The Dirty Business of Cleaning NYC’s Cars: Carwash Workers Face Low Pay, Offensive Conditions, and Poor Treatment
Overview

Every day in New York City, hundreds of thousands of taxis, livery cabs, and privately owned cars traverse hundreds of miles of roads, expressways, and parkways. It’s impossible to quantify how much dirt and grime these cars attract everyday, but certainly it’s enough that car washes in New York City have become a big business. Thanks to the ample supply of cars, drivers, and filth, New York City’s car wash owners are cleaning up.

There are almost 200 car washes in New York City’s five boroughs. Keeping the city’s cars clean are upwards of 5,000 employees. It’s an exploited workforce with wages that are low and too often illegal.

In 2010, the operators of Broadway Bridge Car Wash in upper Manhattan agreed to a nearly $2 million settlement with the state Department of Labor. The owners of the car wash agreed to pay $1.3 million in back wages, overtime, and earned tips between 2003 and 2008 to workers who had not been paid their proper wages.

The investigation and resulting agreement was a clear sign that there’s a dirty side to the city’s car wash industry. In fact, New York State Department of Labor investigators found that close to 80 percent of New York City’s car wash operators are guilty of wage and hour violations.

Long Hours, Low Pay

WASH New York, a coalition of Make the Road New York and New York Communities for Change, with the help of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, UFCW, conducted in-depth interviews with 89 New York City car wash workers over several months at 29 different car wash facilities. This broad investigation revealed widespread mistreatment of New York City’s car wash workers.
Over 71 percent of the workers were on the job for at least 60 hours a week, with some working as many as 105 hours. Despite the long hours, 75 percent of the workers didn’t receive any kind of overtime pay for exceeding 40 hours. When workers did get overtime pay, it was often less than the legally mandated rate of time-and-a-half.

The state’s minimum wage is $7.25 an hour, but 66 percent of the workers reported being paid less than that at times. Only five workers reported that they were paid the difference to make minimum wage if their earnings with tips were less than the legal rate.

Workers reported taking home as little as $125 a week with small or non-existent breaks, and were frequently sent home without pay depending upon business. Not a single interviewed car wash employee received paid sick days, and only one was offered any kind of health care plan.

It’s hard work keeping the city’s cars clean, but it’s even harder work building lives and providing for families on the poverty wage jobs that are the lifeblood of the industry.

**Working at a Car Wash: Uncertainty, Stress, and Hazards**

Besides receiving chronically low pay, the largely immigrant work force staffing New York City’s car washes toil away on a job that subjects employees to extreme working conditions and little control over their own lives.

It all starts with unpredictable scheduling that varies wildly from day to day.

Scheduling, hours, and pay are subject to the whims of management, and especially, the weather. Car wash workers have no idea how many hours they’ll be working a week or how many hours they’ll be paid. They frequently waste huge chunks of their day being sent back and forth from work, and the extreme fluctuations in hours and pay makes sticking to a regular budget a struggle.

“Whenver there is any rain or snow, or if business is slow, the manager immediately sends some of the workers home. When the manager sends us home, they do not pay us for the rest of the day. Because of this, we never know how much money we’re going to make during a day or a week. This makes it difficult to pay bills, like my rent and my cell phone,” said a Brooklyn car wash worker who didn’t want his name used in the report for fear of retaliation – a common occurrence among the workers WASH New York interviewed and surveyed.

The only thing predictable about scheduling hours is their unpredictability. With people constantly being sent home or recalled, workers often find themselves taking on the work of several people just to keep the operation running.

“Just today, my manager sent many people home in the morning. In the afternoon, the car wash was very busy. I had to do the work of three people—driving the cars, working the machine and doing everything else—but I was...
still paid the same amount,” another worker said.

The trips between work and home can start to resemble a crazed wild goose chase, and entire days of running back and forth – without pay – leave workers frustrated, tired, and broke.

“Sending us home so quickly is also a problem because if the weather improves, the car wash gets busy again. This means that whoever stayed at the car wash will have more work than they can handle, because many of their co-workers have been sent home. Just yesterday, the manager called me asking me to return to the car wash, after sending me home in the morning. After

the snowstorm, about a week ago, the manager called everyone in and had us clear the snow from the car wash. When we had finished clearing the snow, he told us all to go home again. This only took an hour, and I made less money that day than I had to pay for my breakfast,” one worker added.

Keeping Cars Clean in an Offensive Environment

Many of the workers our investigators spoke with described a workplace rife with health and safety issues. Car wash workers face a number of significant work-related hazards. They are exposed to offensive cleaning and degreasing substances, and work around high pressure hoses, unguarded machinery, and poorly protected electrical sources which are very close to water and wet surfaces.

Raul, a Mexican immigrant who worked at a car wash upon moving to New York, experienced burns using chemical products, and like many immigrant workers, was afraid to speak up.

“I worked washing cars by hand. Specifically, my job was to scrub the cars after they had been soaped. This was made more complicated because we had inadequate protective equipment and sometimes soap and water would fall on me. This soap was a special kind of soap used to clean cars and contained acids used to clean the tire rims. I could tell how strong the soap was because it made the hair on my legs fall off. One day, soap fell on my ear. A few hours later it began to itch and burn and then became inflamed. I didn’t say anything at the time, because I didn’t know there were laws to protect me, as an immigrant, and I was also afraid that I would lose my job,” Raul said.

Workers interviewed described the foul stew of chemicals they work with every day, and how it has affected their health.
“My lungs and throat hurt from breathing in the bad chemicals. The chemicals that are used in the shampoo are especially strong. I asked them if there was any different kind of shampoo, or protective gear we could use, but the management said no,” said New York City car wash worker Carlos Garcia.

“We use chemical products that are very strong and burn our skin. I have also started to notice that when I work with certain chemicals, even after I leave work and go home, I have a burning sensation in my eyes. This wasn’t the case before, and I have had to start using eye drops. What scares me is that I have seen how my brother, who also used to work in this car wash, has problems with his vision that have persisted even after he left this job,” said Nelson Hernandez, who works at a Car Wash in Queens.

Making matters worse is an industry-wide aversion to providing the proper protective equipment to workers by bosses more concerned with protecting profits than the health of their employees.

OSHA standard 1910.132 calls for personal protective equipment (PPE) to be required at no cost when such equipment is necessary because hazards are “capable of causing injury or impair-
“Working at the car wash has been very bad for my health. My back hurts constantly. We’re never paid when we take off a day for being sick, so I often work when in a lot of pain. When it’s cold outside, my fingernails turn purple but we are never given opportunities to warm up,” added the Brooklyn worker.

“At one point, I had to get an operation on my foot, which cost me $3,000 that I had to pay out of pocket since the car wash does not provide insurance. Another of my co-workers broke his leg at the car wash, when part of the machine fell on him,” he added.

“After 16 years working at a car wash, I’m feeling my age.”

**No Rest At The Car Wash**

When it’s slow at a car wash, workers are sent home. But when it’s busy, they work hard with little in the way of breaks. The breaks are often unpaid, and sometimes exaggerated to hurt workers’ already meager paychecks.

“The manager is very strict about how much time we can take for lunch,” a worker said. “He only gives us 10 minutes, but then deducts 30 minutes from our paychecks. We have no other breaks for the rest of the day.”

Another worker reported a similar break pay scam, saying “we were only allowed to take 10 to 15 minute lunch breaks, but the company deducted a half hour daily from our paychecks.”

Over 40 percent of the workers interviewed by WASH New York reported getting only 15 minute or less breaks for lunch. Eleven of the workers said they were given no lunch break at all. Other breaks were sparse, often allowed only when it is slow or raining, or denied altogether. All told, 41 percent of the workers said they receive no breaks at all besides their short lunch breaks.

Sneaking in a short trip to the bathroom can be an ordeal.

According to one worker, “If I need to use the bathroom, I ask a friend to cover for me. If I am ever in the bathroom for more than five minutes, the manager yells at me and tells me to get back to work.”

“A Frustrating Situation”

Car wash employees are hard-working people trying to support themselves and build better lives for their families. At the bottom of the economic ladder, they find themselves in a situation that many describe as helpless, working a low-paying, hazardous job with no respect or dignity. Besides the low pay, workers are often docked pay if cars are damaged, regardless of who is at fault, and poor treatment is rampant.
“Sometimes we don’t make tip money all week. It can be held back by management if a carpet gets stained,” said Heriberto Hernandez.

Added Carlos Garcia, “If cars are damaged, we have to pay for it out of our tips. This can be very expensive, as it costs up to $500 to replace a mirror. The owners don’t cover it, they are always looking to take it out of our paychecks.”

Tips can be withheld for alleged damage to customer cars, shared with or taken by managers, and inflated to cover the below minimum wage earnings received by many workers.

“All of the workers split the tips,” Garcia said, “and the manager is included in this split, even though he doesn’t do any work and gets paid much more than we do.”

Adan Nicolas, a car wash worker in Queens, reports that managers force employees to regularly inflate the value of their tips.

“Twice a week, every week, they make us sign a piece of paper that says we make $20 or $25 each day in tips, but we don’t always make that much. Sometimes we only make $5 or $10 dollars a day, and on rainy days, we’re sent home and make no tips at all,” Nicolas said.

Facing this kind of treatment creates an environment of hopelessness for car wash workers.

“I came to this ‘land of opportunity’ with so many hopes, but I have become disillusioned about being able to help my family,” a worker said. “The treatment we receive makes us feel powerless. They yell at us, they disrespect us, and they treat us as if we are not even human beings.”

It’s a sentiment shared by far too many workers in New York City’s car washes, and a situation that needs to be changed. The exploitation of car wash workers in the name of profits is a dirty business.
New York City’s car wash workers deserve better. Here are five recommendations for how elected officials and government agencies can help transform hazardous and underpaid car wash jobs into quality jobs that help workers build better lives for themselves and their families:

1. **Stronger and more vigilant enforcement of all wage and hour laws, and all applicable workplace health and safety regulations, at the state and city level.** These laws and regulations are designed to ensure proper, legal wages are paid, and provide healthy and safe working environments.

2. **Make it easier to exercise the right to join a union and organize your workplace without fear of intimidation or retaliation—the very fear that, according to car wash workers like Nelson Hernandez, is often part of the job.**

“We have been threatened many times if we fight for our rights, so for a long time I didn’t do anything to stand up for myself. But I know that if we unite, we can make sure our rights are respected,” Hernandez said.

3. **Yearly state and city inspections to ensure compliance with labor laws and all applicable workplace regulations.** All car washes found not to be in proper compliance should be subject to maximum fines and penalties under the law.

4. **State and city publication of best practices for preventing unlawful treatment of car wash workers.** Appropriate state and city agencies could publish online a clear code of conduct and guidelines for acceptable practices.

5. **State and city hearings on mistreatment of car wash workers and unlawful industry-wide practices.** Appropriate state and city legislative committees focused on labor and workplace safety could schedule hearings this year to determine if new legislation is required to protect our communities from bad operators.

**WASH New York**

WASH New York is a joint campaign of Make the Road New York and New York Communities for Change, with the help of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), UFCW. The campaign is fighting for worker justice and environmental safety in the car wash industry.

**WASH New York**

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