

He said some labor brokers have been known to threaten workers.

"It comes to the point where some of those people, their families are threatened back home," he said.

In December, Antonio Becerra was on lunch break from framing in a new high-end apartment building, The Fifty at Division, on the corner of Southeast Division Street and 50th Avenue, when a union rep approached him.

It was a Friday, and that evening Becerra attended his first union meeting. The following Monday morning, he was fired – right after his supervisor asked him if he accepted the rep's invitation.

Becerra, a 31-year-old husband and father, said he had worked for Timber Technologies LLC for about 18 months without incident.

With the help of the union, Becerra filed a complaint with the U.S. National Labor Relations Board, and Timber Technologies agreed to a non-admission settlement payment of \$128 and was required to post notices at its jobsites, informing workers that they have the right to join a union or organize.

Street Roots interviewed several other workers who were also new to the carpenters union.

One was Will Medrano, who immigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador two decades ago and has spent the majority of the time since working in wood framing and siding. He said that before joining the union, he was often denied overtime pay. At his last job, he said, he was making \$4 less per hour when he left than when he started, but he put up with it because of his immigration status.

"I didn't have documents," he said. "It was scary."

One man declined to be named because he was still working for a non-union employer when the interview took place. He had a freshly broken arm wrapped in a cast, which he said his boss was hassling him about. He had fallen off a ladder while on the job.

"They don't like me to see the doctor," he said.

He came to the union that night with a friend; it was his first meeting.

"I want to join," he said. "We work hard."

Another worker we spoke with, Jesus Vasquez, is one of eight men who filed a claim against G Builders LLC for what they allege is roughly \$7,000 owed to them for work they did on new high-end apartment buildings and a creative office space and retail building located in downtown and inner Southeast and Southwest Portland.

The union helped them refer the case the

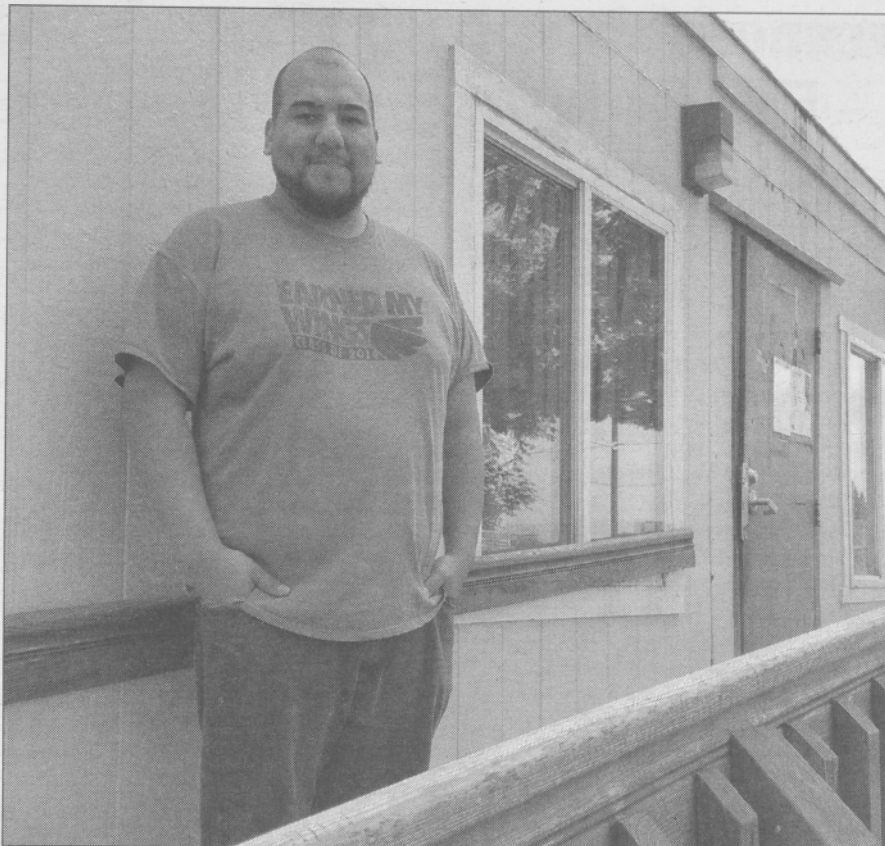


PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Cristian Salgado stands in front of the Worker Center, which he directs for Voz, in Portland. The nonprofit runs a twice-weekly wage theft clinic where volunteer attorneys help workers file claims for wages they are owed, primarily in construction.



PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

The Sept. 23 meeting of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters overflows with Latino workers at the union's Portland headquarters.

Department of Labor, where it's under investigation.

Earlier this year, the Labor Department found a major Oregon drywall company, Westside Drywall, had failed to pay its workers at least \$1 million in wages over the past six years.

The Hubbard-based contractor was sued

in 2010 for \$200,000 owed to 62 workers, and then was sued again this past February for \$800,000 owed to more than 100 workers in unpaid overtime.

In March, the Department of Labor sued PR Drywall in Hillsboro for more than \$98,000 in back wages owed to employees for overtime and shortages in prevailing

wages.

Prevailing wages are area standard wages that the law requires be paid to laborers working on taxpayer-funded construction projects, which for drywall installation and wood framing is about \$35 per hour.

Non-union framers and dry wall installers are typically paid piece rate, or can earn anywhere from \$10 to \$25 per hour, union representatives say.

BOLI's largest wage claim suit to date resulted from an audit of a public-works project at Southern Oregon University in 2015. It found that 44 different contractors and subcontractors had all failed to pay workers the legally required wages to the tune of \$2.5 million in the construction of a dining hall and student housing.

As a deterrent to wage theft, BOLI has the ability to debar contractors, which prevents them from being able to bid on taxpayer-funded construction projects for a period of time, usually a couple of years.

There are 58 contractors and companies currently debarred. Only two contractors have been debarred for life in Oregon.

Cristian Salgado directs Voz's drop-in Worker Center just south of where Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard extends above Interstate 84.

It's a place where day laborers can go to get legal advice if an employer owes them money, learn about their rights and find job opportunities with member employers who are required to offer at least \$12 an hour for a minimum of four hours.

Salgado said immigrants are often surprised when they learn they have any labor rights at all.

"It's pretty amazing," he said. "It reveals why people take advantage – they are amazed they have the right to be paid."

Salgado, like Sanchez, is motivated by personal experience. His parents brought him to the U.S. from Mexico when he was 5, and he grew up working on farms, picking strawberries and raspberries.

He was drawn to working with immigrants and took a job as a caseworker at a nonprofit in Springfield that offers services and resources to Latinos. He worked there for several years before attending the University of Oregon in 2011 as a political science major.

The summer after he graduated, he traveled up to Washington to work the cherry harvest and was reminded of why he had advocated for immigrants' rights.

He said he saw workers handling hazardous chemicals with no protection and working 14 to 15 hours a day with no overtime pay. He went back to work at the

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BY THE NUMBERS

260: Wage claims in construction referred to BOLI between July 1, 2013, and June 30, 2015.

2nd: Oregon's construction industry has the second-most wage complaints, after bars and restaurants. However, construction had a higher reported rate of wage theft when the number of complaints between July 1, 2013, and June

30, 2015, were compared with the number of jobs in each industry.

49: Number of contractors in the Portland area who were fined by the Oregon Contractors Board in September for operating without a license, working with an unlicensed subcontractor, or other license-related violations.

3 out of 4: Construction jobsites in the tri-county area found to be noncompliant in

meeting safety standards when inspected by Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2013-16.

507: Number of construction sites inspected for safety in the tri-county area in that time

294: Safety violations cited by OSHA where the reasonably predictable injury to a worker would be death, 2013-16

3rd: Construction was the third-deadliest Oregon industry during 2014, trailing behind logging and transportation.

47: Number of full-time positions at BOLI's wage and hour division in 1993, following significant budget cuts to the agency.

30: Number of full-time positions at BOLI's wage and hour division today. As Oregon's workforce grows, those investigating labor

law compliance continue to decrease in number.

\$2.5 million: Largest dollar amount owed to workers after a BOLI investigation. BOLI found 44 construction contractors owed their employees \$2.5 million in the building of a new dining hall and student residence at Southern Oregon University in 2015.

– Emily Green