

Open Letter to the United States Congress By Ligia Ivonne Jirón Gaitan May 5, 2005

Dear Congresspeople:

My name is Ligia Ivonne Jiron Gaitan. I am 32 years old, I am a Nicaraguan and I am the mother of 4 children. I have been working for 12 years of my life in the factories (maquilas) in the Free Trade Zone in Nicaragua. I am a nurse, but due to the fact that there are no jobs in the hospitals, I work in the maquilas, where we as Nicaraguans live in a sad reality, because the only alternative for work that we have found is in the maquilas.

Based on my experience in the maquilas, and my knowledge of what the negative effects of CAFTA would be in Central America as well as in the United States, I am against CAFTA. I am writing to ask you to vote NO to CAFTA.

The Free Trade Zones in Nicaragua are part of a strategy for development that is being implemented by the current government. They say that these companies are the alternative for confronting poverty in Nicaragua, but what they don't say is that this "alternative" has brought us more poverty, exploitation, and abuse, and does not contribute to the health care and education of Nicaraguans.

The maquila is synonymous with makeup – it is a false solution to our social and economic problems. The maquilas are abusing people with the false promise of offering them jobs, but these are jobs that are not dignified, that pay miserable salaries.

These factories come to Nicaragua to give jobs to Nicaraguans, but the products that we make in Nicaragua are then sold in other countries, especially in the United States. This doesn't leave any profits in Nicaragua or with the workers. The labor to produce clothing is very cheap - a basic monthly salary is about 1137 cordobas, or US\$70, which is equal to US\$2.30 a day. In the factories they obligate us to work until very late at night because the production has to continue, and we earn a miserable salary that doesn't even cover a third of the basic cost of living. In Nicaragua the basic cost of living is about US\$300 per month for a family, without including education, health care, taxes, and many other things that a home needs. The whole family must work to be able to survive.

I have very sad and negative memories due to the abuse that I have received in the Free Trade Zones. They have fired me from three different companies, just for exercising my right to organize myself in a union, a right that is declared in Article 82 of the Nicaraguan Constitution.

I have very sad memories of Yong Garment, where I was employed as a line supervisor, and where I was abused and they violated my rights as a Nicaraguan citizen. As a supervisor, I didn't like the abuse or the exploitation, the slavery that existed there, so I didn't obey the orders of the bosses when they asked me to abuse my equals. I didn't agree with this treatment, and I always looked for solutions for the workers but it was

very difficult. It was then that the Asian owners fired me for defending human rights. Now I work in a factory called Mil Colores, and we have a union there that is fighting so that they respect our human and labor rights. Unfortunately, this is one of the only factories that has a union that is defending the workers.

As Central Americans we are also very alarmed as we look at the cases of other countries like Mexico under NAFTA. It is evident that NAFTA has had a negative impact on the agricultural sector and on the environment. In Nicaragua we have already been negatively impacted in the area of agriculture, and the small farmers have been obligated to move to the city to work in the Free Trade Zones. Many immigrate, leaving behind their land, because of a lack of resources and work. CAFTA will mean that more small farmers will leave agriculture, and that more Free Trade Zones will come to Nicaragua. It would leave the small farmers and rural workers as the big losers, because they would be unprotected from the avalanche of cheap subsidized products that would enter from the United States.

It is sad and unfortunate that we have so much poverty in Nicaragua, and that so much exploitation exists – this can be seen at a glance. The economy should be at the service of people, but on the contrary, under CAFTA, there will not be any human development. Nor will there be access to education, because maquila workers don't even have time to go to school. A government that considers the maquila in economic terms is complicit with violations of human and labor rights that are committed in the maquila.

Today in Nicaragua we are not living with a war of bullets or bombs, but we are living with an economic war, a war of poverty, of hunger, of violations of our human and labor rights. Economic policies like CAFTA are killing us little by little, and this is almost worse for us as Nicaraguans.

When I left for my visit to your country, the United States, the maquila workers told me that when I got to the United States that I should climb a mountain and yell out no to CAFTA. It is because of them that I believe with conviction that, by unifying the people, it is possible to build a better America.

Thank you very much for the time that you have dedicated to reading this petition from the maquila workers and citizens of Nicaragua. I hope that this story helps you reflect on the sad reality that Central America is living through, and that after this reflection you will say NO to CAFTA.

Sincerely,

Ligia Ivonne Jirón Gaitan  
Maquila Worker  
Managua, Nicaragua