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Mexicans Who Came North Struggle as Jobs Head South

By Charlie LeDuff

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EL PASO - Ernestina Miranda left Mexico for the United States in 1979 in the trunk of a car.

She found a job sewing blue jeans in one of the dozens of clothing factories here. Work was steady, six days a week, 12 hours a day. She married and bought a trailer - without running water or electricity - on a plot of land. She was awarded citizenship in the late 1980's.

Now, those blue jeans jobs that brought Mrs. Miranda and thousands of others like her north have gone south, to Mexico.

"My American dream has turned into a nightmare," she said, over a glass of strawberry Kool-Aid in her listing trailer. Until recently, she had made a life on \$7.50 an hour. She has become a temporary worker in a plastics plant that used to be based in Michigan, earning minimum wage, no benefits, no security. Her husband, Miguel, is unemployed. The mortgage on the slapdash home is in peril.

"I worry about the future," she said, echoing the sentiment of blue-collar and increasingly of white-collar workers from Los Angeles to Detroit, people who find their jobs being shipped to countries where wages are a small fraction of theirs.

When VF Jeanswear, the maker of Wrangler and Lee jeans, announced in September that it was moving the last of its jeans production and more than 1,000 jobs to Mexico, it was the death of that industry in a town once known as Blue Jean Capital, U.S.A. Levi Strauss, Sun Apparel, Wrangler, Lee and Farah do not make jeans here anymore.

Proponents of increased international trade say that it ultimately creates more jobs in the United States and lowers prices for consumers here.

But in the 11 years since the North American Free Trade Agreement, known as NAFTA, was ratified, more than 17,000 garment manufacturing jobs have gone away, according to the Texas Workforce Commission, some to Mexico, some to China, and some to China by way of Mexico. Gone, too, is the good American life described by women like Mrs. Miranda, who has two teenage children. The \$7- to \$10-an-hour job, the health insurance, McDonald's double cheeseburgers, the \$200 apartments in the back of a day care center with a communal toilet, all gone.

In a strange post-industrial twist, most people who have lost their jobs in the garment industry here are first-generation Mexican women. They typically are illiterate and speak little English. They came to El Paso in the 60's, 70's and 80's, when the American factories moved down from the Northern states in search of cut-rate border labor.

With those factories having moved out of El Paso, these American citizens find they are members of the obsolescent class.

“I cannot move back to Mexico,” said Soledad Renteria, 51, who waded across the Rio Grande with her son on her back nearly two decades ago. “My life is here, and my family there is poor,” Ms. Renteria said. “My son wants to work, but I tell him he has to stay in school or he’ll end up like me, working as a janitor.”

In this election year, the presidential candidates debate the benefits of free trade mostly in the rust-belt swing states like Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio that have been battered by the loss of manufacturing jobs.

Yet NAFTA has affected the low-skilled, low-wage Latino workers near the border more than any other place. According to an analysis by the Economic Policy Institute, which focuses on labor issues, California lost 116,000 jobs from 1993 through 2002 because of NAFTA, many of them textile jobs. The federal government has certified that 7,800 workers in El Paso County were displaced by NAFTA over the past three years, more than double the number displaced in Cook County, Ill., which was second.

Immigrants elsewhere find their jobs being shipped back to their motherland. In September, the San Francisco Sewing Association closed its doors after 22 years. Once a provider of clothing for Gap, Esprit and Koret, the company lost the last of its contracts to China. Its 200 unionized employees, almost all Chinese and Mexican, were sent to the breadline.

“We lost the business because Mexico and China are a lot cheaper,” said Steven Lau, co-owner of the factory. “One day’s salary here is one month’s salary in China.”

Economists frequently describe how the departure of low-wage jobs to other places leads to the creation of yet better jobs in the United States, but not everyone displaced is a candidate for these proverbial new jobs. And with Texas safely in Republican hands and polls showing that California is poised once again to vote Democratic, presidential candidates are not rushing to assure these workers that help is on the way.

Raquel G. Ortiz, the daughter of immigrants who stole across the Rio Grande, speaks English and can write in both English and Spanish. But at 56, she is unattractive to new employers and scared, she said, after 21 years at VF Jeanswear.

“Who wants to hire a broken-down old lady?” she asked. “I’d like to be an embalmer. That seems nice and peaceful. But they don’t offer training classes for that.”

She recently wrote a letter addressed to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.:

“President Bush:

“I respectfully need your attention in the matter of my termination from VF Wrangler Jeans. The factory is leaving to Mexico for cheap labor. I have three complaints.

“1) The company wants to give me \$110 for each year service.

“2) No extension of health benefits.

“3) No implementation of promises in the NAFTA treaty to help American workers. I need training for a real job that exists here.”

Ms. Ortiz said: “There’s nothing left here, and I’m too old to go anywhere else. What am I supposed to do?”

The decision to move its manufacturing jobs to Mexico was a simple economic one, according to an executive with VF Jeanswear. “We are the last major apparel supplier to move manufacturing out of the United States,” said Sam Tucker, vice president for human resources. “If we could, we would stay. But in order to make products competitive, we don’t have much choice.”

As part of NAFTA, the federal government promised retraining programs for workers who lost their jobs to foreign competition, so that they could obtain a new job that pays at least 80 percent of what they earned previously.

The El Paso seamstresses are suing the federal Department of Labor, saying they got only remedial English classes and a course, in Spanish, to earn their graduate equivalency diploma. The Association of Border Workers, which filed the complaint, says that the workers should be in bilingual vocational schools or in on-the-job training.

“What do we need with a G.E.D.?” Ms. Ortiz asked. “They trained a bunch of people to be nurse’s aides, and then all of the sudden there were so many nurse’s aides and no jobs for nurse’s aides. It’s ridiculous.”

El Paso is a border town, and along with Juarez, Mexico, makes up one of the biggest international urban centers. But El Paso is one of the poorest urban centers in the country, where three of four households speak Spanish and almost a third of the population cannot speak English at all and where one-quarter of the work force has not completed the ninth grade. Unemployment hovers around 7.5 percent, and median household income is \$37,000, \$20,000 less than the national average, according to Census figures.

El Paso has cheap, willing labor. But Juarez has cheaper, more willing labor. And so the older American workers, particularly from the immigrant classes, are the throwaways in the new economic order, said Eliot Shapleigh, the state senator from El Paso County, who is trying to bring new industry to El Paso.

“The promise of America is that with drive, with heart, with quality education, anyone can succeed,” Mr. Shapleigh said. “We did not make good on our promise to Americans to keep that dream alive.”

There are still some jobs related to the garment industry in El Paso, at laundries and distribution centers. One garment plant is still hiring because it makes military uniforms, which are required by law to be made in the United States. Beyond that, the garment workers scratch out a living sewing hospital scrubs for minimum wage or doing temporary work with no benefits.

And Mrs. Miranda, the marginally educated woman now earning \$5.15 an hour - who is unable to speak English and who failed her G.E.D. exam by five points - summed up the economic situation for blue-collar workers as well as anyone.

“The problem in the United States is bad,” she said. “It is worse in Mexico.”