

Crisis facing immigrant workers in New York exacerbated by attacks

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There has been relatively little attention paid to the crisis facing immigrant workers in New York City, especially those who are undocumented, in the wake of the events of September 11.

According to one estimate, among the dead and missing in the World Trade Center collapse are some 500 undocumented immigrants who worked in low-paid jobs, such as messengers or janitors, or delivering donuts and coffee to the offices in the Twin Towers. Thousands more lost their jobs when the businesses they worked for were destroyed or were forced to close after authorities sealed off the financial district.

Fully 40 percent of the population of New York now consists of people who are foreign-born. Many of these workers, in sections of the economy susceptible to the spreading economic downturn, have recently lost their jobs. They also face the fears due to the scapegoating and harassment of Arabs, Muslims and the immigrant population as a whole.

Most immediately affected are the undocumented workers. Federal law prohibits them from collecting unemployment insurance, and many are reluctant to apply for aid from the relief agencies set up to help the disaster victims, for fear of being turned in to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Those who do go to the relief centers often wait in line for four or five hours only to be told to come back the next day. When finally interviewed, they cannot produce necessary documentation such as pay stubs, since they were paid in cash. Language barriers and a lack of clear guidelines for allocating aid all lead to arbitrary decisions, which more often than not leave the immigrants receiving minimal or no assistance at all.

Workers who were injured in the attack face similar problems when they apply for workers' compensation insurance, for which the undocumented are legally

eligible, but which the state has done little to publicize.

A recent example of the difficulties facing these workers was the report this past week that day laborers hired to clear glass, ash and debris from office buildings at the disaster site have not been paid for up to two weeks of work. They were promised payment in cash by subcontractors, and knew their employer only through someone who hired them on a street corner.

These immigrants are at the center of the huge cleanup now taking place in Lower Manhattan, with hundreds lining up at 8 a.m each morning at the corner of Broadway and Fulton Streets. Told they will be paid \$60 for an eight-hour shift and \$90 for 12 hours, as of October 18 these workers reported that they had not received a penny. Among them are undocumented workers who lost their jobs in the surrounding shops near the World Trade Center. With no savings, they are trying desperately to eke out a living and not knowing what tomorrow will bring.

The nightmare is compounded for families of the missing. Many immigrants left their families behind in their countries of origin and sent most of their earnings back home. Relatives calling from other countries would not usually know the name of the employer, only that the missing person worked for a restaurant or other business in or around the World Trade Center. Coworkers often knew each other only by their first names and nationalities, making precise identification of the missing impossible. Their former employers often refuse to come forward out of their own fear of incurring fines from the INS. As a result, a number of undocumented workers have gone to their graves under the rubble anonymously.

The plight of immigrants in the aftermath of the WTC attacks was the subject of a recent teach-in at the City University of New York's Hunter College. Sponsored

by the school's Asian-American Studies Program, panelists represented a number of groups providing assistance to immigrant communities. The discussion went unreported in the daily mainstream media.

One of the speakers was Jane Clemente of Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV). "Many of our members worked as nannies in the World Trade Center area," she explained. "I myself worked part-time as a nanny. Now I am out of a job. Many employers [of domestic help] either died or lost jobs themselves, meaning we have no one to hire us. We have gone to the temp agencies, but they say this is a very bad time and they have no work for us either. Many immigrant workers died; they had supported entire families in their home countries. Most undocumented workers will not be able to access benefits and services."

Another speaker, Laura Liu, of the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association, said, "Chinatown is less than a mile from the WTC, the poorest neighborhood in Lower Manhattan. Before September 11, people worked 10-12 hour days, six or seven days a week in unregulated industries such as restaurants and garment manufacturing.

"The attack has exacerbated these conditions. Bosses have manipulated the tragedy. Sweatshop tactics already in place have multiplied, and they have told workers things such as: 'We can't pay you because the banks are closed.' In some cases this is just extending a previous withholding of wages, which has now reached as much as eight weeks' pay. The lack of phone service, also electric, water and gas, has led to an economic meltdown. Car service usage is down by 70 percent. Thousands of small businesses have been affected. The focus of relief has not been on Chinatown, but on the better off areas on the west side of Lower Manhattan."

Ms. Liu went on to describe the obstacles facing workers applying for workers' compensation: "The minimum benefit is an unlivable \$40 per week, and many injured workers wait three, five or even ten years to find out about their cases. There are 9,000 injured workers with claims from the WTC attack, at a time when the Workers Compensation Board already had 200,000 open claims to deal with. Some victims of the 1993 WTC bombing still have open cases."

Another speaker described the health and environmental problems which people are suffering

from, including constant headaches, sleeplessness, nausea, worsening asthma, exposure to toxic chemicals such as formaldehyde in the air for weeks, and fear as a result of the experience of the attack.

This speaker described the effects on the economic life of the community that have led to job losses or sharp reductions in workers' incomes: "Trucks couldn't make deliveries due to traffic restrictions. Taxi drivers saw incomes drop from \$300 per day to \$80 a day, out of which they had to pay \$60 to rent the car. This left only \$20 for a 12-hour shift. Street vendors had to find other, less desirable locations where they faced increased police abuse, with many moving to Brooklyn. Garment shops and other employers have also relocated to Brooklyn.

"ID checks and searches made Chinatown like a war zone. Bags were searched. These actions increased the fear of the undocumented especially. Also, one third of the residents lost phone service—which is not just an inconvenience, but also dangerous in the event of emergencies."

To date, none of the hundreds of millions of dollars in charitable donations that have been raised for the victims of the World Trade Center disaster has been distributed to any of the organizations addressing the needs of immigrants. Congress approved a \$15 billion handout to the airline industry within days, but there has been no proposal even to consider the urgent need for immediate relief faced by working people in general, much less the most vulnerable sections of the working class. Not a penny of the \$6.3 billion appropriated to help New York City is going to humanitarian aid; it is all going to pay contractors for the debris removal and to rebuild infrastructure.



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