



P.O.V.'s "Made in L.A."

By Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar

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Filmmaker's Statement

Like many recent immigrants, I came to this country from my native Spain thinking I'd just be here "for a while." Like most immigrants, I ended up staying.

My personal story would not have had anything to do with **Made in L.A.** if it weren't for the fact that, in the five years the film took to complete, it slowly, unexpectedly, became an intimate portrait of an all-American experience: the struggle of recent immigrants to get a foothold, to learn their rights and to assert their voice in our society.

The project started with a quite different goal: one day I read a newspaper story about sweatshops in Los Angeles. It talked about the deplorable conditions faced by immigrants working in some downtown garment factories: long hours, sub-minimum wage pay (or no pay), unsafe or unsanitary conditions, rats, roaches. I simply couldn't understand how this was possible. I was appalled. I had already made a short documentary and so I set out to make a little film that would expose these issues and that would take about five months to complete. Or so I thought.

I approached Los Angeles' Garment Worker Center, then newly opened, and started spending time there, sometimes filming, often just talking with workers. They were about to launch a campaign against a clothing retailer: a boycott and a lawsuit that would attempt to hold a retailer — Forever 21, which sells trendy clothes at cheap prices — accountable for the conditions where their clothes are made. The energy of those early days was electrifying and I filmed everything that I could. As I started to get to know the workers, I was struck by their need to tell their personal stories. Stories of why they came to this country, of why they were doing garment work, of their hopes and fears for their children. They seemed surprised that I wanted to listen.

A very raw and rare intimacy came out in these moments and is captured in my early footage. Speaking in Spanish, my native language, being a woman, and working almost completely alone gradually inspired trust and allowed me to enter their lives. In order to portray this, I shot the film in an unobtrusive, intimate verité style. I also desired to capture the lyrical beauty and the details of this colorful, diverse Los Angeles that few outsiders experience.

The five months that I had planned to devote to the project passed quickly, and yet I felt that I might only be at the beginning. As the film began to grow, I sought out collaborators and met my producing partner, Robert Bahar. Through our invaluable collaboration, we began to reshape the film from a little documentary on sweatshops to a feature story focusing on the lives of three of the amazing women I encountered at the center: María Pineda, Maura Colorado and Guadalupe "Lupe" Hernandez. I filmed them at home, at the noisy protests with their children, at meetings at the Garment Worker Center, virtually everywhere they'd allow me to follow them. I was so dedicated that Lupe used to tease me: *Little camera, one day you'll leave me alone!*



Early in the filming, the Garment Worker Center launched a national tour to draw attention to their boycott campaign and lawsuit. I followed Lupe to New York, and it was the first time either of us had experienced the Big Apple. While there, Lupe visited the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration. Those two visits are captured in the film and were deeply moving for both of us. Lupe saw pictures of the immigrants who came to New York in the early 20th century. She saw how they lived, how hard they worked, and how they struggled to assert their rights. *It's just like today!* was her immediate, gut reaction.

That moment was an epiphany. She and I suddenly understood that the experience of Latino immigrants today resembles, in so many ways, the experiences of generations of immigrants who have come before them, from so many other places, in other times and through other ports of entry. The same struggle, the same hopes and dreams for a better life, for themselves and their children.

If **Made in L.A.** were to accomplish anything, I would hope that it would provide a deeply human window into this oft-repeated immigrants' struggle. Wouldn't you leave your children, no matter the danger, no matter the pain, in order to send back enough money to feed them, hoping to give them a better life? Wouldn't you work day and night, no matter the physical and emotional drain, if you had four children to raise and you had no other options? And, wouldn't you overcome your fears and stand up one day to demand your rights in the workplace if you were constantly humiliated, underpaid, even spat at? What would you do — or not do — in order to survive?

But what we did not anticipate is that their campaign would take three long years and the story would take another turn. Struggles cause people to change and, as the campaign dragged on, we were amazed to observe each woman's growing sense of self-confidence and self-worth, their agency and empowerment. It then became clear to us that *this* was the real story and that their struggle against Forever 21 mattered not just for its own sake, but because it served as a catalyst for each of their individual stories. The story of María taking control and deciding to leave her husband. The story of Maura learning to cope with her fears and struggling to reunite with her children. The story of Lupe, who grew up feeling ugly and insignificant, becoming an organizer and one day reflecting on her path from atop Victoria's Peak overlooking Hong Kong. **Made in L.A.** is a story about the decision to stand up, to say, *I exist. And I have rights.*

I am humbled and honored to have been allowed to capture this on film. Like María, Maura and Lupe, at the end of a long journey, we all got something that we had never expected.

— Director/Producer/DP Almudena Carracedo