

Dateline Mexico by Carlos Méndez

Maquiladora factories seen up close

A Mexican congressional candidate works at one, to get an inside look.

With work card number 22108, the federal congressional candidate for Sonora's III District, Cecilia Soto de Estévez, spent one week as an employee of the Maquilas Tetakawi auto-parts assembly plant, located in Empalme, Sonora, in northern Mexico. At the end of the week, she emerged to give a June 12 press conference offering the first eyewitness account by a congressional candidate of these controversial factories, known as *maquiladoras*.

Soto told the press that "wages here are 50 cents an hour, while in Nogales they pay \$1.40 and in Hermosillo, one dollar." This plant pays "the lowest *maquiladora* wages in the country, and perhaps in the world," she concluded.

Maquiladoras are the "in-bond" assembly plants that have sprung up across the Mexico-U.S. border region, notorious for their labor-intensive, low-wage production methods. They have been described as everything from "concentration camps" to "the solution to all of Mexico's economic ills," and have become a major source of controversy in light of George Bush's North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which would extend them—in the name of free trade—throughout all of Mexico.

Particularly in the northern border state of Sonora, now in the heat of an electoral campaign for governor and federal Congress which ends Aug. 18, the debate revolves around whether the *maquiladora* is an economic alternative, or whether instead, a serious effort to develop the region technolog-

ically should be undertaken.

Surrounded by the 14- and 15-year-old girls who worked alongside her in the plant, Soto revealed that a condition of her employment was to sign up with the National Workers Confederation (CTM), and also to sign her own letter of resignation, with which the firm could fire her at any time, without having to pay severance or any other benefits.

A former Sonora state congresswoman from the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM), candidate Soto observed that during the week she spent at Maquila Tetakawi, it was evident that the quality-control methods used by the firm were so rudimentary that they precluded any possibility of being able to compete with Japanese or Korean products. Further, she noted, the low wages and miserable working conditions meant that workers left for other jobs at the first opportunity, guaranteeing that "the plant condemns itself to never achieving high productivity."

"The *maquiladora* is neither hell nor paradise . . . but we mustn't allow ourselves to enter the Free Trade pact under these conditions, where not even competitiveness is guaranteed," she said.

On April 28, the PARM candidate for governor, Patricio Estévez, had also come out against the *maquiladora* strategy and NAFTA, denouncing them as having a negative impact on the economy of the state, and of the country as a whole.

According to the Sonora daily *El Imparcial* June 2, even the ruling PRI

party gubernatorial candidate, Manlio Fabio Beltrones, had to admit that "all is not sweetness" with the *maquiladoras*, and that "it is time to take another look. . . . It is not a matter of eliminating them . . . but we must stop viewing them as benefactors in their current conditions, and we must reconsider their participation in the state's development."

The technology issue is up front in the electoral campaign in Sonora. Gubernatorial candidates from the PARM and PRI parties have come out proposing implementation of the Northwest Water System (SHINO), and the installation of nuclear plants as energy sources in the state. Since the candidates of the other parties have come out against nuclear energy, and have had nothing to say about SHINO, most voters consider the real battle to be between Estévez and Beltrones.

A former federal congressman, Estévez told the state media and national television April 28 that a nuclear energy program is essential for desalinating sea water and for creating "nuplexes," agroindustrial complexes centered around nuclear plants.

On April 29, the daily *El Imparcial* quoted Beltrones following suit: "Energy sources other than those we have today in Sonora must be sought. . . . I have also said that we must keep an open mind, without reservations, on whether nuclear energy can be the solution . . . but it would be a question of discussing it with the people of Sonora, and seeking what we all want, which is the cheapest energy form. . . . [This] is as possible and as feasible as our decision to undertake these alternatives."

Candidate Soto, a physicist by training and a specialist in nuclear energy, declared that, from the standpoint of "energy flux density," nuclear is by far "the cheapest, cleanest, and most efficient" energy form.