Seeds of Justice

Community Action and Social Research Working Together to Combat Wage Theft in South Florida's Plant Nurseries

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Wage theft, or the lack of payment of a worker's partial or full salary through systematic or unintentional action, is often experienced by migratory workers in the United States. Throughout the nation many cases go unreported due to workers' lack of English skills or because of ignorance of basic labor rights and laws; others stay silent in order to avoid unwanted attention to their lack of legal migratory status; while others find themselves threatened by the very employers who benefit from their labor. In South Florida, cases of wage theft are particularly detrimental, as several factors merge to create and perpetuate its occurrence. There, the existence of a large low-wage workforce, a large immigrant population, and a variety of economic, political, and global forces interact to intensify the issue.

In Miami, several community-based organizations have identified the need to address the issue of wage theft, particularly among immigrants who perform jobs in many of the area's low-wage industries. These organizations spend invaluable resources and efforts, organizing, educating, and providing legal services to their members, many of whom have been wage theft victims themselves. Consistent with their missions, several local organizations have come together in an effort to concentrate resources on wage theft as a unifying campaign. Their combined efforts led to the formation of the *For Your Rights* (FYR) Task Force[1] in mid-2007, under the expectation that a sustained and multi-pronged campaign could create greater public awareness and community mobilization, while allowing member groups to carry out their specific organizational objectives.

As a part of the Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy (RISEP) at Florida International University, we entered the project to provide the FYR Task Force

[1] The Task Force consists of several community organizations and includes: We Count!, Florida Legal Services, Florida Immigrant Coalition, South Florida Interfaith Worker Justice, South Florida Jobs with Justice, American Friends Service Committee, and the Women's Fund of Miami -Dade County.

with empirical analysis of the conditions experienced by workers in different industries of concern. RISEP is dedicated to serving social justice organizations in the state of Florida with empirical research on significant issues relevant to low- and moderate-income families and individuals. As research assistants at RISEP, we had been working with many community organizations in Miami-Dade County and found it essential to expand our research objectives to fit within the FYR task force. Our roles as researchers in the wage theft project were determined in conjunction with the task force and focused on four primary areas conducive to building an action campaign. The task force's action plan included: (1) an education component to inform workers of their rights, (2) the generation of a media campaign to create public awareness of the problem, (3) local and state level advocacy to facilitate legal solutions to the problem, and (4) prosecution of cases of wage theft on behalf of individuals, and if necessary, class-action suits.

In this paper, we focus on the educational component of the action campaign, which proposes to inform workers of their rights. We explore the ways wage theft occurs in one low-wage industry in South Florida, the workers' knowledge of and access to information regarding labor rights and laws, and the obstacles which the task force could face when developing an education campaign for current and potential victims of wage theft as well as worker organizing strategies. Our research was conducted among plant nursery workers in and surrounding the South Florida municipality of Homestead in the far south of Miami-Dade County. We present a detailed description of wage theft and a brief analysis of the local and global conditions that may affect its existence in Miami-Dade County. We also present the findings of our field research among plant nursery

workers and owners, and discuss their implications in the context of the Task Force's intention to develop a worker education effort.

Wage Theft

Cases of wage theft have been increasingly revealed throughout the United States, partly because of a variety of class-action lawsuits and news reports that have led to a wide exposure of the issue. In this way, unlawful practices by national retailers such as Wal-Mart, Toys "R" Us, and Pep Boys have been exposed to the American public. Nonetheless, the issue persists affecting workers nationwide through a variety of industries, as well as formal and informal sectors of the economy (Aguilera 2005, Apple 2002, Brennan Center for Justice 2006, Greenhouse 2004, Lashuay et al 2002, Lee 2005, Margolies 2005, Miller 2004, Nissen 2004, Tucker-Welch 2004 and Valenzuela et al 2006).

Wage theft takes place in a variety of forms. In systematic cases of wage theft, time cards or time records are known to be manipulated by management personnel in a procedure commonly known as "shaving time," where employees' weekly hours are reduced through computerized payroll systems. Other cases include pressuring employees not to record all their working times or to performing chores "off the clock" (Greenhouse 2004, Lee 2005, Margolies 2005, Miller 2004 and Pemberton 1998). Other practices include depriving workers of overtime wages, paying them under the legal minimum wage or, in more voracious cases, simply not paying workers for their labor (Hunsburger 2006 and Miller 2004). It is also common to find a lack of knowledge of wage and labor

standards by both workers and employers, exacerbating the low wages already received by those at the bottom of the country's income scale (Brennan Center for Justice 2006).

Systematic unlawful patterns of wage theft in the retail industry have been exposed by several class action lawsuits filed against retailers including Wal-Mart, Toys "R" Us, Pep Boys, Family Dollar and Taco Bell (Greenhouse 2004, Lee 2005, Margolies 2005 and Miller 2004). In the hospitality and service industries wage theft has been documented to occur in restaurants and hotels that pay wages below federal standards, or fail to pay for overtime hours. Waiters, waitresses, chefs, and maids often find their tips retained by their employers or are paid below the legal standards for tipped employees (Hunsburger 2006, Johnson 2005 and Marks 2005). In the construction industry, reports and news articles have documented that workers often find themselves receiving lower wages than promised or not being paid time-and-a-half for overtime wages, a condition that undermines the federal standards for wages (Egelko 2005). In agricultural and forestry work in the United States, where pay tend to be low, workers are often paid under federal minimum wage standards and employers are not legally required to pay additional compensation for overtime hours (Renford 2001).

Perhaps most vulnerable are those workers participating in the informal economy. These often include day laborers in construction and agriculture, and domestic workers. Day laborers are hired by contractors and individuals to perform small to medium jobs in private homes or in industries that require extra labor for short periods of time. These workers are often abandoned at sites or plainly denied pay (Gonzalez 2006 and Walsh 2006). Domestic workers are usually maids and caretakers of children or the elderly in private homes. This type of work is mostly unregulated and creates tempting conditions

for employers to indulge in forms of wage theft. Pisani and Yoskowitz (2002), for example, found that the average hourly rate for maids working in a Texas border locality was $3.44 for day maids and $2.61 for live-in maids – rates considerably below the U.S. national minimum wage of $5.15 at the time the of the study.

Wage theft is not a phenomenon isolated to remote sectors of either the United State's economy or geography. The issue can be found in large American cities as well as in rural or agricultural areas. Understanding how wage theft works and how it expresses itself in certain sectors of the economy is, however, only a piece of a larger process, one in which global, political, and economic trends and policies collide to create the current characteristics of the U.S. labor market. We now focus on these broader processes, discussing how wage theft is manifested under the rubrics of migration and neoliberalism in the growing, high-density, immigrant cities of the United States.

Local and Global implications

Sassen (1998) argues that immigrant environments such as large cities have traditionally been analyzed in terms of cultural identity, cultural activity, or globalization of economic activity. Such traditional arguments generally miss looking at the local impacts of globalization on human labor. Through direct or indirect American intervention – whether in recruitment of labor or through economic development abroad – individuals are being massively plugged into localized segments of the United States' economy. As a result, new perspectives must be used to analyze the contextual situations that develop as immigrants settle in destination countries. As the current demographic "face of America" continues to change, so do patterns of arrival, economic activity, and

social integration. These patterns require novel ways of analysis, where migration is viewed as a comprehensive phenomenon in which macro and micro, global and local, and social and individual conditions merge to create the current settings experienced by new waves of American settlers.

With more frequency, immigration and global economic activity are viewed by social scientists as related and integrated processes. On the ground, however, polarization in the conceptualized values of economic activities has altered several aspects of the urban economy and impacted structures for social reproduction as well as the organization of the labor process. As Sassen (1998:131) argues, among the most notable effects of this socio-spatial restructuring of the American city, are "the general shift to a service economy, the downgrading of manufacturing – partly to keep it competitive with overseas plants – and the direct and indirect demand for low-wage labor generated." Adding to this are changes in regulation and funding of enforcement policy. As Greider (1997) argues, the de-regulatory nature of neoliberal restructuring affects virtually every sector of public policy, from banking to food safety, from wage and hour laws, to interstate trade and environmental protection. Such changes are accompanied by an expanded supply of low-wage, part-time, and temporary jobs, and are facilitated by the absorption of an increasing number of third-world immigrants into the U.S. economy.

Immigration and economic development in large urban areas, thus, are parts of the intricate globalization processes. It is at this juncture where, we believe, greater opportunity for the manifestation of sub-standard wages occurs, that is where low-wage jobs increase, de-regulatory policies make a substantial impact on the development of the urban setting, and often poor and uneducated immigrants may fall victim to so-called

market forces, which they are neither prepared to, nor capable, of combating. South Florida provides a strategic research site for the analysis of these global forces, particularly through the way in which de-regulation has begun to shape some of the city's spaces and economic trends.

In South Florida, the equation of de-regulation has become intricately connected to the ethnic make-up of the area, particularly in Miami with its upward movement toward global city status. Increasingly, theory and research on the area point to finance, international banking, and managerial nodes of commodity chains as symbols of the changing nature of the city toward a global center (See Knox 1997, Nijman 1993, Sassen and Portes 1993). These changes are said to be not only influential to the growing nature of high-end service jobs in the city, but to the creation of low-wage service industries to attend to the needs of high-wage and managerial industries. This view would lend support to Sassen's (1998) argument about the nature of global cities, where an "hourglass" economy is intensified with the creation of high-wage and low-wage jobs, and the withering away of manufacturing and middle-class jobs. For Nijman (1993), this pattern is unique in Miami because of the traditional low concentration of industrial and manufacturing jobs in Miami's historical development. However, Miami does not contradict the formation of the "hourglass" in the area's economic trends, as newcomers may simply join the ranks of the growing low- or high-end labor structures available in the area.

In *This Land is our Land*, Stepick et al (2003) describe the dynamics that affect and influence power relations in South Florida, where the role of massive immigration since the early 1960s produced a distinct urban environment where ethnicity, economy,

and politics mingle to create a new model for understanding the new, more migrant, and global "American city." This new model that Miami embodies includes the lack of social contract, the dislocation of power from different levels of the U.S. political process, and the transformed dynamics of power among ethnic groups. In South Florida, the dynamics of change are greatly influenced by the early establishment of an international entrepreneur class, represented by the enterprise of the Cuban community in the second half of the 20th century (Portes and Sassen 1993, Portes and Stepick 1993). Power dynamics in the area have been deeply altered, as for the first time in U.S. history first-generation immigrants achieved political, economic, and cultural domain in a city's transformation to global status.

At the national level, neoliberal re-structuring has affected the labor dynamics of the country. A *National Employment Law Project* (Ruckelshaus et al 2006) report concluded that by 2007, the Department of Labor (DOL) budget used to enforce wage and hour laws will be 6.1 percent less than before the G.W. Bush administration took office in 2001, and that from 1975-2004 the budget for U.S. Wage and Hour investigators decreased by 14 percent, decreasing enforcement actions by 36 percent. These numbers likely understate the impact in Florida where there is no state DOL and wage and hour laws are virtually un-enforceable because of a very small presence of the federal DOL.[2] Our preliminary work in Miami-Dade County revealed widespread incidences of wage theft among many of the area's growing low-wage industries. We decided to focus specifically on the plant nursery industry, where low-wage jobs abound and agricultural

[2] Throughout our research, we attended several meetings between the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division and several community organizations. Our personal communication with the DOL, led us to learn that the local office is understaffed.

salaries and regulations help to maintain many workers in the lowest ranks of the area's income ladder.

Site and Methodology

Homestead is a semi-rural city surrounded by vast, green agricultural areas of farms and plant nurseries. However, in recent years rapid southern suburban sprawl in Miami-Dade County has contributed to major growth in the municipality, populating the area with families looking for more affordable alternatives to the high cost of living in the city of Miami and its traditional suburbs. Homestead is home to thousands of agricultural workers, mostly from Central America and Mexico. The majority of them settled in the area because of the rich agricultural industry, with year-round warm weather conditions. Many of these individuals come from agricultural backgrounds in their native countries; thus, the area's farming and agricultural traditions provide an economic activity that is proximal to the worker's previously acquired skills. Homestead's large immigrant population makes conditions less demanding for the everyday activities of newcomers, as Spanish and other native-American dialects are readily spoken throughout the city. There, a worker finds fewer obstacles to finding a job than in the city. Many enter the area's agricultural industry, where no special skills are required to begin, legal documents are not essential, and where the lack of English is not an inconvenience.

Miami-Dade County and the state of Florida are home to a lucrative plant nursery and landscaping industry. A 2006 report by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) places this industry second only to that of the state of California in terms of national industry value. Total sales of landscaping and nursery

firms in the state averaged $15.2 billion in 2005, growing by approximately 54% since the year 2000 (Hodges and Haydy 2006). Overall, the industry provides close to 294,000 jobs, with about 65% of them being full-time positions Miami-Dade County tops the list of sales, with an estimated $1.9 billon in 2005 and a labor force of about 40,000 (Hodges and Haydy 2006).

The industry can be divided into three distinct segments, with nursery growers, landscape sales, and garden center retail sales being managed under similar conditions and often, under the same operation. The largest of these segments is garden center retail, which provides live plants, horticultural hard goods, and other supplies to garden centers and retailers throughout the country. This segment was responsible for producing close to $7 billion in sales in 2005 (Hodges and Haydy 2006). Landscape sales, the second largest segment, consists of installation, maintenance, and design of landscapes primarily for developers, office buildings, retail malls, and outdoor city projects. This segment's total 2005 sales represented over $5 billion (Hodges and Haydy 2006). Finally, nursery grower sales represent the third sales segment of the industry. This segment's sales in 2005 was about $3 billion and consisted mainly of tropical foliage, shrubs, potted flowering plants, liners, trees, and turf-grass among others (Hodges and Haydy 2006).

In this paper, we present preliminary findings of a research project designed to document the extent and nature of wage theft in South Florida's plant nursery industry, the findings will serve the FYR Task Force in developing an action campaign against sub-standard wage practices at both the local and state level. The data presented here is the result of 50 face-to-face open-ended interviews with plant nursery workers, owners, and managers in the area; and of participant observation conducted among community

organizations dedicated to the welfare and development of agricultural and immigrant communities in south Miami-Dade County.

Gaining access to the workers was particularly difficult, as they were often wary of strangers and individuals outside their socio-ethnic networks. As a result, we had to first gain access to community and grassroots organizations that have a client-base of farm workers and which organize workers around immigration, labor rights, or housing issues. Through these organizations' leaders, several snowball samples of workers were started. Once contacted and interviewed, workers provided contact information of other possible participants. For operators (employers), we selected a random sample from a list of plant nurseries provided to us by the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association, (FNGLA); a great majority of these nurseries were members of the FNGLA. Most of the operators we contacted agreed to participate, except in some of the larger nurseries where access was controlled by receptionists and assistants who blocked contact with the individuals in management positions.

Data collection and analysis were conducted between the months of May and September of 2007. This is a relatively slow period in the area's agricultural industries, and thus biased our sample toward full-time, year-round plant nursery workers. Our sample consists of 38 workers and 12 owners and managers. The sample of workers is comprised of 28 males and 10 females, mostly Guatemalan and Mexican, although a small number of the workers were Haitian, Puerto Rican, and U.S.-born individuals. We found it particularly difficult to access women workers; even in those cases where a female researcher attempted to contact and interview the workers, many women were

reluctant to speak with us.[3] In the sample of owners and managers, most participants were born in the U.S., although some Mexican and Cuban individuals also participated.

Our field research with plant nursery workers in Miami-Dade County was based on what the FYR task force determined important to the development of an action campaign, specifically the ways in which wage theft occurs within the plant nursery industry, the conditions which shed light on workers' understanding of their own labor rights, and the challenges that could prevent the task force from properly accessing a large number of workers.

Discussion

Wage theft manifests itself in diverse ways, both, within and across different industries, and unfavorable conditions in plant nursery production are no exception. Many of our informants had suffered wage theft in different ways and often more than once by different employers. As Jose[4] from Mexico explained to us, "I left my previous nursery job two weeks ago; they were paying me just $6.40." Jose was one of a few informants who actually knew what the newly legislated state minimum wage was. When we asked Jose how he had gotten this information he told us, "We always listen to the news, but we are not really sure if that is true, so I told my boss to pay us at least the minimum (wage), but he said 'no.' He told us his company was struggling. After that, he started to get mad at me, he changed with me and did not even want to talk to me."

[3] We attribute this difficulty to the patriarchal structure of the workers' families and cultural styles, where a woman may have been more reluctant to speak with us because we did not speak to her husband before speaking to her.

[4] To protect informants from risk of reprisal from employers or others, we use first name pseudonyms for all workers.

Having complained about his sub-standard hourly rate, he was forced to leave his job because of the harassment he received from his employer.

Similarly, Teofilo, another plant nursery worker from Guatemala, explained the way in which wage theft occurred at his work place.

> At a nursery in which I worked before, they would take away our hours, we would complain and we would still not get paid. There, the foreman would write down the hours we worked; when we complained, the foreman would then get upset and say we were lying and that we were too slow. This lasted more than a year, until they installed a 'punch in' machine for the workers. We never talked to the owners about the issue because we were afraid to lose our jobs.

For these informants, the discovery and complaint about irregularities on their paychecks brought harassment and contempt from their supervisors. However, Teofilo's case shows how workers are often willing to put up with wage theft and harassment because of fear of losing their jobs.

In another example, Miguel, a Guatemalan worker, explained how he was a victim of wage theft at two separate sites.

> This one time a gentleman asked us to work on December the first, he told us that he would pay us $100 dollars each for a full day of work, and when we finished at 7 pm, he only gave us $50. We complained and he responded that he had lost a saw. We later heard that this was a common practice by this gentleman to have a reason of accusing us unjustly; that was his way. He started telling us that he would call immigration and harassed us.

On the second occasion, Miguel explained that after being owed several weeks of pay checks, he confronted his employers.

> I talked to them (my bosses) because my backed up salary started accumulating for several weeks, I even tried to negotiate with them, I told them that if they had no money they could pay me only half. They then began giving me a hard time, trying to intimidate me and told me that I could go to whoever I wanted to, that they were not scared.

Having been a victim of wage theft on a couple of occasions, Miguel's experiences serves to illustrate the relation that exists between complaining to supervisors and the harassment practices that employers in turn develop toward their employees.

Jose's, Teofilo's and Miguel's experiences are consistent with the documented cases of wage theft from the literature and media reports, and show how "shaving" hours, late payments that drag on for weeks, not paying amounts agreed upon, and paying below the minimum wage are practices that affect workers' salaries in an industry which reports multi-billion dollar earnings.

While conducting our interviews, the majority of informants reported not knowing what the minimum wage was in the State of Florida. At During the time of this research, the state's hourly minimum wage was $6.67. A good example of this lack of information is given by Mario, a nursery worker who has been living in Florida since 1992. When asked if he knew what the minimum wage in the state was, he told us, "I think it is around six, six something I believe." Similarly, Marta from Puerto Rico stated, "The truth is I do not know, I do not think anyone at work would provide me with this (information) and there are no posters or information available to us." For Miguel who had been a victim of wage theft on two distinct occasions, the answer was similar, "I do not know. I've never been given such information."

These examples not only show our participants' lack of information regarding the state's hourly minimum wage, but also highlight the lack of information available to them at their workplace. Many of us may be familiar with guidelines, posters and information displayed in lunch rooms or in areas accessible to workers. Unfortunately, this apparently does not occur in plant nurseries and farms where many employees work, eat, are paid,

and rest in the fields, and seldom enter offices and other management spaces of the companies that employ them. Many workers also expressed an unwillingness to share wage information with their fellow co-workers; thus, an informal network where information could be shared among workers was absent. The lack of such networks among workers creates advantages for unscrupulous employers because it maintains workers uninformed of payment standards or unaware of unfair labor practices. seemingly, creates disadvantages for uninformed workers.

The issue of information is further exacerbated by the worker's language skills. Many workers in this industry are illiterate or completed very few years of education. One informant, Marcos from Guatemala, told us that he had never been to school, "Not one day. Let me tell you, my parents were very poor and they couldn't give me an education, that's how I grew up, and as I got older I just started working." Like Marcos, several informants told us they had never been to school. As a result, the existence of posters, even in worker accessible areas would not be useful unless someone took the time to explain their contents to the workers. Aggravating the situation is the fact that many workers, mostly of Guatemalan origin, are native speakers of indigenous languages, such as K'iche and Mam, and have a difficult time communicating in Spanish. These workers come from indigenous parts of their homeland, and even their Spanish is fragmented and limited. Antonio, who is Mexican, told us, "I keep myself informed, and for them (indigenous Guatemalan workers) this is hard because they speak their own dialect, some of them even have a hard time finding a job because they are shy and are afraid that they will not be understood." Again, even in places where standard, bilingual

(English and Spanish) posters are available, many indigenous workers would be left in ignorance of their labor rights and their employer's responsibilities.

For many of our informants, education, language skills, and harassment are some of the issues they have to face in an environment that places emphasis on capital accumulation and productivity. Many of our informants show concern for the conditions of other workers working along them. Alberto from Mexico told us that, "There are other workers that get paid less than the minimum (wage), they are getting about $5.15, a gentleman told me at the nursery. Some of these guys are learning to spray, so the bosses say that they first need to learn in order to get a raise." Another worker, Jonathan,, also from Mexico, explained to us that, "I often hear other workers complain because they get paid very little, and sometimes they give them a lot of work, it is not fair that some get paid more than others, there are some that just started working and they get paid better than some that have been there for longer periods of time." Both of these statements demonstrate a level of frustration regarding the ambiguity of pay structures in the industry. Many workers did not know how payment rates were determined, and often expressed concern about this seemingly unfair situation.

We asked nursery operators how they determined their employee's wages and found that there are varied perspectives regarding the payment scales available to the workers, and great variation in wage practices among employers. One of the operators told us that he starts everybody at minimum wage, "If they last three months, we try to give them a raise. If they last a year we give them a week off." Another operator explicitly told us that he starts his new employees at $7.25, while another explained to us that, "To my knowledge only one person [who works for me] gets ten dollars an hour,

and that's because she's new. She's only been here a year. And for everybody else, the pay scale ranges from $10.50 to $16 per hour. It's a 40 hours week. Time and half and over time." Our data analysis of the owners interviewed does not reveal any inconsistencies regarding the pay structure within each individual firm. In other words, there was no evidence that some workers start higher than others for occupations which entail similar activities; the operators claim to start low and then give bonuses to individuals according to productivity. However, we did find it striking that the wages offered to workers vary greatly from nursery to nursery. It is possible that some over-reporting may have occurred among some of the operators, as the majority of both workers and operators reported workers' wages starting at or near minimum wage.

Many of the issues that the nursery workers face are further accentuated by their lack of knowledge of organizations, agencies, or institutions that can help them in situations like harassment and/or wage theft. The situation is further aggravated by a worker's lack of legal immigration status. As Jorge, who is from Guatemala, described, "I would not know where to go, I believe I would report them (negligent employers), but we do not know anything. In the first place since we have no papers we get very scared, we are always very scared because we have no papers, we are not safe." Tito, another Guatemalan, described the situation stating that, "The only thing that I know, someone told me, that there is a house in Washington where they would help you, but I really do not know where it is."

The workers' lack of knowledge of organizations that could help them also affects any possibility of organizing workers. We asked our participants about their willingness to participate in organizations that work collectively around immigration and labor issues.

Eduardo's answer was straightforward. "No because, like I told you, I had no school, no education, why would I?" A co-worker, Manuel, told us that, "Many (workers) are afraid, sometimes we are scared because they may report us to immigration," while Pedro spoke more directly about the obstacles that workers in the plant nursery industry could encounter, stating that, "There is an obstacle because people are undocumented and do not want to participate."

Informing the Action Campaign

The objectives of this research project were related specifically to the needs that the FYR Task Force identified in order to develop and implement an inclusive wage theft action campaign in the State of Florida. The goals of the action plan include a workers' rights education component, the generation of a media campaign to create public awareness, advocacy to facilitate legal solutions to the problem, and prosecution of cases of wage theft. Individual members of the Task Force are also interested in the potential to organize workers, a tactic that may resonate with some aspects of the education campaign. In this paper, we specifically focus on the part of the action plan concerning educating workers of their wage rights. We explore the ways wage theft occurs in a low-wage plant nursery industry of South Florida; the workers' knowledge of and access to information regarding labor rights and laws; and the obstacles which the task force could face when developing an education campaign for current and potential victims of wage theft.

Our first goal was to discover the ways in which wage theft tends to occur in the low-wage plant nursery industry of South Florida. Our findings in this area suggest that

wage theft occurs in similar ways to those previously reported by the media and research literature. We found that paying under the minimum wage, "shaving" hours, and simply not paying wages due are some of the ways in which workers suffer abuses from their employers. Our analysis also indicates that harassment often results in those cases where employees were willing to speak out and complain. These findings are important because they empirically document the existence of wage theft within the plant nursery industry while providing a valuable asset for the Task Force's development of educational materials, trainings, and policies.

The second part of our analysis looked into the workers' knowledge of and access to information regarding laws and rights at the workplace. In this area, we found that a great number of our informants had no clear idea of what the state's minimum hourly wage was. Many of our informants complained that there were no posters informing them of basic work standards or regulations at their job sites and that they would not be able to extract such information from their employers. The workers also told us that reliable information is not available from co-workers. Indeed, little information about wages is shared among workers. In addition, several informants revealed that they would not know who to seek information or help from if they experienced wage theft or any other form of abuse at their workplace.

The absence of knowledge about informational and assistance resources is exacerbated by the fact that many of the workers we interviewed are partially or completely illiterate and, thus, would not be able to read written information even if made available to them. Also, many workers come from rural areas in Guatemala and lack Spanish skills, which could help them in Miami-Dade's highly Hispanized environment.

These findings highlight the need to develop culturally specific training and educational protocols, but raise serious questions regarding accessibility to workers. Centralized training sessions are often difficult for workers to attend due to lack of transportation and because a few hours of training may signify hours away from an income at an informal or formal job. Other obstacles that the Task Force could face when developing an education campaign for current and potential victims of wage theft include workers' lack of desire and ability to be organized.[5] We found that many workers are unaware or unfamiliar with models of organizing and even to the idea of unionization itself. Often, for those who had a greater knowledge of such activities, the fear of their migratory status represented an obstacle to joining such groups. We argue that this presents a grave challenge in the education campaign goals set forth by the Task Force, as reaching workers is almost reduced to individual efforts, creating access to workers into a "one individual at a time" style dynamic.

The results offered in this paper, represent only a snapshot of the problems faced by the low-wage workforce in the plant nursery industry in South Florida.[6] Wage theft has serious impacts and consequences on the lives' of its victims as families in both the U.S. and in sending countries are affected by the economic problems experienced by their breadwinners. Additionally, although workers are hardest hit by wage theft, businesses that comply with fair wage and labor laws are also undercut by the lower overhead and an environment of dishonesty created by competitors who ignore the law. The deregulation

[5] We use "organizing" in terms of grassroots participation. Some of the Task Force's groups organize their members around immigration and labor issues, training and empowering them through teaching leadership skills and providing them with other tools for accomplishing community development.

[6] In addition to wage theft and on the job harassment as a result of requesting unpaid wages, we also interviewed at least three workers who were encountering sexual harassment from employers. As with cases of wage theft, we referred these individuals to free legal counsel.

of business, specifically the lack of enforcement of wages and hours standards, makes these workers more vulnerable. At a local level, Miami-Dade's power dynamics also play an important role as Miami has become a magnet for immigrants from Latin America and provided a form of labor that is easy for employees to exploit. Although not detailed above, the success of some immigrants in Miami means that employers who exploit workers are just as likely to be Latinos as they are Anglos. In this context we can see how the existence of wage theft is often tangled between global and local path dependent dynamics.

Trade liberalization has brought dramatic changes to the world's economic order in the last few decades. Washington consensus policy and its enforcement by the *International Monetary Fund* (IMF) have shifted the world's economic order toward liberalization of financial markets and de-regulation of international trade, all while permitting the regulation of labor and its flows. Today, immigrants are being plugged into the lowest socioeconomic ranks of the "developed world" and denied access to some of the benefits that capital globalization claims to offer. Decent wages, education, access to health care, and job protection are absent from these individual's lives', as capital globalization continues its march toward endless accumulation. This global order has real impacts on individuals around the world and the conditions immigrants' experience indicate the degree to which capital liberalization is affecting current processes of economic, social, and cultural integration.

We expect to continue this work by producing reports and papers that will serve the Task Force in their educational goals as well as the worker organizing goals of some

of the participating groups. Further analysis is thus needed to have a better picture of the task force's needs and the paths required for the completion of the action campaign.

The findings presented here are only part of a larger process, where research and community action complement each other for a practical promotion of social change. The objective of our research is to reveal facts and, in so doing, contribute to creating an awareness of the conditions experienced by many migratory, low-wage workers as they enter the United State's labor force and join its social institutions. At the same time, we will expand our social research goals to additional industries as we try to impact our community through action. For the organizations we work with, we provide empirical research that documents the conditions of and impacts on individuals' lives, while helping them improve organizational models and strategies. In this sense, social research fulfills a tangible goal, one in which theory, analysis, activism, and organizing work together toward a renewed model for social change.

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