Choices on the Border: A Family Trying to Survive in Tijuana

By Colleen Boyle

Abstract:

This case is set in Tijuana, Mexico as a family attempts to make a decision about immigrating to the United States. The case presents readers with problems facing residents in Tijuana who work in the maquiladoras. The purpose of the case is to get readers to think about the reasons why people immigrate to the United States and the difficulties they face in making that decision and in immigrating. The purpose is also to get readers to make connections between political and economic developments in the United States and the living and working conditions of people in Mexico. The case also presents examples of local organizing in the maquiladoras and the colonias where maquiladora workers live. Participants in a role play take the positions of different friends and family members in a discussion about immigrating to the United States.

Scene: Friday, Tijuana, Mexico

Characters:

Odelia is a thirty-two year old mother of three- Pedro (age 7), Manuel (age 4), Julia (age 3)- living in Tijuana, Mexico. Her husband, Jaime, has recently been laid off from his job in one of the many maquiladoras in Tijuana. Odelia is trying to figure out how her family is going to survive now that her husband has lost his job. She is active in several community organizations including a women’s group and Esperanza Internacional.

Jaime is Odelia’s husband. He lost his job because he was working on organizing an independent union in the maquiladora. Odelia and Jaime migrated to Tijuana about ten years ago from central Mexico to find work. Now, Jaime wants to leave Mexico and join his brother Jose in Los Angeles and try to make a better life for his family there.

Maria is Odelia and Jamie’s neighbor in the colonia, an unincorporated area of land near the maquiladoras. When people began moving to Tijuana to work in the maquiladoras a lack of housing forced people to set up build houses with whatever materials they could find without water or electricity services on vacant land. Now the colonias and the people living in them are often suffering from the environmental damages caused by pollution from the maquiladoras. These colonias have now grown to house thousands of workers and their families and people living in them are beginning to organize to get access to public services. Maria is working with Esperanza Internacional, an organization that is helping families build homes and working to create political consciousness and power within the maquiladora communities through weekly meetings.
Friday Afternoon

Odelia waits for her husband Jaime to come home. On Wednesday, the maquiladora factory that Jaime worked for announced the layoff of 15 employees. Many of the employees laid off were the ones trying to organize an independent union or were employees sympathetic to the organizing effort. In Mexico the major labor organization is an arm of the government and works essentially like a company union—in other words, it doesn’t provide benefits or an independent voice for workers. While the Mexican constitution is one of the best in the world in providing for labor rights, in reality no rights or laws are enforced and companies are free to do what they want to labor organizers, particularly those working with independent unions. Jaime has been working with the Center for Information for Female and Male Workers (CIPTT) which formed in 1993 to help workers form independent unions and publicize injustices occurring in the maquiladoras. Jaime spent Thursday looking for a new job, but he found it impossible—the maquiladoras have a practice of blacklisting within the industry or even within an entire city.

Because of the low wages Jaime was paid they do not have a large savings—even working 60 hours a week and supplemented by the small income Odelia earns selling candy at the local street markets that are a common source of income for families in the colonias, especially for women with young children. Jaime earned $55 a week at the maquiladora, while a living wage (including “luxuries” such as health insurance) would equal at least $175 a week. Jaime has nevertheless been saving what he can in the hopes that someday his family will be able to go to the United States, which, because of the near impossibility of obtaining legal documents to immigrate, will require money to buy documents and/or pay a coyote, or guide, for transportation and, hopefully, protection across the dangerous border.

Jaime is pushing for the family to make the move to the U.S. where he hopes to find better job opportunities and a better life for their three children. In Mexico, the minimum wage is $3.40 a day, although the wages in many of the manufacturing factories in Tijuana average about $1 an hour for ten-twelve hours of work. Jaime knows that in the U.S. the minimum wage
is $5.15 an hour. Odelia, however, can hear the United States Border Patrol (USBP) helicopters patrolling every night from her home, and is concerned about the dangers of traveling across the border. Her friend, Gloria, recently tried to cross the border with her family but was picked up and returned to Mexico by the USBP after being abandoned by their coyote, a guide hired by people attempting to cross the border into the United States. However, others from her colonia have successfully migrated to the United States and Gloria’s husband plans on trying again by himself.

Since 1994, the USBP has built a wall stretching from the Pacific Ocean seventeen miles inland along the border. Because of the increased Border Patrol presence in the Tijuana area, crossing the border now requires traveling through treacherous mountainous or desert regions further east, a task not easy without a coyote, a paid guide, and even harder with children. Crossing the Otay or Tecate Mountains involves scaling peaks up to 6000 feet high in below freezing temperatures during the winter months. The other option, crossing through at least ten miles of the Imperial Desert, creates a high risk of death due to dehydration and exposure. Still, from her house built on the side of one of the many hills surrounding Tijuana out of cardboard and various other discarded materials, Odelia can see the border wall illuminated by the lighting systems used to help the USBP hunt immigrants. Seeing the green hills on the U.S. side from her home that is without water or a sewage system and that sits on a dirt road crowded with other homes just like her own is a powerful pull on Odelia, and she knows it is for Jaime as well.

In the afternoon Odelia talks with her neighbor, Maria:

Odelia: I don’t know what I’m going to do with Jaime, he is really pushing to go to the United States.

Maria: What do you want to do?

Odelia: I don’t know. In the U.S. we will still have trouble finding good jobs and I don’t know how we will find a place to live, although maybe we will at least have a toilet and running water in the U.S. and our children will have better opportunities for education and better futures. Here the kids may finish middle school but there is
no high school for our colonia.

Maria: But, Odelia, some very good things are happening here now. You know that Esperanza Internacional is providing people with homes and you know that you will get a better home eventually too. People are finally organizing here for themselves. Through their work with Esperanza Internacional people are starting to realize the power they have and that we can make a difference here. Do you want to give up the work you have been doing? We have a real chance to make a difference and force the government to provide what it was supposed to be providing. Staying here you can make a real difference in the community.

Odelia: That’s true, but I don’t have time to work in the community and earn money too.

Maria: Jaime can work in the community. I know of a lawyers’ group, Yeuani. They are doing work in the communities. Yeuani is taking the maquiladora owners to court for violations of the labor provisions of the Mexican constitution. Instead of settling outside of court as most companies try to do, Yeuani insists on getting court verdicts, hoping to make the courts enforce the laws that already exist and set precedents that will help workers in the future. Maybe they can help Jaime fight the maquiladora and give him work. They need organizers and case workers.

Odelia: Maybe, I’ll have to talk to Jaime, but then there will be no one to take care of the children.

Odelia does not want to leave Mexico and she has hope that the working and living conditions in Tijuana will improve. She knows that her family is better off in Tijuana than many families are in other regions of Mexico, and she is less hopeful than Jaime about their chances in the United States. In order for her family to survive in Tijuana she will have to find a way to make money. New and existing maquiladoras are almost always hiring. Maquiladoras are factories set up in Mexico by foreign companies. In 1965, the Border Industrialization Program created anexport processing zone along the U.S.-Mexico border, now extended throughout Mexico. U.S. companies are attracted to the low wages and lack of enforcement of labor and environmental protections in Mexico.³ In Tijuana, approximately 217,000 workers are employed in maquiladoras.⁴ But companies use a variety of strategies to enforce their power over employees and to avoid Mexican labor laws regarding benefits and seniority. Companies sign contracts with employees for only one or two months and then after that month or two can sign a
new contract or not hire that employee again. The nature of many of the industries, particularly textiles -- in which production is volatile and seasonal -- means that factories sometimes close down for a period of time and then reopen and rehire all of their original workers as if they were new employees. These practices of “induced turnovers,” and the poor conditions that cause many to leave their jobs, means that factories are constantly hiring.  

Odelia knows she can go to work in one of the maquiladoras. She worked for an electronics manufacturer about ten years ago but left because the conditions were too bad: low wages, long hours, no overtime, no time off, sexual harassment, and health hazards. After 700 workers got sick and two died from bad food served in the cafeteria, Odelia decided to leave and never go back unless she absolutely had to. Now she feels she may have no other choice, although she is also worried about having to leave her kids while she is at work for 10-12 hours a day. Pedro is in school during part of the day, but Manuel and Julia are too young for school and there are no day care services. Jaime will be spending most of his day looking for a job or doing activist work and will not want to take care of the kids all day. Plus, if Odelia goes back to work she will probably have to give up the work she has been doing with a local women’s group and Esperanza Internacional.

Friday Evening

Jaime returns home late Friday evening after the children are in bed. Odelia is afraid that he has been speaking with people about crossing the border, especially since yesterday he showed her a letter from his brother in Los Angeles:

Dear Jaime,

Things are really working out for us now. We just moved into our own apartment after living with Carmela’s cousin for the last five months. Carmela found a job housekeeping at a hotel and I am working in a clothing factory. Our apartment is small but if you want to come your family can stay with us as long as you have to.

Your brother,
Odelia: Any luck?

Jaime: No, they all have my name and won’t hire me. I got chased away by the security guards at one place.

Odelia: Where have you been?

Jaime: Talking to people.

Odelia: What people?

Jaime: I got the name of someone who can cross us and get me papers for $500.

Odelia: That is almost all of our savings, what will we do then?

Jaime: We can meet my brother in Los Angeles.

Odelia: You know they don’t have room for all five of us and what will we do in Los Angeles.

Jaime: It will only be a little while, then we’ll have a place of our own.

Odelia: It took your brother five months to get his own apartment and we don’t speak English. How are we going to get jobs or an apartment? Jose works in a clothing factory, I can do that here. If we stay here we can have our own home eventually and we can help others here build their own homes too.

Jaime: What about work?

Odelia: I can go back to the maquiladora. At least I know I can get a job there and that there will always be jobs here. We don’t know of any jobs in Los Angeles and we’ll have no savings to fall back on.

Jaime: Jose can help me and you hate the maquiladoras. You know how they treat you. We can make a better life in Los Angeles. The jobs there are better and so are the wages. Jose says that there are always jobs for immigrants.

Odelia: What if we get deported? We’ll be back here with no money and we’ll have to start all over again. And what about the children--is it safe to bring them across the border? There is a group here called Yeuani. They are fighting for workers. They can help you get your job back, you want to fight them right? They may be able to get you work, they need more organizers. This is our chance to do
something positive here.

Jaime: Maybe. I can look into it but that still isn’t making any money. And I’m already involved in fighting the companies and we’re not getting anywhere. We can make a fresh start in Los Angeles and make a better life for our children.

Friday, Late in the Night

Odelia couldn’t sleep Friday night. As she lay in bed she thought about the family’s possibilities:

How can we go to the United States? Carmela and Jose already knew some English before going. I don’t know any English and Jaime knows only a little. Getting a job will be difficult and the jobs are as bad in the U.S. as they are in Tijuana. Jose is working in a clothing factory and I can do that here. I want my children to have better opportunities than they have here but how will they do in school not being able to speak English and what will happen to them if we can’t get jobs and have no place to live? We could lose all of our money or get deported!

Our colonia is horrible. No water, no sewage, no electricity. But Maria is right, things are improving and people are working together now. We will have a good home someday if we stay, and we can help others. And if Jaime can work with Yeuani or find work with the independent unions that are organizing, than we will really be doing well here. Mexico is changing and we should stay and fight, but change is happening so slowly. But in Mexico I know what my options are, and I know what I can do and how to do things. I won’t know how to do anything in the United States: how to get a job, how to get the kids in school, or how to get food. And how can I risk the safety of my children taking them across the border? I’ve got things happening here. All of my friends and family are here. I am doing good work in the community. How I can leave?

But maybe Jaime is right and things will be better in the United States. It is still dangerous here for Jaime. Other labor organizers were attacked and beaten a few weeks ago and others have been killed. The economic situation in Mexico has not been
improving recently and wages are going down in the *maquiladoras*. In the U.S. we may have better wages and jobs and better access to schools and health care. I don’t know what to do. Should we stay in Mexico or try to get to the United States and start over there?
References:


Organizations/For More Information:

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