

A Haitian Sweatshop Worker Speaks: “Mrs. Clinton Can Have Her Factories”

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The following is an interview Beverly Bell conducted with Marjorie Valcelat, an assembly work who ran an embroidery machine in a factory from 2005 to 2008. She says the experience made her so sick and weak that she's not felt able to work since then.

I had three children I had to take care of; their father had left. And since I hadn't had enough schooling, I didn't have the skills to do much. So I said to myself, "I'm going to work at a factory." When I got there, they showed me how to run the machines to embroider slips and nightshirts. I spent a month training, but during that time they didn't pay me; I had to pay them for the training.

If I had met the quota, every two weeks I would have made 1,250 gourdes [US\$30.00]. Yep, that's it. But I couldn't meet the quota, because embroidery wasn't my specialty. I did what I could. Sometimes they paid me 500 gourdes [US\$12.50], sometimes 400 gourdes [US \$9.50], every two weeks. I needed to support my family and I couldn't survive.

Then when the machine broke and I called the mechanics to fix the machine – you put a red cloth on the machine so they'd know it's broken – they wouldn't come because I was so scrawny. The big women, the ones with the fat bottoms that they can feel up, the mechanics would go fix their machines. I had been in good shape, big, but the machine and those lights were sucking me dry. So I could never get the machine fixed [so I could keep embroidering] and that put me even more under quota.

It was such misery. And then, I had to travel from far away. There were times when I had to get on the road at 4:00 in the morning, but there'd be traffic jams and I still couldn't arrive on time. At 6:00, they would close the entrance gates. That would mean that I got all the way there, but then I had to turn around and break my back to return home, and they never paid me. And I'd still have to pay the two bus fares, 20 gourdes [47 cents], and where was I supposed to get that money? Sometimes I had to borrow money just to get to work.

You didn't even have time to eat. They'd let you out at 11:00, and then they'd ring the bell before 11:30. You had to return. There were people who'd throw out the rest of their food because they didn't have enough time to eat. Sometimes the vendors near the plant would run out of food, and you'd have to spend a lot of time trying to find food [further away]. If you got back after 11:30 to find the gates closed, you lost the whole day.

And then oftentimes, because you had to move so fast, the needle would break inside your finger. One person I knew, the needle sewed through her finger and to this day, she still

can't use it.

I thought I would do better over time, but I got worse because my muscles got too weak. The last time I was paid, I got 190 gourdes [US\$4.52] for two weeks. I had just gone [to the factory] so the children could go to school and their life could be better than mine. I said to myself, "Well, I don't need to come here any more. I'd best quit this."

When I left the factory, I was so angry that when I passed the woman who'd cooked the food I had bought for lunch, I just gave her all the money and went on my way.

Me, if I had a message I could send to the higher-ups: there will always be factories, because they've always existed, crushing the poor. I don't speak for other people, and some people will still go work in the factories. But Mrs. Bill Clinton will never see me working there. [As Secretary of State, she promoted the expansion of the export assembly industry.] I will never go to whatever factory Mrs. Clinton opened.

We need another model, we do. I could understand if [the US government] came to Haiti and wanted to build schools, because so many schools were destroyed and a lot of children are in the streets. If [they] worked alongside people like this, reconstructing schools, building some health centers, well, that would be better than a factory.

Mrs. Clinton can have her factories. Me and my children, we'll take the health centers.

Beverly Bell is the author of the new book "Fault Lines: Views Across Haiti's Divide." Many thanks to Lynn Selby for translating Marjorie Valcelat's interview. This interview was originally published on otherworldsarepossible.org.

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