

## **NYT. Rewards of a 90-Hour Week: Poverty and Dirty Laundry. May 31, 2004, by Steven Greenhouse**

For the many New Yorkers who dread spending two hours in a noisy, often smelly laundry washing and drying their clothes, it is a godsend that most laundries will handle that unpleasant chore for them, and for as little as \$5 a load. But few customers pay attention to the thousands of "wash and fold" workers - most of them women from Mexico - who actually handle their laundry. They are among the most anonymous laborers in New York. In humid basements and backrooms around the city, they shovel clothes in and out of washers and dryers, matching socks and folding hundreds of towels and undergarments each day.

Most laundry workers earn less, often far less, than the minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour. Gabriela Mendez, a veteran of six Manhattan laundries, said one paid her \$230, or \$3.19 an hour, for a 72-hour week, while at another she earned \$220, or \$2.45 an hour, for a 90-hour week. She and other workers boil over with tales of oppressive conditions or abusive bosses. Some said their employers hit them for taking a long lunch or fired them for being out sick for a day; others said they saw co-workers collapse from the heat. "The laundry pays us less than they're able to," said Inriqueta G., an illegal immigrant who works at a laundry in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn. She would not give her last name. "They say they can't pay us more because we don't understand English," she continued, speaking through a translator. "But we work just as well as other people."

In recent months, the wages and working conditions of laundry workers have begun to attract outside attention. The state attorney general, Eliot Spitzer, has begun cracking down on a handful of laundries, winning tens of thousands of dollars in back wages for the workers and pressuring some laundries to begin granting paid sick days and one-week vacations. Several immigrant advocacy groups have taken up the cause of laundry employees, and an effort has begun to unionize some workers. "There's an industrywide problem about failure to pay the minimum wage, and these workers are almost never paid time and a half," said Patricia Smith, director of the attorney general's Labor Bureau. "When we ask owners why they're paying so little, they say, 'That's what everybody else pays.'" Ms. Smith added that at a majority of the laundries investigated by the office, there have been allegations of oppressive working conditions, including sexual harassment, physical and verbal abuse and poor environmental conditions, like the use of harsh chemicals.

Avenue B Cleaners, a laundry on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, agreed last month to pay \$23,000 in back wages and damages after several workers complained to the attorney general that they had been paid less than \$250 each for a 72-hour work week. Anyone who works a 72-hour week - or 12 hours a day, six days a week - should receive at least \$453.20 a week if paid the minimum wage and overtime. Government officials noted that minimum wage laws also apply to workers who are in the country illegally.

Avenue B's lawyer, Samuel Ahne, acknowledged the company's failure to pay the minimum wage, but he said that should not be surprising. "The reason people are being underpaid is there is a lot of financial stress over all on the owners," Mr. Ahne said, citing property tax increases, soaring rents and intense competition from immigrant entrepreneurs.

James B. Levin, a lawyer for Bright Laundry, a laundry on East 84th Street that agreed last September to pay \$18,200 in a settlement with the attorney general, had a different explanation for the wage violations. "There aren't enough jobs available for people, and they'd much rather work for less than the minimum wage than not work at all," he said. "And, remember, a lot of these workers aren't legal."

Ms. Mendez said she grew so fed up with the illegal wages she was paid at laundry after laundry that she complained to Casa Mexico, an immigrant advocacy group, and then to the attorney general. She, her husband and their 5-year-old son live with two other families in a bare-bones three-bedroom apartment in Corona, Queens. Her 12-year-old son lives with her mother back in Mexico. "We came here because we were living in poverty," Ms. Mendez said. "We didn't have enough to buy shoes. All we ate was tortilla and beans, and we didn't have enough to buy fruit. I wanted something much better for the children." She complained that one laundry did not give the workers gloves even though they handled sheets smeared with blood. Another, she said, prohibited them from drinking water from the tap, despite the sweltering heat. Ms. Mendez also said that one boss hit her because she took a 45-minute lunch, 15 minutes longer than usual.

Inriqueta G., the worker in Brighton Beach, took a laundry job after a Mexican friend told her about it. But the low pay has taken a toll, she said, complaining that by the end of each month she has too little money to buy juice or meat for her children. She pays \$950 a month for a crowded one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, near the

Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, while she receives \$350 in cash for a 70-hour week. That works out to \$5 an hour; if she were paid the minimum wage and overtime, she would earn nearly \$400 more each month. "I don't know how to change things," she said. "Sometimes I look for other work, but it's hard because I don't speak English, and I don't have time to go to school. I just hope one day there will be better conditions at work." Many laundry workers hope that Mr. Spitzer and the laundry owners will negotiate a code of conduct to improve wages and conditions, like the one he negotiated in 2002 with Manhattan's greengrocers, who were often found to have violated minimum wage laws. But immigrant advocates say a code was easier to arrange with greengrocers because so many of them were Korean immigrants, making it simpler for Mr. Spitzer to deal with one group, the Korean American Association of Greater New York.

The ownership of laundries, in contrast, is far more ethnically dispersed. Korean immigrants own many, perhaps most, laundries, but there are also owners from Pakistan, India, Russia and other countries.

Immigrant groups also cite a cultural obstacle to creating such a code - the suggestions from husbands and boyfriends that women should not complain about conditions at work. "When the laundry workers finally started coming to us, when we really wanted to begin a fight, a lot of these workers told us, 'My boyfriend says not to get involved,' " said Gerry Dominguez, a consultant to Casa Mexico and the Association of Mexican-American Workers. "There's a macho element we have to fight here."

Many laundries have raised wages after seeing the attorney general's enforcement actions and after immigrant groups began fighting for laundry workers. During the past year, workers say, pay has climbed at many of them by \$30 to \$100 a week. Many laundries that paid \$250 for a 72-hour-week now pay \$300 or even \$350, which still violates minimum wage and overtime laws.

Asociación Tepeyac de New York, an advocacy group for Mexican immigrants, has staged demonstrations at laundries and is seeking to unionize 40 workers at Symphony Cleaners, which operates several shops on the East Side of Manhattan. "We need a union because the managers treat us so badly," Maria, an illegal immigrant from Mexico who declined to give her last name or initial, said at a recent demonstration at the Symphony Cleaners on East 44th Street. She said one manager had pressured her to have sex but she refused, adding that the manager prevailed with another worker, telling her she would be fired unless she had oral sex with him.

Myung Lee, whose son-in-law owns Symphony Cleaners and who serves as its spokesman, denied that the company violated minimum wage laws. Mr. Lee said one supervisor had been fired after facing sexual harassment charges, but he acknowledged that the supervisor had been rehired because he was such a good manager.

Piedad G., an illegal immigrant from Mexico City who also declined to give her last name, said Symphony Cleaners suddenly laid her off after she began complaining about conditions. She said she worked from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays, leaving her apartment in Queens an hour before work and returning an hour after work. "When you work 7 to 7, it's like you're only living to work," she said, adding that she received \$300 for 66 hours' work, which translates to \$4.55 an hour.

She said she received no vacation days, no paid sick days, no health insurance and only one paid holiday, Christmas. Last summer, she said, a co-worker fainted from the heat. "When I asked for permission to miss a day because I was sick, they wouldn't let me," she said. "When a person misses a day, they tell them there is no more work for them. So I went to work when I was sick." Back in Mexico City, Piedad G. said, she was a dental receptionist. She said she and her husband each paid \$3,000 to be smuggled into the United States, expecting to earn far more here to help pay their two sons' tuition for high school and eventually college. She burst into tears when she started talking about her children, whom she said she has not seen for three years. "Life is a lot more difficult here than I thought," she said. "Sometimes I think I was crazy to come here. This is a country with a lot of opportunities, but in order to take advantage of those opportunities you have to suffer a lot."