

Observers report rampant worker abuses in Katrina-hit area

GULFPORT, Miss. (PAI) — One day in early February, a teenager worker tacking blue plastic sheeting over gaping holes in a Hurricane Katrina-damaged roof of a building in Gulfport, Miss., fell off.

The teenager — who by federal law is too young to even toil on a job like that — was taken to Memorial Hospital in Gulfport, where nurses tried to get him to take a urination drug test before examining his injuries.

But the youngster spoke only Spanish, the hospital personnel speak only English, and he didn't understand what they wanted him to do, says Bill Chandler of Mississippi Immigration Rights Association. So they threw him out of the hospital. And then, to add insult to injury, the contractor who hired him refused to pay him.

Abuses like that, numbering in the thousands, are rampant in the Gulf Coast area as workers and residents try to recover from the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita last August and September.

Data uncovered by Chandler's group, Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) and others show widespread importation and use of out-of-area workers, equally widespread refusal to pay workers, abuse of immigrants, use of illegal child labor, and lack of job safety and health enforcement, among other problems.

Worse, as IWJ discovered in a meeting with a top Wage and Hour Division official in Washington, D.C., the federal government is unaware of the abuses, and may not be willing to do much about them.

The problems in the Katrina-hit area come as the Bush Administration comes under increasing fire from all points of the political spectrum for its poor response to the millions of people who lost homes, businesses and jobs when the hurricanes hit.

Labor Secretary Elaine Chao disputes the lack of response. She touts the Department of Labor's channeling of

\$274 million in aid in the weeks after the hurricane wrecked New Orleans, along with much of Louisiana and southern Mississippi and parts of Alabama.

Even so, 1.2 million people are still displaced from their homes. Of the half of those who are workers, 26.3 percent are jobless, federal figures show. Chao's response to their plight was that "many have found permanent jobs elsewhere."

By contrast, unions rushed in teams to help not just their colleagues in the stricken states, but other workers. It still has teams there, retraining area workers for new rebuilding-oriented tasks and occupations.

Meanwhile, Chandler and others are reporting abuses of workers by contractors hired — without competitive bidding — by agencies to undertake the Katrina cleanup and reconstruction. Abuses include:

- **Outright refusal to pay workers.** Chandler's group, with encouragement by one federal Labor Department worker in Mississippi, has documented such refusals through interviews with more than 1,000 workers. It already recovered \$141,000 in unpaid wages for 65 workers hired by a subcontractor for Kellogg, Brown and Root, a subsidiary of Halliburton, the firm formerly headed by Vice President Dick Cheney.

Other times, contractors and subcontractors stall on paying workers, who then leave to try to find employers who will pay them. Or the contractors bring the workers in for specific jobs and then when the tasks are done, "they dump them and force them out of the decrepit housing they're living in" while not paying them, he adds.

In New Orleans, contractors got away without paying immigrant workers by calling in the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency to conduct sweeps just before payday. Workers fled. ICE agents often pose as Occupational Safety and Health Administration inspectors, over OSHA's protests. "Every immigrant worker has

had wages stolen, in many ways," Chandler said.

- **Lack of wage and hour enforcement, especially in Mississippi, the only U.S. state with no Labor Department.** That puts the entire enforcement burden on overworked and understaffed federal DOL personnel, who in turn have enlisted Chandler's group as their eyes and ears in the field, interviewing workers and gathering evidence.

"All they (DOL) do is take walk-in cases at their offices in Jackson and on the Gulf Coast," Chandler said. And immigrant workers are afraid to approach both offices because the ICE office is right next door. "One result of the lack of enforcement is rampant use of child labor, even in dangerous occupations such as construction, he noted.

- **Diversion of federal money long before it gets to workers.** Chandler gave an example where the federal government hired KBR to remove debris and fill at a price of \$20 per cubic yard. KBR hired a subcontractor for the same task, for \$4 per cubic yard.

The subcontractor's managers did not speak Spanish, so they hired bilingual "crew leaders" who in turn hired the workers to move the debris at \$5-\$7 an hour. But neither the crew leaders nor the rank-and-file workers were paid. Chandler's group argues the "crew leaders" are really employees, not "inde-

pendent contractors," and thus, like the rank-and-file workers, should be covered by federal wage and hour laws.

- **Lack of job safety enforcement.** Acting OSHA Administrator Jonathan Snare admitted Feb. 6 that the agency still is giving "technical assistance only"

to employers and workers on job safety issues in the hardest-hit areas south of Interstate 10. That includes New Orleans, a key oil refining and importation area where Katrina smashed tanks, pipelines, docks, wells, rigs and other facilities.



Quest
Investment
Management, Inc.

• Serving Multi-Employer
Trusts for Twenty Years

Cam Johnson
Adrian Hamilton
Doug Goebel

Greg Sherwood
Monte Johnson
Bill Zenk

One SW Columbia St., Suite 1100 Portland, OR 97258
503-221-0158

www.QuestInvestment.com

THE UNION PLUS® MORTGAGE PROGRAM

Provided Exclusively by Chase Home Finance



When it comes to mortgages, we're taking a stand for Union members.

Chase is backing union members with the Union Plus® Mortgage Program — a home purchase and refinancing program exclusively for union members, their parents and children.

- **FREE Mortgage Assistance Benefit**
If you are unemployed or disabled.
- **A wide variety of mortgages**
Choose from fixed-rate, adjustable-rate, and low- or no-closing costs options.
- **Special Lending**
First-time homebuyer and less-than-perfect credit programs.
- **Savings on closing costs**
Member-only savings on new purchases and refinance.

It all adds up to more home-buying power.

Contact your local Union Plus Mortgage Specialist

866-729-6016



Union Plus is a registered trademark of Union Privilege. Eligibility for mortgage assistance begins one year after closing on a Union Plus Mortgage through Chase Home Finance. This offer may not be combined with any other promotional offer or rebate, is not transferable, and is available to bona fide members of participating unions. For down payments of less than 20%, mortgage insurance (MI) is required and MI charges apply. All loans are subject to credit and property approval. Program terms and conditions are subject to change without notice. Not all products are available in all states or for all loan amounts. Other restrictions and limitations apply. ©2005 JPMorgan Chase & Co. All Rights Reserved. P-UP 104 2A-7604 10/05

Tired
of
Working
in
PAIN?

Most Insurance
Plans Accepted!

PROUDLY SERVING
PORTLAND WORKERS
FOR OVER 29 YEARS

Beeson Chiropractic
helps bring the
relief you need!

- ♦ Treatment for pain due to overuse and repetitive motion
- ♦ Chiropractic adjustments
- ♦ Treatment for accident and sports-related injuries
- ♦ Rehabilitation exercises
- ♦ Therapeutic massage
- ♦ Internal diagnosis and treatment
- ♦ Lab tests and x-rays



Dr. Dan Beeson, Chiropractor
7215 SE Thirteenth Ave. in Sellwood

CALL 503-238-7025