

# Oregon needs to protect all its workers

**T**wo workforces coexist in Oregon: One that enjoys the protection of labor and safety laws, and one that does not.

For three decades, thousands of Latin American immigrant and guest workers have performed much of the most grueling work in Oregon's forests. Many have been exploited, intimidated and subjected to dangerous working conditions, but widespread fear of retaliation keeps their plight largely in the shadows.

## EDITORIAL

Today, Street Roots concludes its three-part series on their plight. After interviews with workers and their family members, discussions with state and federal industry regulators and forestry experts – and after a review of hundreds of government inspection records, it is clear the status quo is doing little to protect these workers from wage theft, dangerous working conditions, and in some cases even death.

Telling workers to speak up and report their employers for violations is not the answer. That's asking them to risk a job that they cannot afford to lose.

On the surface, Oregon is a state that cares about worker protections. Last session legislators passed a sick leave law and banned the criminal record box on most job applications. This session a steep minimum wage hike has already passed through the senate after community groups and advocates built a momentum around bringing the state closer to a living wage.

And yet, in Oregon's forests, many workers fear being fired for reporting injuries – in some cases injuries as serious as an on-the-job amputation.

Many are denied rest breaks, overtime pay and adequate safety gear while working long, laborious hours in extreme temperatures – sometimes without access to drinking water. At night they sleep eight to a single motel room.

And the majority of the time, it's tax dollars going into the pockets of their employers.

Companies that violate safety and labor laws continue to win contracts under the

U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

It's time to let policy makers know it's not OK to spend tax dollars on work performed by people who are being exploited.

In Salem, the governor's Environmental Justice Task Force has been listening to testimony from field and forest workers and is working to tackle some of these issues. Any plan of action will have to include both policy makers and community partners with the following goals:

- Passing legislation to change the agriculture and forestry inspection criteria used by Oregon OSHA. Currently, workers compensation claims play heavily into deciding which employers are inspected, but widespread fear of retaliation in reporting workplace injuries discourages many workers from ever filing workers compensation claims in the first place. This results in a system where law-abiding employers are more likely to be inspected than those who intimidate their workers.

- Providing resources to fund a team of cooperating BOLI and OSHA investigators and inspectors whose focus is reforestation and farm inspection and enforcement. Inspecting 5 percent of Oregon's 284 reforestation contractors each year is not enough.

- Drafting legislation to significantly increase OSHA's civil penalties for breaking workplace safety laws. Oregon's are currently the lowest in the country for first time offenses.

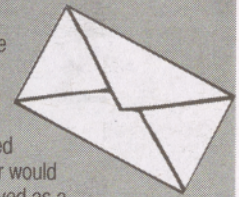
- Creating a licensing system for applying pesticides and herbicides and for performing reforestation activities. Oregonians must pass a test to handle food, but not to apply toxic chemicals or wield chainsaws.

- Making the Forest Service contracting policies more transparent, and conducting a study to see if the Forest Service is setting the stage for exploitation by awarding contracts to unreasonably low bidders.

We appreciate the task force's attention to this important issue, and we encourage a commitment to finding real and lasting solutions to issues facing Oregon's reforestation and field workers.

### Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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Joel Iboa holds up a bottle of murky water, showing the Governor's Environmental Task Force in September what immigrant laborers are drinking at a labor camp near Medford in Southern Oregon. Seated next to him is Dagoberto Morales, founder and director of Southern Oregon Center for Farmworker Advocacy.

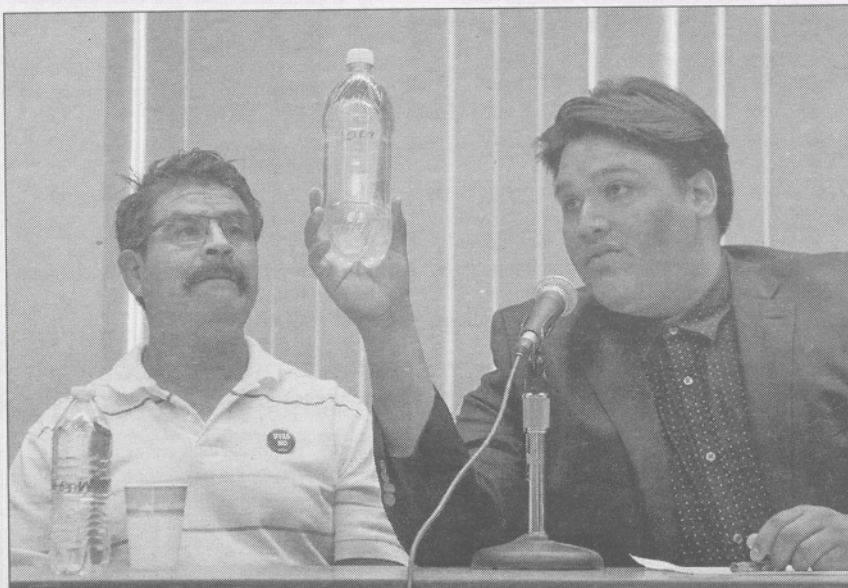


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