

Warehouse workers in California speak to the WSWS

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4 October 2012

Last Friday, when warehouse workers in Mira Loma, California returned to work after a two-week strike, there were no illusions that conditions would magically improve, considering that those making promises were the very people who had systematically created such conditions in the first place.

Warehouse Workers United, a union affiliated with the Change to Win Coalition, hailed workers' return to work as a victory "after winning safety improvements on the job and drawing a response from Wal-Mart about poor working conditions in its contracted warehouses."

In reality, the response from Wal-Mart is absolute indifference. The company has repeatedly asserted that workers' claims were unfounded. The company's statement that it "is developing a protocol of random inspections by third-party organizations and conducting contract reviews with our service providers with an eye towards implementing specific health and safety requirements" means that nothing will improve in the abhorrent conditions workers face daily.

The WSWS interviewed some of the workers involved. The picture which emerges reminds one of conditions in a third-world country or in the nineteenth century.

Carlos moves freight from truck to truck—"cross docking"—at a warehouse in Hemet: "There have been multiple problems and conflicts within the warehouse itself. There are no fans, so once it's 80 to 85 degrees within the warehouse itself, it's going to be 120 to 130 degrees in the trailer.

"There's not sustainable water to drink. A lot of our water comes from a faucet from outside the warehouse which is near a rat trap, and the sprinkler system, and different chemicals. A lot of times when they bring us water it has leaves, or dirt, or soot and they cover it up

with powdered Gatorade.

"The warehouse itself is extremely old. I would say anywhere from 50 to 80 years old. The ramps themselves are bent, warped, shifted, and not in working order. It's just extremely hard to get in and out of the trailers, so by safety standards it's just not up to par.."

When asked if there were any precautions against pollutants, Carlos said, "The warehouse has a truck stop with multiple trucks coming in and out and we have no idea what's coming through in the air, or on the floor, or on our hands. We're touching multiple boxes with chemicals, powders, and dirt so we have no idea what we're up against.

"The way we're getting paid is the very minimal. On the first and second shift they pay \$8 an hour and the second and third shift they pay \$8.50. Other warehouses around the area pay anywhere from \$9 to \$16 an hour. The reason for that is our warehouse works with 100 percent Wal-Mart goods. So the whole base of operations goes from Wal-Mart to NFI and they hire the staffing agencies and the staffing agencies hire us. That way, Wal-Mart doesn't have to take any responsibility for us, so they don't have to pay the proper wages nor do they have to give us the benefits or the health insurance.

"Until a couple of weeks ago, most of us were working six days a week, but most of the time it's Monday through Friday. On Saturdays people usually get picked to come in but it's never more than 37 or 38 hours. I would say that 90 to 99 percent of us don't get to have a full 40-hour week. I think that's their way of trying to save money and not give us overtime. Let's be honest. If we're to hit that overtime mark we would be getting \$12 an hour. We need that money, we can't just survive on \$8 an hour with a family, car payments,

mortgages, phone payments, insurance, and so we can't stay afloat with \$8 an hour."

Carlos was asked about health and safety: "The companies that hire us could care less if you get hurt. I have a couple of friends that have been hurt, fell off a dock, boxes landed on them. I have a best friend who was hit by a forklift and all they want to do is send us to their doctor, just to give us a prescription and send us right back to work.

"There's no proper training for forklift drivers. They give people tests to watch on a television and then they go ahead and throw people on a forklift to see if they get it. It's not a proper training. So more and more people every day are getting hurt. There's more retaliation when we speak out and tell them there are things that are wrong. More favoritism and discrimination within the warehouse itself. There are so many things wrong with that warehouse and no one is fighting for it but us workers.

"That's why we went on this pilgrimage. There's about 40 to 60 of us that decided to go on strike and make our presence known within the warehouse industry and everyone started realizing that Inland Empire, the center of all warehouses, their workers are being mistreated.

"One gentleman got an emergency phone call from his father and he stepped out of his trailer to let his father know he'd give him a call right back and they fired him right there on the spot. They didn't want to hear any type of comment from him, they didn't want to know what was going on, they didn't care.

"I got suspended for telling my supervisor that his lead was being very disrespectful, verbally threatening me, and I got sent home and suspended for four days for letting him know that I was being disrespected."

Pedro, works at the Mira Loma warehouse as a loader and unloader. He said, "The heat is unbearable. You're sweating 24/7. There are heavy boxes and it wears you out, especially your lower back. If you don't take your time to relax, or take it easy, you could easily get hurt or dehydrate.

"You don't really have time to fill up your water bottle because you're scared that on your way to the lunch area someone is going to come up and say 'Hey, what are you doing? Why are you walking around?'

"The pay is really bad, they pay \$8 an hour. The first day we went back to work, they said they were going to

send us home early by lunchtime so I only worked 4 hours, that's \$8 an hour for 4 hours minus taxes. That's only \$25. I worked my butt off. If they told me I was only going to work 4 hours I wouldn't have gone. Twenty-five dollars for four hours? That doesn't even cover gas, and I have two babies at home.

"Then if you miss a day, they'll suspend you for three days."

When asked what happens when workers make a complaint, Pedro said, "I had two friends who tried to do a report and they [management] told them to wait. As far as I know you have the right to file a complaint at that moment."

Pedro was asked if there were a lot of pollutants in the warehouse, he replied, "Oh yeah. There's so much dust, I've never seen them vacuum. It would be good to have a face mask because every day you blow your nose you can see all that dust. They have pigeons in the warehouse and they poop everywhere. It gets really hot with all the forklifts blowing hot air."

Pedro responded to a question about what had been accomplished by the WWU: "They helped us get together and be as one. Before we weren't together, everyone was separate and doing their own thing, and now we're like brothers, like a family and we look after each other. And now with the march and everything Wal-Mart has to answer us and people are figuring out what the conditions are like in the warehouse, not just for us but for all the people that can't speak up, it gives them hope to speak up.

When asked if the strike could spread, Pedro said, "Yeah, all over the world. Not just in this nation, but all over the world. There were people supporting us from warehouses in Chile that work in Wal-Mart-associated warehouses and we gave them hope to stand up for what's right."



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