



The Workers' Edge

Voice of the Tompkins County Workers' Center

Workers' Center Ensures Safe Working Conditions

Linda Holzbaur

Did you know that occupational disease is the fourth leading cause of death in New York

the labor and social justice movements shows that it took hard, sustained work by many thousands of women and men to successfully create laws and regulations regard-

ing safe housing and working conditions. We need to

for injured workers in obtaining appropriate benefits and social services. No worker is turned away because of inability to pay. Services are available to undocumented workers as well as to US citizens and residents.

One of the continuing challenges we face is reaching the people living throughout the county who will benefit the most from this program. I hope to soon meet with community and religious groups, unions, food banks and others to share information with potential OHCC clients and to learn from them about the specific needs of low wage workers. As with all of our programs, we know that this outreach will help us build relationships with those who have not come in contact with the Workers' Center before, helping us to become an even richer asset to the community through a more widely varied membership.

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State? The Tompkins County Workers' Center now has a new partner to

assist local workers dealing with workplace health and safety issues, the Occupational Health Clinical Center (OHCC) in Syracuse.

Ensuring the safety and health of workers is an essential concern of the Workers' Center mission.

Many local workers, especially low wage earners, have no health insurance or have unaffordable deductibles. Even with adequate coverage, many injured workers find that third party health insurers are reluctant to pay for diagnostic tests. The Workers Compensation program is notoriously slow; it is the workers' responsibility to provide proof that the illness or injury was workplace related, an expensive and time-consuming process. This is where the OHCC can help, not only with diagnosis and treatment plans but also with modifying the workplace in order to make it a more healthful place.

Many employers do try to create a safe work environment for their employees but unfortunately that is not always the case. As long as profits are more important than people in our society, some unscrupulous employers will cut corners, endangering their workers' safety and health. The history of

“It is everyone's fundamental right to have a safe work environment.”

honor that legacy by continuing to challenge the lack of respect given to workers and their health. It is everyone's fundamental right to have a safe work environment: our partnership with OHCC will help safeguard that right locally.



Call Linda at 269-0409!

What services are available at OHCC? The Clinic, one of a statewide network of occupational health centers, works at many levels for workers and retirees: physical exams, diagnostic tests and medical evaluations to determine if health problems or injuries are related to the work environment; help with modifying the worksite or work habits to prevent future health problems; education to reduce or eliminate hazardous exposure; referrals to specialists for treatment; support



Workers' Center Spotlight: Steph Edley

Jeci Brown

Steph Edley first came to the Workers' Center through her internship while she was at Ithaca College. She got involved with the Organizing School which she helped to build with Alicia Swords, a professor from IC and active Workers' Center member. Steph was inspired by the people she was meeting locally and nationally. She attended a Poverty Initiative [<http://www.povertyinitiative.org>] trip and saw how organizing among poor people was happening nationally in different communities. She started to put together the pieces of her own past and her experiences here and the strong need to build an alternative ways of living and being with each other.



Steph, smiling as usual.

During the day, Steph works with youth from all over Tompkins County to try to keep them in safe homes and out of court and institutions. She sees her work at the Workers' Center as addressing some of the systemic problems the youth she sees face every day.

Steph has been working hard to connect with other members of the Workers' Center. She is still actively involved in our connection with the Poverty Initiative. She has joined the Empowerment and Leadership teams and has spent literally whole days of her life thinking about how to create structure at the Workers' Center.

Her goal is to encourage relationships to produce leadership by the poor and real, radical change in our community and world.

Thank you, Steph, for all the work you've done thinking about the Big Issues. We are lucky to have you!

Poverty Initiative Visit January 2009: Reigniting the Poor People's Campaign



Call the Workers' Center at
Get more involved! **269-0409!**



Support these Certified Living Wage Businesses



Advocacy Center
Alternatives Federal
Credit Union
Ancient Wisdom Productions (Web Designer)
Autumn Leaves Used

Books

Black Box Computer Consulting
Blue Spruce Painting and Decorating
Boyce Thompson Institute
Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga
CFCU Community Credit Union
Colonial Veterinary Hospital
Community Foundation of Tompkins County
Contemporary Trends, Inc.
Custum (Production, operations, Mgmt. Solutions)
Day Care & Child Development Council of Tompkins County
Downtown Ithaca Alliance
Finger Lakes ReUse
First Baptist Church of Ithaca
First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca
First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Green Clean
GreenStar Cooperative Market
Home Green Home
Hospicare and Palliative Care
Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County
Ithaca Carshare
Ithaca Health Alliance
Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency
IthacaMed
Jeffrey Feirman Building and Renovation
Jewel Box
Jillian's Drawers
Loaves and Fishes
Money with a Mission
Morris' Men's Wear & Morris Too
Multicultural Resource Center
Northeast Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine
Opportunities, Alternatives, and Resources (OAR)
Ongweoweh Corporation (Pallet Mgmt)
PPM Homes, LLC
Renovus Energy, Inc.

Shade Tree Auto, Inc.
Significant Elements, A Program of Historic Ithaca, Inc.
Singlebrook Technology, Inc.
Snug Planet LLC (Home Performance Contractor)
Sparks Electric
Sprague & Janowsky (Accountancy)
St. John's Church
St. Luke Lutheran Church
Stone Quarry House (Bed and Breakfast)
Sunny Brook Builders
Taitem Engineering
Taughannock Aviation Corporation
Temple Beth El
The Frame Shop
The Strebel Planning Group
Tompkins Community Action Tompkins County
Tompkins County Public Library
Town of Ithaca
United Auto Workers Local 2300
Upscale Remodeling Corporation
Ward & Murphy (Law Firm)

Wage Theft: New York is Watching

Kathy Russell

It's no wonder that the Tompkins County Workers' Center gets so many complaints about wage theft. It's a huge problem nation-wide.

Roughly two million workers in the US are not paid a minimum wage, and millions more don't get overtime pay, have tips stolen or don't get paid at all, according to Kim Bobo, Executive Director of Interfaith Worker Justice and author of *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Working Americans Are Not Getting Paid — And What We Can Do About It* (The New Press, Dec 2008). For more information, see <http://www.wagetheft.org>

The book shows that at least three

million workers are misclassified as independent contractors, who are not covered under labor law. They are often forced to clock out and then clock back as working under a different employer. Also, many workers are denied rest breaks or lunchtime.

Agriculture, poultry processing, janitorial services, restaurant work, garment manufacturing, long-term care, home health care and retail have the worst offenders, particularly if large numbers of immigrants are employed, according to Bobo.

Even the Economic Policy Foundation, a conservative group, estimates that companies steal at least \$19 billion in unpaid overtime each

year! It's outrageous that a worker who steals \$1,900 would likely get jail time, but bosses who steal from workers get off scot-free!

Part of the problem is lack of enforcement. In a March expose, the Government Accountability Office disclosed that the Federal Labor Department's Wage and Hour Division failed to offer support in nine of the 10 cases brought by a team of undercover agents posing as low-wage workers.

If citizens organize to force the Obama administration to fulfill their promises, the new Department of Labor under Hilda Solis might help. Her Wage and Hour Division will increase its staff "to refocus the

Cont. on next page

Wage Theft, cont.

agency enforcement responsibilities” against wage theft and “ensure that contractors on stimulus projects are in compliance with the applicable laws” (*NY Times* 3-25-9-09).

The New York Labor Department’s new program called Wage Watch—the first of its kind in the nation—to try to cut down on employer crimes is another promising sign. Like Neighborhood Watch programs, it will enlist unions, churches and other community groups in the fight against wage theft. It’s going through a six-month trial period now in New York City and Long Island. After that, the program could spread out across the state. The goal is to educate employers about the law and the workers about their rights.

If you’d like the Workers’ Center to get involved, let us know!

Here’s the plan: “Participating groups will select a geographic zone for their efforts, and within that zone, they will participate in a range of activities aimed at improving labor law compliance, including holding know-your-rights training; providing employers with information about compliance; and distributing literature to workers in supermarkets, laundromats, nail salons, and other community settings. When they encounter workers facing serious violations of the law or employers with detailed questions about compliance, New York Wage Watch groups will have a designated point person for referrals in the Labor Department’s Division of Labor Standards, which enforces wage and hour laws. The Department will provide training and materials to participating

groups” (NY DOL press release 1-26-09).

“Unions are critical in the fight against wage theft, which makes supporting the Employee Free Choice Act even more important,” said Mary Sullivan, executive vice president of the Civil Service Employees Association. (*NYSUT’s New York Teacher* - March 18, 2009)

Wage Watch builds on a time-honored truth. Workers suffer less if their employers know an organized, determined community is watching and will act against them if they violate workers’ rights. The message: New York is watching.

Workers' Center Stands Up for EFCA

In the span of six days, first the Tompkins County Legislature (by a 12-3 bipartisan vote) and the Town of Ithaca Board (unanimously) passed Resolutions in favor of Federal legislation called the [Employee Free Choice Act \(EFCA\)](#). The Workers' Center worked closely with the Mid-state Central Labor Council to get these Resolutions passed and will continue such work until Federal, state, and local laws reflect a respect for worker's 'right to organize'.

More than 125 people braved the cold weather on Tuesday, April 7th, to encourage Tompkins County Legislators to sup-



**Marty Luster,
Photo News Service**

port the Resolution, then almost immediately, the Town of Ithaca Board was inspired (go to

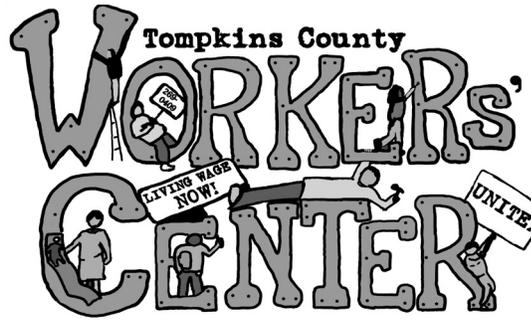
www.TCWorkersCenter.org for a copy of the Town's Resolution). To sign the Jobs with Justice online petition in support of EFCA, go to www.jwj.org

The Workers' Center is looking for individuals and organizations to sign on to the support of



this important legislation. If you have the time and where-withal to get post-cards filled out in support, please let us know and we'll

hook you up! In addition, if your organization or religious institution could/would like to sign on in support of EFCA, we'd be especially (in alliance with our national partner, Jobs with Justice) interested in talking to you.



What is the Tompkins County Workers' Center?

The Tompkins County Workers' Center is composed of a group of low and middle income residents of Tompkins County.

Our Mission is to stand up with all workers treated unfairly at work or faced with critical poverty, racial, housing, health care or other social and economic issues.

We will support, advocate for, and seek to empower each other to create a more just community and world.

What does being a member of the Workers' Center mean?

A member is someone who believes:

1. In helping each other to make our community a better place to live.
2. We all deserve to have good jobs with good wages so we can live decently.
3. We all deserve rights and fair treatment as workers.
4. Healthcare is a right—everybody should have affordable access to it.
5. We all deserve a livable neighborhood and affordable housing.

What Do You Think It Means? What Moves You?

I Want to Get Involved in the Fight for Workers' Rights!

\$_____ Individual Annual Membership
Due = One Hour's Wage or \$7.15 if not working

During the next year, I'LL BE THERE at least five times for someone else's fight, as well as my own. Please contact me with Rapid Response Alerts.

Signature _____

Your Name (please print)
Home Street Address
City
State Zip
Phone (s)
Email

Send to: TC Workers' Center, 115 The Commons, Ithaca, NY 14850

You'll receive a laminated card in the mail or at a meeting. Great to have you with us!

_____ is a member of the
Tompkins County Workers' Center (TCWC)

During the next year, I'LL BE THERE at least five times for someone else's fight, as well as my own. If enough of us are there, we'll all start winning.

TC Workers' Center, 115 The Commons,
Ithaca 607-269-0409 www.TCWorkersCenter.org

I'll Be There.....

...standing up for our rights as working people to a decent standard of living.

...organizing working families to take strong action to secure a better economic future for all of us.

...fighting for secure family-wage jobs in the face of corporate attacks on working people and our communities.

...supporting the right of all workers to organize and bargain collectively in the workplace.



Living Wage Updated by Alternatives Federal Credit Union

\$11.11⁶

The Tompkins County Workers' Center is incredibly proud to stand with the Alternatives Federal Credit Union in Ithaca, New York as we update our Living Wage figures today. Alternatives is a national leader in financial institutions that recognizes and, in fact, actually acts on behalf of people rather than profit. We are also proud to stand with our 62 Living Wage-Certified Employers.

The new Living Wage for Tompkins County, for a single person, is **\$11.11/hour at 40 hours a week or \$23,103.87/yearly**, presuming health insurance coverage is provided by the employer. If health insurance is not provided, for a single person, the Living Wage than increases to \$12.11/hour at 40 hours a week, or \$25,188.80/yearly.

In a global economy that favors corporate profits over the needs of the people that help to make these corporations wealthy (subsidized by taxpayers), and subsequently are helping to bring our

economy dangerously close to a precipice of destruction, we have a movement growing and building in Tompkins County that seeks economic human rights for the vast majority of us. It is fair for all of us to ask the questions:

***If Alternatives Federal Credit Union and the CFCU Community Credit Union can pay a Living Wage, why can't the Bank of America and the M & T Bank pay a Living Wage?**

***If Jillian's Drawers can do it, why can't Wal-Mart and Target?**

***If Tompkins County can do it, why not Cornell University and the Ithaca City School District?**

***If GreenStar can do it, why not Tops, P & C, and Wegmans?**

***If Autumn Leaves Used Books can do it, why not Borders and Barnes & Nobles?**

***If the Stone Quarry House Bed and Breakfast can do it, why not the Holiday Inn and Ramada Hotels do it?**

get up, stand up
607.269.0409 / www.TCWorkersCenter.org

Jeci Brown, Editor



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