

broken levees, broken promises



New Orleans' Migrant Workers
in their own words

introduction

immigrant justice project
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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.



ant onia

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 3 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



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I was demanding what I had earned with my sweat.

received a single check for that work. The work was so hard and so diff cult that we did. Imagine them no 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.

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emilio



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

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recommendations for action

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 other characteristics.

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