

City garbage is on the move; what, or who, will be left behind?

By Brian Levinson

The Matatlan garbage dump in Tonalá is preparing to close its doors and function as no more than a transfer station. The question is what will happen to the workers — not so much city employees — but the independent *pepenadores* (garbage pickers) who rummage every day in search of salvageable goods.

There are about 800 of them working in Matatlan. They fill rucksacks with aluminum cans, milk cartons, plastic containers and cardboard. The items, cleaned and flattened, are sold to intermediaries, who in turn sell them off to private companies with recycling capabilities.

For the *pepenadores*, garbage is not just a job, but a way of life. Whole families work together. Many live in a small shanty-town on site. They decorate their houses with refuse — fashioning a roof out of a Telcel banner, for example — and sleep on thrown-away blankets.

Daily profits can range from 50 to 200 pesos, which is above the 45-peso minimum daily wage, and the shanty-town residents pay no



Photo by B Levinson

The garbage pickers, or *pepenadores*, of Matatlan search through piles of garbage with their hooked iron *ganchos*. Recyclable items like aluminum cans or plastic bottles are cleaned, stuffed in bags and sold off to intermediaries.

rent. On the other hand, there receive no social security, cannot open a bank account, and public schools are not conveniently located — assuming that many of the children would forgo their daily pay for an education.

There are a surprising number of young *pepenadores* at Matatlan. Alexandre Viviamos Reyes, 11, works with his father and uncle collecting garbage. Asked about school, Viviamos Reyes claimed to attend "*la abierta*" — referring to schools with more flexible hours that normally cater to adult students.

Pepenadores have an odd relationship with the government. By law, they are not allowed to pick garbage. But this is overlooked because they help reduce the amount of waste, and represent an important — if forgotten — sector of the economy.

Which is not to say the government always reciprocates. "The authorities do very little, they don't help us as they should," said Jose Luis Canche Martinez, a Zacatecas native, who has picked garbage at Matatlan for 15 years. National health insurance programs, for example, do not as yet cover informal sector jobs like garbage

picking.

And Matatlan is full of occupational hazards. There are tractors and dump trucks, with poor visibility, that race back and forth across the site. Because the ground is not sturdy, *pepenadores* must also beware of virtual mudslides that pour down the hills. Then there is the disease-laden garbage itself — dirty needles, used toilet paper, sharp and rusty metal.

Biologist Manuel Ramirez Lozano, who works for Guadalajara's Environment and Ecology Department, noticed one *pepenador* bringing discarded blankets back to his home in the shanty-town.

Some of the blankets found in the dump are just old or dirty — "rich people wetting their beds and throwing everything out," said Ramirez — but others come from hospitals, and may carry dangerous viruses like hepatitis, which claimed at least one life last year.

The *pepenadores* do boast a labor union. They pay a small monthly fee, and must flash their card at the entrance to the dump. But it seems the union has failed to limit membership. There are

Garbage from 8

-complaints that individual earnings have dipped in recent years due to an influx of workers.

The bigger threat is the closure of the dump. Within months, Matatlan will operate as a transfer station, leaving perhaps half of the *pepenadores* without any garbage to pick. Some of the displaced workers could be offered more "institutionalized" jobs — only minimum wage, but with benefits — at Las Laureles in Zapopan.

Las Laureles is a newer, cleaner dump with a thick liner along the ground to prevent soil and water contamination. It has begun receiving much of the garbage from Guadalajara, Tonalá and smaller municipalities. (Following the forced closure of the Chapala municipal dump in January, anywhere from 40 to 50 tons are also sent daily from Lakeside.)

Thanks to a rudimentary city recycling program, a percentage of the garbage that arrives in Las Laureles has already been separated into organic, inorganic and sanitary materials (diapers and toilet paper) by residents in 43 colonias in the metropolitan area.

Alonso Delgadillo is Chief of Machinery for CAABSA Eagle, a private firm that directs much of the activity at Las Laureles. He showed how machines were able

to convert the organic materials into compost, free bags of which are periodically awarded to residents who participate in the separation program.

A second facility processes the inorganic materials. CAABSA Eagle employees are lined up along an assembly line, separating the plastics, metals and other recyclables. The workers are unionized and receive a minimum wage. A good number of them are women whose husbands have left to work in the United States.

The materials are sold directly to large companies — many of them also the original producers — with recycling plants. There are no intermediaries, like those who line the streets leading to Matatlan.

CAABSA Eagle is planning to hire an additional 300 people to separate the inorganic materials. While city officials have talked about offering these new jobs to Matatlan garbage pickers, the final decision lies with CAABSA Eagle.

Delgadillo said his company will be sympathetic to the needs, and skills, of the *pepenadores* during the hiring process, but they would still need to qualify for the job. "In Matatlan, they are not all real *pepenadores*," he said. "You have to keep in mind that some of are trouble-makers."
