

COMMUNITY VOICES

CARWASHERO: A “CLEAN” MESSAGE

*Bosbely Reyna**

In February 2007 I started to work for the Carwash Industry. The owners of this carwash are Benny and Nisan Pirian and the Manager is Manuel Reyes. During my first days at the job I realized that I was never introduced to my fellow co-workers by my manager, nor was I given any instructions or training on what precautions to take at the job. I was never given any information regarding my salary.

Manuel Reyes, my manager, told me that if I worked for free for one week then I would be hired. During my first days at the job I learned everything there is to know about the carwash industry. I worked ten hours to eleven hours a day and I would have to ask for a break to eat. Even then, sometimes during the rush hours when many cars would pull in, the manager would tell us to get up from the table and would tell us “go to work.” My coworkers and I would work drying cars and each day we would each have to hand dry at least forty to fifty cars. With eleven hours working we would ask the manager to give us some time to eat and to take water breaks and he would always tell us “after—right now there is no time.”

* Car wash worker for almost two years. The Community Labor Environmental Action Network, otherwise known as the CLEAN Carwash Campaign, is comprised of a diverse coalition of non-profit organizations and community groups to change the working conditions of some of the most exploited and hardest working workers in Los Angeles. Seven to ten thousand carwash workers in the Los Angeles area toil in an industry that is too often affected by the routine violation of basic employment laws.

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When the drain pipe would get clogged up he would order us to unclog them and to clean them out without giving us any gloves or protective masks. He would tell me that if I didn't do this kind of job he would lay me off for a week without pay. I would be forced to do this work while I endured the strong smell of the dirty water that had collected and I also ran the risk of getting my hands stuck in the drains or even worse, having them sliced by the machine. All of this while being exposed to the dirty water. The chemicals that we would use to clean the cars were very strong and would irritate our hands and burn our eyes. The times that I did cut myself there was no first aid available so I would have to work with my exposed cuts and I would have to go to the pharmacy myself to buy something to treat these cuts.

When Pirian would pay us, he would make out the checks for \$35.00 for a day's work. When anyone would try to dispute that they were not being fully paid he would always say "If you want to work I pay \$35 a day." He would also order us to pay out a dollar to the vacuum workers and to the workers in charge of soaping the cars, as well as a dollar to the workers assigned to drive the cars.

My coworkers and I would request for our salaries to be increased, and Benny would tell us that by August 2007, he would be paying us \$40.00 a day. He claimed he was not able to pay us more, yet the carwash was always busy and filled with customers. Benny Pirian would force us to finish all the cars as quickly as possible. Whenever an employee would accidentally hit a car, he would have to pay out of his own pocket for the damages. Otherwise Benny would deduct it from our paychecks and would threaten to fire the employees.

Our manager would never respect us and he would physically threaten to beat us if we complained. The closing time for the carwash was 6:00PM but Benny would close at 6:30PM and there would always be 25 to 30 cars left to wash. We would be forced to wash all of them and he would leave while we stayed and would not finish until about 7:00 to 7:30pm.

There were many instances when the manager abused and assaulted some employees with kicks and punches while throwing towels and water at our faces. Manuel and Benny never provided

any tools or uniforms for us to work with. Instead they would sell us the t-shirts we had to wear; we had to pay \$15.00 for five t-shirts and one dollar for each of the bottles of spray. Whenever a customer would leave without paying, Benny would force us to pay for the service from our own tips.

There were not enough chairs or space to take our lunch; there was only a small table with four chairs for 40 to 50 employees. We would all have to wait for the ones at the table to finish eating in order to have a seat. There was only one restroom that we all had to use and there were times when the restroom was out of order for up to two to three days. Whenever I would complain, Benny would lay me off for two to three days and he would threaten to fire me.

My fellow co-workers Pedro Guzman, Manuel Castillo, Juan Galicia and I would discuss making a complaint and making some changes and that's when Castillo told us that he had a pamphlet that read "Help for carwash workers." Some of them called the number of the pamphlet and attended a meeting, and the day after, they invited me to come along, and I went. In these meetings I received a lot of information and support for all the carwash workers.

At the first meetings that I went to there were not many people, but there were times when about 80 to 90 employees of different carwashes would unite. After these meetings we realized that as workers we have rights that need to be respected. After Benny and Manuel Reyes realized that my co-workers and I were trying to organize ourselves they punished us by forcing us to work in the soap and vacuum stations. They also cut back our hours and did not allow us to work together. Eventually Jose Torres and I were unfairly fired. They told us that we did not work well and worked at a slow pace. They told us that we created problems and that's why he was being fined and he blamed us for all his problems. As a result, Benny only allowed us to work for four hours and Manuel Reyes would force me to work on one single car for ten minutes and I would do it. He would look for different ways of harming me and was trying to make me get tired of the work so that I would leave the carwash. I was able to endure his mistreatment and abuse, but eventually he got what he wanted and he fired Jose Torres and me. Now he continues to harass workers. Manuel Reyes and Benny

continue being unjust with their employees and continue disrespecting them.

The carwash campaign always supported us in everything and we have learned many useful things. To me the campaign means having support and information about working conditions. For this reason I support the campaign so that it continues to be active and so we could work to improve the carwashes. In this campaign I have made presentations and conferences related to the carwash industry and I have served so that carwash owners like the Pirians abide by the law and respect their employees as stated by the laws of California. I am happy to have learned a lot in the campaign and my fellow members feel great for the support. We have all learned about the rights that we have as workers and about fair salaries and working conditions. We know that we should not tolerate any more injustices and that we must be respected.

Thank you to this campaign and other organizations that have supported us and continue to support all of the carwashes.