

Problems on the Job?

A Worker Center Can Help

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BEFORE YOU READ: What do you think a worker center is? What does it do?

Mistreated at Work

Maria was a caregiver who took care of an older couple. She worked over 60 hours per week. The couple's daughter would not pay her overtime. Maria came to the Brazilian Worker Center (BWC). She attended a Know Your Rights workshop, and we helped her send a letter to her employer to request her overtime pay. She won her case! Then she joined our group of domestic workers. Now she comes with us when we go to events, and she tells others her story.

Another woman, Lupe, worked in a supermarket. She had a problem with the manager. He mistreated the workers. He yelled at them in public. He cut their hours arbitrarily, and he pressured them to quit their job. The workers complained to the boss, but nothing happened. She came to BWC for help. We explained that she has rights. She has the right to a safe workplace where no one harasses her. She wanted to spread this information to her co-workers, so she brought our flyers to share with other workers.

Helping Workers Find their Power

Maria and Lupe came to us because they had a problem on the job. We helped them learn about their rights and negotiate with their employer. We also gave them a way to stay involved. Now, they show solidarity with other workers by telling them their rights.

The Brazilian Worker Center is an organization founded by workers for workers. It is a safe space for workers regardless of their immigration status. We organize workers to use their power



The Brazilian Worker Center provides support to families and communities in the Boston area, as well as workers.

to protect their rights and make sure their workplace is safe. We often meet with workers whose employers have broken labor laws. For example, they steal wages, don't pay overtime, retaliate, and discriminate. We encourage people to try to resolve the problem with their employer. We always recommend they have another worker with them as a witness, so they will be protected. If that doesn't work, we send a letter to the employer to seek an agreement and, if necessary, bring the case to the Attorney General's office.

We have been amazed at the way employers mistreat workers. Consider Jose's story: Jose was trying to get his former employer to pay him for the work he did. The employer refused to pay. He sent him WhatsApp messages using derogatory language. He also threatened him by sending him photos of his family and suggesting that something bad could happen to them. At another job, he got an injury and asked for a doctor. The

This article is available at two levels: high beginner (pp. 10-12) and high intermediate (pp. 12-13).

supervisor gave him an immigration form (not a medical form) to fill out, so the worker called us and we started a case against the employer. Impersonating a U.S. citizen on this form is a felony, so we understood that the employer was trying to create trouble for the worker.

Employers often use workers' immigration status to make their workers too afraid to speak up. For example, if a worker complains, the employer will threaten to call immigration. This is retaliation, which is a crime. Another way employers try to control workers is when they get hurt on the job. They say, "When you go to the hospital, don't say you were injured at work!" They don't want to pay the workers compensation.

Workers Realize They Can Fight for Themselves

Workers come to the worker center with a feeling that they have no rights because they are undocumented. When they learn their rights and realize they have the same human and civil rights as U.S. citizens or people with "papers," they realize they can fight for themselves.

When we first start meeting with a worker, we ask them what happened. Sometimes, they don't say much because they think it is not important. But when they hear about other cases, they realize that the conditions that they've gotten used to are not right. When workers talk to one another, they don't feel alone in the situation. When the workers know they are not alone and someone is behind them, they become strong enough to fight.

From Defending Themselves to Defending Others

Our Building Justice Committee was formed by workers who had resolved their cases and wanted to help other workers. They understand a lot because they were in the same situation. This committee works in partnership with Justice at Work (J@W). Together, we monitor and take action on wage theft cases. For example, we go together to deliver demand letters to employers, or we give out flyers at a workplace. We once

gave out flyers in front of a hotel where workers were mistreated, and the next day management settled. This is how we build confidence between workers and organizers. When they see that a worker center can help, they want to keep working with us and they help spread the word.

AFTER YOU READ: According to the authors, what does BWC do? What questions do you have about worker centers? Find one in your community, and invite them to speak at your program.

Gizele Bombardier, Lorraine Reiter, and André Simões are staff members of the Brazilian Worker Center in Boston, MA, and they are enrolled in an English for Organizers class at their workplace. They are Brazilian immigrants. They come from different backgrounds but they share the same commitment to support the rights and dignity of all people.



How Can the Attorney General's Office Help?

The job of a state attorney general is to represent the interests of the public. Find out who the attorney general is in your state. Is he or she elected or appointed?

In Massachusetts, the Attorney General's office has a Fair Labor Division. If you think your employer broke the law, you may file a complaint with the Attorney General's office. Workers may also sue their employers for wages owed.

Visit the website of the Attorney General's office in your state. Find out how you would file a complaint against an employer.