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Editorial

Workers in America, Cheated

An important new study has cast an appalling light on a place where workplace laws fail to protect workers, where wages and tips are routinely stolen, where having to work sick, injured or off the clock is the price of having a job.

The place is the United States, all across the lower strata of the urban economy.

The most comprehensive [investigation of labor-law violations](#) in years, released Wednesday by the Center for Urban Economic Development, the National Employment Law Project and the U.C.L.A. Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, surveyed 4,387 workers in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. Its researchers sought out people often missed by standard surveys and found abuses everywhere: in factories, grocery stores, retail shops, construction sites, offices, warehouses and private homes. The word sweatshop clearly is not big enough anymore to capture the extent and severity of the rot in the low-wage workplace.

Workers told of employers who ignored the minimum wage, denied overtime, took illegal deductions to pay for tools or transportation, or forced them to work unpaid before or after their shifts. More than two-thirds of them had endured at least one wage violation in the previous workweek. More than a quarter had been paid less than the minimum wage, often by more than \$1 an hour. Violations typically robbed workers of \$51 a week, from an average paycheck of \$339.

The report paints an acute picture of powerlessness. Of workers who had been seriously injured on the job, only 8 percent had filed for workers' compensation — a symptom, researchers said, of the power of employer pressure. Although 86 percent of respondents had worked enough consecutive hours to be entitled to time off for meals, more than two-thirds had had their breaks denied, interrupted or shortened. Workers who complained to bosses or government agencies or tried to form unions suffered illegal retaliation: firing, suspension, pay cuts or threats to call immigration authorities.

It is, of course, morally abhorrent that the American economy should be so riddled with exploitation. But it is also powerfully evident that there are practical consequences when the powerless are abused. Low-wage workers spend a high proportion of their income on necessities; when their paychecks are systematically bled by greedy employers, an entire community's economic vitality is sapped as well.

The answers are basic, though too long ignored. Government needs to send more investigators to back rooms, offices and factory floors, and to enlist labor organizations and immigrant-rights groups as their investigative eyes and ears. Penalties for wage-law violations need toughening. Employees who have historically been denied basic labor rights — domestic workers and home health aides — need to finally be given the protection of wage-and-hour laws. Companies must not be allowed to skirt their legal obligations by outsourcing hiring to subcontractors, letting others break the law for them.

The report has particular significance for immigrant workers, who made up 70 percent of the survey (39 percent of them were undocumented). Workplace abuses are flourishing in the absence of a working immigration system, where illegal immigrants are vital to the economy

but helpless to assert their rights.

The report upends the argument that the way to help American workers is to make illegal immigrants ever more frightened and exploitable. Only by protecting all workers will the country begin to rebuild a workplace matching its ideals of decency and fair play.

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