

'Tijuana Dream' Clouded by Pollution, Job Exodus to Asia: TV

By Dave Shiflett

Oct. 9 (Bloomberg) -- Ross Perot heard a "giant sucking sound" as U.S. jobs went south to Mexico, an ill wind that has since carried many of those same jobs to Asia and left devastated towns and people in its wake.

Filmmakers Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre capture this industrial-strength desolation in "Maquilapolis" (City of Factories), which airs tomorrow on PBS at 10 p.m. New York time.

The documentary reminds us that for all its glories, globalism can leave very dirty footprints. The one-hour film focuses on workers, mostly women, who toil in the industrial areas in and around Tijuana. One roadside sign boasts that the city is the "World Capital of Televisions;" it has also supplied consumers with panty hose, batteries and medical equipment, among other things.

As many as 4,000 factories have operated along the Mexican border, where wages of \$11 a day have drawn thousands of rural workers looking for a better life amid the urban blight. But many businesses have left for Asia, where labor is even cheaper, and stiffed workers on their way out.

One plot line traces worker Carmen Duran's attempt to get Sanyo Electric Co. to ante up her severance pay, which would certainly come in handy in a place where it takes two hours to earn enough for a jug of milk.

The company apparently believed it could hose Duran with impunity. As one worker puts it, women are prized because they are "cheap and docile." Many are also desperate single mothers whose government is much cozier with industry than with its citizens.

Hungry Dogs

Downtrodden workers share their neighborhoods with crowing roosters and barking dogs. We see one bony mutt trying to eat a cardboard box with such enthusiasm you'd think he'd gotten hold of a steak. The humans don't fare much better.

The land appears to have never hosted a blade of grass. Water for baths is heated on open fires, and many of the shacks are built with garage doors discarded by Americans across the border.

Yet the most sinister enemy here is pollution. During a rainstorm, a factory vents its wastewater, sending a vile deluge racing down the muddy street. This is a common practice, a resident says.

Worse yet is lead poisoning, which appears to be pervasive. Workers display sores and welts, and though we cannot see the damage done to internal organs, the film says birth defects are common. Children are born without fingernails and sometimes without brains.

No Bitterness

Though every deal in these company towns seems to be a raw one, the "Tijuana dream" of upward mobility lives on amid the withering squalor. Workers count their small victories, like the local labor board's ruling that Carmen deserves a \$2,500 severance check from Sanyo.

She uses the money to put a floor in her shack, but it may be the last check she sees for a long time because a pollution-related illness has made her unemployable. While community activists have forced some companies to clean up their environmental act, the show says many others continue to pollute.

Amazingly, most workers show little bitterness over the shoddy treatment they get from their employers. They live in hope of better times, which don't seem to be coming anytime soon.

For more information on the program, visit <http://www.pbs.org/pov>

(Dave Shiflett is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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