from its identity as a women's union and a symbol of struggle for working women, but that this strength has been difficult to translate into gains such as title to new collective work contracts or improvements in working and living conditions for unionized workers.

This paper is based on a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with garment workers, labor organizers, union advisors/supporters, factory managers, and labor authorities. Out of a total of 67 interviews, 21 are with rank and file garment workers; 15 are with garment workers on the Union's national executive committee; 12 are with union advisors and supporters; 14 are with researchers; 3 are with labor authorities; and 2 are with factory managers. In addition to the interviews, the field research included extensive participant observation at the "19th of September" Garment Workers Union in Mexico City during 1986 and 1987, and a review of written materials, including union documents, articles in newspapers and journals, and related academic studies.

Recent research on collective organization in Latin America has documented women's active role in neighborhood associations, social movements, political parties, and unions, but many questions remain unanswered about the significance of gender in these diverse forms of women's political and social activism (Caldeira 1987; Galvez and Todar 1987; Ardaya Salinas 1987; Larguia and Dumoulin 1987). In popular neighborhood associations, women constitute 85 percent of the active membership and in issue-oriented movements such as the Movimiento Contra la Carestia de la Vida, the vast majority of the participants are female. Although there is wide variation in types of women's groups, a common thread weaves in and out of the different forms of women's collective organization. This commonality among activist women, whether they are poor women joined in neighborhood associations, working women in unions, or middle class women in feminist organizations, involves women's roles which link them to concerns for everyday life (lo cotidiano) in the home, the family, and the community. Research on women and gender revolves around the theme or variations of the theme of the public vs. the private realm; of domestic work in relation to paid labor; of reproduction, consumption, and distribution in relation to production for the market. As researchers begin to move beyond the study of women's work to include the study of women's political and social activism, these same themes are approached only from different angles. Researchers are finding that collective organization has, in some cases, engendered a new sense of identity and citizenship among women. Through collective organization, women are questioning the separation of politics from everyday life and are re-evaluating the political significance and potential of their roles as housekeepers, workers, and community members.

In studying popular neighborhood associations, researchers have found that collective organization among poor women must be understood within the context of a household strategy of survival. The women identify themselves as housewives and organize as such. Some studies have pointed out limitations of a family-based women's identity (Blondet 1987) but others have emphasized the potential for social changes through collective organization by housewives and community members. For example, through oral histories, activist women in poor neighborhoods surrounding Sao Paulo, Brazil, explain their participation in collective organizations based on their traditional roles as mother and housewife. Implicit in their words is a common theme of opening a public space in which a gender identity develops through the process of collective organization for better living conditions. Questioning the relations of politics to daily life, Caldeira (1987:115) writes,

> What's new about the recent social movements is that, as a way to do politics, they affect and modify daily life...Women's space is

redefined; the limits which characterize the public and the private are transformed, as is the masculine/feminine. And all this takes place in a fragmented manner within the context of daily life.

Instead of looking from the neighborhood associations outward, Caldeira looks inward for the transformative potential of women's collective organization. She asks how women's collective action affects the women themselves--their social relations, their gender identity, and their political activity. She concludes, "What is occurring in the social movements is a cultural transformation of a much bigger scale than we first thought and that we tried to express in the discussion of the 'new ways of doing politics'" (1987:119). Caldeira argues that collective action, instead of turning toward the State, has found a new space in the transformative potential of daily life.

In contrast to women in local community organizations, activist women in formal organizations, such as unions or political parties, are a decided minority. In these settings, gender issues are often subsumed under what is referred to in the literature as "class issues." But the scant research that addresses women's issues in formal organizations retains a thematic emphasis on domestic work and the public/private split.

In an analysis of women and unions in Chile, Gálvez and Todaro show that in terms of possibilities for unionization, women workers are at a great disadvantage. The main reason given is that Chilean women are twice as likely as Chilean men to work in the informal sector where chances of unionization are nil. Of the minority of women in the formal sector, many fill positions that cannot be unionized. For example, 22.5 percent of women in the formal sector work in the state bureaucracy, a sector that cannot collectively negotiate work contracts.

In their Chilean case study, a series of affirmations are drawn from interviews with female union members, union leaders, and employers in female-dominated sectors (telephone operators, garment workers, and bottlers). They include: 1) Specific problems of working women are rarely considered in the union setting and are not integrated into the union's agenda; 2) women's domestic role limits their participation in the union through both material limitations (time, schedule) and ideological obstacles (fear of participating in public, rejection of what is "political); 3) unions have not modified their organizing styles to promote or facilitate women's participation; and 4) within union work, there is a sexual division of labor (Gálvez and Todaro 1987:214).

In a case study of Bolivian women's collective organizations, Ardaya Salinas finds that political participation among women in the popular sector has been important and, at times, decisive in both party politics and unions in Bolivia. Looking at two cases, the Female Commands of the M.N.R. party, known as the Barzolas, and the Housewives Committees of the COB mining union, Ardaya Salinas describes both as part of a mass movement with extensive participation from women in the popular sectors. Both organizations are characterized as adjunct and subordinate to the larger party or union, because they lack a focus on women's liberation as part of the more global struggle within the specific context of party or union politics. Ardaya Salinas writes,

> Both the party and the union subordinated the women's struggle to the interests of their institutions' upper echelons; at no time did they address demands specific to women as an exploited and discriminated sector....In this respect, the party that called itself nationalist and revolutionary and the union that called itself class conscious, both fell under the influence of patriarchal capitalist society when it came to their conception of women's role in a society in which they are already active participants. (Ardaya Salinas 1987:341)

Ardaya comments on the "regrettable" absence of intellectuals from the women's liberation movement in both forms of organizations, and adds that neither the party nor the union encouraged any new internal political/ideological movements and that "women's activities were directed in an authoritarian and vertical fashion from the bureaucratic spheres of the organizations" (Ardaya Salinas 1987:342).

In a contrasting article, women's liberation is the focus of attention in an analysis that reviews strategies and gauges advances toward women's equality in post-revolutionary Cuba. After documenting the efforts of two mass women's organizations, the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) and the Women's Affairs Department of the Central Organization of Cuban Trade Unions, in promoting women's equality in the home and workplace, Larguia and Dumoulin write:

> Cuban women in the 1980's cannot see their emancipation as women as divorced from structural change in the revolutionary process. For them, private property and domestic slavery are practically synonymous--a part of a hated past. For them, women's liberation and social revolution mean one and the same thing. (Larguia and Dumoulin 1987:340)

As we can see from this limited review of research on women's collective organization in Latin America, more questions have been raised than answered. In general terms, the focus on women and gender raises questions about the relations of the private realm to the public, and further, the relation of the political (lo político) to the domestic sphere (lo cotindiano). Women's liberation cannot be reduced to a union issue, a community issue, or a demand in a party platform. Women's liberation implies a fundamental restructuring of not only women's work and political participation but also of authoritarian and patriarchal structures and ideologies which separate and differentially value women's roles and men's roles. Housewives, workers, and community members in the popular women's movement are organizing to better their families' living conditions, and as they do so, they establish new forms of social relations among both women and men in civil society. In defining the "19th of September" Union as a women's organization as well as a trade union, the garment workers have put themsleves at the forefront of the popular women's movement by formulating a political agenda based on concerns as both workers and women.

WOMEN, GARMENT WORKERS, AND UNION ORGANIZING

The general economic crisis, together with a policy of industrial reconversion and labor control through state-organized unions, has created

overwhelming constraints for unionization among Mexican garment workers. Production in this sector has moved increasingly into the "informal" sector and the underground economy. In 1986, an estimated 50 to 80 percent of garments made in Mexico were produced in the underground economy where there is no enforcement of safety or health regulations and no opportunity for union affiliation.[2] Many studies have documented the concentration of female labor in the underground economy and the informal sectors (Benería and Roldan 1986; Lopez-Garza 1985; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983). Studies estimated that 45 percent of the women employed in Mexican cities work as domestic servants and 54 percent of the street vendors are women (MAS 1987:4). Other activities of the informal sector and the underground economy that employ a large number of women include industrial home work, child care, personal services, and food processing.

In the formal industrial sector, the garment industry is the second largest employer of women; the food processing industry is the largest.[3] Other industries in which women are concentrated include the shoe, electronic, chemical, and tobacco industries--all of which "play a secondary role in the national economy...and have the worst working conditions, with benefits and salaries inferior to those dictated by the Federal Labor Law, and either have no unions or have 'charro' unions" (CPIM 1987a:96). Of the small minority of garment workers that are unionized, all but approximately 2,600 belong to charro or corrupt unions affiliated with the CTM, the CROC, and the CROM, or other small PRI-affiliated centrals[4] (see the appendix for an explanation of the acronyms). The union leaders hold protective contract with the employers and formal labor conflicts are rare; often the workers are unaware that they belong to a union.[5]

Mexican women have been pulled into wage labor in both the formal and informal sectors, and although their work is quite diverse, some basic characteristics are common to most working women's situations: (1) Women have been relegated to certain types of work which have been described as extensions of domestic work realized in the public sphere and this work has, in turn, been identified as "women's work" (Benería and Roldán 1986); (2) women work in low-paying, low-status jobs where there are limited opportunities for upward mobility; (3) female workers are often subject to male authority in the work place (e.g., male supervisors, male labor officials) and are vulnerable to sexual harassment; and (4) women's paid work is concentrated in areas of the economy that are difficult to organize (e.g., the informal sector, the garment industry). These situations operating in the workplace describe a gender hierarchy that discriminates against women workers.

For garment workers, the gender hierarchy has resulted in a sexual division of labor in the industry where 82 percent of the managers and the supervisors are male, 95 percent of the seamstresses are female, and the predominantly female positions (e.g., seamstress, finisher) are "unskilled," low-paying positions while the higher-paying "skilled" positions (e.g., cutter, presser) are male-dominated. In the smaller shops that are part of the informal economy, the pay is low, there are no benefits, and working conditions including employer-employee relations are unregulated. In this setting, an even higher proportion of the seamstresses (97%) are women (Alonso 1987). In both settings, sexual harassment is a problem; all of the garment workers interviewed had either been a victim of sexual harassment or had witnessed harassment of their co-workers.

Outside of the work place, women workers retain their reproductive responsibilities as mothers, housekeepers, wives, nurturers, and often, heads of household--responsibilities that add hours of work to a work day. Among garment workers, an estimated 68 percent are single heads of household--a figure that contradicts the ideology often espoused by employers and policymakers that women's wages are secondary (Guzmán 1984:90). The problem of the "double day" of work is rooted in the multiple economic roles of producer, reproducer, and consumer embodied in the woman worker. On a daily basis, after eight or more hours of paid labor, most working women go home to their second shift of domestic work: raising children, caring for the sick, feeding the family, and so on. The problem of the double day has been aggravated by inflated prices and cutbacks in public services during the crisis of the 1980s which has made the tasks of maintaining family and home more burdensome. Within this context defined by constraints and obstacles, garment workers and their feminist supporters accepted the challenge to build an independent union from the ruins of the earthquake.

SOLIDARISTIC TIES BETWEEN THE UNION AND OTHER WOMEN'S GROUPS

Solidaristic ties between women's groups and garment workers go back at least to the 1970s if not beyond. Since the earthquake, these ties have been particularly important to the development of the union's political program as a working women's organization. Advisory and support groups from women's sectors of political parties, autonomous feminist groups, women's church groups, a feminist service organization, and feminist labor organizers have promoted women-centered ideological and substantive content in the Union's demands, projects, and programs. These groups have, in turn, been transformed by the experience of the garment workers. This section follows the development of solidaristic ties and traces the interaction among feminists, garment workers, and popular women's groups through the years preceeding the earthquake and up to the present.

The characterization of the union as "born from the ruins" downplays a history of determined organization and mobilization among garment workers. As early as 1918, garment workers were demanding an independent union along with safer and better working conditions, higher pay, and a working environment free of sexual harassment.[6] Organizing continued intermittently throughout the 20th century until the early 1980s, when conflicts involved over half of the members of the present national executive committee of the union as well as feminist activists from political parties and autonomous feminist groups.[7] With a workforce that is estimated to be 85 percent female, this sector naturally drew the attention of feminist activists.[8] Their feminist agenda called for the promotion of collective organization among workers in the garment industry and in other sectors that traditionally employ women, such as food processing or assembly work (maquiladoras). Working in the capacity of legal and/or political advisors, the feminist organizers taught classes on the Federal Labor Law and union rights, organized meetings, provided support during the conflicts, provided legal advise, produced and distributed written information and propaganda, and drew the attention of the media to these isolated conflicts. One such activist, a labor lawyer and member of the PSUM (Partido Socialista Unificado de México), explained her early involvement:

> I worked for 10 years in the Front for Independent Unionism organizing garment workers. In isolated struggles we organized a number of small groups that didn't achieve the status of a union but managed to negotiate agreements with factory owners--agreements that were tenative; that we were never able to enforce....Now we have the national union and that, in itself, is a great advance. (Marín 1987:3)

Feminist groups including the women's sector of PRT, PMT, PSUM, the CIDHAL, CPIM, and a number of autonomous groups outside of the political parties, have documented organizational work with garment workers during the 1970s and early 1980s.[9] In isolated instances, regional independent unions were registered but none had staying power; most factories would either close or fire the organized workers and simply change their name to avoid the problem of an independently organized work force.

Garment workers also developed solidaristic ties with women organized in the popular urban movements that have taken shape in Mexican cities. These consumer-based and territorially-based grassroots organizations have proven to be the most viable form of popular women's organization during the crisis years. With the economic collapse of 1982, these popular urban movements began to spring up in response to the worsening conditions of life in the crowded cities. Representatives from 60 such organizations founded the National Coordinating Body of Popular Urban Movements, the CONAMUP (Coordinadora Nacional de Movimientos Urbanos Populares) in 1981.[10] Eighty percent of the movement's participants are women organized in their neighborhoods around issues concerning the basic needs of home and family such as services (water, gas, transportation), price controls for basic foods, and rent control. Within the CONAMUP, a women's organization called the "Women of CONAMUP" was formed in 1982. This is a broad-based popular women's organization that addresses the specific needs and situations of poor women in the urban setting. They organize yearly regional and national conferences and conduct on-going meetings and projects at the regional level and within the individual member groups of the CONAMUP. Following the earthquakes, the CONAMUP and other popular urban movements experienced renewed growth and development when rescue and reconstruction workers extended their efforts through continued work in the organizations of the CONAMUP.

The "Women of CONAMUP" added a popular component to the women's movement in Mexico and paved the way for a more diverse class composition within a feminist movement that had once been dominated by upper and middle-class women. The "women of CONAMUP" also set an important precedent for the garment workers by providing an example of a popular, democratic organization at the regional and national levels, run by women with little or no formal education and organizing experience. The garment workers union and the "Women of CONAMUP" collaborated in many projects and protests following the earthquakes and still maintain close ties. For example, the CONAMUP women hold their regional meetings at the union locale of the "19th of September" Union. They regularly make use of the union's facilities (e.g., the meeting hall, the ditto machine, the sound system), participate in many joint activities, and generally maintain a relationship of solidarity and cooperation with the "19th of September" Union. The two organizations share a number of common characteristics: high participation rates among women; female leadership; formal independence from government agencies, active political parties, and

"official" unions; grassroots participation; and popular styles and strategies of "doing politics" (e.g., marches, sit-ins, petitions, flyers). These characteristics identify the "19th of September" Union as part of the popular women's movement.

Feminist groups have maintained solidaristic ties with the "19th of September" Union, and in the aftermath of the earthquake, sympathetic women's groups were diverse and plentiful. One of the first groups to approach the garment workers was the Marxist-Leninist Feminist Lesbian Seminar (SMLFL). This group organized a donation-and-distribution center for the affected garment workers and collaborated in every aspect of the initial collective actions in the garment district. Other groups to respond in the first weeks following the earthquake included CIDHAL, GAMU, CEM, CPIM, lawyers from UAM, women's groups from local churches and neighborhood groups, and the women's sector of the PRT and the PMT.[11] On October 12, 1985, an umbrella group called the Feminist Committee for Solidarity with the Garment Workers was formed. This committee took over the donation/distribution center, and between October 13 and November 2, 1985, distributed 105 packages of food and canvas tents in the garment workers encampment.[12] Feminist groups engaged in the practical task of collecting and distributing food, blankets, and basic neccesities immediately following the earthquake. Soon after, they took on advisory roles, offering political and legal advice, financial and moral support, media access, and educational services to the groups that eventually united to become the "19th of September" Union.

Once the Union was registered and the struggle to gain severance pay (indemnización) for the damnificadas gave way to the slower and more trying process of gaining title to new collective contracts, many of the feminist advisory groups withdrew into the background. By mid-1986, there were six women's groups that constituted the core of the feminist support and advisory groups. These groups worked with particular factories and with specific 'constituencies' within the union toward the goals of securing new collective work contracts, enforcing existing contracts, and developing the educational and service-oriented programs and projects sponsored by the union. The Collective for the Integral Promotion of Women, CPIM, is the support group that has maintained the most constant presence at the union and in affiliated factories. Two full-time activists from the CPIM work and practically live at the Union. They have taken responsibility for on-going education, training, and advising in eight factories that hold contracts with the Union, and up to eight additional factories that are in the process of becoming unionized or are in conflict. The group was organized over five years ago by a small group of women militants of leftist political organizations and parties. One of the group's members explained:

> We had all been involved in grassroots organizational work (trabajo de masas) with workers and colonos when we realized that what we were doing was only part of our work--work that didn't confront our condition as women. We were accustomed to political work based on a fundamentally economistic line in which gender was absent. Then, we recognized the importance of feminism and of the need for women's liberation. ...We found it hard to pursue that part of our struggle from within the existing organizations of the Left so we proposed forming an autonomous organization as women. (CPIM 1987b:2)

The CPIM has a history of support work with garment workers in and around Mexico City and has expanded its work to the border area among the workers in the in-bond plants (maquiladoras). The group has been a continuous source of support and service for the Union and has incorporated a number of garment workers into their ranks.

The CPIM collaborates with another group that also maintains a presence at the Union, the MRP (Movimiento Revolucionario del Pueblo). The MRP was one of the small leftist parties that merged, in 1987, with the coalition of Left Parties, the PMS (Partico Mexicano Socialista). The MRP's main link to the union is through the participation of their labor lawyer who drafts about half of the Union's legal documents. She is also involved in union education and training, political and legal advice, and union negotiations. Two additional MRP participants are young students that offer mainly logistical support. The MRP concentrates its organizing efforts on four factories and has others "in process."

The remaining five factories that hold collective work contracts with the Union are advised and supported by the MAS (Mujeres en Acción Sindical) and CIDHAL (Comunicación, Intercambio, y Desarrollo Humano en América Latina). CIDHAL has on-going organizational and service work with garment workers, domestic workers, food processors, and colonas (poor women in neighborhood organizations). CIDHAL dedicates the work of four full-time employees who concentrate their efforts on union education programs, feminist consciousness-raising and education, networking with other feminist groups, and services for union members.

There is much overlap in the work of CIDHAL and Women in Union Action (MAS); in fact, CIDHAL is part of MAS. MAS is a group that was founded in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquakes by feminists from PRT, the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers Party; GAMU, a women's organization of university workers; CIDHAL; and the Women's Studies Center, CEN, at the National University, UNAM. MAS is a support group of about 20 that work with garment workers and with women in the sevice sector. They began their work in the garment worker's encampment of the Centro after the earthquake and later joined forces with the organized garment workers of San Antonio Abad to make one national union. They dedicated their early support efforts to the struggle for severance pay and indemnification payments for the earthquake victims. Through these efforts, they developed innovative strategies such as sit-ins at the private home of employers that refused to pay, sit-ins at the factories, direct negotiations with employers, and negotiations through the Secretary of Labor. Their pressure tactics eventually proved effective; by March, 1986, 90 percent of the damnificadas had received their indemnification payments.

The MAS/CIDHAL advisors oversaw the Union's first successful recount election, an election in which factory workers vote for one of two or more contending unions. On December 19, 1985, the "19th of September" won its first recount over a state-organized union in "Red Heart Sports Clothes," a factory that employed 120 workers. Just five days later, 23 workers were fired and deductions were taken from the checks of those workers that voted for the "19th of September" Union, and a whole new conflict began. Presently, the CIDHAL/MAS advisors oversee the organizing work in five factories that had collective contracts with the Union and in an additional six factories in the process of unionizing or in conflict.

Two additional women's groups collaborate with the Union on specific projects and programs. The Group for Popular Education for Women, GEM, has co-published with the Union five educational pamphlets and two audiovisuals that deal with problems in and out of the workplace that are common to garment workers. The pamphlets are made available at no charge to all garment workers and are presented in a comic book format with straightforward language that takes the mystery out of explanations of the Federal Labor Law and basic rights of labor. The "Women for Dialogue" is a women's church group that has collaborated in various projects and publications with the Union; it has also facilitated the distribution of church funding and earthquake relief funds to garment worker's projects generally, and specifically, to Union-sponsored projects such as the Union's childcare center and the Training Workshop for Women Over Forty.

More informal solidaristic ties between the Union and organized sectors of women have also been established. For example, the Union locale has been used by metro ticket takers, nurses, telephone operators, and teachers for organizational work such as meetings or printing needs. Colonas, women's sectors of peasant organizations, and feminist groups have also gathered at the Union locale. The Union's broad network of solidaristic ties among women's groups extends beyond the Mexican border to include groups and agencies in Holland, the Philippines, the United States, Japan, West Germany, Austria, Central America, and South America. Solidaristic ties can mean anything from regular correspondence to international funding. For example, the U.S. Universalist and Unitarian Service Committee allocated $20,000 from its Women's Project Fund for the Union's childcare center. In another instance, a Dutch funding agency bought the Union a building and offered an operating budget for a period of two years for the Union's Training Workshop for Women over Forty. Feminist groups from both Austria and West Germany have also established solidarity relationships with the Union that include the allocation of funds for various union projects and programs.

The interaction effect between the women's groups and unionized working women is one that demands closer analysis. What kind of advisory and support roles were developed, and how have they been used to strengthen the union and/or the women's movement? How are issues of autonomy and democracy resolved in the advisory/support relationship? What kind of solidaristic ties have been developed and how have they been used to strengthen the union? To what extent are these ties based on a common identity as women? How does the interplay of class and gender affect ideology and political mobilization? The analysis suggests that solidaristic ties and advisory/support relationships between women's groups and the Union have set the Union apart from other labor organizations by broadening the basis for a collective identity among women workers. This class/gender-based identity is reflected in the demands, programs, and projects of the Union, as conveyed in one of the Union's most important political documents, its Plan of Action, and its efforts to put that plan into action.

THE UNION'S FEMINIST AGENDA

The Union's "Plan of Action" begins with a characterization of the labor movement and the problematic situation presented by (1) the economic crisis, (2) a government policy of labor control and repression, and (3) IMF policies

of industrial reconversion and administrative restructuring that have resulted in massive lay-offs and unemployment. The Plan emphasizes the need to build a broadly-based popular movement:

> The labor movement must open itself to not only defense of labor demands, but to the building of a popular power base. ...Our Union constitutes the first step; together with other women who have organized and struggled in the poor neighborhoods, in other unions, and in the countryside, we constitute a powerful working women's movement. (September 19th Union 1987:3)

The document follows with a plan of action that underscores a vision of fundamental change:

> We need to wage an economic battle as our fundamental issue, but just as importantly, we need to develop a political and ideological struggle. That is what we are doing as we make our union into a force that, together with other popular revolutionary organizations, fights for power and begins to construct not only new values and a new popular culture, but also, new forms of interpersonal relations that question and rebel against women's oppression. (September 19th Union 1987:3)

The document describes the Union as independent, combative, and democratic, with three challenges: union growth in terms of members and collective work contracts, development of the Union's internal democratic structure and practice, and development of class consciousness. The platform lists 54 separate demands for enforcement of the Federal Labor Law; better living and working conditions; and respect of worker's rights to political participation, free unionization, and working class solidarity. Of the demands, 10 explicitly mention women's rights or gender:

1. policies that fight discrimination against pregnant women such as testing for pregnancy before hiring, illegal firing of pregnant women, and conditions in work contracts that prohibit pregnancy
2. enforcement of maternity rights outlined in the Federal Labor Law
3. equal pay for equal work
4. equal opportunities for male and female workers
5. childcare centers
6. policies to combat sexual harassment and violence against women
7. public cafeterias, laundromats, and stores with controlled prices for basic foods to help alleviate the burden of domestic work and maintenance of the family
8. free and voluntary motherhood
9. freedom to construct and participate in a popular women's movement
10. freedom to create linkages with the feminist movement and other social movements

In line with these demands and resolutions, the Union has pursued a variety of programs and projects that address women's issues. One such project was the planning and co-sponsorship of the First National Conference

of Women Wage-Earners, held in Mexico City in July 1987. The two-day conference brought together over 400 women from 30 unions and organizations to participate in workshops and discussions on the theme Industrial Reconversion and Women Workers. In the workshops, first separated by sector, then by topic, the participants formulated responses to the government policy of reconversion, which works to incorporate large numbers of women into the paid workforce but offers jobs at minimum wage or less in poor working conditions. The main problem addressed by conference participants was the intensification of their work. They pointed out that policies of reconversion eliminated the "dead time" during the work day, added new tasks to their jobs, and speeded up production. Other issues discussed involved their dual roles as worker and mother/housekeeper and the lack of infrastructure to facilitate domestic work once they were incorporated into wage labor (e.g., childcare facilities, laundromats). In the final plenary session, the participants voted on resolutions and a plan of action to address problems they identified with the policy of reconversion. Among the long list of resolutions was a plan to form a permanent commission of representatives from all sectors to pursue the initiatives of the conference. The garment workers played a key role in organizing the conference and have remained active in the work that has followed.

The Union has consistently participated in regional and national conferences of the CONAMUP as well. In November 1987, twenty union members travelled to Zacatecas for the III Regional Women's conference of the CONAMUP. At this conference they discussed the need for women's equal participation in broad social movements and their specific oppression as women. This kind of exchange between the Union and the women of the popular urban movements is on-going; there is collaboration on projects and mutual participation in events such the March 8th International Women's Day march, national and regional conferences, as well as international forums such as the IV Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encounter.

The Union also sponsors internal programs that address women's needs. One of the most ambitious has been the construction and operation of a childcare center. The center, built in a remodeled building donated to the Union, opened in September 1987. It can take up to 90 children per day. Workers who use the center pay a token charge and the daily program includes meals and activities based on a philosophy of "critical thinking and learning through experience" (CENDAI 1987:2). For parents, the center offers seminars on nutrition, parenting, and child development. The center was built and operates with national and international funds that were donated from feminists and ecumenical organizations, but those funds do not cover the total operating costs. The Union has proposed that factories employing over 50 female workers contribute to the center's operating expenses, as mandated in the Federal Labor Law but, as of yet, no funds have been forthcoming.

The Union-sponsored education and training programs take many forms. The Workshop for Women over Forth is a training program in which unemployed garment workers can diversify their skills in order to better their chances for employment in an industry that practices age discrimination. This program has also received national and international funding from both feminist and ecumenical organizations. The adult education program offers primary and secondary education to adult workers in the evenings or on the weekends. Political or union education classes are given by the advisors on an on-going

basis with the members of the Executive Committee, and with small groups of the rank and file. In addition, the CIDHAL together with a constant stream of collaborators and visitors, offer classes on female sexuality, sex-education, interpersonal relations, and feminist consciousness raising. In September, 1987, the Union opened a small women's health clinic that offers free consultations with health workers and emphasizes prevention and natural cures.

The Union's programs and projects, as well as the solidaristic ties it has developed with women's groups, have helped to create an image of the "19th of September" Union as an experiment in women's unionization and a symbol of struggle for working women. This highly visible union is covered regularly in the national and international press. It obtains funding from a variety of sources and receives political/moral support from unions, women's groups, churches, political parties, and human rights groups. All this attention has added to the strength of the Union as a symbol and as a movement, but in its capacity as a labor organization, the Union remains in a defensive position. With only 2,000 working members and title to 17 collective work contracts, the "19th of September" Union is small in comparison to any other national industry-wide union in Mexico. The 17 contracts that have been won are tenative in the highly mobile garment industry, and conflicts are the norm as opposed to the exception.

GARMENT WORKERS AS PRODUCERS AND REPRODUCERS

Recognition of the importance and value of the roles of reproducer and consumer have long been feminist claims. In the case of the Garment Worker's Union, these claims are taking the shape of actual Union programs and demands that question the exclusive focus on production and worker's roles as producer. A number of the Union's demands and actual programs are based on the problem of the double day and the worker's reproducer and consumer roles. For example, the child care center, the call for controlled prices of basic foods, the demands of laundromats, public cafeterias, subsidized housing, and improved health and public services all seek to socialize domestic work and address basic consumer problems of the housekeeper. Demands addressing maternity and paternity rights of workers also seek to articulate reproductive roles with the role of worker (producer). These demands are not only addressed to employers; many of them are demands being made of the State.

As a women's organization, the Union has introduced issues of reproduction and consumption into the realm of labor politics and trade unionism. Their participation as a women's union in the labor movement has the potential for broadening the narrowly defined concept of labor demands and issues that focus almost exclusively on production. One of the characteristics that has set the Garment Workers Union apart is the fact that it is a union of women and as such, it is a union of workers that face the problems of the double day and the burden of multiple economic roles of producer, reproducer, and consumer. Their demands bring to the discussion the reproduction and consumption side of working class demands in the political economy.

GENDER AS A BASIS FOR COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Since the onset of the crisis, the economic roles of reproducer and consumer have become more problematic for the urban poor. These consumer-

based and home-based problems have been at the root of mass popular organization in the CONAMUP and in other neighborhood organizations. In their economic roles as reproducers and consumers, women have dominated these organizations and have established a new way of making demands based on these economic roles. For example, renters "unions" have made use of the renter strike tactic in which renters collectively refuse to pay increased rents. Neighborhood unions have also collectively refused to pay increased prices for services, including fees for piped water and electricity. These groups are organized as unions of housekeepers and consumers.

The "19th of September" Union has been a focal point in revealing common interests and the potential for collaboration between sectors of women. Garment workers have recognized a gender-based commonality with the women of the CONAMUP and have played out those common interests by collaborating as part of a popular women's movement. They have also based many of their actions and solidaristic ties on those common interests and have found great strength in those gender-based linkages. From the basis of common roles as reproducer and consumer, the popular women's movement has linked diverse sectors of women in a broad-based movement, just as the role of producer has linked diverse sectors of the working class in a labor movement. Women workers are at once, producers, reproducers, and consumers--roles that coincide with their socialization and identity as women--but all workers (male and female) have the potential to be reproducers (keepers of a household) and consumers and to organize around those economic roles.

The Garment Workers Union, is at once, a labor organization and a women's organization. The Union's uniquely feminine character has been both a strength and an obstacle in efforts to build a union and to better the working and living conditions for garment workers. The obstacles are rooted in a gender hierarchy that, on an occupational level, relegates women's paid labor to the lowest paid, most unorganizable sectors of production. Women are often relegated to this lower paid sector because their wages are viewed as supplemental to the household income--which is not true in the majority of garment worker households (Afshar 1985; Guzmán 1984). This ideology reinforces social relations of production which place women workers in a disadvantaged position in terms of prospects for unionization and improved working and living conditions.

Outside of the workplace, the gender hierarchy persists, taking many forms such as the devaluation of unpaid work in the home and the imposition of the double day of work for women workers. These constraints limit the availability of women workers for union activities and political work. In the case of the "19th of September" Union, circumstances have demanded creativity on the part of the union members and advisors who have developed innovative solutions to the problems that limit participation among women workers. For example, one of the union's highest priorities is to furnish a daily meal for organizers, strikers, and their families, a benefit that can free up hours in a woman's work day.

For the Garment Workers Union, the shared obstacles described above have provided an impetus to develop gender-based links among women workers and among lower-class women. In this way, a collective identity based largely on gender has been a strength. In the solidaristic ties between feminist and women's groups, in the Union programs and projects, and in the linkages that

have incorporated the garment workers into a broad-based popular women's movement, gender identity provides a framework for a political agenda and ideological commitments that signal a new direction for unionization in Mexico.

Notes

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1. Quoted by La Jornada, October 19, 1985 from an informal address by President Miguel de la Madrid to the participants in the garment workers march to Los Pinos, October 18, 1985.

2. These estimates come from two sources: the National Chamber of Garment Industrialists report that 50% of the production comes from the "informal" sector and the underground economy (CNIV 1986:9) and Professor José A. Alonso from the Sociology Department at UNAM reports that 80% comes from outside of the formal sector (Alonso 1983).

3. The National Chamber of Garment Industrialist reports two figures for the estimated number of garment workers employed in the industry. The first, derived from the records of the IMSS (Social Security) estimated that in 1985 there were 175,000. The Chamber itself has compiled a second figure, which is calculated from production reports and their own research, estimated that there are 546,000 garment workers, 85% of whom are women. (Figures taken from CNIV 1986, Table II.8.)

4. For an explanation of the term "charro" and its meaning in reference to Mexican labor unions, see Evelyn Stevens, 1974:103-106.

5. In an unpublished thesis from UNAM, Moises Guzmán reported that from a sample of 150 garment workers interviewed, 116 or 77% belonged to unions although the majority were unaware of their membership in the union. Of the 150, 62 or 41% had made a formal complaint to their union representative but 49 or 79% never got any type of response from their union or their employer (Guzmán 1984:93-94).

6. See Centro de Estudios Históricos del Movimiento Obrero, "Las Costureras." La mujer y el movimiento obrero mexicano en el siglo XIX. Antología de la prensa obrera. México 1975. Pp. 141-148. (articles from El Socialista and La Convención Radical Obrera); Dawn Keremetsis, "La doble jornada de las mujeres en Guadalajara: 1910-1940." Enucuentro; Estudios sobre Guadalajara. El Colegio de Jalisco, #4 (julio-sept.) 1984, pp. 41-61; Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Irapuato Mi Amor, Mexico D.F. 1984; Ma. Angela Valdivia, "La Larga Marcha de las Obreras de Medalla de Oro" in Siempre (March 21, 1973:2-4); La Causa del Pueblo (newsletter of the Left, Mexico City) 1973-75.

7. Six of the eleven members of the Executive Committee had been involved in strikes or other conflicts before their involvement with the "19th of September" Union. Of the six, four had taken a leadership role in those conflicts.

8. The National Chamber of Garment Industrialists reported this 85% figure in an internal document titled, "Diagnostico Económico de la Industria Nacional del Vestido." México, D.F.: CNIV, 1983:5.

9. The PRT is the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores; PMT--Partico Mexicano de los Trabajadores; PSUM--Partido Socialista Unificado Mexicano; CIDHAL--Comunicación, Intercambio y Desarrollo Humano en América Latina, is a privately funded feminst organization; CPIM--Colectivo de Promoción Integral de la Mujer--is a small feminist organization dedicated to union organizing among working women.

10. Here, the word "popular" refers to a broad collection of lower classes including the working classes, workers from the informal sector, "casual" workers, the un-and underemployed, "marginalized" classes and the poor.

11. CIDHAL is a privately-funded non-profit feminist organization that offers services--a center for documentation on women, and a political education program for women; GAMU is the Autonomous Univeristy Women's Group from UNAM; CEM is the Center for Women's Studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico--UNAM; CPIM is the Colectivo de Promoción Integral de la Mujer, a small, independent group of feminist activists dedicated to organizing working women and colonas; UAM is the Autonomous University of Mexico; PRT is the Revolutionary Worker's Party, a Troskyist party; and PMT is the Mexican Worker's Party.

12. These figures were taken from a report titled "Informe del Comité Feminista de Solidaridad con las Costureras," December, 1985.

Appendix

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CEM Centro de Estudios de la Mujer (Center for Women's Studies)--a center established in 1985 at UNAM

CENDAI Centro de Enseñanza y Desarrollo Infantil (Children's Development and Learning Center

CIDHAL Comunicación, Intercambio y Desarrollo Humano en América Latina (Communication, Interchange and Human Development in Latin America)--a privately-funded feminist service organization

CNIV Cámara Nacional de la Industria del Vestido (National Chamber of Garment Industrialists)

CONAMUP Coordinadora Nacional de Movimientos Urbanos Populares (National Coordinating Body for the Popular Urban Movements)--an umbrella organization founded in 1981 by 60 neighborhood associations in the popular urban movement

CPIM Colectivo de la Promoción Integral de la Mujer (Collective for the Integral Promotion of Women)--a small feminist organization dedicated to union organizing among working women

CROC Confederación Revolucionario de Obreros y Campesinos (Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants)--a PRI-affiliated labor federation formed in 1952

CROM Confederación Regional de Obreros Mexicanos (Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers)--a PRI-affilated labor federation founded in 1917 by Luis Morones

CTM Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (Confederation of Mexican Workers)--a labor federation formed in 1936 as one of the three pillars of the dominant party, the PRI (then PNR)

GAMU Grupo Autónomo de Mujeres Universitarias (Autonomous Group of University Women)--a feminist group at the National Autonomous University of Mexico which, in 1985, became CEM

IMF International Monetary Fund

MAS Mujeres en Acción Sindical (Women in Union Action)--a group founded in the aftermath of the earthquake by women of the PRT, GAMU, CIDHAL, and the CEM

MRP Movimiento Revolucionario del Pueblo (Revolutionary Movement of the People)

PMS Partido Mexicano Socialista (Mexican Socialist Party)--a coalition party that resulted from the merger of the PSUM, the PMT, the PPR (P. Patriótico Revolucionario), the MRP, and the UIC (Unidad de Izquierda Comunista)

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