

2009 CITY BUDGET & LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES Issue Backgrounder: WORKER RIGHTS

SUPPORT VITAL PROGRAMS FOR LOW-WAGE WORKERS.

Immigrant workers constitute half of the city's workforce and are essential to the industries that drive the city's economy.

The economic crisis is deteriorating job security and putting pressure on employers to cut corners. The city must act to improve worker safety, enhance workers' ability to enforce their labor rights and get paid for the work they perform, and create a workforce development initiative to increase opportunities for workers to survive and get ahead.

Immigrant workers face some of the harshest working conditions, toil extremely long hours, and are concentrated in low-wage jobs where employers often fail to pay the minimum wage or to pay workers at all. The city is also facing an epidemic of workplace injuries and fatalities at construction sites.

Support Community Worker Centers

There are more than 10,000 day laborers in New York City who contractors seek out to do short-term, manual jobs. Most are low-income immigrants who are vulnerable to severe health and safety risks, and too frequently do work and then are not paid. Abuse,

racial discrimination, and wage-and-hour violations by employers are widespread; and in the case of female day laborers, sexual harassment and assault are common.

Community worker centers are an effective way of serving low-wage workers and businesses. Community worker centers help neighborhoods by moving job seekers off the streets; and benefit workers by providing an organized, sheltered space with amenities like bathrooms and services such as vocational training, English classes, know-your-rights workshops, and computer literacy courses. These centers also make contractors more accountable.

In 2006 the city established a joint City Council and Mayoral Temporary Commission on Day Laborer Job Centers, after finding that New York had fallen behind other major cities in addressing day laborer issues, especially given the harsh economic conditions and patterns of abuse against day laborers, New York City must take action and establish community worker centers that better equip low-wage workers and help them integrate into the economy.

Establish a Worker Safety Initiative

In recent years, New York City has seen an increase in serious workplace injuries and fatalities at construction sites. In 75% of cases, the victims were immigrants. Last year, the city passed legislation to strengthen the Department of Buildings' ability to enforce scaffold-related safety violations, an important step that we support. However, the city must also provide safety training to workers. This burden cannot rest solely with employers. Most immigrant workers sustaining workplace injuries are non-union and are unable to access the current range of union-based and OSHA-accredited apprenticeship programs. The city must provide additional safety training, and ensure that programs are available in languages that workers can understand.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Fund community worker centers throughout New York City.

Establish a \$2 million worker safety outreach initiative.



Detailed Recommendations:

We urge Mayor Bloomberg and the City Council to provide funding to establish community worker centers with programs in ESL, health and safety training, and worker legal services.

We urge Mayor Bloomberg and the City Council to establish a \$2 million worker safety outreach initiative that will enable organizations to provide comprehensive occupational health and safety training, conduct English classes that will improve workers' ability to communicate, and curb unscrupulous employer conduct.

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