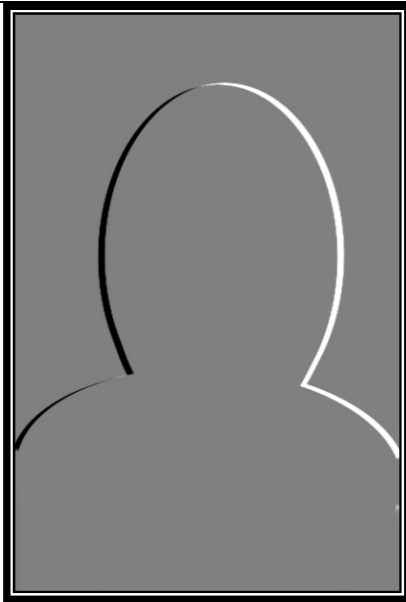


**Comparison between a conventional free trade zone worker and a worker-owner at the Fair Trade Zone**

The following interviews were conducted in order to compare and contrast the experiences, living conditions and quality of life of a worker in a conventional free trade zone in Nicaragua with those of a worker-owner in the Fair Trade Zone. We chose to interview two women who come from very similar situations – both lost their homes in Hurricane Mitch in 1998, both live in Nueva Vida in Ciudad Sandino, both had the same educational level, both have husbands living with them, both have four children of similar ages and both work in a sew shop. “Mayra,” who asked that her real name not be used, works in a Taiwanese-owned free trade zone near Ciudad Sandino. Zulema is a founding member and current worker-owner of the Fair Trade Zone, the first worker-owned free trade zone in the world, owned by poor Nicaraguan women.



**Interview with “Mayra,”  
worker in a conventional free trade zone  
16 Oct 2005**

**What is your position?**  
Assistant in ironing.

**How long have you been working at this company?**  
Two years.

**How much do you earn monthly?**  
The basic pay is \$38 [per month], but in order to earn that much we have to work overtime from 5:15 PM to 7:15 PM.



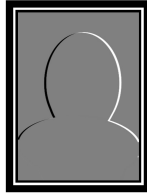
**Interview with Zulema Mena Garay  
Fair Trade Zone worker/owner  
16 Oct 2005**

**What is your position with the Fair Trade Zone?**  
I am an owner and I work in cutting.

**How many years have you been working there?**  
We’ve been working for seven years now.

**How much do you earn monthly?**  
The minimum wage is \$75. But if we’re earning by production, it’s more, I can earn up to \$235 monthly.

*["Mayra", continued]*



**What time do you start work?**

At 7 AM sharp.

**Do you receive benefits?**

Yes.

**Do you have health insurance and social security?**

Yes.

**Can you go to the doctor if you need to?**

Yes.

**Do you take advantage of that?**

Yes, I do, I go every month for a doctor's visit.

**Are you paid for a day of missed work if you go to a doctor's appointment?**

Well, it's not a full paid day because they dock your pay. I can talk about how it really is, right? So, no. Because if I am sick and I go home one day because I feel sick and I want to be paid for the whole day, they don't pay me for it. They take the whole day out of my pay.

**And if you get sick, they don't pay the day even if you have a doctor's note?**

If I ask for the day off, but if I ask for only three hours or just the morning, they take that out of my pay. If, for example, they pay an incentive, then they take away the incentive because I missed three hours' work. And in my pay I get a bonus of \$4.70 that is paid every two weeks and they also lower that.

**And if your children get sick are you paid for the time off to take them to the doctor?**

They won't accept it. Just a note from the doctor for me personally.

*[Zulema, continued]*



**What time do you start work?**

7 AM.

**Do you receive benefits?**

Yes.

**Do you have health insurance and social security?**

Yes.

**Can you go to the doctor if you need to?**

Yes, whenever we need to.

**Are you paid for a day of missed work if you go to a doctor's appointment?**

Yes, it's paid.

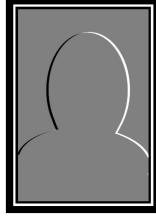
**And if your children need to go to the doctor?**

That's also paid. And if there is doctor-ordered rest, that's paid too. We always need to bring the note from the doctor to show why we missed work.

*[“Mayra”, continued]*

**Are you given maternity leave?**

Yes, three months.



**When you started work, did they make you take a pregnancy test?**

No, but they told me that there was no work for pregnant women.

**Are you paid legal holidays?**

For example, the 14th and 15th of September they paid us the basic pay...But they are tricky, because sometimes on a Saturday they make us work and pay that vacation time off. They make us re-pay the hours. For example, in these past five days they gave us off as vacation, they gave us Friday. And they said, “Since the day after the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> is a Friday, we’re going to give you the Friday too.” But then they made us pay it back by working on a Saturday. So that Saturday what we earned in overtime we didn’t actually get paid, they got it. They never come out on the losing side.

**Do you work weekends?**

Saturday I work all day if I want to. Sometimes I work the whole day, sometimes I work up till noon.

**Do you work Sundays as well?**

In my area, no. But in some areas, for example in the packing area, there is work every day and there is no rest because it’s required work. If you don’t keep working, you’re fired. They work seven days a week.

*[Zulema, continued]*

**Are you given maternity leave?**

Yes. In my case, I’m not going to have any more kids. But for other women, according to the law – because we follow what the law says – they are paid for their doctor’s visits...When she has the baby she is paid her pre-natal and post-natal time which is three months.



**When you started work, did they make you take a pregnancy test?**

Ah, no.

**Are those women that start work now asked to take a pregnancy test?**

No. We don’t do that. We haven’t reached those extremes.

**Are you paid legal holidays?**

Yes, if we work a holiday its double pay. If we don’t work, it’s normal pay that day.

**Are you asked to “replace” a holiday?**

No.

**Do you work weekends?**

Yes, if needed, we do. But if it’s not necessary, then we normally work Monday through Friday.

**How often do you work weekends?**

When we are close to finishing an order. Maybe twice a month.

*[“Mayra”, continued]*



**Are overtime hours forced?**

Sometimes they are, why lie about it?

**Are overtime hours paid double, or how are they paid?**

They’re not paid double. If I work four hours of overtime, they pay me for those four hours, but they don’t pay me double, no. Maybe for those people who earn production pay, but not for the basic pay.

**What hours do you normally work?**

From 7 AM to 5:15 PM is the normal work day, and its paid with the basic wage that one earns every two weeks.

**Do you feel under pressure at your work?**

Sometimes, yes.

**Does your boss put pressure on you? How?**

For example, maybe there is a lot of work and pressure, and if I go to the bathroom they mark the time I take. And if I stop work for a minute they are right there and they are like, “What happened? What’s going on? Work!” So everything is pressure and one doesn’t feel comfortable. And if they see you speak with the person next to you, they also punish you. Imagine that all of this is pressure. And I can’t put a little bit of food in my mouth, you have to sneak it.

**What is your daily production goal?**

Where I am, as assistant in ironing, that’s where the waistband, the pockets and all start. So all of these pieces have to be done and we have to finish a minimum of 7,000 – 8,000 per day.

*[Zulema, continued]*



**Do you work overtime?**

Yes, when it’s necessary we also work overtime.

**And how is the overtime paid?**

It’s double. Those working for production also are paid double.

**What hours do you normally work?**

From 7 AM to 5 PM.

**Do you feel under pressure at your work?**

Well, no because we ourselves are the owners. It’s a matter of conscience whether or not you worry about getting the job done. We have a supervisor and we do what she tells us to. As I said, as members we have more responsibility to take charge of our work.

**Does your boss put pressure on you?**

When necessary, yes. We don’t want to come out looking bad with our clients. We have to get their orders done on time, so we have to keep things moving.

**How do they put on pressure?**

Well, they call us together and they say, “Look, on such and such a date we have to send the order.” So we concern ourselves more to get everything out on time and have it done right, but nobody is saying “hurry up.” We understand the responsibility we have.

**What is your daily production goal?**

We were doing 500, but now we’re faster and we can do more like 800.

*["Mayra", continued]*



**And what happens if you don't reach your daily production goal?**

They punish us. And sometimes they lower our incentive pay if we haven't reached our goal.

**And do they give you more incentive pay if you go over your goal?**

Of course, if you go over the goal. If not, then they lower it.

**Are you allowed to leave your station and go to the bathroom?**

You can go when you want to, but if you're not careful, they will even fire you. It's controlled. For example, in my case, I go in the morning, don't take too long and don't go again until the afternoon when I'm on my way home so that I'm not going all the time.

**Are you restricted in speaking with your co-workers?**

If you talk, you have to hide it so that they don't see you talking.

**Have you ever suffered verbal abuse from your boss or co-workers?**

From my coworkers. Maybe not from the bosses because one is always trying to control oneself with them so that they don't yell at you because you need the work.. But sometimes among your own co-workers there are some who think that they are better than others and so sometimes we get mistreatment from them, hateful words.

**Have you ever suffered physical abuse from your boss or co-workers?**

No.

*[Zulema, continued]*



**And what happens if you don't reach your daily production goal?**

If we don't reach the goal, the business loses too.

**But what happens to you if you don't reach your goal personally?**

I lose the client.

**There's no punishment?**

There's no punishment, but the saddest thing is to lose a client. The business closes its doors if you don't have any clients.

**Are you allowed to leave your station and go to the bathroom?**

Yes, many times, we don't have rules about that.

**Are you restricted in speaking with your co-workers?**

No, no no. You can speak normally. Well, often there are times when you can't – where I am, you can't talk much because you're measuring and concentrating. But for the people in line...its not off-limits, as long as people are working.

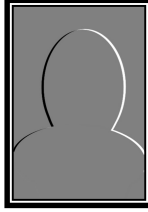
**Have you ever suffered verbal abuse from your boss or co-workers?**

No, no, no.

**Have you ever suffered physical abuse from your boss or co-workers?**

No, no, no, no.

*[“Mayra”, continued]*



**Have you seen other people suffer it?**

Yes, of course I have. One time there was a girl who was sick, they didn't let her go home and the Chinese woman came over and forced a pill down her throat so that she wouldn't go, and that kind of thing isn't allowed. There are times that there are things that they do – one time a Chinese woman cut a worker with scissors and that even came out on television. You see all of that.

**But are they supervisors, or managers?**

They are the area bosses. The supervisors are Nicaraguans but they are the same because instead of being on the side of the workers, they are on the side of the Chinese. So sometimes one suffers mistreatment from them too. For example, I had a supervisor that thanks to God they got rid of, but you should have seen how she made me cry, she would yell at me and tell me I was all kinds of things and it made me feel horrible. But because you need work, you keep going.

**How do you get to work?**

In the transport buses they provide.

**Do they charge you?**

Yes, its three córdobas there and three back, so six total.

**Could you study on Saturdays and Sundays if you wished?**

Working where I do? No, because it's just not possible. Sometimes they say “You can either work or you can go to school but you can't do both.”

**How far did you get in school?**

Through eighth grade.

**Do you ever think of continuing in school?**

Not anymore, because even if I wanted to, I don't have the money. My budget just doesn't stretch that far.

*[Zulema, continued]*



**Have you seen other people suffer it?**

I haven't.

**How do you get to work?**

Well, there are three ways to get there: on foot, by bicycle, or by bus. But for my health I go by foot or by bicycle. If I need to get there fast, I go by bus.

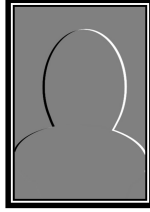
**Could you study on Saturdays and Sundays if you wished?**

Yes, I am studying. I'm in accelerated classes, but I don't go every day. I go three times a week...they offer accelerated secondary school classes, I'm in the ninth grade.

**What grade level did you study before?**

Well, I'm actually going backwards. I already passed the ninth grade, but one forgets a lot. I hadn't studied in many years.

*[“Mayra”, continued]*



**Do you receive trainings in your work?**

No.

**How many children do you have?**

Four.

**And are they in school?**

The oldest is in high school. The other girl studies too, and the boy, but the youngest doesn't.

**Are you married?**

Yes.

**Does your partner work?**

Yes, he is a vendor in the market right now. He has a little more time, he leaves the house at seven and gets home at five.

**Does your partner help with your expenses?**

Yes, when he can.

**Do you have time to help your children with their homework?**

I would be lying to say I do – I just don't have time.

**When do you leave the house in the morning?**

At ten to six.

**And when do you get home at night?**

I leave there at seven when I work overtime, and I arrive home at eight.

**When you get home do you cook?**

No, because I have my oldest daughter who helps me, but if I didn't have her I would have to come home and cook.

**And on weekends you work Saturday so Sunday is your only day at home?**

Yes.

*[Zulema, continued]*



**Do you receive trainings in your work?**

Yes, we do.

**How many children do you have?**

I have four children.

**And are they in school?**

Yes, from the oldest right down to the youngest.

**Are you married?**

Yes.

**Does your partner work?**

Yes, he's self-employed. He is a mechanic.

**Does your partner help with your expenses?**

Yes, if he didn't, I would have left by now!

**Do you have time to help your children with their homework?**

Yes, I have to help the littlest one most, and the other two, but the oldest one studies high school on Saturdays.

**When do you leave the house in the morning?**

I leave at six thirty in the morning.

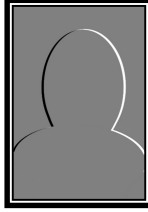
**And when do you get home at night?**

We leave work at five, by 5:20 we're here at home.

**And on weekends, are you at home?**

Yes, sometimes I go out with my children. There's a circus here now and we went to the circus... Sometimes we go to the mall and have an ice cream. It's good to get out with your children.

*[“Mayra”, continued]*



**What do you do after work?**

Well, as I said, I have my daughter who helps, but if it weren't for her I'd have to do all the housework.

On the weekends I wash clothes by hand, I cook, I do the chores. Right now I have just finished washing a mountain of clothes and there are still dirty clothes waiting. I'm going to straighten the rooms and dust.

**Do you feel satisfied in your work?**

Well, maybe not satisfied, but you just go on because of necessity.

**How could your work be better?**

Well...if they would raise our salary a little, in the first place. In the second place if the treatment were a little different.

*- the end -*

*[Zulema, continued]*



**What do you do after work?**

Well, if I find the dishes dirty, I wash them, I make the beds, do chores. But if I come home really worn out, I just put my feet up on a chair. Because sometimes I get home really tired from being on my feet and then riding a bicycle. I go to bed early and get up early. But most of my time off is Saturday and Sunday.

**Do you feel satisfied in your work?**

Ah, yes. I feel proud. Because while I'm a worker, I'm also an owner of my own work. I'm not always thinking that tomorrow they're going to fire me or if I really screw up they're going to run me off. I know that I'm not working for a [foreigner], it's us who are in charge of our work and the work is a little more relaxed.

**How could your work be better?**

Well, for me, I'd like to see everyone working at our factory. I would like all of Nueva Vida working there, but it's just not possible.

**Anything else you'd like to mention?**

Yes, I would like to support my neighborhood here in Nueva Vida more...I would like to help the children that are abused...Because imagine, the kids are sniffing glue, they're sleeping in the street, they're begging on the buses. [My neighbor] abuses the children he has...Because right now these children are sick, they are malnourished, and as punishment, he beats them with a rubber hose. This is the goal that I have right now...Maybe we [at the cooperative] can look for a way to do something for the community that we live in. Because it's not all about working and exporting, it's also about the help that we have to give, the percentage [of our profits] that we have to give to an organization, to children, to senior citizens...I would like to do this in the neighborhood where we live.

*- the end -*