

SANTOS CASTAÑEDA

Organizing in the Face of Retaliation

Twenty-five-year-old Santos Castañeda is the child of warehouse workers. His mother would come home complaining of back problems, and his father underwent eye surgery due to exposure to dust and paint. Expressing grievances was out of the question for them. He couldn't understand why.



After dropping out of high school to help support his family, working in Chino warehouses himself, the poor conditions he's experienced and the retaliation he's faced for speaking up have given him an appreciation for their situation. He has faced intimidation, been written up and demoted, and had his pay cut and his hours slashed. Across warehouses, he's witnessed the same things: Untrained drivers, old forklifts, unsecured pallets stacked high with heavy boxes, injured workers fearful to make a report. No protective equipment, insufficient water stations, timed restroom breaks, the constant watch of supervisors.

The Chino-based company NFI, which only hires workers through the temp agency Tri State Staffing and supplies shoes to Walmart, has been the worst. Castañeda has worked there for nearly four years: when he first arrived, he saw pallets and broken racks strewn across the floor. He saw a forklift tap a 30-foot high column of pallets, and 40-80 pound boxes tumble down.

So when Castañeda was approached by organizers from Warehouse Workers United (WWU) last June, it didn't take much to convince him to act. He began educating workers on their rights to a safe workplace. With WWU guidance and support, they filed a Cal/OSHA complaint pointing many violations. The company retaliated immediately, starting with Castañeda.

His daily shifts were cut in half; soon the same began happening to co-workers. "I was depressed and stressed out. I felt like dropping everything and quitting. [But] we started something, we had to finish it. If I quit, I'd just end up at another warehouse and face the same problems." In mid-August, after handing out flyers about health and safety and speaking at a rally, Castañeda was fired. Thanks to a delegation led by WWU and SEIU Local 721, he was reinstated two days later.

The organizing efforts ultimately paid off. Cal/OSHA fined the company \$256,000 for 60 violations and required they address them all. By the end of 2011, the warehouse was transformed. Old forklifts were replaced and the speed limit reduced. Workers were trained to operate the new machines. Mirrors were installed and hung from the ceiling so drivers could see whether aisles were clear. Limits were placed on the height of pallets, which now have to be shrinkwrapped. There are additional water stations and free protective equipment has been made available. Emergency exits have been cleared and fire extinguishers installed. Health and safety trainings are held each morning and workers told that they have a right to organize.

However, retaliation against Castañeda continues. He still works inside an extremely hot container, doing a job normally assigned to three people. He barely makes \$120 a week, and his eyes are so irritated from dust that it hurts to close them. He has filed a report with the Labor Commission denouncing the company's acts of retaliation and hopes for a favorable outcome.

Still, Castañeda says it is his anger at these injustices that have kept him from quitting. And despite this ongoing retaliation, he continues to organize. "To me, all the people that work in the warehouses are my brothers. I know what it's like to be treated bad," he says. "The process is slow, but at the end it's worth it."

KARLA CAMPOS

Fighting for Justice on the Job

Karla started working at American Reclamation during the summer of 2011; she is a 25-year-old single mother, supporting herself and her two children, ages 8 and 10. Karla was a sorter, someone who collects and sorts waste materials passing quickly by on a conveyor belt, to ensure materials are recycled properly. Sorting is a dangerous job in the recycling industry; workers sort through hazardous materials—anything from dead animals to needles, often without proper training or protective equipment. Many sorters say they are issued one pair of gloves, which quickly develop holes because of the glass and sharp objects they sort through. Some say that they receive only one disposable, flimsy painter’s mask a week to protect them from breathing in the fumes and dust being released by the waste. Karla says that in her facility workers are frequently breathing in dry wall dust from construction waste that is being broken up. She also reports that even though their facility does not collect biohazardous waste, syringes are a common sight on the sorting line.



“I thought I was going to be trained, at least for a couple of days, or at least see a video, but they just throw you right in... I had to support my children, so I had to take the risk... It’s a risk everyday working there.”

—*Karla Campos*

Because of the poor treatment and dangerous conditions Karla and her co-workers faced daily on the job, they decided to start a campaign to unionize. Being afraid for their health and safety, they also filed a complaint with Cal/OSHA in November 2011. Their complaint involved lack of training and receiving improper protective equipment. Because of the severe and imminent hazards at the facility, Cal/OSHA considered the complaint high priority and made their first inspection within two weeks of the filing.

Karla became a leader among her co-workers in the fight for justice and better working conditions, making her a target for the anti-union company. On January 5, 2012, Karla’s boss accused her of planting a bucket of syringes on the sorting line to get the company in trouble. The next day Karla slipped while climbing over a pile of trash to get to the one bathroom provided to the workers. She fell and fractured her tailbone; within an hour of this accident, her boss fired her. Giving almost no explanation, the boss alluded to the planted syringes as the cause for her dismissal. Karla and her co-workers feel confident that this firing was an act of retaliation against her because of the leadership role she had taken on in the unionization process. Karla is now out of work; however, she is not giving up. She continues to both lead and inspire her co-workers, actively participating in the ongoing fight to organize. And she is pursuing her legal rights through the Department of Labor Standards Enforcement (DLSE).