

4-28-2006

Buenos Aires Shops After Deadly Fire

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Buenos Aires Shops After Deadly Fire." (2006). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13480>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Buenos Aires Shops After Deadly Fire

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Argentina

Published: 2006-04-28

A deadly March 30 fire in a Buenos Aires sweatshop threw public light on the thousands of Bolivian immigrants living clandestinely in Argentina who work under slave-labor conditions. When the government conducted a crackdown on illegal operations in April, many Bolivians protested that they wanted to keep working, but with legalized status and humane conditions. In the following weeks, the government began efforts to normalize the immigration status of undocumented people living in Argentina.

The March 30 fire in the outlying Buenos Aires neighborhood of Caballito killed six people inside a textile factory. Four children were among the dead, two of whom were three years old, another was 10, and the fourth was 15, according to Federal Police. The other two victims were Bolivian women between the ages of 25 and 45. More than 4,000 Bolivians work in slave conditions. The blaze illuminated a large network of illegal factories where thousands of undocumented workers toil in conditions that federal officials characterized as "virtual slavery."

In the week following the fire, the government investigated 86 shops and shut down 41 of them for hygiene or safety violations. Officials estimated that 160 of the 1,600 shops that employ Bolivians are clandestine textile factories, in which some 4,000 people labor in semi-slavery conditions, according to Enrique Rodriguez, the Buenos Aires government officer in charge of production activities. Another 11,000 of their compatriots, according to Rodriguez's estimates, work under irregular labor conditions.

Workers' wages do not go above 400 pesos (US\$133) per month and work days are as long as 15 hours, but often workers do not see their pay because the bosses threaten to turn them in to the authorities or promise to pay them all the money at once, according to Argentine newspaper Pagina 12. Many workers are contracted in Bolivia with false promises, and, once they are in Argentina, the employers subject them to extortion, using their illegal status as leverage against them.

An April 4 story in the newspaper Clarin reported that the government had, at that time, closed 18 shops where 45 families had been living. In one location, 60 people were living in 1.5 sq meter cubicles, divided only by cardboard, according to a city official. "And all were using a nauseating bathroom," she said. Responding to reporters' questions, the official said, "What impacted me most? The fear they had of us. They are panicked that they will be deported. The majority of them do not want to talk nor to identify the bosses or who is responsible." In the location she described, there were fewer beds than people and evidently some worked while others slept.

A governmental mission from Bolivia confirmed on April 13 that Bolivian immigrants were subjected to degrading conditions in Argentina's textile sweatshops, but it did not verify complaints of slavery. Hector Arce, vice minister of governmental coordination, said members of his commission visited Buenos Aires shops, and "we have confirmed the that situation our Bolivian

brothers and sisters are subjected to in some shops is, if not at slavery levels, then at levels of servitude and degradation of human dignity that are not acceptable."

Arce's commission agreed that the Argentine and Buenos Aires governments should force the shops to legalize their operations but said that officials should stop the series of closures that were "leaving our Bolivian brothers and sisters without work." "Many Bolivians come from the country and are exploited here," said Rodriguez. "We want to regularize their situation. That way, after making a census of the shops, the proprietors will have 15 days to put everything in order. If not, they will be closed."

Immigrants protest for legalization, fair working conditions

The deaths of the six immigrants and the factory shutdowns galvanized a protest movement of Bolivian workers who feared that they would not have any jobs left after the crackdown, though they also called for "dignified" jobs. "Here no Bolivians exploit their compatriots," said one Bolivian woman who identified herself as Norma and was part of the protests, along with her three small children. "We are victims of the large textile businesses that take advantage of the impossibility of us regularizing our situation."

Norma, an undocumented person, called for "another amnesty" for those in her situation since "no money reaches" Bolivian immigrants who want residency and "dignified work." "We want to defend our sources of legitimate work," said a community leader who did not identify herself as her group formed a picket line on the Avenida de Mayo, near the capital building in downtown Buenos Aires. In the first week of April, repeated protests of 1,500 to 3,000 Bolivians took to the city center to reject "exploitation."

Reporters said they saw signs reading, "Don't rob us, we want to work," and cries from protestors that "Koreans and Jews are exploiters," referring to the owners of the small clothing factories. Jorge Kim, representing the Korean Businessperson's Association of Argentina, described the workers' denunciations as unfair and said the businesspeople were in the same boat as the immigrants.

A former director of immigration control said he resigned from his post last year after he tired of being unable to investigate clandestine sweatshops that residents of the Floresta zone of the city had reported. Carlos Sapere, former head of the Departamento de Control de Permanencia of the Direccion Nacional de Migraciones (DNM), said he was unable to investigate 129 shops because he came up against an endless set of impediments. Among them were a lack of inspectors to conduct control operations and a superior's order that he do nothing. "In May of last year we had 129 reports of clandestine shops to investigate. During the 39 days I was in my post, I applied on repeated occasions for the opportunity to count on at least 12 inspectors in order to act. The funny thing is I had only two, but assigned to other projects. That is, I had no inspectors to visit the shops." He said when his boss ordered him to not to visit the shops and would not authorize any inspections, he decided to resign after 19 years in the DNM.

Government hopes to normalize immigration status of 750,000

By mid-April, the government said it hoped to regularize 750,000 undocumented immigrants living in the country within three months, although its early efforts barely finished documentation for 300. DNM director Ricardo Rodriguez said that between 700,000 and 1 million undocumented people of different nationalities are living in Argentina, most from neighboring Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile. "This situation has two origins: those who relocate illegally to look for a better place, and the others, those who are tricked in their countries of origin by various advertisements, but when they get here they don't get any of what had been promised," said Rodriguez. "Only 54,000 Bolivians received legal papers in the last 11 years."

The large border between the two countries and Bolivia's extreme poverty make Argentina a relatively attractive destination for Bolivians. "Our border is very permeable because of the vast territory it covers," said Rodriguez. "The only way to reverse this situation is to return an identity to these citizens. Until 2004, Argentina was like a factory of undocumented people."

Authorities launched an unprecedented campaign to register migrant workers following the fire. Long lines formed outside government offices and several consulates in the Argentine capital on April 17, as a free legalization program for immigrants seeking to work legally in Argentina was set up after two weeks of debate by Buenos Aires lawmakers and the protests by Bolivian factory employees. The government said about 10,000 attended the April 17 registration drive, although only 300 obtained legal-residency status that day by successfully getting a certificate of temporary residency (*residencia precaria*). The DNM said it hoped to regularize the status of thousands of immigrants through the *Patria Grande* program, which would include only residents from some of the countries that are members or associates in the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR). Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru are the MERCOSUR countries that have the most citizens living in Argentina.

While the certificate of residency is not permanent or definitive, it will allow immigrants to open bank accounts, rent a place to live, and obtain legal employment. Applicants need to present two passport photos and their passport from their home country. Previously, to receive a permanent residency, there were greater requirements. Similar situation in Sao Paulo, Brazil Brazilian authorities found a similar situation for thousands of Bolivians living in Sao Paulo earlier this year.

The Public Ministry said something like 100,000 Bolivians live in Greater Sao Paulo, an industrial metropolis of 18 million inhabitants. The Brazilian authorities say that many end up enslaved with 14-hour workdays, miserable wages, and no form of social protection. The majority are employed in the city's textile-assembly sector. The government set up an amnesty program to normalize the immigration status of the Bolivians in-country, with the aim of reducing their vulnerability to abuses.

"It is very important that there be the highest number of applicants to the [amnesty program], given that the undocumented Bolivians end up subjected to working conditions very close to slavery," said the regional prosecutor for citizens' rights in Sao Paulo, Sergio Suiama. The government presented a provision whereby all Bolivians who arrived in Brazil prior to Aug. 15, 2005, could legalize their status and obtain permanent residency by presenting a list of documents at Federal Police headquarters before March 15.

In early February, a Public Ministry spokesperson anticipated that there would be something like 30,000 Bolivians, then without correct papers, applying to the program.

-- End --