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State News

Mississippi

La Raza Urges Federal, State Officials To Crack Down on Nonpaying Contractors

Jackson, Miss.--The National Council of La Raza called on Mississippi and federal authorities Nov. 22 to enforce labor laws in the Gulf Coast rebuilding process following complaints from Latino workers of not being paid.

NCLR President and Chief Executive Officer Janet Murguia visited a tent city in Gulfport, Miss., Nov. 18 to examine the living and working conditions of Latino workers involved in the rebuilding.

Murguia joined local civil rights leaders to call for greater enforcement of state and federal labor laws. La Raza also called for long-term solutions to the mistreatment of workers in the area.

"It is difficult to imagine that workers in the U.S. who are playing such a critical role in restoring Gulf Coast communities are forced to live in third-world living conditions," Murguia said in a statement.

She added, "It is equally offensive that contractors have been allowed to exploit workers with impunity."

Workers complained to Murguia and others during the site visit about contractors who hired them for long periods of time and then refused to pay them for their labor or denied them the promised wages.

Brenda Muniz, an NCLR spokeswoman, told BNA Nov. 23 that her organization got involved with the issue through the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance and other local NCLR partners. "We are working with them to ensure that relief

services, housing and other post-Katrina rebuilding efforts reach Latino communities throughout the region," she said.

Will Seek Help from Gov. Barbour


Muniz said her organization will ask Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour (R) to create "labor enforcement mechanisms and enhance oversight authority to monitor contractors and investigate worker complaints regarding nonpayment of wages," adding that Mississippi does not have a state labor department.

"NCLR is also in the process of sending a letter to the U.S. Department of Labor requesting that more resources be dedicated to the region to investigate complaints against contractors surrounding nonpayment and worker protections," Muniz said.

The Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance has submitted about seven complaints covering 150 workers to the U.S. Department of Labor, Victoria Cintra, a Gulf Coast outreach organizer for MIRA, told BNA Nov. 21. She estimated workers are due \$150,000 in unpaid wages.

David James, a spokesman for the Department of Labor, would not comment on the complaints filed by Cintra's organization. He told BNA Nov. 23 that "I can confirm we have received correspondence [from MIRA] and we are looking into the matter."

"Once a case is opened, we cannot comment on it," said James.

"The Department of Labor is really working with us. They're trying to do the best they can with the laws," Cintra said. 

By Maybelle Cagel

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