

# Forest worker abuse prompts special hearing in Salem

*Sen. Michael Dembrow convenes Senate Workforce Committee for testimony on immigrant and guest worker exploitation*

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Worker abuse and exploitation in Oregon's forests was the focus Tuesday morning at a special hearing before lawmakers in Salem.

Sen. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland), chair of the Oregon Senate Workforce Committee, invited workers, their advocates, state regulators and land managers, industry leaders and employers to answer questions about the oversight of contractors and the treatment of the reforestation workers they employ.

These laborers are primarily Latino immigrants or foreign guest workers, brought to the U.S. legally under a temporary work visa program known as H2-B.

They labor for long hours, performing some of the most grueling work in Oregon's forests. They are the workers planting saplings in the wake of logging operations, thinning stands and brush with chainsaws to reduce fuels, fighting forest fires and spraying herbicides.

Dembrow said it was Street Roots' in-depth series of reports on the exploitation of these workers that motivated him to hold the informational hearing.

As Street Roots reported in February, extensive research and surveys of workers in Southern Oregon show they're often denied rest breaks, drinking water and basic

sanitation, and that supervisors are known to discourage them from reporting serious and debilitating on-the-job injuries as being work related.

They're frequently housed in motel rooms where the bodies outnumber the beds, and are pressured to work dangerously fast,

sometimes with inadequate equipment. In some cases they aren't paid overtime or the wages they were promised, but widespread fear of retaliation and language barriers keep them from speaking up or reporting their employers for violating labor and safety laws.

"We talk here all the time about the need to restore forest health," Dembrow said, shortly after the hearing. "If we don't take good care of our forests, they're going to

burn, they're going to be diseased. We owe fair treatment to these workers."

Through a translator, Ramon Gutierrez and Andrés Cortez relayed their experiences working for reforestation contractors.

"I'm here asking for your help," Gutierrez told the committee. "I've come to tell you that in this type of work, we are mistreated very much, almost like animals, and we are not animals."

Cortez said over the past 13 years he's worked for several companies in Oregon's forests, and he's never seen a safety inspection take place.

"They give us bad equipment, that's part of the reason that we have accidents, and we are under too much pressure to do more work than we can," Cortez said, adding that he suffered a fractured foot on the job.

Gutierrez said he's been injured too — he broke his arm while working for an Oregon-based company on California land and had to have surgery in three places.

"They don't treat us like we're people. In the whole year I worked with a company, I never had a rest break, and they never paid my overtime," Cortez said. "They bully us and they always threaten us that they will fire us, and that's part of the reason that many of us don't speak out. That's why we are here today. So you can hear us and you can help us, because we feel that you are the ones that can help us."

Gutierrez told the committee a fellow worker committed suicide because he couldn't live with a work related injury. After the hearing he told Street Roots that man was his best friend.

"His life was ruined," said Gutierrez. "He was bullied at work for not being able to do the job as fast. He was slower, he wasn't the same since the injury."

He said his friend was just 21 years old when he hung himself in April.

Dembrow said he was struck by the workers' testimony, and walked away from the hearing with the impression that legislature needs to focus on finding more resources to enable regulators to enforce the labor and safety laws that already exist.

He said there are a few things he still needs to explore further, such as how extensively workers are made aware of their rights, how many inspectors it would take to get the job done, and what it would cost. But

he's committed to finding answers and plans to introduce legislation in 2017 to combat the exploitation of this workforce, which may include the Bureau of Labor and Industries.

"The wage theft bill that we passed earlier in the year is going to create three new wage theft inspectors for BOLI," Dembrow said, adding that one of those inspectors will likely be dedicated to agriculture and forestry, so the amount of work he or she is able to get done would be a good indication of how many more inspectors might be needed.

Michael Wood, Administrator of Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Division, told the committee a business in Oregon has the likelihood of being visited by his safety inspectors once every 32 years. He said in 1992, it would have been once every 15 years.

He also told the committee that OSHA is looking into some of the issues raised by Street Roots reporting, such as the way it determines which contractors to inspect.

Dembrow said while the Senate Workforce Committee has not worked much with OSHA in the past, "I'm very motivated to now.

Whether we're talking about safety training, exposure to pesticides or a variety of things — it sounds as if we really have work to do in the area of worker protections."

Carl Wilmsen, director of the Northwest Forest Worker Center, also gave testimony at the hearing. He's been advocating for reforestation workers for decades.

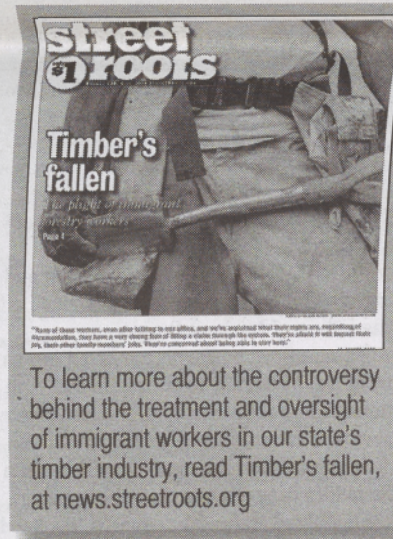
He said Dembrow's move to hold a hearing and the concern demonstrated by members of the committee made him optimistic, and he hopes it will result in meaningful action.

"I've done this before," he said. "Sometimes you get a lot of talk and nothing happens."



*Members of the Oregon Senate Workforce Committee hear testimony about working conditions from forestry workers, May 24, in Salem.*

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE



To learn more about the controversy behind the treatment and oversight of immigrant workers in our state's timber industry, read *Timber's fallen*, at [news.streetroots.org](http://news.streetroots.org)

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— SEN. MICHAEL DEMBROW  
D-PORTLAND