

SHATTERED DREAMS AND BROKEN BODIES: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE INLAND EMPIRE WAREHOUSE INDUSTRY

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INTRODUCTION: A TALE OF BIG BOXES AND BROKEN BODIES

Anyone who spends time in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, commonly referred to as the Inland Empire, will quickly realize just how much the warehouse industry has radically altered this region's economic and environmental landscape. What is more difficult to discern are the hidden costs that lie behind the loading docks of these massive, often windowless, warehouses. The region is the most important in the country for goods movement, products from Asia that enter the country at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and are destined for the shelves of the largest retailers in the world, first and foremost Walmart. This preliminary report on the health and safety conditions of Inland Empire warehouse workers sheds some light on what takes place behind the doors of the region's goods movement industry. We provide an opportunity for this often invisible workforce to tally up the human costs of delivering goods to our stores and to our homes. More importantly, we discuss ways that industry leaders and regulators can deliver on the promise of good blue-collar jobs by lifting up a workforce that is often overburdened.

We are in what seems to be a never-ending crisis. People keep losing their homes, jobs are hard to come by, and the lingering effects of the 2008 economic collapse are difficult to shake. What happened in the Inland Empire between 2000 and 2010 will remain with us for a long time; the population exploded, new communities popped-up overnight, and gigantic warehouses were built along every major roadway. It happened because everyone seemed to believe that the Inland Empire was the next big thing.

But the bubble burst and made us realize that not everything was as it seemed. The obvious horror stories of the foreclosure crisis have been well chronicled, but what's often missing is how the boom and bust industries that drove so much of the region's growth exposed many workers to job insecurity and much worse, often dangerous and debilitating work conditions. Warehouse jobs, like so much of the development that took place in the region, were supposed to provide good blue-collar jobs to local residents. The industry grew at a rapid pace, more than 73,000 jobs were added in the logistics sector between 1990 and 2007. Policy makers often cite average wages for this sector - \$46,779 a year in 2007 according to the California Employment Development Department - to support their claims that warehousing offers workers a good life. Nonetheless, as we mentioned before, those big boxes hide a more grim reality. Many of the jobs that were created by the warehouse industry came through special temporary staffing agencies that specialized in providing a steady supply of low-wage workers. These workers don't count when it comes to figuring out official industry wage levels and employment figures. Nevertheless, it's time for us to take more notice of what happens to one of the largest groups of workers in the Inland Empire.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Accounting for the plight of warehouse workers proved to be a challenge because most of them tend to work in inaccessible workplaces. In alliance with CLUE-CA and UCLA LOSH, WWU accessed pilot grant funding from the U.S. Department of Labor OSHA Susan Harwood Grant program, in order to assess health and safety hazards in the warehouse industry and train workers on workplace health and safety. With this in mind, we set out to collect individual data through a series of more than one

hundred interviews with warehouse workers from Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Interviews were conducted by a team of twenty current and former warehouse workers who received forty-two hours of health and safety training from the UCLA Labor and Occupational Safety and Health program (UCLA LOSH). Together, UCLA LOSH and the team developed a 52-question needs assessment tool that was then used with warehouse workers identified through cluster and snowball (referral) sampling from specific warehouse districts across the region. The survey included questions aimed at determining the state of working conditions, the frequency and nature of injuries, and the level of training and safety precautions in major warehouses from across the Inland Empire.

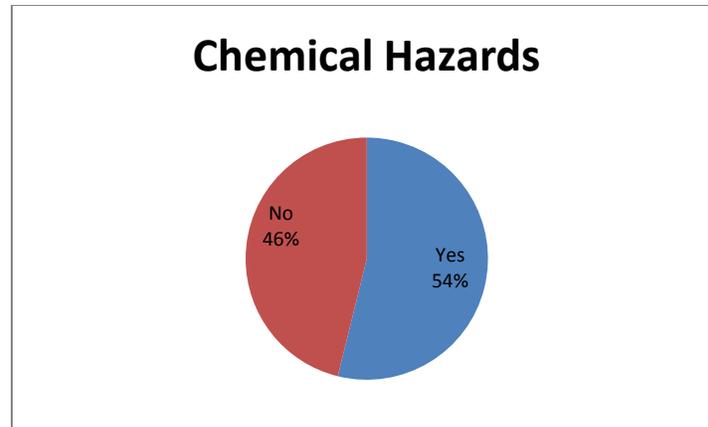
The research project relied on the cooperation with Warehouse Workers United (WWU), a labor advocacy organization that seeks to improve working conditions for warehouse workers in the area. Staff and volunteers from WWU have engaged in face-to-face conversations with thousands of warehouse workers during the past several years; their goal was to identify and improve workplace conditions. What WWU found was that warehouse workers consistently identified health and safety, along with a slew of on-the-job injuries, as one of the major issues that affects their lives. In July 2010, five warehouse workers spoke before a Community Accountability Commission and recounted how they have struggled to overcome workplace-related health and safety issues. The Commission made a recommendation to collect further information about the conditions in the warehouse industry; this preliminary report is a product of that decision. What follows is a preliminary analysis of the survey results that we think outlines significant trends in the industry.

Of the 101 current or former warehouse workers surveyed, sixty-three told us that they had been injured on the job, eighty-three had suffered from a job-related illness, and eighty-four witnessed an injury to a fellow co-worker. These initial results confirm some of the disturbing anecdotal stories we've heard for the past several years. Simply put, Inland Empire warehouse workers often work in dangerous conditions. We turn now to a more detailed explanation of the warehouse industry's most dangerous and pervasive workplace hazards.

CHEMICALS AND AIR POLLUTANTS

Warehouse workers are exposed to hazardous chemicals even before delivery trucks arrive with their cargo. Their day often begins with cleaning duties that can expose them to toxic chemicals used for cleaning or maintaining machinery such as forklifts and conveyor belts. To make matters worse, workers told us that they felt powerless because supervisors were often unresponsive to their health complaints. The following vignette illustrates a typical day in the life of an Inland Empire warehouse worker.

Rolando's story is not unusual. Forty workers report getting injured or feeling ill as a result of exposure to chemicals in their work in a warehouse. Forty-nine of the 101 workers we interviewed reported that they were exposed to chemicals in their workplace. Of these forty-nine, only twelve received what they described as sufficient training on health and safety.



Workers agreeing with the statement "Chemical Hazards are causing or may cause Injuries and Illnesses for Workers in Warehouses." N=101.

Warehouse workers who handle shipping boxes and merchandise are sometimes exposed to harmful toxins. For example, one worker described feeling nauseous after constantly using a specific type of marker to label boxes. Another worker recalled using a substance similar to paint thinner to remove price stickers from merchandise. The chemicals were so strong, that they ate through the worker's latex gloves in less than ten minutes. Direct and repeated use of such toxic substances can lead to negative long-term cumulative health affects.

Besides the harsh cleaning chemicals we mentioned, many of the interviewees complained about exhaust fumes generated by the endless stream of diesel trucks and forklifts that occupy the loading bays. Additionally, workers reported adverse reactions to accumulated dust that often covers shipping boxes as they enter the warehouses. The dust can consist of rubber from forklift tires, a variety of substances released during the unloading of international shipping containers, and/or a myriad of particles that accumulate while boxes are stored on racks for months at a time. Such dust makes working difficult. The following quote illustrates how dust affects workers in this industry:

Dust went in his eyes. They turned red, and he got an infection, but he didn't report it because he was scared.

Constant exposure to air contaminates and particulate matter generated a number of specific health issues. For example, one worker vividly described how dust and small particles caused him to produce black mucus from his nose after a long day's work in a local warehouse. In addition, several workers were distressed by the headaches and nosebleeds - that often occurred both on and off the job - because they feared that repeated inhalation of unknown substances would have long-term consequences. While some companies provide masks and other protective equipment, these measures are often inadequate. Meanwhile, workers continue to be exposed to harmful chemicals and air pollutants.

ERGONOMICS

Ergonomics deals with the physical capabilities and limitations that individuals face in performing certain tasks or in using particular equipment. While each warehouse is different, a number of familiar themes emerged that show how the extreme conditions and pressures of warehouse work routinely force workers to exceed their physical capabilities. Ergonomic related injuries are often caused by performing repetitive tasks, working in the same position for long periods of time, and/or working in extreme physical positions. However, many ergonomic related injuries are caused by a single incident of overexertion. These injuries, whether they are cumulative or not, often last a lifetime. Thirty-five percent of those workers that we interviewed reported ergonomic injuries. Let's turn to the specific ergonomic issues that warehouse workers face while on the job.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised by the high incidence of ergonomic injuries, after all, loading and unloading containers is hard work. Workers must walk into 40-foot shipping containers and move boxes that can weigh up to 200 pounds. Once the boxes are removed from the containers and stacked onto pallets, they are then directed in one of two ways. Pallets are either quickly sorted and redistributed out of the warehouse or are wrapped and kept in the warehouse as stock. Workers are responsible for covering the remaining goods with a complete roll of plastic wrap.

REPETITIVE STRESS

Seven percent of the ergonomic injuries reported by warehouse workers were caused by the repetitive stress associated with the rapid pace of work in modern distribution centers. Workers are under constant pressure - through the use of performance quotas - to rapidly move, scan, tag, and box goods. Supervisors encourage workers to extend themselves by offering incentives to work as fast as possible. As a result, workers end up making the same movements thousands of times a day. But human bodies were not designed to withstand such stress, and warehouse workers have the injuries to prove just how dangerous distribution centers can be. One worker told us what happened when she suffered from a job-related repetitive stress injury:

(I sustained a) right hand injury due to the continual use of the scanner. I lost movement on my right hand thumb and I was also diagnosed with carpal tunnel. One of the doctors tells me that there is nothing wrong with my hand yet he has suggested surgery. My doctor gave me a letter of disability for my employer. Human resources said that my letter was not acceptable and I was

Juan Carlos' Story

With all his strength Juan Carlos pulled a pallet jack loaded with well over 1,000 pounds of merchandise across his warehouse floor. Recognizing he had overexerted himself, Juan Carlos reported the incident to the agency's supervisor who then sent him to their affiliated doctor. Though the company covered the consultation with the company's doctor, Juan Carlos was only given pain killers and told to return to work. After two weeks continuing to perform the physically demanding tasks in the warehouse, the pain in Juan Carlos' back became unbearable. Admitting his pain to his direct supervisor, he was told to go home and that she would discuss the issue with the boss, see what they could do, and call him later. That was over a year ago.

told that if I didn't show up for work the next morning by 7 AM then I would be given a written warning.

As the story suggests, warehouse workers not only have to endure the painful consequences of dangerous work, but they must also contend with management practices that expose them to further medical harm, or that punish them for reporting their injuries. Many of these outcomes can be avoided. Especially because this type of injury takes months and sometimes years to reveal itself. Companies can implement simple and low-cost protocols, such as job rotation and exercises, to reduce the likelihood of repetitive stress injuries.

STRAINING, LIFTING, PULLING

As we noted above, warehouse workers must often exert a tremendous amount of force to move goods in and out of distribution centers. Our interviews revealed twelve injuries that were caused by straining, lifting or pulling while on the job. The following quotes, from a worker who was operating a malfunctioning pallet jack, offers a glimpse into just how much warehouse workers have to stress their bodies to do their jobs:

While pulling a 1200 pound pallet I hurt my back, both shoulders, neck, left foot, and [I] have a hernia.

This same worker sustained another injury a few weeks later; he is now permanently disabled and unable to work.

FALLS/OTHER IMPACTS

Twenty-two percent of our interviewees claimed that they were injured as a result of falls or other workplace-related impacts. The rapid pace of warehouse work, when combined with poor working conditions, can have disastrous consequences. Supervisors systematically press workers to meet quotas, especially because retailers often impose special performance measures; failure to meet these standards can result in the loss of a contract. Workers bear the brunt of this pressure and most of those who suffered falls cited time pressures as a major factor in their injuries. Other culprits included product wrapping or water on the floor, unsafe equipment, and dangerous work practices that expose workers to moving vehicles both in and outside of shipping containers. Workers described and showed us major injuries to their backs, knees and heads. Some of the more serious head injuries were caused by boxes or other objects that fell from warehouse racks and pallets. One worker who was injured in such an accident reported to us what happened to him:

A rack divider fell on my head. It hurt me on my right side by my eye. They still haven't replaced all the loose pieces from the racks.

Such accidents are common but also can be easily fixed. The fact that the hazards were not addressed after the worker sustained an injury indicates that employers need to pay closer attention to potential hazards both before and after accidents occur.

DANGEROUS MACHINERY

Warehouse workers who spend their days loading and moving boxes are especially susceptible to machine-related injuries. Approximately ten percent of the workers we interviewed had been injured while working with machines; forklifts, scanners, and conveyors were the most commonly identified causes. A quick tour of a warehouse worker's typical workday may provide us with some clues about why machinery poses such a danger to their health. As shipments arrive, containers must be unloaded and merchandise, which often arrives on pallets, is immediately moved from the loading docks to a temporary storage rack in the warehouse or directly onto another truck. Once the merchandise is transported across the warehouse either on a forklift or a pallet jack, it is then stored on shelves that can measure up to 40 feet high. Though existing laws are supposed to regulate tasks that are done at extreme heights, many warehouses do not provide the equipment necessary to comply with such measures. As a result, workers are forced to take serious risks with their health in order to do their jobs.

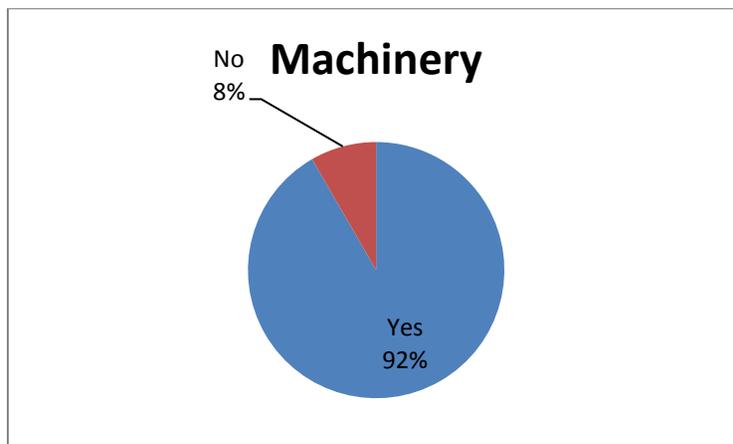
Some workers are able to use a forklift; a motorized vehicle that is used to lift and transport the pallets across the warehouse. Others must instead transport the merchandise using a hydraulic pallet jack that they walk behind and either push with their own strength or navigate with the help of an electric motor. Forklifts are useful machines that enable workers to lift and transport heavy loads. However, they are also one of the greatest causes of warehouse injuries. Their size and power require operators to acquire mechanical skill and training. But even the simple act of getting in and out of these large machines has led to worker injuries. The inherent dangers posed by forklifts are magnified by the already hazardous warehouse environments that we've mentioned above. For example, one worker explained how normal operating conditions in a typical warehouse increase forklift dangers: "(There is) a lot of dirt on floor, so the forklift would slide when (the) brake would be hit." Many of the workers

David's Story

David works as a forklift driver in a local warehouse. In addition to forklifts, David's warehouse also uses Raymond Lift Trucks to complete similar tasks. A lift truck is similar to a forklift except that it is operated from a standing position, it only moves forward and backwards and is nearly eight feet tall. All of these moving vehicles require extra caution and safety measures. In this case, forklifts are driven backwards as a way of avoiding dangerous frontal collisions. But such restrictions do not prevent all accidents.

One day, as David drove his forklift through the warehouse, he and a co-worker who was operating a Raymond Lift crossed paths and collided. David was unable to see or hear the Raymond machine until they were bearing down on each other. He tried to stop the impending collision by taking his foot off the accelerator, but the pedal got stuck on a loose block of wood. Finally, in a moment of desperation, David placed his foot between the Raymond Lift and his forklift to lessen the impact of the collision. David's leg was crushed between the two machines and he was taken to a hospital where part of his foot was amputated. David continues to work at the warehouse with the assistance of a prosthetic foot.

that we spoke with were concerned about improper forklift uses. One of these workers recalled that “while loading a trailer he would stand on forklift blades to load up high (3-4 feet or higher).”



Workers agreeing with the statement "Improper use of or dangerous machinery are causing or may cause injuries and illnesses for Workers in Warehouses." N=101.

EXTREME TEMPERATURES AND LACK OF WATER

The busiest time of year for the logistics industry is the summer and early fall - from the Back-to-School season through the pre-Black Friday Christmas rush. Thousands of new workers are hired through staffing agencies for the busy season. These workers fill the gaps by packing, loading, unloading, and sorting mountains of goods. Summer brings with it extreme outdoor temperatures that can reach over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Meanwhile, temperatures inside warehouses can soar even higher and workers who spend time on “cherry-picker” forklifts, suspended 20 feet in the air, must endure even hotter climates, outside the reach of any temperature control or ventilation. Some warehouse workers spend most of their days loading and unloading goods from steel shipping containers that are directly exposed to the sun.

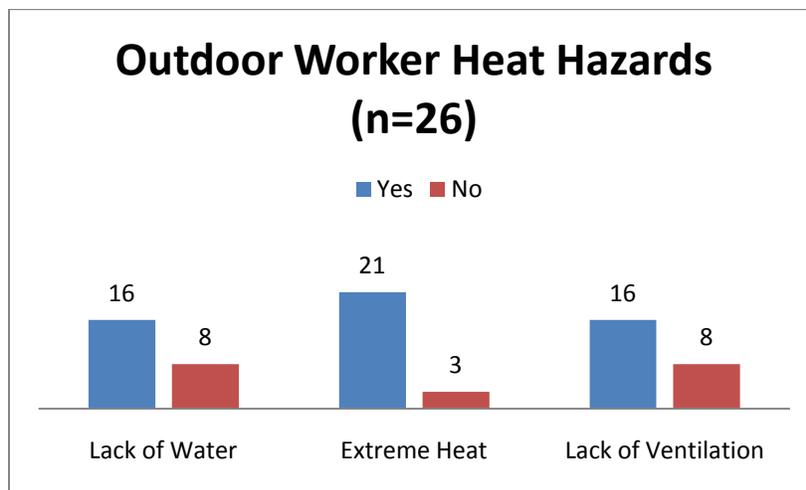
High temperature hazards are often exacerbated by insufficient ventilation or access to water, and inconsistent breaks. Of the 101 workers surveyed, seventy-four reported excessive heat or cold as a problem. Seventy workers complained about insufficient ventilation and forty-eight said that they lacked an adequate supply of drinking water. Many workers described working in warehouses as hot as 125 degrees and others as low as 10 degrees. One worker reported bringing gloves and a hat to work in the extreme cold. A survey of data from Costar Group shows that only sixty-three out of the 361 major (over 200,000 square feet) warehouse buildings in the Inland Empire region offer air conditioning. One of the warehouse workers we interviewed recalled an instance where the heat became so unbearable that he had to bring his own fan to work. In addition to little ventilation, a significant number of workers noted little to no access to water in the warehouses. In the cases that water was accessible, workers said that they had to comply with a number of restrictions. For example, no cups were provided or the water was far from their workstation, making it practically impossible to access it when needed.

A worker who witnessed the effects of such heat illness noted the following:

George works in a warehouse that experiences temperatures well over 100 degrees and little ventilation. He remembers a coworker fainting under the heat while working one day. The paramedics were called and the coworker was carried out of the warehouse. He never saw that coworker again.

OUTDOOR HEAT

California has an outdoor heat standard that applies to workers who spend time outside, such as loaders and unloaders in warehouses and workers in warehouse facilities that have no walls, facilities called cross-docks. This standard requires that water, shade and rest breaks be available to outdoor workers at all times when the ambient temperature is over 85 degrees. We interviewed twenty-six workers who spend some or all their time loading and unloading, or working at cross-dock facilities (and therefore subject to the outdoor heat regulations). Twenty-one of these workers noted that excessive heat was a problem, but only eight of these outdoor workers said that water was available during high temperature periods.



Reporting of high heat hazards among workers surveyed who spend part or all of their time working outdoors.

CAUSES OF HAZARDS AND INJURIES

The high volume of injuries reported by warehouse workers indicates a systemic problem in the Inland Empire's goods movement industry. This rapidly expanding industry was able to grow during a time of relatively low regulation and worker organization. Something must be done to address the issues that we've outlined above. In order to move forward, we need to first understand some of the systemic causes that expose warehouse workers to debilitating workplace injuries.

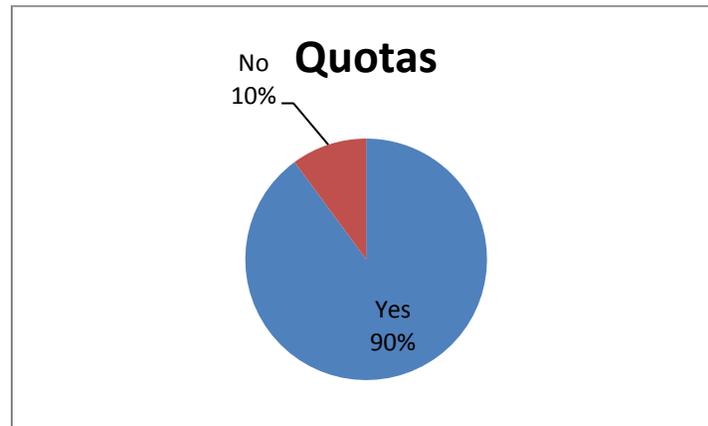
LACK OF TRAINING/ PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES

Only twenty-three of the 101 workers surveyed said that they received adequate job training. Some workers were simply told that they should “figure it out” on their own. According to one interviewee, workers were left to their own devices: “I provided my own training; learn as you go so no other training was provided.” Workers employed through the staffing agency system are not provided with the same level of training or supervision when compared to direct-hire employees. Temp workers often feel like they are disposable and have few opportunities to ask questions about their workload.

This lack of training permeates all other aspects of workplace health and safety. OSHA standards require that workers receive adequate training before starting work, especially on new and dangerous equipment. Workers that have no understanding of the hazards they are exposed to are in no position to raise concerns or make educated decisions about the tasks they are asked to perform. Any of the stories laid out in this report could have been prevented by a good worker education program that explains both proper work techniques and the basic rights that all workers have to a safe workplace.

LINE SPEED

As we mentioned before, warehouse workers are forced to work under extreme time pressure. Many workers must complete tasks under strict deadlines and are encouraged to meet quotas by piece-rate like payment systems that compensate them by the number of tasks completed in a certain time period. The clock is always ticking and workers are under constant pressure to pick up the pace. But expectations are often unrealistic and force many workers to take extreme measures in order to complete their assigned tasks. In an attempt to meet quotas, finish on time or complete a certain number of tasks, workers often overexert themselves and damage their health in the process.



Workers agreeing with the statement "Line Speed and Quotas are causing or may cause Injuries and Illnesses for Workers in Warehouses." N=101.

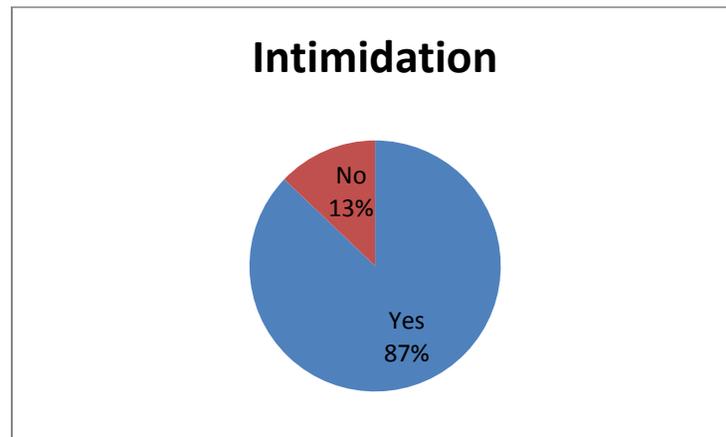
Ninety percent of all respondents said that they received pressure from supervisors to move faster. When asked whether hazards existed for workers due to work speed, one worker stated:

Yes, because they gave us quotas, we had to move 350 (boxes) per hour.

Other workers are paid by the number of containers they load or unload in a day. They simply do not get paid if they fail to load or unload a container in a certain amount of time. The combination of quotas and supervisor pressure result in work speeds that cause accidents, maximize hazards, and increase the number and severity of ergonomic injuries.

PRESSURE TO NOT REPORT AN ACCIDENT

Part of the reason that many temp workers feel like they are disposable is because staffing agencies have high turnover rates and often fail to develop strong relationships with the people they hire. Furthermore, an outspoken or injured worker can be seen as a distraction and a drag on productivity that should therefore be terminated. Many warehouses create additional incentives for workers to not report injuries. One worker told us that she received a gift card because no one reported an injury for two straight weeks. But the fact that warehouses celebrate “injury free” workplaces doesn’t mean that workers don’t get hurt on the job; many injuries are simply unreported because employees fear retribution or feel pressured by their peers to maintain the benefits associated with the lack of on-the-job injury reports. The pressure to not report accidents in warehouses allow injuries to go unrecognized and untreated.



Workers agreeing with the statement "Intimidation by supervisors causes or may cause Injuries and Illnesses for Workers in Warehouses." N=101.

Only twenty-one of sixty-three workers, one third, who had been injured in a warehouse reported the injury. At the same time, eight of these workers noted that the supervisor did nothing after reporting the injury. An example of the workers’ reasons for not reporting is illustrated by the following statement:

What's happening at work bothers me but they don't change anything. When someone reports what's going on nobody does anything to help us.

LACK OF ENFORCEMENT OF EXISTING LAWS

Only twenty-two of our sample believe that government agencies are doing an adequate job of enforcing health and safety laws that are supposed to protect workers. Several workers mentioned that their workplace had never been inspected by state regulators. The dearth of state resources will only make matters worse as regulatory agencies struggle to survive current austerity measures. Nevertheless, without organized worker representation, CAL-OSHA represents the best opportunity to protect warehouse workers, especially before an injury occurs and leads to disrupted lives for workers and lost productivity for employers. We hope that this research spurs a significant push for enforcement and that it leads to increased awareness of workplace health and safety issues among both workers and employers. Such an effort can be coordinated with organizations that are reaching out to workers, such as WWU, as well as employer groups such as local Chambers of Commerce.

THE EFFECT OF DANGEROUS WORKPLACES IN THE BROADER COMMUNITY

Many workers reported long-term physical problems that resulted from their warehouse jobs. On a personal level many workers face a future of chronic pain and injuries with debilitating consequences. One worker described his frustration with pain in his hand and back that hurts so much that it incapacitates him. A woman who lost a finger in a warehouse admitted, "I feel bad and I am ashamed when my husband wants to hold my hand." This statement points to the emotional burden caused by the pressures and dangers of warehouse work. Workers told us that they often carried their work stress home with them and exposed their families to the pressures of of unstable work, injuries, and humiliation.

The personal stories that we shared in this report are undoubtedly experienced by thousands of workers in the Inland Empire's warehouse sector. More than 100,000 people are employed in the region's logistics sector and many of them are in danger of suffering from the types of debilitating injuries that we highlighted in this report; injuries that can threaten their ability to put food on the table and to provide for their families. What's more, the industry's propensity to spit out injured workers can place higher demands on a public health system that is already over-burdened. Workers who depend on disability or Social Security often need other, locally funded social services, such as welfare and food stamps to care for children and family members.

Finally, employers must understand that workplace hazards and injuries affect their bottom line. Injuries lead to reduced productivity, damaged machinery, reduced morale, and increased workers' compensation rates. Every employer should see the benefit in operating a safe workplace.

CONCLUSION

Our findings show that health and safety practices within the warehouse industry put workers at risk and need to be reformed. We call on all employers to take responsibility and to respond to these findings in a constructive way. Accordingly, we developed the following recommendations:

- Employers should invite CAL-OSHA to educate both workers and supervisors about job safety and about pertinent occupational standards for their facility.
- Employers should engage workers in health and safety committees, including workers who are employed through staffing agencies.
- Employers should provide training for all workers both at the time of hire and on an on-going basis. These trainings should include those employed by staffing agencies, especially in the following areas:
 - Heat safety, both indoor and outdoor.
 - Operation of equipment, especially forklift safety both for drivers and other workers on the floor.
 - Education on the nature and proper use and storage, as well as protection and hazards, of all chemicals and exhausts handled or encountered in the facility.

Warehouse Workers United would gladly work in partnership with any employers that are interested. Together, we can make sure that warehouse workers don't have to break their bodies in order to earn a living. We particularly urge employers to address those problems that were identified in this report, especially at workplaces where workers reported significant problems and sustained repeated injuries. In the coming months, WWU will continue its mission to improve warehouse workplace conditions. Our efforts will include a series of health and safety trainings for warehouse workers. We will also work with regulatory agencies and advocate for enforcement of existing laws that are supposed to protect warehouse workers. Furthermore, we will continue to work with individual workers to ensure that their specific cases are dealt with fairly and that they receive any medical care or compensation that is due to them. Although the challenge is great, we believe that these problems can be mitigated, but it will require that warehouse managers and staffing agencies take these findings seriously and assume some responsibility for the workers who deliver our goods and drive a significant share of the Inland Empire's economy.