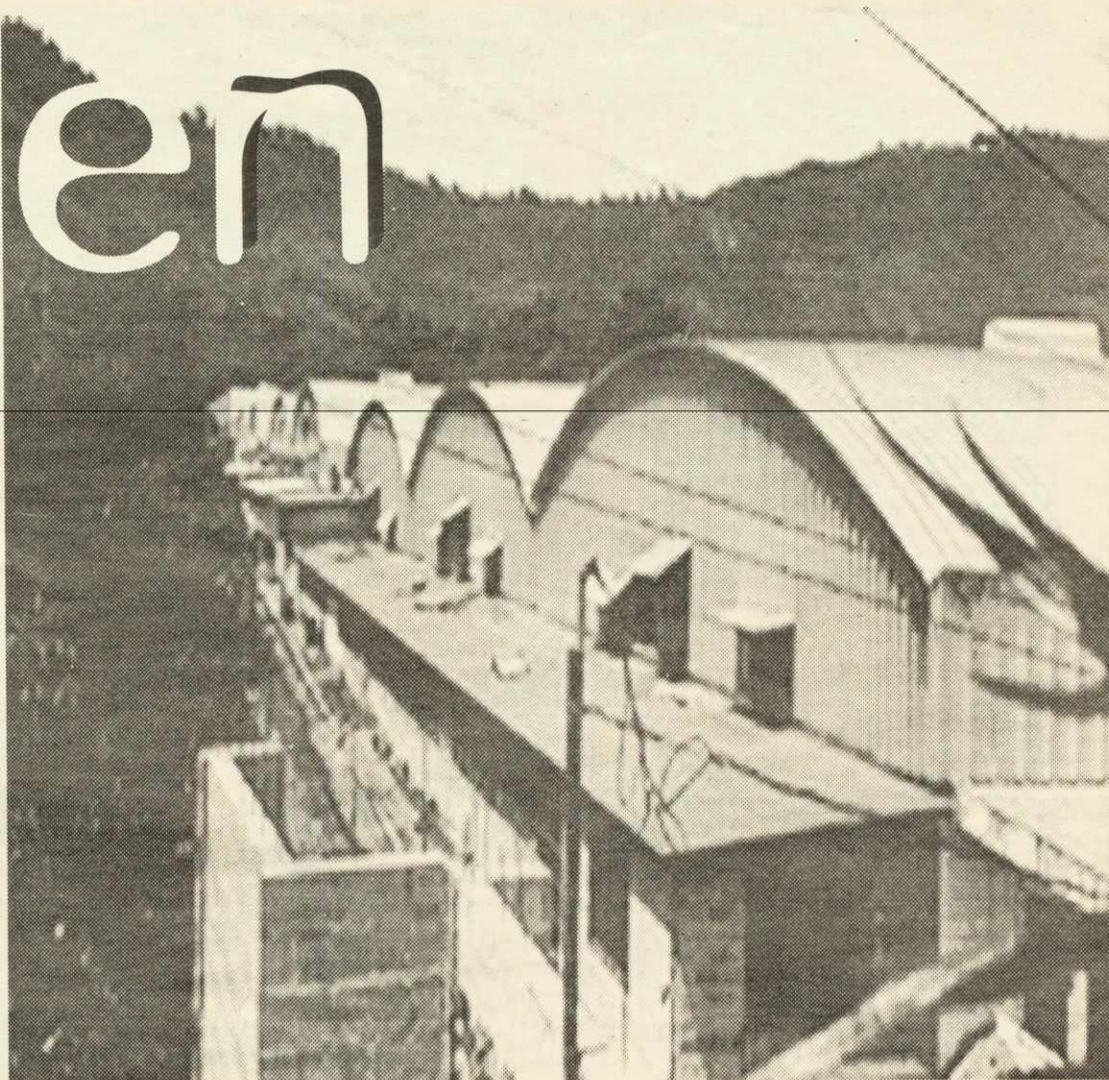


FOCUS

Women unite in the Zone



Activist speaks of poor labour situation

BY KATY HENDERSON

As part of a cross-country tour, Violeta Perez, co-ordinator of La Zonera, spoke to a group of students and other community members at Dal on Feb. 17. Her lecture discussed factory workers in the Dominican Republic.

Since 1969, when free trade zones were established, the Dominican Republic has been a hotbed for cheap industry.

Multimillion dollar companies set up factories, knowing that they can get hard workers willing to work long hours for lesser pay.

These zones are good for business because they are exempt from paying taxes.

"It is promoted by the government as a way of getting companies to set up and create jobs. The workers have to pay taxes but the company has no accountability and can easily move on," says Perez.

After working in these free trade zones for 10 years, Perez knows only too well the inhumane conditions the women must face every day.

"I suffered all the exploitation and limitations — not being able to go to the washroom, not being able to get free time for medical attention or appointments."

She and several other members of La Zonera have researched the free zones and the working conditions within them. What they found was that workers were repeatedly and systematically refused the right to form unions in any of the factories.

These restrictions are in strict violation of labour code provisions, and resolutions set out by the Organization of International Trade, regarding the liberty and

organization of workers.

She and other members of the Committee of Women Workers (La Zonera) have developed programs of education and action to raise the consciousness of industrial workers in the free trade zones — helping them to better defend themselves and their human rights.

"They have learned they can defend themselves because there are certain laws that defend them. They are more aware and will think about organizing within their own workplace," said Perez.

When asked if the women wouldn't get fired if they stood up for their rights, Perez replied, "When the management sees women that defend themselves they normally get afraid and back off — they don't get fired necessarily."

A few facts to keep in mind concerning working conditions for factory workers in the Dominican Republic:

— The majority (over 70%) of factory workers are women.

— Workers in the Dominican Republic make approximately 400 Dominican pesos per week. The equivalent of \$40.00 Canadian.

— Workers over the age of 30 are not allowed to work in any factory, as it is believed that they will not be able to keep up with quotas.

— Every women is given a pregnancy test before she is hired on. If a woman is found to be pregnant she is let go immediately.

— Young women are often expected to perform sexual favours to secure employment.

To learn more about which companies are especially exploitative of the workers in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere, go to the "Sweatshop Fashion Show" on March 9 at 12pm in the Green Room of the SUB.



Workers are searched as they leave a sweatshop.