

PEOPLES' PERMANENT TRIBUNAL

INTERVIEWS

1. Maria Elena Aguilar

Marcial Godoy (MG): Hello Maria Elena, could you please introduce yourself and tell us a little about yourself?

Maria Elena Aguilar (MEA): My name is Maria Elena Aguilar; I am from Mexico, from Puebla. I came here 20 years ago, when I was single. I came here and worked for four years in a factory, my salary was very low, I didn't like what I was getting paid, so I later decided to look for another job. Well I worked in restaurants, they also paid me very little and it was long work hours and the truth is it wasn't very good. And then later after the restaurant was sold or changed owners, I had enough and went to Mexico, I was no longer here. I went to Mexico and I took my two children and then I returned again to New York. I left my children in Mexico because their father and I separated. Now I only have my children, and I wondered when I return again, where will I get work? And I was a bit sick, I have Lupus and in Mexico they told me that I could not cure that disease. I came here to cure myself because there are more opportunities here, and the truth is yes, it was good because now I am getting treatment and I don't pay much. But I left my children, they stayed there and now I am trying to work. There is a lady who helped me get a job in a restaurant because I was sick, I couldn't even move my hands, I couldn't lift a plate, I couldn't even sit down; but I still said, "I have to get better, because I have my children." I said, " dear God give me strength because I have me two children," so I did recover but well, that restaurant burned down, and I had to change jobs. A friend told me "let's go to the Williamsburg stop, there's work there, they'll give you a job" and I said, "good." I thought that when they say cleaning work, it was normal cleaning, like with a mop and all, and when I went I was surprised when I saw there were many women. There were between 40 and 50 women waiting for jobs. And I said, "dear God, there's many women, I don't think I 'll get work." And yes, thank God, I got work that day, they told me for four or five hours. But I was surprised when they told me "you will clean on your knees" and the truth is I have to work because I have my children, I have to support them both. So yes, I worked on my knees, and I was working there two years, on my knees working. Why? Because I needed to send money to my children because they were both in school. And when I saw, I said no, not that. The truth is I sometimes cried because I said, "I'm nobody's slave, why do I have to clean on my knees for these people?" I would curse, but at the same time I said, I have to put up with it. There were about two weeks that I worked for 10 or 12 hours cleaning on my knees; the truth is I sometimes couldn't support my body, I felt very bad. But I said I have to do it. And now, when I met the organization there at the stop, well they went there because they were going to help us and everything, and I didn't believe them because I thought they would take up our time and I have to work; because if I go to one of their meetings it's a waste of time and I prefer to work. But I later went to some courses they gave us in basic English, on how to defend ourselves from our employers, and little by little. Now well thank God, now my life has changed much because I joined the organization and well...

MG: What is the organization called?

MEA: The Worker's Justice Project. Since then I was in some classes they gave us on leadership, bookkeeping, finances. And now we are have a cooperative called Apple Eco-cleaning Co.; which by the way, I now do the books.

MG: How many colleagues are there?

MEA: We are now six. Now we are doing well, the truth is it's going well, they treat us differently, they pay us better, we have more time to be with our children. And well, we get home and we even have time to cook, to sit there for a while, but not before, because we had too much work before, it was too much.

MG: And the employers would ask you and other colleagues to clean on you knees, why?

MEA: They made us clean on our knees because they wanted their houses to be clean, the floor to be without a speck of dirt, or sand...

MG: Not a single footprint.

MEA: Yes, so sometimes the floor was cement or sometimes wood, and they wanted the wood to be very clean. But sometimes they gave us clothes—they even gave us peoples' underwear for us to clean with. They gave us women and men's underwear to clean the floor with. Really, I always said why do they treat us like that if we are women, we are workers, but we are nobody's slaves, we do not have to do that. And well, I was there putting up with it.

MG: And how many colleagues are in the Worker's Justice organization?

MEA: Now we are many, well not many, but we are between 10-12. But we are only six in the coop.

MG: And being undocumented, how has it affected you, I say obviously in many areas of your life, but in work, in the relations with other persons, how have you been able to integrate yourself here?

MEA: The truth is when I got here I came with the dream that, well, I said it's going to go well. And now what I need is to have papers, have a visa to even be able to travel. Because I say, we are workers, our work is worth something and we come to work, not to rob. Because we want a better future for our children, because in Mexico I also worked. I worked picking tomatoes, green beans, cucumbers, peanuts, and we picked them and packaged them as well, I did all that in Mexico and arriving in the U.S. I knew that I could work wherever. And the truth is that's how it is.

MG: And besides organizing yourselves, do you participate in the broader movement of justice for immigrants?

MEA: We have participated in marches, such as now on May 1st, workers' day, that day we went to march here in Manhattan. We have gone to different places, like when we also went to Washington to a march to ask for migration reform and all that. And we put ourselves at risk of

being detained by immigration and being returned to our country. But we don't care, if we are united I don't think they would throw all of us out, back to our country.

MG: And how do you see the future? What are your expectations of them passing a law, that the circumstances you are in change?

MEA: What I would like is for the laws, how can I say, that they help us, like... what's the word. That they see that we want, that we don't want to steal from them, but that with our work we want to show that we are equal to them, that we are not inferior to them.

MG: For the law to acknowledge this.

MEA: And that they acknowledge our work and acknowledge everything.

MG: And how long has it been since you have seen your children?

MEA: Well, I have not seen my son for 10 years, but my daughter I brought here because she was born here.

MG: And can you communicate by computer, by telephones?

MEA: No, see that the computer doesn't reach my son because I still don't have enough money to send him one. Sometimes I don't have enough for shoes or telephone. The truth is my son sometimes goes around in tattered shoes, I tell you, because sometimes I don't have enough money. I have my daughter here and she also goes to school, and sometimes I don't have enough, and I am alone.

MG: Do you live alone or with other colleagues? How to you manage your life?

MEA: I live alone. I rent a room with my daughter. A man is renting me a room and the two of us live in one little room, because I cannot go someplace else because of my daughter. It is too dangerous.

MG: And you live in Queens, right? Do you live near other colleagues? Do you have someone to go to in you neighborhood?

MEA: Yes, some colleagues. I have a sister, and she does live near, a little close.

MG: And your sister also participates in the organization?

MEA: No, she doesn't participate. She only dedicates herself to the home and she is there.

MG: And what do you think about your participation here in the Tribunal?

MEA: The truth is it was very interesting for me. The truth is that I am afraid of speaking, I get a little scared and I start to tremble and then, I get nervous and everything. But now I speak more, but before I was scared and said, "No, for what can I say," no, better keep quiet.

MG: Well, you speak very well. Thank you very much for your time.

MAE: A little mixed up but...