

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



September 6, 2010

Labor Tries to Organize Carwashes in Los Angeles

By **STEVEN GREENHOUSE**

LOS ANGELES — The carwashes of Los Angeles would appear to be an unlikely target for a unionization drive.

Many of the estimated 10,000 workers in the business here are illegal immigrants, who are too scared to speak out or give their bosses any excuse to fire them. Many carwash companies have just two or three outlets, not 20 or 30, requiring scores of separate organizing efforts. And carwash owners, who invest a million dollars or more in each facility, are fiercely resisting the prospect of being tied down by collective bargaining and union rules.

Nonetheless, labor organizers have set out to unionize this city's carwash workers, hoping to improve their paltry pay and end widespread abuses. The unions, led by the [United Steelworkers](#), acknowledge that it is a struggle, but they voice confidence that they can organize the first carwashes in the next few weeks or months, and that this will start a domino effect once other owners realize that unionized businesses can survive and even thrive.

As organized labor's ranks continue to decline, unions are looking increasingly to low-wage service workers as a source of growth, convinced that these workers — car washers, janitors, nursing home aides, security guards and pharmacy clerks — will be eager to join. In some ways, union leaders say, this campaign parallels previous ones in which unions organized thousands of immigrant janitors in Houston and Los Angeles and substantially lifted their wages.

In addition to adding members, the carwash campaign hopes to send a strong message to employers to stop taking advantage of workers in an industry where it is common practice.

California officials have estimated that two-thirds of the 500 carwashes in Los Angeles violate workplace laws. Many workers say they are paid just \$35 for a 10-hour workday — less than half the minimum wage — and some say they are not paid for time during which no cars go through the wash. Others complain that they are not given gloves or goggles even though they often use

stinging acids to clean tire rims.

“These are the farm workers of today,” said Peter Dreier, a professor of urban policy at Occidental College in Los Angeles. “They’re nearly invisible, even though they work in a highly visible industry.”

After two years the organizing drive, which has involved billboards, lawsuits and a candlelight vigil outside one carwash owner’s home, has made important strides.

Most notably, the campaign helped to get two carwash owners, brothers Benny and Nisan Pirian, sentenced to a year in jail for minimum-wage violations, sending shock waves through the industry.

Some Pirian workers had complained that they received no wages — only tips — and were not given lunch breaks, causing some to wolf down their food while soaping and scrubbing cars. Prosecutors accused one Pirian manager of brandishing a machete to threaten pro-union workers.

“They exploited and took advantage of the workers just because we were immigrants,” said Pedro Guzman, a Honduran-born former employee at the Pirians’ flagship, Vermont Hand Wash. “We want to change the bad conditions inside the carwashes.”

In addition to support from the steelworkers, the effort has received financial backing from the national [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#) and many foundations, including the [Ford Foundation](#). It has also attracted support from Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa](#) and [Cardinal Roger Mahony](#), the city’s Roman Catholic archbishop.

California is often described as the trendsetting car capital of the world, and for many Californians, getting their car washed every week or two is as important as having their hair or nails done.

“The carwash fight is about a core L.A. industry,” said Rabbi Jonathan Klein, executive director of a clergy group who has often picketed alongside the carwash workers. “It’s an industry built on the backs of cheap labor.”

One day last week, 20 union supporters picketed outside Robertson Car Wash on the west side of Los Angeles, chanting, “No justice, no peace.” They protested what they said was the use of tips-only workers. They also demanded that the owner sign an agreement allowing unionization through card check and pledging not to speak out against unionizing.

A young man drove up in his black **Honda** Accord and opened his window to hear them out. The pickets burst into cheers when he backed up and drove away.

One customer, Aimee Neufeld, said she knew little about the dispute. She said she was sorry to hear the workers claim minimum-wage violations, but added, "In this neighborhood, people tend to be generous tippers, and that should supplement their income." Several workers said their tips ran from \$40 to \$80 a day.

For eight months, union activists have picketed Robertson Car Wash, hoping to pressure its owner, Ilya Bershadsky, into becoming the first one to sign a pro-union agreement. He has resisted.

"This carwash has been unfairly singled out," said Mr. Bershadsky's lawyer, John A. Lawrence. "They don't have the interest of any of the employees working inside. One picket told us, 'We don't care if we put you out of business.'"

Randy Crestall, owner of Autospa **Chevron** Hand Wash in Valencia, a Los Angeles suburb, said that law-abiding owners resented their scofflaw competitors.

"They're a blight on our industry," said Mr. Crestall, a former president of the Western Carwash Association. "As good operators, we don't like them to be on the same playing field as us."

He said 95 percent of California's car washes were law-abiding, although he acknowledged that many in Los Angeles flout the law.

Mr. Crestall said the unionization push would hurt everyone. "Having a union will mean higher wages, and that will lead to higher prices," he said. "That will mean fewer consumers coming to carwashes, and fewer jobs for these workers."

The leaders of the unionization drive acknowledge that success will be difficult. "These immigrant workers are being beaten down by the system," said Leo W. Gerard, president of the United Steelworkers. "They deserve a chance of having a voice at work, and we are good at helping people do that."

The unionization drive calls itself the Clean Carwash Campaign and has created a brigade of former carwash workers, many of whom had been fired for backing a union.

"This is not the type of campaign you win overnight," said Chloe Osmer, the campaign's strategic coordinator. "It's the type of campaign where you have to bring the floor up in the industry before you can really have some unionization success."

Although no carwashes have gone union, the campaign helped persuade city officials to investigate the Pirians' carwashes. Last year, the city attorney charged them with a total of 220 misdemeanors that could have meant 120 years in jail. In mid-August, the brothers pleaded no contest to six charges, including grand theft and conspiracy. They were ordered to repay \$1.24 million to 54 underpaid workers.

"This is an area where wage theft is particularly prevalent in L.A.," said Julia Figueira-McDonough, a deputy city attorney. "This was a very strong case."

Mark Werksman, the Pirians' lawyer, said the two brothers had done nothing wrong and had accepted a one-year sentence only because they faced a six-month trial and perhaps dozens of years behind bars.

"They were prosecuted because they were successfully resisting the unionization drive," he said. "The union will drive the carwashes out of business, and everyone in L.A. will have to wash their own car."