



Day laborers in Morristown rally for rights

Workers also learn how to better organize

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Standing in front of the Morristown train station is a daily ritual for construction worker Milton Mejir, but yesterday was different.

Instead of waiting for a contractor to swing by and pick him up, Mejir, 36, was one of about 25 day laborers and organizers who stood on the station steps for a news conference.

Clutching signs, they called for immigrant rights. Then together, they walked to Santa Margarita church on Sussex Avenue for a seminar on how to better organize themselves.

"There's a lot of repression," Mejir said in Spanish.

"They don't pay you what's necessary" to live, he said. Like other laborers, Mejir, who arrived in Morristown a year ago, works long days in construction to send money home. He has a 10-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter in Honduras.

The rally was part of a two-day conference hosted this weekend by Wind of the Spirit, a nonprofit immigrant resource center in Morristown. About 40 laborers and organizers from around New Jersey, New York and Connecticut attended, including community leaders from Morristown, Newark, Freehold and Mamaroneck, N.Y.

The East Coast convention is held every two years. But organizers chose Morristown as this year's location to support day laborers protesting the mayor's plan to have local police deputized as immigration officers, said Francisco Pacheco, East Coast organizer for the National Day Labor Organizing Network.

"It's to demonstrate that the towns are not alone, that there are organizations to combat racism, discrimination, the persecution of day laborers," said Diana Mejia, executive director of Wind of the Spirit.

Federal immigration officials in New Jersey recently approved Morristown's application to have its police deputized, Mayor Donald Cresitello said June 5. The application now will be reviewed by officials in the Washington, D.C., office of the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

By deputizing local police, the town hopes to reduce crime, overcrowded housing and day laborers gathering on street corners.

During the winter months, about 10 to 20 laborers wait outside for work, Mejia said. In the summer, it could be 50 to 60. The majority stand around the train station.

Those who are undocumented are especially fearful of deputized local police. Many work 12- to 14-hour days and say they are underpaid by their employers.

Some Hispanic residents say the day laborers are just seeking work, and targeting them creates an atmosphere of distrust and racism in town.

Others suggest alternate solutions, like building a town facility for day laborers with bathrooms, garbage cans and resources such as English classes.

"In some cases, the best strategy is a worker center," said Amy Gottlieb, program director of the Immigrant Rights Program of the American Friends Service Committee, "so you don't have people running to cars."

Local police often ticket contractors and homeowners immediately after they stop in front of the train station to pick up low-paid landscapers or construction workers, day laborers say.

To some extent, the workers have adapted. Instead of forming one long line, they now split into small clusters around the train station. This helps them avoid attracting police, but only in the short term.

"The problem will always be here," Mejir said in Spanish. "I don't think the people of Morristown think badly of day laborers -- it's the police and immigration authorities."

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