The Man Who Took My Job

By Dan Baum

David Quinn has spent what President Clinton calls “the longest period of economic growth in our entire history” tumbling down the economic ladder – from having a shot at being the first in his family to get a college degree to a life of working poverty. David is twenty-seven, a shy, unassuming man more attuned to rock & roll and classical guitar than to global politics, and his response to career calamity was simply to scale down his expectations and soldier on.

So while one could argue that David was forced out of college in 1997 because Clinton and Congress failed to reform health care, David would just say he was unlucky. He needed complicated oral surgery his student health plan wouldn’t cover, so he abandoned his education and took a union job (with dental insurance) making automobile steering wheels for Breed Technologies Inc., outside Fort Wayne, Indiana. David’s father had been a union welder, and his grandfather had worked in the very same steering-wheel plant, and David figured that, as a consolation prize for giving up college, he at least had a secure gig. Going to college had been a reach, anyway, and he had twelve thousand dollars’ worth of student debt to prove it. He moved in with a woman he'd met in Spanish class named Alyssa Lewandowski, had his upper jaw sawn off and repositioned to correct

a bad bite, and began thinking about buying a house. All day he pumped molten plastic into a chest-high mold and pulled out searing hot steering wheels. In his off hours, he'd coax fluid blues riffs from his Stratocaster guitar, a perennial refuge. It wasn't all he'd dreamed of, but David started settling into the blue-collar life.

Less than a year later, in March 1998, David was unemployed again. Breed closed the factory and fired all 455 workers – not because of a drop in sales, but because the company figured it could make steering wheels cheaper in Mexico. All around him factories were closing, often for similar reasons, and David wasn't able to find another manufacturing job. He ended up delivering pharmaceuticals to discount stores for seven dollars an hour, with no benefits and no future. Then a baby arrived. One day Alyssa told him, "We're out of diapers," and without a word David took his beloved Strat to a pawn shop, sold it for a quarter of its value, and stopped for a pack of Kimbies on the way home.

Still, he didn't get angry. "A company's got a right to do what it wants," was how he put it.

David's job at Breed was sacrificed to corporate globalism, specifically to the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, which turned six years old on January 1. By easing rules and erasing tariffs, NAFTA makes it easier for American companies to do their manufacturing in Mexico, where the minimum wage is about $3.60 a day, and enforcement of safety, labor and environmental standards is notoriously lax.

Breed aggressively pursued these advantages. The company was founded in 1987, in Lakeland, Florida, the brainchild of an engineer who had worked on safety sensors for the military and then applied them to civilian automobiles. By the time David got hired, Breed was selling almost $800 million a year in air bags, sensors, steering wheels, seatbelts and other car parts to just about all the major automakers. Its strategy by the late Nineties was to buy up factories in both the United States and Mexico, moving production from north to south. In addition to David's workplace, Breed closed six other auto-parts factories across the U.S in 1997, sending at least a thousand American jobs to Mexico and cutting labor costs on affected products by as much as ninety percent. But the company's orgy of expansion brought with it unbearable debt, and last fall Breed filed for bankruptcy. Breed officials declined to comment for this article.

David Quinn didn't know it, but he was particularly vulnerable to such corporate maneuverings. Being a young, male Hoosier without a college degree at the turn of the millennium, he had a great big bulls-eye painted on his nose. While the Dow was reaching delirious heights in the Nineties, people with only high school or some college – meaning most American workers – ended the decade earning less, in constant dollars, than they had at the start. Being young in the Nineties hurt, too; entry-level wages fell as much as eight percent, with men doing slightly worse than women. And it happens that Indiana is one of eight states that suffered disproportionate NAFTA-related job loss.

One by one, factories that Indianans had worked in for generations were shutting down and sending their jobs to Mexico. The names of the departed were a gloomy roll call to Hoosiers: Thomson Consumer Electronics. Jay Garment. Magnatek. Uniroyal-Goodrich. Breed. Indianans blame NAFTA for job-losses at 107 factories in their state so far.

Just how many Americans have been hurt by NAFTA is unclear. The Clinton administration, which sold NAFTA to Congress partly on the promise that it would create jobs, sidesteps the question of exactly how many – if any – the treaty has created. The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, which quantifies the workforce from every conceivable angle, chooses for some reason not to compile such a number. Instead, the administration credits NAFTA only in general terms with helping generate the current boom. The prestigious Economic Policy Institute, on the other hand, looks at how the U.S. went from having a trade surplus with Mexico before NAFTA to having a whopping $21 billion trade deficit today, and estimates that almost 400,000 Americans have lost manufacturing jobs due to NAFTA.

That's about the same number of jobs that have been created in the maquiladoras, or foreign-owned factories based in Mexico, since NAFTA was signed. So at first glance it seems fair to conclude that there's been a huge transfer of wealth, and that Mexican workers are profiting from the misfortune of their American counterparts. Mexican factory wages may be low by U.S. standards, but in the Mexican countryside people commonly earn as little as ten dollars a week – when they can find work. A job in an American factory, especially a new one, sounds better than whacking weeds with a

machete in the hot sun or selling chewing gum to motorists on the streets of Mexico City. In raw terms, factories generate wealth – for those who work in them; for those who own them; for those who market, advertise, transport, and sell the products they make. Shiny new American factories – built where once stood only a patch of beans or a few emaciated goats – sounds like a dream come true for Mexicans.

The reality, it turns out, is harsher than that. The transfer of wealth has not been nearly so neat. David Quinn was painfully aware of how NAFTA had damaged his own life when, in January, he and I traveled together to Mexico. Our goal was to see if we could find the worker who was now doing his old job – to see, in essence, if David's lifestyle crossed the border along with his job. I'd found David by calling trade activists around the country, who directed me to dozens of union locals savaged by NAFTA-related factory closures. He turned out to be a depressingly typical NAFTA casualty. Instead of him, someone from Lowland, Tennessee; McAllen, Texas; or Arab, Alabama – to name but a few places in America devastated by the treaty – might have made the trip. David was simply the first worker I found who was willing to go. But he turned out to be a staunch traveler, gifted with empathy, courage, and a quiet knack for crossing boundaries. During a four-day journey through modern industrial Mexico, David would wade through Dickensian misery and emerge ready to see what had happened to his life and why. We left Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the morning of January 29th, on the trail of the man who got his job.

It’s freezing cold and pitch dark, and David shows up at Fort Wayne Airport for the flight to Brownsville, Texas, badly wanting a cigarette. This is his first airplane trip, and he looks a little miffed standing alone in one of those glass-walled airport smokers’ lounges, wolfing a Marlboro Light and a Mountain Dew. He says he doesn’t know what he expects to find in Mexico; he hasn’t thought about it.

David is taciturn about the way he lost his job, too. He heard a rumor. Then it was posted on the bulletin board. No, the union didn’t do anything, he says. There was nothing to do.

“How did you feel about it?”

“Bad, I guess.”

Waiting for the flight to be called, he sits quietly with his hands folded, studying how the passengers feed their belongings into the X-ray machine.

Two years ago, when Breed announced that it would close the plant where David worked, his union, Local 7462 of the United Paperworkers International Union, offered to take a pay cut to keep it open. Breed dismissed the idea. “You can’t compete with Mexicans willing to accept fifty-one cents an hour,” management told the union negotiators. The union wasn’t able to wrest anything more from the company than severance pay of $150 for each year of service, plus a few months of health insurance. So men and women who

had worked at the plant for, say, twenty-five years, walked away with $3,750 – before taxes – to help them start a new life.

Under similar circumstances, some unions do fight back. When Nabisco tried to close a factory in Pittsburgh last year, the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers Union raised enough hell to attract the attention of a buyer. Impressed by the devoted workforce, the new owner found a way to keep the plant open. In South Dakota, workers at a doomed cement plant successfully agitated to have the state take it over and keep it running. Elsewhere, unions made such a stink about the low wages their companies were planning to pay in Mexico that the firms tried to buy good will by offering retraining or college tuition to their laid-off workers. But David's union wasn't one of those.

Walking across the Gateway Bridge from Brownsville, Texas, to Matamoros, Tamaulipas, David is wrenched through a transition that is neither gradual nor subtle. He's far from the sterile landscape of Fort Wayne, where acres of parking surround homogenized outposts of national corporations – Ethan Allen, Cracker Barrel, Circuit City – and everything is experienced through the windshield of a car. Here on the border, tightly clipped lawns, orderly intersections and credit-card-ready gasoline pumps give way abruptly to cracked and crowded sidewalks, business owners standing in their doorways urging you inside, the overamplified accordions of ranchera music competing with the roar of badly tuned bus engines, and the blare of sound trucks hawking everything from lettuce to lightbulbs. Even before you step off the bridge to Matamoros, life looms up close and personal, a barrage of noise and smells and jostling.

David is unruffled. He walks straight into a grubby little store and, in lumpy but serviceable Spanish, buys himself a pack of Marlboro Lights and a 500 ml. Coke.

"I liked Spanish class," he says sheepishly.

The Pastoral Juvenil Obrera, or Pastoral Working Youth, is a Catholic group organizing to improve conditions in the foreign-owned factories. Their "office" is actually a tiny windowless room in the back of a squat cement house, where portraits of Jesus Christ share a wall with Che Guevara and Salma Hayek. Redheaded Maricela Rodriguez, whom everybody calls "Gorda," (Fatty) not only knows Breed workers, she used to be one.

"I was there six months, sewing leather covers on steering wheels," Gorda tells us. "Was that your job?" she asks David.

David shakes his head. "Tell her I operated a mold," he says. "I made plastic wheels."

"Here's what I did all day," Gorda says, demonstrating three quick stitches with both hands and then a jerk of the threads up and out to tighten them. "I ended up hurting the nerves in my arm, got bad tendinitis." She does the stitch-stitch-stitch-yank again. "Fifteen wheels a day," she says. "That's 1,600 repetitive motions. We did a study."

In walks Manuel Mondragon, looking like a Mexican revolutionary from a Hollywood movie, with a rakish beard and the eyes of a panther. Manuel can't work in the maquiladoras anymore, he says, because the factory owners' association blacklisted him as a troublemaker. Now he works for PJO, his salary paid by the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition, which supports a variety of worker-justice programs in the U.S. and Mexico. When asked if he can help find a Breed worker making plastic steering wheels like David used to, Manuel pushes his hands deep into the pockets of an old tweed sport coat and looks us up and down, as though deciding whether we're worth the risk. After a long, frowning moment, he says, "Let's go see Erick and Maribel."

It takes forty minutes to go six miles – not because of traffic, but because any of the million potholes we skirt could total Manuel's sprungshot 1986 Buick. Once it's too late to turn back, he lets on that neither Erick nor Maribel actually worked in a Breed plant. "But Maribel used to work in a different steering-wheel factory," he adds quickly. "So she can describe the work in general. And maybe she'll know somebody."

Maribel and Erick turn out to be a well-dressed and handsome young couple who live with their eight-year-old son in a ten-by-ten-foot plywood cube. With the growth of the maquiladora industry since NAFTA, the number of factories in and around Matamoros has expanded by a third, but almost no additional housing has been built. Erick and Maribel's shack, which isn't much bigger than their double bed, is one of several slapped together in the garden of a bigger, dilapidated house that has another sprawling family crammed into it – and the only bathroom in the compound.

Maribel's job was to receive the plastic steering wheels hot from moldsmen like David. She enunciates carefully the chemicals she handled —Sicomet, toluene, Varsol, and Lokweld. "I learned their names after leaving the job. While I was working, the company refused to tell us what they were or what health effects to watch for." They are associated with a horrifying list of ailments ranging from "defatting of the skin" and blurred vision to nervous system damage and birth defects, according to medical journals, U.S. government bulletins, and literature by the chemicals' manufacturers that are cited in a lengthy legal complaint being prepared against Breed and the Mexican government by a coalition of workers'-rights organizations.

"Ask her if she had a mask," David says.

"No," Maribel says. "Only goggles, and some days not even gloves to handle the chemicals and hot plastic."

David whistles.

"When I got pregnant I asked to be moved to a job where I didn't have to breathe chemical fumes all day." As Maribel talks, her eight-year-old son, Erick, bundled against the cold, walks in and scrambles across the bed for a hug. He's small for his age, and when he unwraps his scarf he reveals a port-wine stain that mottles half his face. Also, there's something odd about his eyes; they're unusually wide-spaced, as though the top of

his face is built on a broader scale than the bottom. When he pulls off his wool beanie it's clear why: his head is twice the normal size, with two great bony growths the size of doorknobs sprouting from his forehead.

He's clearly not retarded – he has a sprightly, grown-up wit – but Maribel says he suffers terrifying seizures. "And other children are afraid of him," she adds, "so he's lonely." They don't know what's wrong with him, or even if the chemicals caused his deformities, because when Maribel quit work to take care of him the family lost its health insurance.

Manuel seizes the moment to mention a study conducted by the Autonomous University of Mexico in 1998: Two thirds of the maquiladora workers surveyed reported health problems from the chemicals they used at work, he quotes, and an astounding one in five reported birth defects in their children. Usually, Manuel adds, the workers have no idea what they're using.

David swivels on the bed toward Manuel. "In the United States, every container in the plant has to have a label," he says. "If it contains something dangerous, it has to have a big hazmat label with the name of the chemical, and a number, one to four, that says how dangerous it is."

"That's allá," says Manuel ruefully, meaning, "Over there" – the term Mexicans use for the United States.

NAFTA may have created jobs in the maquiladoras, Manuel says, but working conditions have worsened. He brandishes the university study showing that wages in the maquiladoras around Matamoros have dropped since NAFTA was signed, in an era when inflation has run between ten and twenty percent a year. And strangely, in this town, ordinary consumer goods are more expensive on the Mexican side of the border than on the Texas side. People who can get permission to cross into the U.S. often do their grocery shopping in Brownsville, Manuel says. But low wages and weakened buying power are only part of the problem for Mexicans, according to the university study: the work week has gone from forty to forty-eight hours; benefits such as life insurance, scholarships and regular raises have been replaced by a bonus pegged to productivity, and the right to strike is gone. “The maquiladoras were bad before NAFTA,” Manuel says. “They’re worse now.”

“It’s what the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization were about in October,” he continues. “Liberalizing world trade should not harden the lives of ordinary working people. It’s why your AFL-CIO fought against NAFTA in the first place.”

The AFL-CIO fought, but by 1993 the labor federation had become a toothless old lion. The share of the U.S. workforce its unions represent had fallen by half since World War II, to one worker in six. The best the AFL-CIO and its allies could secure were all-but-unenforceable “side agreements” on labor and the environment. Activists have yet to win a labor complaint before the U.S. government agency responsible for enforcement. But proponents of better-regulated world commerce are gaining strength. The protests at the

Seattle World Trade Organization meeting, in which the AFL-CIO was a key participant, not only prevented the WTO from accomplishing its trade-liberalizing agenda, but also so frightened the world's captains of finance and industry that their following meeting, in Switzerland in January, was almost entirely occupied with Seattle.

The day ends for David on an upbeat note. First, he finds something he recognizes on the hotel restaurant's dinner menu: chicken tacos. Then, as he rises to walk outside for a cigarette, a waiter hands him an ashtray.

"You can smoke in a restaurant here?" he asks, gratefully lighting up and exhaling luxuriously. "Well, that's one good thing about Mexico."

Manuel finishes eating and rises to go. So what about the guy who has David's old job? we ask him.

"Tomorrow," he says with a courtly bow. "Tomorrow we will find him."

In the morning, David is unusually talkative. He saw a rock band on Mexican MTV that he really liked – Los Estrambóticos – and he wants to find their CD. And talking yesterday about the weakness of the AFL-CIO has got him thinking about his old union.

“We once had a vote on whether us entry-level guys should get a raise, and it lost,” he says, sipping his breakfast Coke. “You had to vote before your shift started, which means these guys got out of bed a half hour early to vote against their fellow union members getting a raise! They said, ‘If I’m not getting a raise, why should the entry-level guys get one?’ ” He shudders and lights a cigarette. David doesn’t use foul language, but the memory makes him mad enough to resort to euphemism. “F-ing a-holes,” he mutters. “Union guys getting out of bed early to burn other union guys,” he says. “No wonder the AFL-CIO is weak.”

Finding David’s old job is a slow process in a world with few phones and much suspicion. Manuel is inching us closer, but it's clear that an American journalist interested in their plight is an unusual thing, so he's making the most of it. Right now he has assembled a small group of people who used to work in a Breed steering-wheel plant. They’re waiting for us in a musty print shop, crowded around a cast-iron press that looks old enough to have crossed the ocean with Cortés. It’s bitter cold. Martha Ojeida of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, an ally of Manuel’s, runs the meeting like an orchestra conductor on speed, pointing to each worker in turn to elicit his or her story. Sitting among the lead slabs of type and boxes of smeary, half-finished business cards, we hear in detail from Sylvia, who was bullied back to work by her own corrupt union when she tried to complain about being sick from chemicals; from Mathias and Christina, a young couple whose baby lived only two days; and from Ezekiel, whose baby was born without a brain.

David lets out a sigh like a locomotive clearing its brakes, and everybody turns to look at him.

“Sorry,” he says, though it isn’t clear whether he’s apologizing for the interruption or for being a comfortable white person in a roomful of suffering brown ones.

Toribio Rezendis speaks last. He’s a solid forty-two-year-old with strong Indian features who migrated from the state of Veracruz to sew leather covers on steering wheels. “Like Gorda,” he says. “Only I did it for nine and a half years.” His arms are immobilized by repetitive stress, so he not only can’t pantomime the work the way Gorda did, he can’t do any work at all. His elbows are so disfigured that out-of-place tendons are visible through the skin, and his arms hang at his sides, useless. “If I’d stayed home,” he says, “at least I’d still be able to work.”

Toribio asks David why some American workers feel the Mexicans have “stolen” their jobs.

David doesn’t even glance over for help with translation; his Spanish is limbering up. “I guess because they don’t know you,” he says. “They only think about what they lost. . . .”

Martha suddenly thrusts her face into David’s and yells, “We’re not the enemies, guys!”

David jumps and scrambles back against the wall. “Yeah,” he warbles, “yeah, I know, yeah.” By the end of the meeting he’s shuffling like a man in irons, as though he’s dragging the burden of the Mexicans’ stories. It’s been a gloomy morning, and we’re no closer to finding David’s old job than we were the previous night.

Lunch – chicken tacos – perks David up enough to make for a music store. The posters in the window are of guys in embroidered sombreros the size of satellite dishes – an unlikely place to find a rock band – but David wants to try. As he pushes open the door, he’s rehearsing his Spanish. “They’re like the Ramones, doing ska. They’re like the Ramones, doing ska.” The woman behind the counter just arches her heavily painted eyebrows. Ramonays? Ska?

Manuel is waiting to take us that afternoon to meet someone named Alma, “who might know someone in the Breed plant.” The afternoon is a horrific detour through a squatter camp that has grown from a garbage dump. The shortage of housing in Matamoros is so acute that 2,000 families live here. Shacks made of tar paper, tin, and scrap wood stand amid mountains of plastic bags full of reeking refuse. The families live without electricity, water, sewage, transportation or schools. Running through the camp is a creek that serves as an open sewer for maquiladoras upstream. A ghastly yellow liquid is flowing from a pipe into the creek just yards from where children are buying tamales from a cart, and the air is thick with stinging fumes. These people, Manuel points out, aren’t the poorest of the poor, because most of these families have at least one member working in the maquiladoras.

Manuel's extended tour of maquiladoraland isn't just for our education – though the repetition of brutal scenes and tragic stories is working its effect – but but it's also a way for him to check us out, to see if we're worth helping to our goal of finding David's counterpart. Alma doesn't know anyone from the Breed plant, but apparently we have passed muster. As we leave the dump, Manuel is grinning like a pirate. David's old job isn't in Matamoros at all, he says, and it's clear he knew it all along. The job went about an hour away, he says, to a factory in Valle Hermoso. Manuel graciously presents us with a scrap of napkin bearing the name of an activist there who can help us.

"Good luck," he beams, as we squeeze into a taxi held together with baling wire and Virgin Mary stickers. The drive is an unremitting nightmare of shattered pavement and suicidal dogs, and as we bounce along, David shares another memory that the events of the day have jarred loose.

"Right after the factory closed, I was having dinner with my uncle, who's a real right-winger. He said, 'Do you think they'd have closed that factory if it wasn't union?' As though it was the union's fault." David shakes his head at the idea. "But you know," he goes on, "when they announced they were closing the factory, the union did nothing. Everybody just ran off to find his own job."

Actually, his uncle might have a point. David's local didn't have the strength to protect itself, but the fact that the plant was unionized might have helped motivate Breed to move

the jobs. Half of the companies recently surveyed by Cornell University said they use the threat of moving to Mexico to fight off union organizing drives, and one in six actually closed all or part of a plant when forced to bargain with a union. David and his co-workers may have had just enough of a union to induce Breed to close the plant, but not enough of one to stop Breed from doing so.

The taxi driver leaves us in downtown Valle Hermoso, a ragged little town of cracked cement storefronts huddled in a chilling winter rain. We kill an hour eating chicken tacos and then wander the grimy streets, trying record stores for Los Estrambóticos. "Es como los Ramones haciendo ska!" David keeps saying, but he gets nowhere.

Late that night we finally find the guy whose name is scribbled on the napkin; he turns out to be, at first glance, a boy of fourteen. In fact, Pedro Lopez is twenty, but his baby face and slicked-down hair give him the look of an altar boy. He lives with his mother in a decent if simple cement house, with electricity and plumbing. There's even a bookshelf, with three books on it: Mexican Labor Law, a Spanish-English dictionary, and the Holy Bible. Pedro's tougher than he looks – when he was only seventeen, he helped lead a long and brutal strike against a Canadian steering-wheel factory that ended when the workers filed charges. Two years later, the Mexican government decided in the workers' favor, but the victory was moot – by then the company had changed hands. The new owner was Breed Technologies, Inc., which had just closed its plant in Fort Wayne, Indiana, so it could move the jobs down here.

Pedro and David suffered on both ends of the same deal. And Pedro knows just the guy we're looking for.

The guy who got David's job never knew that David – or someone like him – even existed. It never occurred to him until now that for him to get a job, somebody up north had to lose one.

Alejandro Morales is seventeen, a decade David Quinn's junior. A wispy mustache tries, without much success, to make him look older, and a shiny pompadour adds intensity to his deep, dark eyes. Most striking, though, is his remarkable calm. He's willing to talk on the record, and risk being fired, because, like David, he dreams of a life beyond the factory. Every day after his eight-hour shift, he attends high school until eleven at night.

We sit on upturned paint buckets and sacks of cement outside the shack that he shares with his father, an aging longhair named José Angel. To Alejandro, the idea that this portly blond guy had once done his same job, and now had come looking for it is almost too much to believe. They explore each other tentatively by talking a little shop.

"I spray the mold with mold-release and a layer of paint," Alejandro says evenly. "I close it, and inject the polyurethane. Then I open it up, and hand it behind me to a man who trims it with a knife. I make twenty wheels an hour."

“What does the mold look like?”

“Like a big clamshell,” Alejandro says. “Comes up to about here.” He indicates his chest.

“That’s it exactly,” David says, slapping his knees. He asks if Alejandro’s factory has eye-wash stations, which the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration required Breed to have in Indiana.

“No.”

“How about hearing protectors?”

“No.”

“Gloves?”

“Only sometimes.”

“Jeez,” David says to me. “Those wheels are so hot when they come out of the mold that sometimes I’d have to wear two pairs.” He turns to Alejandro. “How do you handle a wheel without gloves?”

“Rapidly,” Alejandro answers, without irony. Then it’s his turn; he asks David what it was like when the company moved.

“I’d come in to my shift,” David says, “and every night there’d be another mold pulled off the line, mounted on a pallet and shrink-wrapped. On the side, someone would have written ‘Mexico’ in big black letters. It was like watching your job get shipped away right in front of your eyes.” A thought strikes him. “You’re not only doing the same job, you’re probably using the same mold!”

Alejandro pulls out a pay slip. His base pay for forty-eight hours is 274.68 pesos, or about twenty-nine dollars. To that are added bonuses for punctuality, perfect attendance and productivity; subtracted are union dues and taxes, leaving take-home pay of 459 pesos, or forty-eight dollars a week. A dollar an hour. Company transportation to and from work costs about a dollar a day, and lunch in the company cafeteria another dollar, so Alejandro’s net is closer to thirty-six dollars a week, or 75 cents an hour.

“I made $10.49 an hour,” David tells him, and Alejandro, who has maintained a gelid blankness until now, grimaces as though zapped with a cattle prod. “Dollars or pesos?” he asks.

“Dollars,” David says. “We thought they were getting a pretty good deal off our labor, but here!” He sits back, puts his hands on his knees, and, in English, exclaims, “Fuckin’ A!”

They do a little math together. According to what David's union told him, Breed charged about ten dollars for each wheel it sold to GM, Ford or Chrysler. A Breed worker, in that case, whether American or Mexican, makes $200 worth of product an hour. So David got five percent of the value of each wheel he made. Alejandro gets one half of one percent. That simple difference – to say nothing of freedom from effective unions, OSHA and the Environmental Protection Agency – is why companies move jobs to Mexico.

Another thing Alejandro doesn't know is that his employer has recently filed for bankruptcy. Not even the employees' rumor mill picked that one up, he says.

We rise to say our goodbyes to Alejandro and his father. As we do, David leans over and takes José Angel by the arm.

"Somos hermanos en la lucha," he says, looking deep into the startled man's eyes. We are brothers in the struggle. The older man grasps David's hand and shakes it warmly.

"Hermanos," he says.

The moment surprises everyone a little, David included. He fumbles with his glasses for a moment, then punches himself into his nylon Steeler's jacket, zips up, and says something about needing to buy a pair of silver earrings for Alyssa before going back across the border. Already this trip is receding into the past for him. But there's an

implicit promise in his farewell to José Angel that he won't forget what he's seen here, that he won't allow flesh-and-blood Alejandro to return, in his mind, to "some Mexican" who got his job. Right before leaving, he turns back for a moment to Alejandro, and they stand, foreheads almost touching, talking too quietly to hear from a distance. Then a snatch of their conversation makes its way across the yard.

"They're like the Ramones," David says, "doing ska."

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One shouldn't judge the entire maquiladora program by those in Matamoros and Valle Hermoso, says Martha Tovar, president of Solunet Inc., an El Paso-based firm that does market research for companies that do business with the maquiladoras. "Matamoros is a very troubled place for maquiladoras, perhaps because there is lots of union activity there," according to Tovar. "Overall you just don't hear of the problems like you do in that region." [LET'S CUT THIS PARAGRAPH]

Unions worldwide used to begin their meetings by singing "The International," the workers' anthem of global solidarity. Nowadays, it is capital that sings that tune. Fort

Wayne and Valle Hermoso find themselves bound to each other by way of a Florida-based corporation named Breed and its partners in Berlin, who balance the products they make in Mexico and Indiana with those they make in Spain, Finland and Hungary for clients in Michigan, Italy and Tokyo so they can repay lenders in Canada and North Carolina and shareholders worldwide. Breed's president, Charles J. Speranzella Jr., earned more than three quarters of a million dollars in 1998, a year when the company lost money and was heading for bankruptcy, a year when Alejandro would have earned less than $2,000. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, during the richest years in American history, employees of American corporations are living and working under medieval conditions, and if the barons of the World Trade Organization have anything to say about it, the process will only accelerate.

It's illegal in most countries for U.S. unions to organize. But the UAW is helping Manuel's organization compile data on repetitive stress injuries. The United Electrical Workers is supporting the formation of a new, independent federation of militant unions in Mexico. The Steelworkers Union last year signed a formal alliance with a Uruguayan union to help it stand up to Titan International Inc., which has tire factories not only in South America but also in Europe, India and the United States.64

What goes around comes around; when a member of the Electrical Workers union was fired by a Wisconsin company during an organizing drive, the Japanese labor federation Zenroren, which has an alliance with the Electrical Workers, was able to pressure the parent company in Japan to lean on its Wisconsin subsidiary to reinstate him. When Titan

International tried to send employees from Uruguay to its Des Moines plant to break a strike, the Uruguayans refused.

Such global thinking is new for the American labor movement, which turned insular during the Cold War and timid in the face of Reaganism. But even the creaky old AFL-CIO is starting to rouse. In February, the federation took two big steps in the direction of cross-border solidarity. First, the AFL-CIO reversed its fifteen-year-old support of tough immigration laws and criminalizing businesses that hire undocumented Mexicans. "The world has changed," a senior federation official said, announcing the AFL-CIO's new support for a general amnesty for millions of Mexicans illegally working in the United States and the people who hire them. Then AFL-CIO president John Sweeney embarrassed the Clinton administration by walking out on its effort to ease trade barriers with China. Sweeney said he didn't trust the government to consider workers' interests in trade policy. The AFL-CIO would never use these words, but the organizing principle of its future might be summed up as, "workers of the world, unite."

Los Estrambóticos do indeed exist, and their CD is available on the Internet. A clip is available, too, and they sound like . . . the Ramones doing ska. I send the CD to David, then give him a call. Alyssa has to call him in from the freezing sidewalk, where he's retreated to smoke a cigarette out range of their daughter's lungs.

With the economy as strong as it is, David has found a new job in a stainless-steel pot-and-pan factory in Fort Wayne, earning $12.50 an hour plus union benefits. So he and Alyssa have started talking once again about buying a house, and he’s window-shopping for guitars. He’s happy to be working union again, but he knows the job is unlikely to last, that the factory will pull up stakes when it decides to make saucepans cheaper in Reynosa or Shanghai. Perhaps the most important change in David is that where once he shrugged his shoulders in helpless resignation, now he’s bitching about his local.

“We have these nickel-grabbers in the union here, that’s what I call them,” he says. “They only care about what they’re going to get, each one for himself. ‘He got more overtime than me,’ that kind of thing.”

He says the trip to Mexico was an incredible experience, but he doesn’t know how he can get across to his co-workers that a bunch of poor brown people on the other side of a tall fence are their hermanos en la lucha.

“They wouldn’t even listen,” he says. “They wouldn’t know what I was talking about.”