

LABOR BATTLE ON HORIZON



A first-of-its-kind investigative report has brought to light the widespread mistreatment of New York City's car wash workers. The report called, "The Dirty Business of Cleaning NYC's Cars" is compiled from a representative sampling of 89 car wash workers at 29 car washes around the city and was released by WASH New York (Workers Aligned for a Sustainable and Healthy New York) along with a broad coalition of car wash workers, elected officials, labor leaders, and activists. Fittingly, the report was unveiled in front of Metro Car Wash in Rego Park, Queens, a car wash exemplifying some of the worst practices in the industry. A similar campaign in Los Angeles resulted in collective bargaining agreements between at least three car wash companies and their employees. According to the report, unveiled on Tuesday, New York car wash workers are routinely denied overtime, exposed to toxic chemicals and receive less than minimum wages. Of the employees interviewed, none got sick time and only one was offered any sort of employer-sponsored health plan. David de la Cruz Perez, a Guatemalan immigrant worked for five years at the Sutphin Boulevard Car Wash, but was refused sick pay when he broke his hand on the job and missed six months of work. The report also found that workers are exposed to dangerous chemicals, unguarded machinery, and electrical outlets close to wet surfaces. "The company did not provide us with any protection from the strong chemicals," said Heriberto Hernandez, a former employee at Metro Car Wash. "We did not have gloves, masks or smocks. "Sometimes, I'd cut my hand or arm-it's part of the job. There were no first-aid kits at the car wash". Other car washes that came under fire included LMC Astoria, LMC East Harlem and Smart Car Wash on Crocheron Avenue in Flushing. Employees answering phones at these places declined to comment on worker's allegations. Manager of LMC Car Wash in East Harlem, Paulino Cabrera, says his company treats workers fairly and offers lunch and coffee breaks, as well as proper protective gear. "Ask my employees over here," he said. Providing protective gear "is part of the company". Key findings in the report are: 71 percent of workers put in at least 60 hours a week, with some working as many as 105 hours; 75 percent didn't receive any overtime pay for exceeding 40 hours; 66 percent reported being paid less than the minimum wage; over 40 percent reported getting only 15 minute or less breaks for lunch; and not a single car wash worker received paid sick days. Only one worker interviewed was offered any kind of health care. The report was commissioned jointly with community groups Make the Road New York and New York Communities for Change. The main recommendations that were presented and discussed at the campaign include: proper enforcement of all applicable wage and hour laws, and all workplace health and safety regulations; freedom for workers to join a union without fear of intimidation or retaliation; regular city and state inspections to ensure compliance with labor laws and workplace regulations; publication of best practices by authorities to prevent unlawful treatment of car wash workers and state and city hearings on mistreatment of car wash workers and unlawful industry-wide practices. Queens Councilman James Sanders said, "We can have shiny cars and justice" and added that he would push for a hearing exploring the mistreatment of car wash employees. Stuart Appelbaum, President of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) said, "We're here today to say that car wash workers should be able to exercise the same rights as all other workers, including the fundamental right to join a union if they so choose". "We take labor violations extremely seriously, and we will not allow the unsafe work environments, low wages, and wage theft to continue" said New York State Assembly Member Francisco Moya. "These violations are committed disproportionately against immigrants and members of the Latino community, individuals who are often scared to speak up when they are being wronged". To quote Vincent Alvarez, president of the New York City Central Labor Council. "Today the struggling begins. But we will be with you through this battle".

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