

Legal case exposes social chasm in New York

Immigrant workers sue Donald Trump

Bill Vann
30 June 1998

Trump Tower on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue draws a seemingly endless stream of tourists from around the world. They jostle past large security men to glimpse the ill-matched marble floors and gleaming gold walls, and marvel at the building's atrium and interior waterfall.

Never mind that this style of opulent vulgarity has been copied by scores of hotels and shopping malls across the country. The Trump Tower remains an unrivaled monument to the accumulation of personal wealth. With 40 stories of luxury apartments costing many millions of dollars, including real estate speculator Donald Trump's own 53-room penthouse, a visit to Trump Tower offers the peculiar allure of physical proximity to the rich and famous.

If the tourists wanted to understand more profoundly the building's significance--that is, its place within the scheme of New York City's social relations--they could learn more from a visit to a courtroom in lower Manhattan. The proceedings in question are not the legal battles over prenuptial agreements and alimony payments between Mr. Trump and his ex-wives. These are well covered by the media and relevant details can be learned on the nightly news.

Federal District Court in Manhattan is the arena for a case that has dragged on for 15 years, with virtually no public notice. It is a lawsuit brought by some 200 immigrant workers who were brought to New York from Poland to do the demolition work on the old Bonwit Teller building, clearing the foundation for the Trump Tower's construction.

The undocumented immigrant workers were paid \$4 an hour to work 12-hour days, seven days a week under hazardous conditions. They were exposed to clouds of asbestos dust, without being provided any protection. Several have since died.

The workers were cheated out of much of even this meager compensation, after the contractor that Trump hired went bust. The workers are suing not for their stolen wages, approximately \$4,000 each, but for \$4 million they charge Mr. Trump owes to the welfare fund of Demolition Workers Local 96 of the Laborers International Union.

There is an irony in this claim, which is no doubt quite clear to the workers. The union was a partner in defrauding them. It allowed the Trump contractor to bring in the undocumented immigrants and violate its wages and hours scales in return for token payments into its welfare funds for between 12 and 15 of the 200 men working at the site.

The lawsuit charges that Trump's company took direct control of the demolition work after the contractor's failure to pay wages led to work stoppages. Therefore, it claims, the Trump organization was responsible for paying the full amount for each worker into the welfare funds. The workers stand to get some pension and welfare benefits if the suit is successful.

So far, however, Donald Trump has used his considerable resources to bottle up the legal action. It has been in the federal courts for 15 years and, by any estimation, Trump has spent more in legal fees than it would have cost to meet the workers' demands. He has had four major New York law firms defending him in the matter.

In 1991 another federal court ruled on some of the issues, finding that Mr. Trump indeed did conspire with the bureaucracy of Local 95 to withhold payments to the union funds. Appeals on other matters, however, threw the case back into the courts.

The extraordinary dragging out of the legal action by the immigrant workers against Donald Trump has had its effect. Several of the lead plaintiffs have already

died, as has one of their lawyers and the original judge. Yet 15 years after the lawsuit was initiated, and 18 years after the workers were cheated out of their compensation while working under intensely exploitative and hazardous conditions, the case still stands as powerful expression of the chasm between wealth and poverty that characterizes social relations in New York City.

While New York's comeback is constantly celebrated by politicians and the media, the fact remains that creation of new wealth, concentrated almost entirely in the speculative activities on Wall Street, has benefited a thin layer at the top, while leaving masses of people trapped in poverty and low-wage jobs. Unemployment remains at twice the national average. One recent study showed that roughly two-thirds of the growth in wages has taken place in the financial services industry, with the vast majority going to those at the top. Bonuses, which go almost exclusively to the highly paid deal makers on Wall Street, accounted for 23 percent of all wage growth in the city between 1990 and 1995.

Immigrants account for nearly one-third of the city's population and provide a seemingly inexhaustible supply of the kind of cheap labor Mr. Trump used to erect his tacky palace on Fifth Avenue.

The role of the union in the Trump Tower case is also representative. The textile and clothing workers union, UNITE, for example, has been accused of providing its union label to Chinatown sweatshops that have employed workers at minimum wages and inhuman hours and then cheated them out of their paychecks. AFSCME's District Council 37, representing municipal workers, cemented a political alliance with New York's Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and then looked the other way as he brought in tens of thousands of welfare workers to serve as involuntary cheap labor for the city.

Sitting on top of this social structure, Mayor Giuliani has recently come under ridicule from the media for plans to build an emergency operations center, universally described as a bunker, to direct governmental operations during a period of extreme crisis.

Given the widening chasm between wealth and poverty in New York and the absence of any buffers--such as effective unions or social reformist policies--to soften class antagonisms, the building of a

bunker is entirely logical. When the type of exploitation suffered by the workers who cleared the site for the Trump Tower creates a social explosion, there may be more than a few of the building's residents asking the mayor if they can join him inside.

See Also:

Cuts hit hospitals, homeless services

New York mayor announces layoffs

[30 May 1998]

The man and the guinea pigs: a New York City fable

[28 March 1998]



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)