

# Car Wash Workers Organize

*Carlos Linarez and Rocio Valerio*

## We Want Wages and Respect

Car wash workers have had enough abuse and humiliation. We are just like any other person in this world who wants to have honest work and respect. Therefore, we are uniting for a good cause. We are asking for benefits such as a minimum wage, overtime, adequate equipment, set work schedules, vacation time, and health insurance, as well as sick days.

To make ourselves stronger, we work together with several community organizations and a labor union. Our campaign is called WASH NY.

## Many Bad Experiences

I got involved in WASH NY after a friend who had been working for 17 years got fired because he went to get a cup of coffee. This ugly and unjust situation made me angry and sad and inspired me to join the campaign to organize for rights for the car wash workers.

Before our campaign started, we *carwasheros* had many bad experiences. Sometimes the owners did not allow us to keep tips. We had to work with toxic cleaning chemicals, and we did not have the right safety gear. When it was really cold, we weren't allowed to take breaks to warm-up. And the bosses mistreated us. The managers called us bad names. When we spoke up about working conditions, the managers often got back at us by cutting our hours, which hurt our paychecks.

## Starting to Win

After only six months of organizing, we started winning some big victories. In the fall of 2012, car wash workers in Queens voted 21-5 in favor of being represented by RWDSU. Later, car wash workers in the Bronx won another union election. As of January 2013, we have four car washes organized into unions.



WASH NY is a collaboration between NY Communities for Change, Make the Road New York, and the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU).

Now, workers have better wages and better working conditions. At the carwash where I work, we were getting paid \$5.50 an hour for 60 hours of work, with no overtime, and we had to share our tips with the managers and cashiers. Then we won a raise to \$6.25 an hour, and we don't have to share the tips with the managers and cashiers.

The owners gave us gloves, but we are still fighting for proper gear. A good thing is that the managers stopped calling us names and insulting us. Also, the boss told the managers that they couldn't fire us without first checking with him.

We feel a bit better now going to work since the managers are not mistreating us like before. Since there has been some change, it has encouraged us to continue fighting for more respect, better pay, and better working conditions.

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*Carlos Linarez is a "carwashero" in the South Bronx. He is from El Salvador and has been in New York for two years. Rocio Valerio, originally from Mexico, is a lead organizer at New York Communities for Change.*