

SWEATSHOP

UNDERCOVER IN
THE GARMENT
INDUSTRY

A reprint of a series
published in the
**Los ANGELES
HERALD
EXAMINER**



MERLE LINDA WOLIN is a staff writer for the Los Angeles Herald Examiner.

On Tuesday, April 22, 1980, she went undercover, becoming Merlina De Novais, a Spanish-speaking illegal immigrant from Brazil. Dressed in the clothes of a poor Latin seamstress, a medal of the Virgin Mary around her neck, she knocked on the door of a randomly chosen sewing shop in the garment district of Los Angeles.

It was the beginning of the Herald Examiner's 8-month investigation of California's \$3.5 billion garment industry.

Wolin got jobs in several Los Angeles sewing factories, tolerating conditions she described as "worse than I ever imagined in this country. If I hadn't been there, I would not have believed it."

Like thousands of garment workers in the state, she was paid less than minimum wage,

was eyewitness to blatant violations of health codes and felt firsthand the fear and oppression of laborers unprotected by current laws.

For nine full days of work, she was paid a total of \$71.24.

Wolin traced the garments she sewed from the factories to the manufacturers and, eventually, to the shining storefronts of Beverly Hills.

In more than 150 interviews, she sought to unravel the

horrible mystery of why this state's garment industry, which is based in Los Angeles and is growing at a pace that rivals that of the apparel business in New York, functions with few controls to the disadvantage of its workers.

Her 16-part story was published in the Herald Examiner from January 14 to February 1. The full text also appeared in La Opinion, the Spanish daily.

**Los ANGELES
HERALD EXAMINER**

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UNDERCOVER IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

When the Herald Examiner began its investigation of the California garment industry last year, staff writer Merle Linda Wolin posed as a poor, Spanish-speaking, and illegal garment worker. In a transformation startling even to her fellow journalists, she took on the character of Merlina De Novais, a Brazilian immigrant with limited skills.

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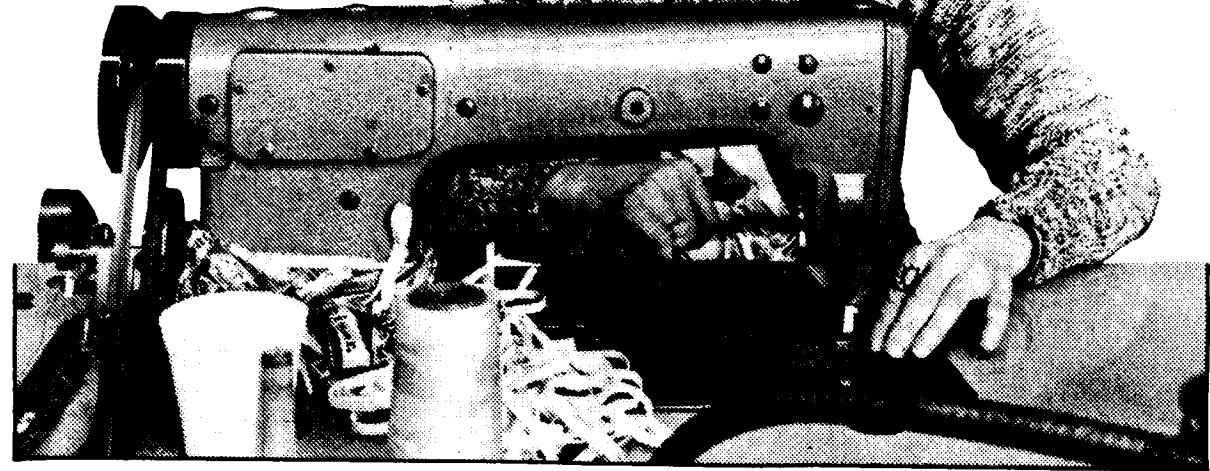
Today the Herald Examiner begins her saga, a 16-part investigative journey into the \$3.5 billion California apparel industry. Her story will lead you through the entire industry, from the dingy factories to the glittery clothes racks. Along the way, you will meet everyone from the frightened immigrant workers, to the swank manufacturers, the corporate heads of large department stores, and the government officials who have jurisdiction over the industry, including Mayor Tom Bradley and Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr.

The Herald Examiner sought to discover why this particular industry is so rife with labor and health code violations and what can be done to stop them. After more than 150 interviews, surprising but clear lines of responsibility emerge.

Here is Wolin's story.

En un proyecto periodístico mancomunado, esta serie de 16 partes sobre la industria de la costura aparecerá en La Opinión todos los días, con excepción del sábado. La traducción castellana de cada artículo saldrá un día después de publicada su versión original en inglés en el Herald Examiner

In a joint publishing effort, this 16-part series on the garment industry will be published every day except Saturday in La Opinión, Los Angeles' Spanish-language daily. The Spanish translation of each article will run one day after the original English version appears in the Herald Examiner.



Chapter 1

Merlina's job in Oscar Herrera's factory

By Merle Linda Wolin
Herald Examiner staff writer
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It was almost 5 p.m. on a Tuesday when I stepped out of the elevator onto the factory room floor. I stood quietly, looking anxiously to both sides of the now empty sewing shop. Near the entrance, a dark-haired man in a white T-shirt stood working at a long, wooden table piled high with red cloth. His name: Oscar Herrera, owner of the shop. Late afternoon light filtered through the rows of sooty windows that formed one entire wall of the large production room. He motioned for me.

"Venga venga! Come here!" he said in Spanish. "What are you looking for?"

"Busco trabajo. I am looking for work," I said nervously.

"Do you know how to sew?" he countered.

I nodded yes, not wanting to lie outright. He told me they had work and that if I could make this jacket — he walked over to a rack of clothes and held up a white blazer — and this dress — he held up a short-sleeved, red one — I could have a job.

It was surprisingly easy. I felt a

rush of success and worked hard to suppress it.

I was, after all, posing as a poor and traditional Latin woman, a frightened illegal alien who would not dream of expressing her emotions to a stranger, much less to a man in a powerful position. His reaction to her could make the difference between eating a balanced meal the next day or spending more time on the streets looking for work.

"How much will I make?" I asked timidly.

"It depends on you," he replied. "The faster you work, the more money you make. It's piece work." Then, looking at me quizzically, he asked, "What is your native language?" He seemed puzzled by my accent. "French?"

"No. Portuguese. I'm from Brazil."

"OK. Work begins promptly at 7:30 a.m. Hasta mañana."

It was my first experience as an undercover, illegal garment worker. And it was the beginning of a special eight-month Herald Examiner investigation into the California garment industry, a business so riddled with labor and health code violations that many government officials claim it is the "dirtiest in the state."

Transforming a fair-skinned,

green-eyed Jewish reporter into Merlina De Novais, a poor, illegal Brazilian worker required study. The workers in the Los Angeles garment industry, estimated at nearly 125,000, are mostly Spanish-speaking Latins from Mexico and Central America or Asians, most of whom come from Korea and Taiwan. Each ethnic group tends to stick together. Unless you speak their language and dress like them, it is virtually impossible to penetrate beyond the surface of polite conversation.

I could not pass as a Mexican or Central American because I speak Spanish with a blurred French accent (my first foreign language was French) and posing as an Asian was, of course, out of the question. Brazil seemed a safe place to be from: Very few (if any) Brazilians work in the garment industry and claiming that Portuguese was my native tongue would explain my rather strange Spanish accent. If I were asked to speak Portuguese, I would make up words or smile evasively.

As for sewing, I consider myself a fairly skilled home seamstress. When I was young, I learned how to make clothes, drapes and bedspreads in a 4-H club in Chey-

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UNDERCOVER IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

Continued from page A-1

enne, Wyo. I often won blue ribbons for my work at the Laramie County Fair. But my previous training was totally inadequate for working as a professional seamstress. I knew nothing about the industrial machines of the garment district. They are, I soon discovered, large, powerful, and potentially dangerous. Their capacity for speed made my home machine seem like a toy.

My transformation from journalist to garment worker took approximately five hours. Silvia Botello, a Mexican-born colleague from Spanish language radio station KALI, accompanied me to El Plojito (the little flea), officially known as the Westlake Outlet, a huge discount department store at the corner of Seventh and Alvarado streets. I was told that here many poor Latinos shop for clothes and household goods.

Together we rummaged through the large bins of cheap, foreign-made 100 percent polyester clothing. You may not try on the clothes. Sizes come in small, medium and large. The price was right: lime-green stretch-fabric trousers, \$5.99; a red and green floral, loose-fitting drawstring blouse, \$3.99; imitation brown leather, front-laced walking shoes, \$4.99. The most expensive item, a heavy, acrylic blue and white tweedlike cardigan, \$7.99.

After I selected a large, light brown handbag, a bright red plastic wallet, several Catholic prayer cards, a small note pad, a gold-looking ring and bracelet, and a minimal supply of brown-toned eye shadow, mascara, rouge and lipstick, I was ready to go.

For luck, Silvia Botello loaned me a gold medal of the Virgin Mary. From here on, it would hang noticeably around my neck.

Work begins early in the garment industry. By 6 a.m. city buses are packed with sewing machine operators, ironers, cutters and trimmers heading for downtown. Workers travel from as far as El Monte to the east and Sunland to the north. Many carry their lunches in brown paper bags. There is little conversation.

By the time I arrived for work at Herrera's shop, most of the other workers were already settled into the day's routine. Herrera waved me into the factory. He showed me to a single-needle sewing machine, one of 16 organized in two rows facing each other. I sat down on a bare metal chair.

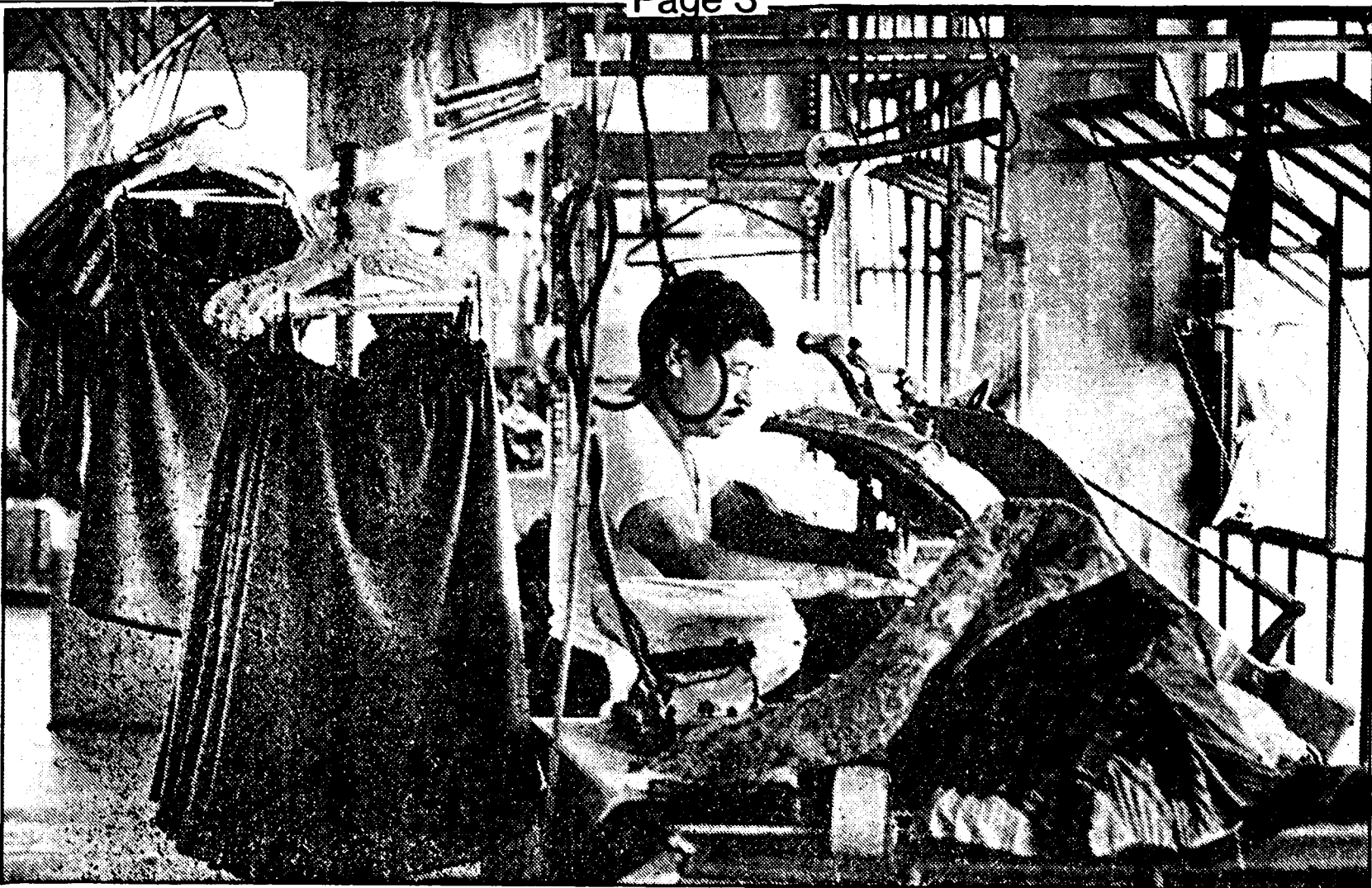
In front of me was a large, gray industrial machine, a Japanese-made Juki. None of the workers openly acknowledged my presence. There were several side glances, never long enough to break the dull rhythm of metal hitting metal. Over it all, upbeat Latin music — disco, pop and salsa — was piped in from a radio tuned to Spanish language station KLVE-FM.

My first impression: I was struck by the number of men who worked in the factory. It appeared that the industry's work force, once nearly all female, has expanded to include equal numbers of men. Most of the approximately 25 employees in the shop were of Latin descent, Mexican or Central American. There was one older black American woman. I saw no Anglos. I heard no English.

A dark-eyed, rather plump, middle-aged Latin woman approached my work station. She is Martha Herrera, the owner's wife, who works in the shop as the *mayorduma*, or shop supervisor. She gave me a small pile of white polyester cloth panels and another pile of small rectangular pieces of the same cloth.

The trick, she explained, was to pin and sew the small pieces, the pockets, to the larger panels. No price for the labor was discussed. The job was easier said than done. After little more than two hours, Martha returned to my station. The pockets, she said, were too difficult. She would give me easier work.

Now, she explained, my task would be straight-line sewing. She wanted the manufacturer's labels — this one was Oops Inc. — sewed into strips of cloth that later would become a dress collar. Then she wanted the collar and the neck-piece stitched together. Again, no



Oscar Herrera, owner of the downtown Los Angeles shop where reporter Merle Linda Wolin toiled undercover as Merlina De Novais.

mention of price.

For the rest of the day, until 4:30 p.m., I worked diligently at the machine. From my vantage point in the factory, I observed the interactions of the workers and got a feel for life in the shop.

At 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. a bell rang, signaling the beginning of a 10-minute break. Unless someone happened to announce it was the beginning of time off, there was no way to know. Few of the workers stop working. Several of the young men, however, did walk to the far side of the factory floor to smoke cigarettes and talk. A few took the elevator seven floors down to the street and came up moments later with steaming-hot coffee in white, Styrofoam cups.

At noon sharp, most of the workers walked back to the lunchroom, a small, dingy room at the opposite end of the factory. One long table with two picnic benches on either side filled the space. On top of the table, a dirty sheet of clear plastic, stained with cigarette burns and old coffee cup marks covered a grayish piece of salmon-colored cloth. Diffused light made it through the surrounding soot-blackened windows.

The workers had lined up their brown paper lunch bags in a row down the middle of the table. Several people hovered over an old portable broiler oven set on a small table in the corner. They rotated the position of the small tin-foil pouches on the broiler, making sure each one was heated, while some of their co-workers joked and laughed at the table.

Others quietly read *La Opinion*, Los Angeles' Spanish-language daily. A woman whom I had seen working at one of the machines in the morning now prepared lunch for the elderly man who worked directly across from me in the shop. Later, I learned they were father and daughter and that he, like me, was just a beginner.

Nearly every worker's lunch consisted of two or three tortillas with a dollop of rice or beans. A few brought hot chilies or spiced carrots, but I saw no other food. People ate directly out of the foil pouches. Like poor people from rural areas in Mexico, no utensils were used. The younger workers, who seemed to have more money to spend during the day, perhaps because they have fewer financial responsibilities at home, drank from cans of Coca-Cola or 7-Up. The rest went without a beverage.

During the meal, a klatch of younger men held a good-humored discussion about the relative merits of Mexican, Salvadoran and Guatemalan beer and engaged each other in general light-hearted banter. One was determined to draw me out.

"You're new here," he said. "How do you like the work? What is your name? Where are you from?"

The rest of the workers stopped talking. They, too, wanted to know more about this new person in their midst.

"I'm from Brazil," I said shyly, trying to suppress a smile.

"Oh! I hear that life is getting better down there," said another, obviously trying to impress his co-workers with his worldly knowledge. "Politically, it's more open and I understand that life is going up. Is that true?"

I shrugged my shoulders. A person from my supposed background would not know much about national politics. A young female sewing machine operator came to my rescue.

"Leave her alone, you guys," she admonished. "If life was getting better there, do you think this poor woman would be here?" It was the

end of the discussion.

The physical condition of the plant did not seem intolerable. The eating area was less than sanitary, but the bathrooms in the shop were clean. Unlike other sewing shops where I eventually worked, there was toilet paper.

Bottled water was available but without cups. When a worker generously offered me a drink of water, I took a few nervous gulps from his cup. He seemed unaware of the possible consequences — respiratory illnesses, even hepatitis — of sharing water with a stranger.

During the first afternoon, I was impressed by what seemed to be an *esprit de corps* in the factory. The daughter came over to her father's side several times to ask him how he felt. Once, she brought him a pillow to sit on. Other workers regularly asked each other how it was going. People were kind and helpful to each other. The owners also seemed more like the workers, not like taskmasters who cracked the whip.

Also, I was amused by some of the homespun traveling salesmen who added a bit of color and spectacle to an otherwise gray day. Twice during our work, a Spanish-speaking food vendor walked up, and down the factory room floor, hawking produce and sweets.

"Strawberries! Candies! Buy them here!" he shouted above the noise, waving his goods in the air. It seemed like an unlikely setting for a sales technique that I had always associated with rodeos.

One woman asked him how much a bag of hard candies cost. "\$1.75," he said.

"Hah!" she replied with a hearty laugh. "It must be a joke! Who can afford that?"

At the end of the day, Oscar Herrera came to inspect my work. He told me it was very bad, I had wasted electricity. He said if the manufacturers saw the work, they would not pay him for mine or for any of the garments. That is why, he explained, poor work from one of us blows the whistle on everyone else.

I felt terrible. I apologized but I also explained that the *senora* had seen my work in progress and OK'd it. I told him I would rip the work apart the next morning. He agreed.

Oscar and Martha Herrera glared at me when I stepped off the elevator in the morning and sheepishly entered the factory. "I came to work," I said in a hush. "Your work was not very good, *senorita*," said Martha. "It has to be done over."

"I know," I replied. "That's why I came back. I'm willing to do it over." The moment was awkward. I stood silently, thinking about untold thousands of unskilled immigrant workers in Los Angeles who, according to U.S. Labor Department officials, get their start in this country in much the same way.

The Herreras did not have the heart to fire me and it was clear that I was not leaving on my own. I kept in mind the fact that I was supposed to be a very poor person, a woman on her own, separated from her husband, desperately trying to feed two young children at home.

Martha looked at her husband. He showed no sign of resistance. She took a deep breath and finally said OK.

For the next two hours, I ripped out the collars without saying a word. The woman who came to my rescue in the lunchroom the day before now sat across from me. Her name is Ana. She evidently saw what happened when I entered the

shop and told me not to worry. "Don't be intimidated," she said warmly. "This kind of work is very slow for everyone. Even for experienced operators it's hard to make money."

"How much money can you make here?" I asked in a whisper, leaning across the machine. "The most I ever made was \$150 a week," she said. "But many weeks, I've only made \$50." She raised her eyebrows as if to ask, "Can you believe it?"

Martha Herrera approached. Ana and I abruptly looked down at our work. Martha handed me a small ticket, on which she wrote: "Six collars at 40¢ each = \$2.40." (Ana had just told me that I should get 45 cents a collar.)

Two dollars and 40 cents for a nine-hour day — plus a few hours the following day! Martha did not include "makeup" pay, required under the law when a worker does not earn minimum wage at the piece rate.

I was shocked. Had I not lived it, I would not have believed workers could make so little in the United States.

Martha and I stood there awkwardly. She said they needed people who could sew perfectly. From the corner of my eye, I could see Ana mouth something to me that I took to mean, "Hang in there." I asked Martha if there was other work I could do.

She did not reply but went to talk to her husband. Several moments later, she motioned to me. She led me to the racks where the nearly finished clothes were hung. She explained that I could button skirts, trim loose threads, do non-sewing tasks for 5 cents a garment. If time permitted, I could practice straight-line sewing at the machines where ultimately I could earn more money.

Whew! I still had a job! As I began to button white polyester skirts with scores of pearl-like buttons on the side opening, many of the other workers came to my new station.

"That's how it is for everyone who just starts," said one, referring to my demotion.

"Don't feel bad, many of us are new to this, too," said another. "You'll get the hang of it."

People introduced themselves

and asked me my name. I began to relax. Unlike many jobs where months can pass before co-workers know each other, people here seemed to go out of their way to ask personal questions.

Where is Brazil? Does everyone there like soccer? How did you get to Los Angeles? Do you have children? How do you say "What time is it" in Portuguese? Nearly everyone welcomed me and offered to help me in my work.

I soon learned the ropes. Besides odd jobs like placing decorative handkerchiefs in blazer pockets, I buttoned, trimmed loose threads, plastic-bagged dresses, tied belt loops, and rolled and pinned cuffs on fancy purple and green blazers. The principal manufacturers' labels I worked on were Oops Inc. and CW II.

Friday was payday. At noon, I waited until nearly everyone had left the lunchroom to ask two of the friendliest workers — one a thin, dark-eyed Guatemalan named Sergio, who operated the buttonhole machine, and the other a jovial Mexican ironer named Javier — if I would get paid without a Social Security card.

"You don't have a card?" asked Sergio with a laugh.

"No," I answered meekly.

"Don't worry," he said. "Just tell the owners you want to be paid in cash. You could have told Martha you didn't have a card. She doesn't care. But never mind. If you want, I'll get you one, a fake one. They are expensive, 50 or 75 dollars. But I have a friend."

"Hijos! You're kidding!" I said. I was shocked at the price. "It cost that much?"

Javier nodded yes. He said that he was using his father's card which had been purchased many years ago for just \$15. "Nothing here is cheap," he said.

I stood there thinking about the dangers of being illegal, what it would be like for someone to have to face the genuine possibilities of losing his or her work or perhaps being deported. It was a frightening thought.

"Please don't say anything to Martha or Oscar," I said, in a tone of voice half-pleading.

"Don't feel any pain about it," said Sergio. "Everything in this life has its solution. If you want the card, let me know. It takes about 15 days for it to come through. Then they (the owners) will pay you by check. But really, don't worry. Nobody here has papers."

Sergio asked me how I entered the United States. When I said I paid a coyote (the Spanish name for a person who smuggles people across the border) to sneak me and my children across the Tijuana border, he laughed and said that every Latino in Los Angeles came in that way.

At the end of the day, Martha distributed paychecks to some of the workers. I noticed Josefina, one of the ironers, look at Martha for a good 30 seconds after she got her check. She was outraged. Her mouth dropped open. I saw the check. \$106 for the week. She showed it to Javier, the other ironer. Her eyes blazed with resentment, but in a style typical of those who have no bargaining power, she did not say a word.

When I was ready to leave for the day, I asked Martha if I could be paid. She explained that normally workers were paid for the previous week's work, but if I was really in need, she would arrange payment with her husband.

I waited in line to speak with Oscar. I showed him my record of the number of garments on which I had worked. One of my bills did not reflect four other tasks on the garment that I also completed, tasks that merited an additional nickel per garment.

Oscar tallied my wages on his small calculator. I noticed that he cheated me on one garment, paying me 4 cents per item rather than 5.

The total: \$24.88 for three nine-hour days. He then asked Martha if I indeed had completed the other tasks. She nodded. He offered to throw in another \$6 to make it \$30 even. He handed me three \$10 bills — all with a smile. No questions about Social Security were asked. Nothing was deducted for tax purposes.

As I waited by the elevator, Martha and her son, Oscar Jr., a grown man who often dropped by, asked me if I was satisfied with my work and pay.

"*Esta bien*, it's all right," I said humbly, but not masking my disappointment. "I just hope I can earn more." Martha went to great pains to assure me that I would get valuable experience in their shop and it would serve me well in the future. She told me I also could work on Saturdays. It was not mandatory, but it was a way to make more money.

I agreed to work the extra day though I knew I would not go back to the shop. Not until I returned as a journalist and confronted them about blatantly violating health and labor codes — such as cockroach and mice infestations, peeling paint on walls and ceilings and minimum wage and overtime practices.

I walked down the stairs with Jose, the elderly man from Mexico who sat across from me at the machines. He told me he, too, was new to the garment district. No, he had not made minimum wage. He never has. He said it was difficult in this life, maybe even worse in the United States than in Mexico. At least in Nayarit, his home state in Central Mexico, no one went without food.

"I have 11 children still in Mexico," he said. They want to come here. But I don't think it's a good idea. Who knows. Maybe I'll make more money in *La Costura*, (the Spanish term for the garment industry). I need to practice. All I can do is hope."

Tomorrow: Another day, another job

How the garment industry works

