

My name is Jose Victor Hernandez. I am 31 years old and I am originally from El Salvador in Central America. This is my first time in the United States of America, and I arrived here in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The main reason that I had to abandon my country was to look for a better life economically, which almost cost me my life. Upon leaving behind my home, my wife who was expecting our second child, and with a million tears in my eyes and a bag full of hopes and more questions than answers, I fixed my gaze upon the United States that so many times I heard my friends say was a place where you could work and make money. It is said that Hispanics are appreciated and recognized for their work in the United States; therefore I decided to come to New Orleans. I heard there was work here after the tragedy that we are sadly all too familiar with.

It took me about two weeks to find my first job. I have to say that the language barrier is one of the most difficult things to overcome; no one is interested in talking with someone that does not understand, and everywhere I went first for work asked for a social security number, which I do not possess since I am undocumented. Finally I found someone who was willing to give me a job. My boss told me that the only way he could pay me was under the table, which I accepted and he also then told me that way I would not have to worry about reporting taxes. The work was to remove trash in the streets, and we worked ten hours a day including Sundays. The first week I did not receive any pay because they held one week's pay from all the workers and they said it was according to the law. The next week upon receiving my pay, I noticed it was not complete and when I tried to talk with my boss about this, he told me that he did not understand what it was that I wanted to say. When finally he was able to understand me, he told me that he would have to go over his books in order to see where the error occurred and if there was a difference in my pay he would correct the problem, which he never did. I thought about quitting like some of my friends, but my boss never paid them for the week of pay he had held back. I continued working for that company, but every time I got paid it was the same problem. Sometimes the difference in my pay was not a whole lot, but on some occasions it was as much as \$200.

Due to my dedication to the job and the supposed lack of interest from American workers in driving the heavy machinery, I was given the opportunity to learn how to drive them, which I did in order to move up in the company. This was an additional responsibility because to drive the heavy equipment was a very serious task. My salary did increase but it was

still not adequate. Unfortunately, things began to get worse at this company when the bosses decided they wanted to be able to do more work in order to make more money for themselves, but meanwhile give even less money to the workers. They began to discount the time that they gave us for lunch and add two hours to our daily workload, so in this way we worked from six in the morning until six in the evening. Essentially, we worked twelve hours a day, but we were only being paid for ten hours a day. The work was very difficult, and when someone wanted to have a day off, the bosses would say, "That's fine, take the day off, but don't come back because we will look for someone to take your place." In the end I had enough courage to quit this job, and fifteen days ago I received a phone call from my former boss asking me to return to work, but he still did not want to pay me correctly for the work. I have had all kinds of supervisors, from racists that think that we are slaves and don't want to give us breaks, even to take a sip of water, to those that are more considerate and allow you a break every once in a while.

When I worked for that company I saw so many injustices against people that had no support from any government agencies, or that did not know what to do in certain situations. Oftentimes when something would happen, they would be told to be quiet and the most common threat was "if you say something, we will call Immigration (ICE)." The worst thing is to know that sometimes they would actually follow through on these threats in order to avoid paying someone for their work. They would call Immigration, which without asking why, would come and arrest workers, sometimes in their own homes.

Ladies and gentlemen, how long can so much injustice continue against us when all we want is to be able to live an honorable life with dignity? Sometimes they call us delinquents and take us to jail, when the only crime we are guilty of is to have been born poor and tried despite all obstacles to make our lives and our families' lives more bearable. Thankfully there are places that exist like the Interfaith Worker Justice Center here and others that support us when there is still so much injustice we have to fight against daily as immigrant workers living in New Orleans.