

BROKEN LEVEES, BROKEN PROMISES



New Orleans' Migrant Workers

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

INTRODUCTION

As New Orleans is being rebuilt, a new tragedy is unfolding. This one is also happening in public view, and those who could prevent it are once again looking the other way.

The new tragedy is the exploitation of migrant workers doing backbreaking and dangerous clean-up work. After working seven days a week in difficult and contaminated settings, migrant workers in New Orleans are systematically underpaid for their work and are often not paid at all. When the checks don't come, workers are left hungry and homeless. Workers face serious health threats from the dangerous work conditions — like snakes, asbestos and mold — without adequate protection or training. When workers are injured as a result of unsafe working conditions, they are denied medical treatment and workers compensation benefits. Meanwhile, major U.S. companies are lining their pockets while they hide behind the subcontracting system, the workers' fear of retaliation, and the general chaos in the city.

Should we allow New Orleans to be rebuilt on the backs of the most vulnerable workers? Is this our vision of a new New Orleans?



IMMIGRANT JUSTICE PROJECT
FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT
JJ ROSENBAUM *or* REBECCA WATSON
334 956 8200
JENNIFER.ROSENBAUM@SPLCENTER.ORG

Lured by promises of long hours and good wages, men and women left their homes and families and went to New Orleans. They left the construction sites of Houston, the orchards of Michigan, the sweet potato fields of Mississippi, and the day labor sites of Memphis and a dozen other cities. They arrived ready to work, expecting nothing more than the wages, hours, and working conditions they had been promised. They came and worked alongside hurricane survivors who had recently returned from their temporary places of refuge to rebuild the city. Although the majority of these newly-arrived workers are Latino, the migrant worker population in New Orleans is diverse and includes African-Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants from many countries. What these workers now share with each other is the sad fact that they have been deceived and exploited.



This booklet contains the stories of just a few of the people working in the reconstruction of New Orleans. Their stories are representative of what the Immigrant Justice Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center has heard over and over again from workers with whom we have spoken. As part of our outreach and legal assistance, we have been in contact with over five hundred women and men who worked in New Orleans between October 2005 and February 2006.

*“I’m here every morning at 6 a.m. to wait for work.
There’s nothing reliable. With each new job,
there’s a new risk of not getting paid.”*

ARTEMIO





CÉSAR

The demolition work was the hardest. We tore down everything inside the schools we were cleaning because, in some of the schools, the water had risen up to the roofs.

The companies that came from outside Louisiana caused us many more problems than people from here in New Orleans. When our bosses talked to us, it was like they were talking to animals. They abused us just to make themselves richer. At times, I was afraid even to ask to go to the bathroom. We had to always keep working hard. If someone asked for a break, they told him he had two options — to continue working or be fired. People carried on because the desperation to be paid was so great — to have money for food, to help our families, and for other personal reasons. We know that we have to work, but I believe they should treat us well and with respect like any other person from the United States.

When the company didn't pay us when they had promised they would, I heard of people who didn't have food to eat. I saw people cry as well. I don't know if it was out of desperation or out of hunger. The company had told us that they would provide us food. But we didn't eat. Why? Because when lunch didn't arrive, they didn't care. They would leave us there without food.

At the beginning, when we first started, everyone worked well and everyone looked normal. When three weeks had passed, people looked thinner and looked tired as if they didn't have the hope of anything except to keep waiting for their first paycheck.

I saw something else in people — that they didn't know whether to continue working or to quit. They said, "If I leave they won't pay me and, if I stay, who knows what will happen?" There wasn't any other option because many people didn't have the money to return to the state they had come from. If they didn't continue working for the company they'd be kicked out of the hotel and would have to sleep in the street. And, because of all this, they had to continue. They were forced to do it.



“Cuando los supervisores nos hablaban, parece que les estaban hablando a animals.”

[When the supervisors of the company talked to us], it was like they were talking to animals.



ANTONIA

I've been living in New Orleans for four years. There were Latinos here before the hurricane, but not so many like now. Because of the hurricane, my husband and I went to New York. While we were in New York, a friend of mine called me from here and said, "Come back down here, there's work." We needed the work, so we came back, and I began working for a company doing clean-up work. Every day we got to work at 7 a.m. and left at 5 p.m. There was still so much water. We began cleaning — pulling out all the filthy things that were completely wet, covered in mold. They smelled awful. We pulled out all the trash from the buildings, tore down the walls with hammers, and then dragged everything outside. It wasn't easy.

We worked in different locations and I wasn't paid anything for my work. The company owners kept telling us that we were going to receive our checks — first it was Monday and then it was going to be Wednesday. We would all wait in a long line for our paychecks from 6 p.m. until midnight or 2 a.m. after working all day. There were hundreds of us waiting. Some people would be paid, but the majority were not. When my turn arrived to get my check, I'd already been working two weeks, and I was angry because I hadn't been paid. I'd been working to make enough money in order to buy food.

The owner said that my check hadn't been issued by the computer, and I would just have to wait to get it another day. I began crying in front of everyone and told the owner, "You're abusing us." There were four security guards, and the owner yelled to them, "Kick this woman out of here." I told the security guards not to touch me because I was within my rights, and I was only demanding what I had earned with my sweat.

It was Christmas time and, after not being paid, I went to New York to visit my children. I had to go there without a cent. Now, two months later, I still haven't



"Estaba reclamando mi sudor."

I was demanding what I had earned with my sweat.

received a single check for that work. The work was so hard and so difficult that we did. Imagine them not paying you for it!

I'm afraid that I'll be hurt by the companies again. I want to leave here because I'm really frustrated. Now, people don't trust working here because they think they're not going to be paid for their work. Really, those people abused us all. I'm planning to leave for New York. I've spent four years in New Orleans, but now I just want to leave. I don't want to be here anymore.



I was working in a church. I slipped and fell off the ladder. I broke my arm and cut my face. There was so much blood. My boss left me at a hospital in New Orleans where no one spoke Spanish. I was then taken to a hospital in Baton Rouge. There, they told me to come back in four or five days when they would fix my arm.

I was totally alone and without any place to sleep or anyone to help me.

I have a metal pin in my arm. I'm never going to be able to work as hard as I could before. How will I pay my hospital bills? I'm really worried.

EMILIO



HECTOR

The work we were doing in the schools was horrible. The hurricanes had left the schools full of mud—three or four feet of mud. All sorts of filth was in the mud. There were horrible smells, and we found snakes, frogs and a lot more.

At five in the morning, we were already standing and waiting for the company bus to pick us up. At seven or eight at night, we would still be at work because the bus hadn't come yet to take us back to the hotel. We would be suffering from the cold and hunger because we only ate once in the evenings. Imagine working a whole day on only water! Since we weren't being paid for our work, we didn't have any money to feed ourselves. We ate only in the evenings when the hotel helped us.

Now I have stomach problems. I don't know what's going on with me. Maybe it's because of so much filth and the putrid smells. I think it's because I had to endure so much hunger. Since working in the schools, I haven't been well. In the mornings when I shower, I find dried blood in my nose. I feel like something has damaged me. I had to endure all this just to work in order to earn a living.

I believe that the contractors don't have a heart to be touched. Poor people come here to work, to better the city, to do the clean-up and to help out. These contractors, all they want is to hoard money. They don't care whether you eat or not. They just want to get the money and run away with it as many companies have done. Many companies have contracted people at a certain wage, but when the time comes to pay them, they just decide they don't want to pay it anymore.

Latinos have given a lot of support to New Orleans. We didn't come here to harm anyone — we're here doing our best. We ask of you, the authorities in New Orleans and anywhere else, that you just look at us too. Look at us because we came to better your city, to better the state. We're seeking only the rights that everyone deserves.



“Estamos reclamando nada más los derechos que todos merecen.”

We are seeking only the rights that everyone deserves.



JOSE, JOÃO, & CARLOS

When we heard about the work in New Orleans, it seemed like a fantasy. We were recruited to come here, and we were told we would work ten to twelve hours a day and get paid well. We were promised a hotel and food — even Brazilian food! The truth is, in the end, we didn't get what we were promised.

In early October, we traveled two days from Florida to New Orleans and arrived before 6:00 a.m. When we arrived, we couldn't go into the city because it was closed. We were waiting, driving around on the bus, and then we went straight to work—after two days of traveling. The city wasn't flooded anymore, but in the basement of all the houses and buildings, it was still flooded. It smelled really bad.

We first stayed in a parking area with some mattresses, without bathrooms and without showers. At first we were taking baths in the Mississippi River. After a while, showers were installed. But there wasn't enough water for everyone, so some showered, and others couldn't. One day, the food I was given by my employer had gone bad. One woman complained about the food, and our supervisor told her “go to a restaurant or bring food from your house.” He talked to us like we are dogs, but we are not. How are you going to a restaurant when there are no restaurants and everything in the city is closed?

The work in the basement of the hospital was the worst because of the stench. It was still flooded. I was in contact with contaminated materials — syringes, dead monkeys, medical waste. We took all the filth out of the building with our own hands.

We had protective equipment for work, but during the lunch time, when there was a break, we took off all that equipment. We had lunch outside sitting on



*“Nós tiramos todo o entulho do prédio com
as nossas próprias mãos.”*

We took all the filth out of the building with our own hands.

the chairs that had been inside of the building, eating in the mud and dust, around all the contaminated things. Why were we provided all this equipment inside to work, but we had to eat close to the contamination?

They gave us masks with filters, and they changed the filters in the first and second weeks, but after a couple of weeks, the company didn't change them anymore. The masks were only good for seven days. If a worker lost his mask, he couldn't get a new one. He had to work without one until the end of the seven days. There wasn't anyone to ensure that everyone had a mask — no one from the government, from the public health agency, or anyone, to take care of us.



“I’ve been cheated by three employers in two months. I did the work. I’m only asking what’s fair — that I be paid for the work I’ve done.”

FRANCISCO

“The work was so hard and so difficult that we did. Imagine them not paying you for it!”

ANTONIA

“It makes one feel cheated — what they have done. After all, any human being that has been exploited feels bad.”

CÉSAR

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

THIS RECONSTRUCTION of the great city of New Orleans should not take place at the expense of vulnerable workers. Local, state, and federal government responses to the abuse and exploitation of these workers have been completely inadequate. At a minimum, the government must ensure that workers are paid properly and are not exposed to dangerous working conditions. In order to ensure fair and decent treatment of workers, government agencies and employers must take the following steps:

[Local, state, and federal government officials should acknowledge the magnitude and significance of worker exploitation in the reconstruction of New Orleans.

[State and federal agencies should aggressively enforce existing wage and hour, health and safety, and workers' compensation laws.

[Government officials should fairly enforce workplace protections without regard to race, national origin, immigration status, or level of English proficiency.

[The U.S. Department of Labor should audit government contractors for compliance with federal wage and hour laws, and the federal government should suspend contracts or refuse to award contracts to noncompliant employers.

[Louisiana should adopt additional new worker protection statutes that protect workers engaged in reconstruction; and

[All contractors should comply with the federal wage and hour laws and should monitor their subcontractors to ensure compliance.

TRANSLATED BY REBECCA WATSON
INTRO WRITTEN BY JJ ROSENBAUM
PHOTOS BY VALERIE DOWNES
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DESIGN DIRECTOR RUSSELL ESTES

New Orleans workers' names have been changed to protect their identity.

*“When our bosses talked to us,
it was like they were talking to animals.
They abused us to make themselves richer.”*

CÉSAR
NEW ORLEANS WORKER

IMMIGRANT JUSTICE PROJECT

Southern Poverty Law Center
400 Washington Avenue
Montgomery, AL 36104
www.splcenter.org