Report Exposes Dirt in Car Wash Industry

IWJ and the affiliated worker center network congratulate ARISE Chicago for the release of the first ever comprehensive study of working conditions in Chicago's car wash industry.

The report, Clean Cars, Dirty Work: Worker Rights Violations in Chicago Car Washes, reveals how employers across the industry violate minimum wage and overtime laws. The report also exposes an industry fraught with health and safety violations.

ARISE Chicago tied the report’s release to the launch of a large-scale campaign to organize car wash workers across the city with the United Steel Workers. To download the report, visit www.arisechicago.org.

The Network continues to receive requests for assistance in building new worker centers across the country.

Celebrating Wage Theft Wins

Workers, worker advocates and community groups are making slow but steady uphill battle against wage theft. This year, affiliates helped pass at least three new anti-wage theft ordinances, and build up several other campaigns in communities across the country.

BROWARD COUNTY

Taking its cue from neighboring Miami-Dade, Broward County recently passed the Wage Recovery Ordinance, which creates a resource for thousands of wage theft victims who previously had nowhere to turn. Broward is the second county in Florida to implement a wage recovery program despite strong opposition from business groups. Workers and worker advocates led by the Florida Wage Theft Task Force, which includes IWJ affiliate, South Florida Interfaith Worker Justice, were instrumental in getting the Broward County ordinance passed.

ARKANSAS

Members of the Arkansas legislature are expected to introduce a statewide wage theft prevention bill in the spring. If passed, the law would limit wage deductions an employer can make and it would also require employers to pay all employees by the next regular payday following termination or departure.

The Northwest Arkansas Worker Justice Center is leading the campaign against wage theft in Arkansas, and helped craft the language for statewide wage theft prevention law.

HOUSTON

The Down With Wage Theft Campaign, led by IWJ affiliate, Fe y Justicia Worker Center, continues to gain momentum and support from groups around the city. The campaign, launched in March this year, is pushing the passage of a Wage Theft Ordinance that provides for an administrative hearing process of wage theft cases through Houston’s Office of Business Opportunities. It would also ban companies found guilty of wage theft from securing city contracts, business licenses and permits needed to continue operating in the city. For more information visit www.downwithwagettheft.org.

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A Growing Network

The IWJ Worker Center Network welcomes two new centers in Dallas and Nashville.

The new Dallas office is the first satellite office of the Workers Defense Project (WDP). WDP has been serving low wage workers in Austin for 10 years, and has recovered nearly $1 million in unpaid wages. WDP plans to work with construction workers in Dallas.

Since its inception in 2009, newly-affiliated Workers Dignity Project (WDP) in Nashville has racked up an impressive record of victories, including winning more than $60,000 in back wages and compensation for low wage workers.

The Network continues to receive requests for assistance in building new worker centers across the country.

Trained & Inspired

Organizers from around the country gathered in Chicago in October for IWJ’s Organizing for Worker Justice training. The weeklong program was designed to help develop participants’ organizing skills and provide practical communication, fundraising and administrative tools. It also provided a venue for organizers to exchange ideas and share best practices. For more information about IWJ training programs, visit www.iwj.org.
Poverty Wages Hurt; Time to Raise the Wage

By the Rev. Michael Livingston

“What does the Lord require of us but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.” (Micah 6:8)

With 12.1 million people unemployed and one in six Americans living in poverty, we should all agree that we need more good paying jobs that allow workers to support their families.

Raising the minimum wage is essential to our economic recovery. These days, far too many workers have become expendable and undervalued, easily replaced and exploited in a system that places all power in the hands of the employer. CEO’s of the companies employing the most low wage workers in the nation make an average of 9.4 million dollars a year – that’s 430 times more than a worker making ten dollars an hour.

The federal poverty level is $22,000 for a family of four. Income at twice that level is hardly enough to sustain a family. Minimum wage at $7.25 an hour is 40 percent below the federal poverty level. In other words, if you make the legislated minimum wage, and even up to 40 percent above it – we guarantee you will live in poverty. This is immoral.

I’ve Seen How Hyatt Hurts

By Sung Yeon Choi-Morrow

A couple of months ago I spent time with some Hyatt employees on the job. I was already familiar with the campaign after having helped organize a big day of rallies at various Hyatt hotels in downtown Chicago in 2011. I understood why the campaign was so important to the worker movement and our fight against corporate greed. But actually spending time with Hyatt employees made the horrors of their daily work lives even more real to me.

During my short visit, I noticed that most of the housekeepers had bandages wrapped around swollen wrists. It turns out many of them suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome; some have even undergone surgery. They told me it was from lifting the heavy mattresses. I also noticed some women wearing back braces. You’d think they worked in warehouses moving heavy boxes – well, they might as well be with mattresses weighing anywhere from 80 to 100 lbs.

Hyatt housekeepers clean as many as 30 rooms per day, almost double the number of rooms union-hotel workers have to clean.

We in the religious community have the capacity to positively impact the lives of Hyatt workers. We love to conference, and sometimes our conferences are at Hyatt hotels. We all need to take responsibility, research and engage in conversations with our organizations and use our consumer power to leverage for Hyatt workers. Can we all work together to ensure that our respective religious organizations don’t support worker abuse at Hyatt hotels? For more information about the campaign you can visit: www.hyatthurts.org If you want more information on how to ensure fair labor practices in your hotel contracts, please visit our website: www.iwj.org for more information.

Health and Safety Training: Three Times a Charm

IWJ is excited to announce another year of health and safety trainings, thanks to funding from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA) Susan Harwood Training Grant Program.

Over the last two years, IWJ and its affiliates trained more than 2,000 trainers and workers in health and safety measures in the following sectors: construction, cleaning, poultry and meat packing, restaurants, landscaping, and home care. Of those sectors, construction has the highest mortalities; meatpacking has the most injuries. IWJ recently developed a “Training the Trainers” program that provides workers in those sectors the tools and resources necessary to train their co-workers on their workplace rights.

More on IWJ’s health and safety trainings at: www.iwj.org.
Black Friday Prayers and Actions for Walmart Workers

For the first time in the history of organizing at Walmart, store associates are walking out of the job to demand decent pay, basic benefits and respect. Warehouse workers and other associates, workers at Walmart stores and associated warehouses might see the change for which they’ve been fighting.

IWJ is mobilizing religious and community support for workers who are making change at Walmart. On Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, people of faith will join thousands of store associates, warehouse workers and other allies, workers at Walmart stores and associated warehouses.

Chaplains for Workers
This year, IWJ also launched a Walmart chaplaincy program, which nurtures and trains store workers — who identify themselves as people of faith — to serve as internal workplace chaplains who can support and encourage the leadership and courage of their co-workers. The program was piloted in Seattle and has since been expanded to some Los Angeles and Dallas stores. For more information on the program, email info@iwj.org.

Why Call for Jubilee at Walmart?

The Jubilee Year is authorized by Moses in Leviticus 25. It is celebrated in lyrical fashion in Isaiah 61 as “the year of the Lord’s favor” (Isaiah 61:2). It is claimed by Jesus as the shape of his life and ministry (Luke 4:17: “Learn to do good; seek justice, promote the welfare of your community.”)

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The biblical provision for the jubilee year proposes a pause in the rough and tumble of real-life economics. It knows that through predatory action in the economy, some gain at the expense of others and some lose because of their vulnerability, and huge social inequities result. In order to curb such unsustainable economic arrangements, the jubilee year provides a regularized occasion when economic property and livelihood is given back by those who have gained to those who have lost.

Given that the jubilee in biblical provision occurs every fifty years, the 50th anniversary of Walmart is a splendid occasion for a Jubilee Year among us. Thus it is here proposed that on its 50th anniversary, Walmart pauses in its rough and tumble of economics to give back for the sake of the neighborhood. Such give back may take many forms: give back to the neighborhoods that the stores tend to diminish. Give back to the workers who stay locked into poverty by poor wages, give back hope to those locked into despairing economics. It would be an act of neighborly generosity that would bring health and well-being to the neighborhood to the benefit of all parties.

The term “jubilee” comes from the Hebrew term yb, “ram’s horn.” The Jubilee Year begins when the ram’s horn is blown. We can listen for it in Walmart stores all across the nation. When it sounds, the neighborhood will dance and sing!

Full text available at www.iwj.org

My Summer Organizing Clergy

By Kyra Brown

Although I have been a community organizer since high school, I spent this summer organizing a group that I had not given much thought to “organizing” before: clergy. Having just completed my first year of seminary, I was ecstatic to be offered an internship with Interfaith Worker Justice.

I was tasked to plan a prayer breakfast, which would provide at least thirty leaders across faith traditions the opportunity to network with one another and learn about the workplace injustices facing food service and hotel workers in the Baltimore area. While I learned that I have a passion for organizing clergy, I also became painfully aware that not all clergy might choose to support these kinds of efforts. For instance, one religious leader said that while he commended our efforts to work with the church in improving economic conditions in America, he found our methods and goals divisive.

His response was a little disheartening, at first. But his logic seemed all too familiar. In Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” written on April 16, 1963, to clergy, King writes: “we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive.”

At that moment, I realized that I must be on the right path. By the same token, we (community organizer and leaders) still have work to do!

I submit that while economic justice issues can be “divisive” that is not the goal of those raising awareness around such matters. As a society, we must get to a place where we are as critical of the systems which perpetuate oppression as we are of the prophets who bring to light such oppression.

The Biblical mandate to promote justice should outweigh any potential political dispute. IWJ is following the mandate of Isaiah 1:17: “Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Visit www.iwj.org for more information on IWJ’s summer internship programs and for Kyra’s full reflection.

Labor Day Programs a Success!

More than 400 congregations around the country participated in this year’s Labor in the Pulpits/on the Bimah/in the Minbar program. A signature program of IWJ, LiP/B/M gives congregations the opportunity and the tools to lift up issues impacting workers, and to get to know the workers, worker leaders and advocates within their community. This year, workers and advocates talked about wage theft, the right to organize, health and safety, unemployment and underemployment, among other things. For sermons and sample reflections, and to learn more about the program, visit www.iwj.org.
A Message from IWJ Executive Director Kim Bobo

In September, I spent a few days in North Carolina talking with folks about wage theft. Having written a book on wage theft, I’ve heard hundreds of stories about employers stealing wages from their workers. Nonetheless, I was again overwhelmed and shocked at the meanness and brazenness of some employers. I met:

• A university employee who was “misclassified” as an independent contractor for more than ten years, denied employer side of payroll taxes, overtime pay, unemployment, workers compensation and the benefits offered to other university employees such as sick days and vacation days. Every time he complained, nothing happened.

• A country club employee who served at banquets but never saw the 20 percent service fee the club charged to the banquet parties and instead was only paid minimum wage.

• A worker at a golf club who never received her tips.

• A young man who (at age 15) worked 78 hours his first week at a Dunkin Donuts and received above minimum wage for 40 hours (but not nearly what minimum wage plus overtime would have been). When he asked about the payment, he was told he should take what he was offered or find another job.

• A firefighter who works 168 hours per four-week shift, but is only paid for 160 because the city pays in four, forty-hour payments.

• A woman who sells products to nail salons and knows that all the workers are paid as independent contractors.

Every time I think I’ve heard it all, I hear a story like the employer deducting from paychecks for his birthday party. Really?

If you’re not sure about the extent of the crisis of wage theft, start talking to workers. Talk to young people and you’ll hear about it because they work in restaurants and retail places notorious for wage theft. Talk to your neighbors and family members. I suspect, like me, you will be shocked and saddened.

We need to do more as a society, which is why I’m so pleased with the terrific local wage theft campaigns many IWJ affiliates are leading across the nation. These campaigns strengthen enforcement and they broaden awareness of the issue and expand the advocates for worker justice.

Check out http://bit.ly/wagetheft_iwj to learn more about local wage theft campaigns.

If you want to raise awareness about wage theft in your community, offer a workshop using the IWJ Wage Theft PowerPoint. Download a FREE copy from www.iwj.org.

Wage theft is all around us, but is a crime we can stop with our work together.