Temporary Labor:
Issues of Health and Safety Experienced by
Warehouse Workers in the Inland Empire

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# Table Of Contents

**Introduction**: Page 3  
An Overview of Globalization and its Local Impacts on Warehouse Workers in the Inland Empire: Page 6

**Literature Review**: Page 8

**Research Methods**: Page 12  
Setting: Page 12  
Positionality: Page 14  
Methods: Page 16  
Ethics: Page 17

**Discussion**: Page 17  
Health and Safety Issues in the Warehouse: Page 17  
Corporate Responses to Health and Safety Issues: Page 20  
Effects of Warehouse Workers United: Page 25

**Conclusions**: Page 29

**Works Cited**: Page 31

**Appendix**: Page 33
Introduction:

The NFI, a national trucking and supply chain company, warehouse in Mira Loma is a short bus ride from the Warehouse Workers United (WWU) headquarters, located at 601 S. Milliken Ave, Suite A Ontario, California. The bus is full of workers and community supporters filled with excitement and anticipation. We leave the WWU parking lot, heading south on Milliken ave, past the multitude of temporary staffing agencies and warehouses and over the train tracks. We take another left at the stop light onto E Mission ave and on the right, I can see all of the ‘Wal-Mart’ and ‘Swift’ containers through the thin line of trees. We turn onto Wineville ave, and we arrive at the warehouse. The bus doors open and the suffocating smell of animal decay from the nearby farms and slaughterhouses, mixed with truck exhaust and air pollution, billow in.

Upon arrival, the workers and I, a student intern, grab Warehouse Workers United signs saying “Striking for our families, Warestaff unfair” and “NFI unfair” and join the picket line. The workers are on strike and we are picketing outside of the warehouse to protest against NFI and Wal-Mart in order to bring publicity to the workers’ struggle and give them a voice. Inside the warehouse, workers are being silenced by the company and retaliated against by their employers simply for demanding the rights that are lawfully theirs. These workers are asking for a safe work environment in which they work knowing that they will leave at the end of the day without an injury due to broken equipment and other unsafe practices. They want access to clean drinking water and proper ventilation so that they do not suffer
from heat stroke or dehydration. They demand breaks and time to rest throughout their busy, strenuous workdays, which should be a basic right for manual workers.

Today, members of Warehouse Workers United, workers, community members, and other supporters are here to demand that the workers in this warehouse are treated justly. We begin by marching and blocking the entrance to the warehouse so that semi-trucks holding Wal-Mart merchandise cannot get in or out. This shuts down the entire warehouse and its proceedings, as merchandise cannot be delivered. We chant with excitement and determination: “Sin justicia, no hay paz, Sin respecto, no hay paz!” “We’re fired up, can’t take it no more”. “When workers rights are under attack, what do we do? Stand up, fight back!”

Police in swat attire begin to gather and we know something big is about to happen. They have clear, plastic masks that cover their faces, bulletproof vests, and batons attached to their belts along with zip-tie handcuffs and handguns. I begin to worry that things may get dangerous, but I have faith in our ability to maintain a peaceful protest. They watch respectfully while we protest, blocking the street from all traffic. Soon they tell us to disperse and the majority of us do, moving off to the side of the road, and continuing to chant. Six volunteers, however, refuse to move, locking arms and sitting as the middle of the road in an act of civil disobedience. Again, the police officer asks them to move, but they refuse. One by one, they are arrested peacefully as we symbolically sing, “We shall overcome”, which is reminiscent of civil rights protesters. As each of the volunteers is arrested, we chant our support: “We are proud of you, we are proud of you!” There is a high sense of

1 No justice, no peace, no respect, no peace!
community and support amongst the workers and participants. We hope that this public display will force the management to make changes within the warehouse that will better the lives of the workers.

* * *

This research paper investigates warehouse workers’ experiences of health and safety violations in the Mira Loma NFI warehouse, the effectiveness of Warehouse Workers United (WWU) as a grassroots labor rights organization local to the Inland Empire, and their methods of educating workers on the topic of health and safety in the workplace. This paper and my analysis prioritize worker narratives and perspectives in order to better understand the struggles of warehouse workers and their fight for a safer, healthier work environment. Through my internship at WWU and interviews with workers, I have found that health and safety issues in the warehouse cause workers to feel out of control, wronged, and victimized in their place of employment. In addition, workers feel maltreated and pressured by their employers who seemingly do not care about their safety and wellbeing. Warehouse Workers United, however, empowers workers, giving them a voice as well as a sense of community, and an ability to make changes in the workplace.

Before I begin with my ethnographic analysis, I will provide an overview of this topic through the lens of globalization, as well as a literature review on the topic of informal labor. After reviewing my methodological approach, I move into the ethnographic presentation of my research, followed by conclusions regarding informal labor, health and safety issues, and warehouse work in the Inland Empire.
An Overview of Globalization and its Local Impacts on Warehouse Workers in the Inland Empire:

Globalization is a long-term process of international exchange involving ideas, philosophies, religions, languages, and other aspects of culture, goods, services, and capital. The emergence of a globalized economy, throughout 20th and 21st centuries has allowed for an even easier exchange of goods and ideas. This is due to the development of new forms of transportation, telecommunications, and the Internet (IMF, 2008). While globalization has opened doors to new markets, forms of capital, and cultural expansion, it has also made room for outsourcing and the exploitation of workers. As the United States moved away from manufacturing and began outsourcing production, it has become a more consumer-based economy. This transformation has allowed for the growth and expansion of the logistics industry, which is becoming ever more present in the Inland Empire (Ilgen, 2003).

As the logistics industry has grown, thanks to the globalized economy, it has had many impacts on the local economy and workers in the Inland Empire. Shortly after WWII, the Inland Empire provided an ideal location for logistics because of its expansive, cheap land and the emergence of two major rail lines and three major freeways. It is also conveniently located near two major shipping ports, Long Beach and Los Angeles. One result of this has been rapid import-lead growth and economic expansion however it has also had detrimental effects such as the exploitation of blue-collar workers (Ilgen, 2003). Outsourcing and the global supply chain allow for production in other parts of the world such as China or Bangladesh. These products then travel through ports in Eastern Asia before reaching the ports
of LA and Long Beach and ultimately the warehouses and eventually stores across the country. All of this shipment and storage of goods is expensive, so companies, specifically Wal-Mart and its subcontractors, must cut costs wherever possible. Unfortunately, this leads to the exploitation of workers and minorities working in warehouses, ports, and factories around the world. The system of subcontracting involves the retailer, who determines the price of the goods, which in turn determines labor standards within the warehouses. This makes the retailer responsible, but not liable for health and safety concerns and violations.

Competition for low-skill jobs in Inland Empire warehouses has created a new labor market for blue-collar workers and Latino communities called temporary, or casual labor (Davis, 2003). Employing workers through Temporary Staffing Agencies strips large corporations of the responsibility of providing workers with living wages, benefits, social welfare, and job protection that direct employee contracts require by law. Temporary laborers are used to cut labor costs and forego responsibility for the pay and working conditions of the workforce. The use of temporary workers is a “union avoidance strategy.” It breaks down the labor organizing efforts that keep workers from being exploited and retaliated against. Temporary agencies are disproportionally located in the Inland Empire and widely used amongst Inland Empire warehouses. The use of temporary labor is a strategy for keeping money in the hands of wealthy employers and CEOs of large corporations through the exploitation of low-skill, blue-collar laborers. In addition, warehouse workers are considered a hidden workforce that is often subject to poor working conditions and unsafe labor practices (Bonacich and De Lara, 2009).
The success of Ontario’s industries has also exposed many workers to job insecurity and dangerous and debilitating working conditions, specifically amongst Ontario’s Warehouse Workers. Warehouse workers are often exposed to harmful chemicals and air pollutants that are used for cleaning and maintaining machinery. Direct and repeated use of toxic substances can lead to long-term negative health problems. Ergonomic studies have shown how the extreme working conditions and pressures of warehouse work often force workers to overexert themselves. Repetitive stressors such as heavy lifting, straining, pulling, working for long periods of time without a break, and working with dangerous machinery are all aspects of warehouse work. The problem arises when workers are not compensated for resulting injuries. There is an extreme lack of enforcement of existing labor and safety laws that are set in place (De Lara, 2011). Due to temporary labor, arbitrary labor contracts, and the ever-expanding competition for low-skill jobs, companies fire and replace workers rather than take responsibility for their workers’ wellbeing. Temporary employment has not only kept power and wealth in the hands of large corporations, but it has also increased economic insecurity of workers due to low wages and limited advancement opportunities. This results in a widening gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’

**Literature Review**

Informal labor and the hazards that accompany it are a global problem. There are many words used to describe informal labor such as day labor, contingent work, temporary labor, and casual employment. Informal labor is defined as a
“management technique of employing workers only when there is an immediate and direct demand for their services” (Valenzuela, 2003: 310). Freedman coined the label ‘contingent work’ in 1985 as a “variety of nonstandard work and arrangements, including low levels of job security, less predictable work hours, and the absence of traditional workers’ rights and benefits” (Valenzuela, 2003: 311).

Many hazards come with the nature of temporary employment. The work is unstable, and unpredictable. It provides no benefits for the workers, pays poorly, and is often associated with hazardous work and health and safety violations such as lack of regular breaks, and working safety equipment. The unpredictability of work combined with the possibility of debilitating injury, makes it very hard for casual workers to provide for themselves and their families and makes life a daily struggle.

In this literature review, I will situate the problem of informal labor in order to set the stage for my ethnographic material on health and safety issues in the Inland Empire warehouses and their effects on Inland Empire warehouse workers. Temporary workers are increasingly used as part of a larger strategy to lessen employment costs and allow for hire-at-will and, more importantly, fire-at-will contract conditions rather than to simply meet the short term needs of the boom and bust economy. The first signs of this employment strategy became apparent during the 1970’s (Theodore, Peck: 2002). Nate Theodore and Jamie Peck argue that the growth in gross domestic product and intensifying international competition created an environment where cost-suppression motives and a need
for enhanced workplace flexibility created a higher demand for temporary workers (2002).

Chicano Studies and Urban Planning researcher, Abel Valenzuela, argues that globalization, immigration, and the informal economy stemming from deindustrialization have all been factors contributing to the growth of day labor and informal labor practices. US Temporary Staffing Agencies have existed since World War II and are abundant in low-income neighborhoods where there is an inexpensive, flexible, and easily available labor force. “For profit temp agencies have a highly exploitative employment relationship with workers, charging them a cashing fee for their daily checks, requiring payment for transportation, holding a deposit and charging a fee for equipment use, and paying only minimum wage,” (Valenzuela, 2002: 320). By classifying day laborers as independent contractors rather than direct employees, companies avoid having to provide protections and benefits for their workers (Valenzuela, 2002; Fuller and Vosko, 2008).

Rebecca Smith explains that because the employer/employee relationship is ambiguous in the field of day labor and employers are not legally bound, they therefore do not have to abide by labor rights laws. Smith advocates for day labor centers as a solution by offering a safe place for temporary workers and employers to negotiate terms of employment. They also inform day laborers of their rights as workers, offer a place where workers can obtain skills and education, and provide a space in which activists can organize around public policy issues relating to day laborers (Smith, 2008; Krinsky and Reese, 2006).
Many scholars have criticized the social inequalities that temporary workers face and call for more socially responsible and ethical workplace climates. Sylvia Fuller, and Leah F. Vosko report that “Temporary employment is organized in highly gendered and racialized ways in industrialized countries, raising further concerns that the increasing prominence of such arrangements will worsen labor market inequalities along these axes,” (Fuller and Vosko, 2008: 32). Along with the growth of temporary labor comes a concern for the well-being of the worker. Paul Murphy and Richard Poist call on the logistics industry in particular to seek socially and economically beneficial results. “While the logistics industry has tended to address economic and legal considerations, the limited literature attention to ethical issues in logistics is consistent with a laggard approach to social responsibility,” (Murphy and Poist, 2002: 23). Murphy and Poist found that the top three social responsibility issues in logistics consist of ethical conduct, safe movement and storage of products, and employee health and safety (2002). Praveen Parboteeah and Edward Kapp’s study of ethical climates and workplace safety behaviors found that workplace climates in which workers have a sense of shared responsibility for their coworkers’ safety as well as their own is directly related to workplace injury prevention (2008).

Wendy Holmes et. al. explores the effectiveness of body mechanics education to promote correct ergonomic behavior amongst migrant and seasonal fruit warehouse workers. In this study, researchers provided workers with general safety education and demonstrated and evaluated workers on correct lifting techniques and stretches for injury prevention. Using a pre- and post- training assessment of lifting and bending, researchers found a statistically significant
increase in proper lifting and bending techniques, which indicate that “practice focused on task and job specific applications for learning body mechanics principles may be a crucial factor in both achieving initial competence and long term retention of body mechanics principles,” thus improving overall injury prevention in the workplace (Wendy Holmes et. al., 2007: 469).

Through reading this literature, I have learned the ways in which employers avoid providing employees with basic protections, a living wage, social benefits, and statutory entitlements by employing them through temporary staffing agencies. Managers dodge labor rights laws such as the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and the National Labor Relations Act by classifying day laborers as independent contractors. In these ways, large corporations have managed to exploit a labor force whose purpose was once to act as fill-ins or to meet short-term needs. It is clear that the literature on warehouse work and the logistics industry still needs further development. Also apparent is a lack of literature regarding workers’ experiences of health and safety. For the remainder of this paper, I will examine Inland Empire warehouse workers’ experiences with health and safety in the workplace.

**Research Methods**

*Setting:*

Warehouse Workers United (WWU) is an organization lead by Sheheryar Kaoosj and Veronica Alvarado that works to reform temporary labor practices in the Ontario warehouses of the Inland Empire. WWU has specifically focused on the NFI
warehouses that store Wal-Mart merchandise, as it is the world’s largest private company whose practices indirectly and directly affect the lives of millions of people (Warehouse Workers United, 2012). The warehouse workers have been subject to harsh working conditions such as high heat and heavy lifting as well as unsafe equipment and workspace. Furthermore, the workers are not paid a living wage, and have not been given basic benefits such as healthcare, paid medical leave for work-related injuries, or paid overtime. These workers have been maltreated and are being robbed of their labor rights (De Lara, 2011). By empowering the warehouse workers to change their working conditions through the education of workers regarding health and safety, workers rights, and the benefits of being part of a union, WWU fights for a more just working environment in the warehouses.

Through my time spent at WWU, I have come to see how central community is to the organization. WWU “stands for good jobs with decent wages, access to healthcare and other basic rights and benefits including a workplace free of intimidation and retaliation” (Warehouse Workers United, 2012). They work to change working conditions and to establish long-term justice for all warehouse workers.

I was first introduced to Warehouse Workers United and the workers plight through the Pitzer in Ontario program. WWU and Pitzer in Ontario have been long-term partners engaging in participatory action research. I first met my supervisor, Shehryar Kaoosj, during an informal gathering at the Ontario House where he spoke about the problems warehouse workers face, the upcoming march, and my likely role in the organization if I were to intern there. I was immediately convinced that
this was where I wanted to do my research and was excited about the prospect of working with marginalized workers of the Inland empire.

Throughout the semester I have spent about 150 hours in the Ontario community (approximately 10-15 hours each week) working at Warehouse Workers United and getting involved in their efforts for social change at both the WWU office and several publicity events throughout Ontario. My participatory research with the organization, and involvement has included time spent at the office, rallies, marches, and other events.

When I first began working at WWU in September, the organization was preparing for its first workers’ strike and march from the WWU office to Los Angeles. This six-day pilgrimage was intended to publicize the struggles of a hidden workforce that is the Ontario warehouse workers. The warehouse workers, community supporters, and organizations in solidarity with WWU, marched to the LA capitol in order to publicize their struggle for justice in the warehouses. Other ways in which the workers struggle has been spotlighted include various strikes, rallies, and acts of civil disobedience. While working at WWU, I also helped with health and safety surveys analyzing the trainings at WWU workers’ health insurance. These surveys propose that Kaiser provide WWU members with health insurance.

Positionality:

As an eighteen-year-old sophomore in college, I had never been in a warehouse before or even met someone who had worked in one. I was very naïve to
the process of shipping and the movement of goods from the manufacturer to the store shelves, which make up the logistics industry. I had seen the large semi-trucks on highways and the massive windowless structures that store products, but I never thought about the many people who spend their days and nights working in those warehouses. I could see the truck drivers through the car window and as a child I remember spending long road trips pumping my fist in an attempt to get them to honk their boisterous horns. Warehouse work, on the other hand, is a hidden workforce that often goes unnoticed and underappreciated by society. In reality, however, our consumer economy could not function without it. Warehouse workers are crucial to the movement and storage of merchandise before it is on the store shelves ready to be consumed. Due to the blue-collar nature of warehouse work and heavy lifting that is required for most positions, the majority of workers are lower class, young, uneducated or undereducated, men who are often immigrants and/or of an ethnic minority (Latino in the case of WWU). As a college-aged, white, English-only speaking, upper class girl who can't even do a pushup, I seem to have very little in common with the members of WWU other than my desire for social justice, equality, and basic human rights. I understand that my race, specifically my white privilege, plays a significant part of who I am today and will continue to influence my life. My background also has a significant effect on my research at Warehouse Workers United as it is yet another way in which I cannot fully relate to the community and understand workers' every day struggles at home and in the workplace. In addition, I have the option of walking away and turning a blind eye from this injustice while it is something that affects the workers and their families
every day in every aspect of their lives. Instead, however, I have chosen to share the workers stories about the labor rights violations that they experience and how it impacts their lives in hopes that spreading this knowledge will prevent future injustices from occurring.

Methods:

I obtained my information through a participatory action based method in which I attended WWU’s various rallies, and marches, as well as through my internal research and evaluation of WWU’s health and safety workshops. I also conducted extensive research on background information regarding labor rights and health and safety in the workplace. Finally, I gathered the bulk of my information through extensive ten- to fifteen-minute formal interviews with warehouse workers at the WWU office. I interviewed five warehouse workers who live and work in the Inland Empire and who have been involved in Warehouse Workers United. The workers are Latino, male, adults with a range of education levels and English proficiency. I asked questions that involved gathering information about workers personal experiences at the workplace, particularly with their employers and health and safety issues, as well as the effectiveness of WWU health and safety trainings. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and coded for my research.
Ethics:

Before beginning the interview process, I acquired our participants’ consent through the attached consent form (see appendix). Pseudonyms have been used in replacement of proper names of the participants so as to protect their identity and the integrity of my research project. Due to the retaliation that temporary workers face from their employers, it is imperative that their identities are concealed so as not to bring them any harm. No harm was done to participants and I gave full disclosure about the project and intentions of my research. My final results are to be shared with the participants of my study as well as with my organizers and partners at WWU, in the hopes that this research may benefit the workers and the organization.

Discussion:

In the discussion section of my paper I will discuss workers experience of health and safety violations in the warehouse, how warehouse employers treat warehouse workers, and how Warehouse Workers United affects the lives of the workers.

Health and Safety issues in the warehouse:

Throughout my interviews with warehouse workers this semester, I have come to understand how health and safety violations in the warehouse cause workers to feel as though they have no control of their work environment, as well as wronged and victimized by their employers. Workers live in fear of getting hurt on
the job due to a lack of attention to health and safety regulations. In this section of my paper I will discuss some of the physical injuries and mental stress that workers have experienced.

Health and safety has been a major issue in the Mira Loma NFI warehouse in Ontario, CA. Warehouse workers face many safety violations in the warehouse making it difficult to complete their tasks safely and efficiently on a daily basis. Workers in the warehouse have been forced to use faulty and broken equipment, work long hours in extreme heat with no breaks or access to clean drinking water, and are consistently put in dangerous situations due to the time management pressures placed on them by the management. Throughout my research, workers have consistently reported that there is a lack of equipment, such as ramps and carts in the warehouse and that the equipment that they do have is often broken or unusable. Broken ramps make it difficult to load and unload merchandise. Forklifts and, more significantly, people fall through the cracks, causing them to break bones and suffer concussions (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012). In an interview, a warehouse worker named Richard, expressed the physical stress he experienced due to the use of broken carts that made it harder to move merchandise around the warehouse. Heavy lifting puts a lot of strain on workers’ bodies causing muscle fatigue and many long-term injuries, such as back and knee problems. Workers are also not given enough breaks or clean drinking water throughout their long workday and they are continually affected by extreme heat, especially in the summertime, as the warehouses and trailers are poorly ventilated. Cesar, one of the lead warehouse workers involved in WWU, reports, “Having workers work eight
hours a day in a hot trailer at 120 degrees, dehydrating, having heat flashes; that’s a problem, they’re overheating.” Forklift drivers driving too fast and workers being hit by forklifts, have also been reported as safety hazards in the warehouses (Nate; Vince; Cesar; Daniel; Interviews, November 16, 2012). All of the workers we interviewed reported instances in which they, or someone they knew had been injured on the job. Daniel, for example, told me:

This one guy one time was trying to load up these boxes, and I don’t know what happened but he ended up taking one step back and he fell all the way down... like four and a half feet, maybe five, and fell backwards (Interview, November 16, 2012).

Working in a warehouse is very dangerous especially when proper safety precautions are not taken. Common injuries include everything from nips, cuts, bumps, and bruises to broken bones and long-term back injuries. Forklifts driving too fast hit workers, and people have had entire columns of boxes fall in top of them. “I’ve been nipped by a forklift, nothing major but there’s a lot of close calls” (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012). Richard and Cesar both reported a recent incident in which a co-worker was standing on the bumper of a ramp and fell through when it broke, cutting their whole arm. Vince has hurt his back from repeatedly lifting heavy boxes and Nate’s friend fell off the back of a truck, spraining his ankle.

Not only is working in a warehouse stressful on the body, but it is also stressful on the mind. “I was down in the dumps and working in the warehouse actually made me a little bit more depressed than I actually thought [possible]”
(Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012). Cesar is a strong leader and had hoped to make a career in the field of warehouse work, however, now he is unsure.

There are times where I’m so ticked off, or I’m so upset that when I get home I don’t even go inside. I literally just stay in my car and blast the radio and try to think everything through so that when I get home, and I see my daughter, I’m not upset, you know, I try to just forget about it. But it has affected me quite a bit, you know, but I try not letting it (Interview, November 16, 2012).

Working in the warehouse has had a detrimental effect on workers’ lives both in and outside of the workplace. The mental and physical pain is something that lingers long after the workday is over and could be avoided if health and safety regulations were enforced in the warehouse.

*Corporate Responses to Health and Safety Issues:*

Warehouse workers have expressed that the problem lies in company management. In this section I will explain how, according to the workers, the NFI company puts a lot of pressure on them, unfairly retaliates against them in a multitude of ways, and is far worse than any other warehouse in which they have worked. Company response to health and safety issues in the NFI warehouse is very minimal. Workers report being disrespected and retaliated against for speaking up about health and safety issues, and when injuries occur, workers are often blamed for faults of the company and how the warehouse is run. Daniel explains that:
The health and safety was not enforced at all, and I mean literally at all. I can remember almost every single day telling the supervisors to tell the forklift drivers to slow down. You know, cause somebody’s gonna get hurt or killed! And a few months later I was telling them like almost every day, someone’s gonna die, (Interview November 16, 2012).

Workers feel as though the managers and supervisors of the warehouse do not care about enforcing or improving worker safety.

They run to the rescue like everything’s like majorly wrong here, you know, they try to run and give everyone the sense like they care but in actuality, they don’t care. They just send them straight down to the agency and send them to the clinic. They'll be back in about four hours with pills, (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012).

Workers are forced to keep working when they can or are just sent home.

You can stay home until we call you, which is their way of saying; okay you’re done, goodbye. And if that, they’ll just send you down to the staffing agency for ‘light duty work’, which literally means you sit on the table and not do anything for four hours. I’ve had many guys that I’ve known just sit down there and just read books... This one guy, he brought his iPad and started playing Angry Birds the whole time. So they really don’t care, they don’t (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012).

The workers comment that the managers of the company are not concerned about workers being injured because the temporary workforce is, in essence, unlimited and there is always someone standing in line to take their place. Rather than fixing
problems and preventing injury, workers report that management ignores their complaints and avoids fixing the problems: “Nothing happens, they tell you what you want to hear” (Vince, Interview, November 16, 2012). Working in a warehouse can be very dangerous, especially when safety is not the number one priority amongst workers and management.

A lot of people don’t understand that being in a warehouse is dangerous. This warehouse that I’m working at now really doesn’t care about that. It’s not on their man agenda, it’s not their main priority right now their priority is to get the product out of the trailers, into the other trailers to be shipped out. They don’t see the bigger picture that having workers work 8 hrs a day in a hot trailer at 120 degrees, dehydrating, having heat flashes, that’s a problem. They’re over heating; people die from that. They don’t care (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012).

Due to the actions described by their employees, it seems as though the NFI Company is more concerned with money making policies and cutting spending than they are with basic labor rights and practices.

The supervisors and managers of the warehouse put an exorbitant amount of pressure on workers to complete the work faster than what is physically possible, putting stress on workers bodies and minds as well as causing them to act in unsafe ways. Pressures to unload and load trailers quickly causes forklift drivers drive too fast, which is unsafe. “They’re supposed to have them unload, like, four trailers a day, but the company makes them do like six or seven” (Daniel, Interview, November 16, 2012). In my interviews with workers, several mentioned being hit
or knowing someone who had been hit by a forklift. Management threatens workers with the loss of jobs to pressure them to work faster. “If you didn’t hurry up and empty that container by the end of the day, you were going to lose your job. And they had a hundred people waiting in line to take your job.” (Daniel, Interview, November 16, 2012). Direct hires, who work alongside these workers, however, are not in the same predicament: “they don’t get the same pressure that we do... their jobs are secure” (Daniel, Interview, November 16, 2012). Job insecurity is a large problem that temporary workers face because their indirect contract conditions allow them to be hired- and fired-at-will. The stress of job insecurity and the pressures of warehouse work take a toll on the body and mind.

Emotionally, you try not to attach yourself to people for certain reasons of emotional stress... there’s so much pressure that’s put on the workers, such as myself, on trying to get the trailers in and out as fast as possible but because of the amount of heat or the lack of equipment, it takes a major toll on the body because we are doing everything by hand... so by not having this equipment, it hurts us in a way where we’re actually picking up heavy boxes which can damage our bodies and just the mental toll on it is where the managers, the supervisors constantly are always on you about everything. So working in a warehouse is difficult because there is so much pressure around the entire warehouse (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012).

The pressures that are put on the workers by their supervisors and how they are treated magnify the stress of working in a warehouse. Workers are in constant fear of job loss, which severely affects workers ability to pay their bills, especially when
money is tight in the first place due to the low paying nature of the work (Richard, Interview, December 4, 2012). In addition, workers are constantly retaliated against, threatened, and treated poorly by their supervisors. In my interview with Richard, he reported an incident in which a co-worker and friend had gotten injured on a broken ramp and was sent to the clinic. After receiving a routine drug test at the clinic the worker was fired. “They tried to blame it on him, like it was his fault” (Richard, Interview, December 4, 2012). Workers feel as though the company will go to any length to blame the workers in order to save themselves.

When asked to compare their current work environment to other warehouses in which they have worked, workers consistently reported that the Mira Loma NFI warehouse was “by far the worst” (Daniel, Interview, November 16, 2012). Cesar compared his current work environment to past jobs with FedEx and UPS.

FedEx and UPS have their unions and they’re very well organized, very respectful, they don’t but the pressure on as much as this warehouse that I’m working at now here in Mira Loma, and you just go there to do your job. You don’t get harassed, you don’t get retaliated against if you speak up, if you have rights, you have rights. At least FedEx and UPS actually work with you (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012).

When there is a mutual respect amongst coworkers and employers, the general work environment is more positive and more productive. It fosters a sense of mutual respect and a desire to work together.
Effects of Warehouse Workers United:

Through the various rallies, strikes, and marches workers feel as though they have a public voice. Cesar explains that he is involved in WWU because “its good for the community and over 80,000 to 90,000 workers that [I'm] helping including myself and my family, it’s great” (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012). Through WWU workers are educated and empowered to bring about the change that they want to see in their work environment. They see “how they can fix the problem and resolve the problem on a more positive level” (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012). WWU has been working to pressure the Mira Loma warehouse to bring its health and safety regulations up to standard with national and state regulations. Slowly but surely, the company has been meeting the demands of the workers. “Fixing the ramps, getting fans inside the warehouse, getting water dispensers... and little by little they’ve been meeting the demands,” (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012). Richard reports that changes really occurred after representatives of WWU traveled to Arkansas, crashing the Wal-Mart headquarters and demanding that they listen to the workers’ complaints and make changes in the warehouse. Workers are now supplied with the safety vests and equipment needed to do their work rather than being required to purchase these items themselves. Some of the workers have created a ‘health and safety committee’ in which they patrol the warehouse for health and safety violations and bring them to the attention of the supervisors. When necessary, they even shut down the broken ramps themselves. The health and safety committee shows other workers that they can make improvements as well (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012). Improvements in the management’s
treatment of workers have occurred as well. They do not threaten workers or yell at them as much, workers are not given as heavy of loads as they used to, and they have not been calling workers off. Changes are also occurring in the Temporary Staffing Agencies. ‘Ontime’ is replacing ‘Warestaff’, and workers are being offered benefits and possibly raises within a few months time (Richard, Interview, December 4, 2012). This is a great opportunity for warehouse workers and brings hope that improvements are being made to better the lives of these workers.

WWU has health and safety trainings for workers to better understand their rights as well as the dos and don’ts in the warehouse.

A lot of the training has to do with what you should and shouldn’t do, you know, to reach higher levels you actually use stairs, or one of those little plastic staircase things. [Don’t] stand on pallets, be aware of your surroundings, don’t block the entrances to the trailers. You know, just simple common sense things that we know but that we don’t follow. But ever since we started the training I’ve been actually following the rules basically, (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012).

The health and safety trainings help to educate workers so that they can avoid potentially dangerous situations that exist in the warehouse as well as create a more safe work environment for everyone.

After the trainings that we’ve been having I’ve noticed that Gordon has been using the stairs more, turning on the lights so that he can actually see, um putting the fan inside the actual trailer so that he can get some fresh air...
Malcom is the same way. If the ramps are broken, he’ll go ahead and shut them down himself, (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012).

Workers feel as though the health and safety trainings have helped them to improve their personal safety as well as advise others to do the same. Empowerment through education has proved to be successful in promoting safety in the workplace, however there is still more that could be done to both improve the safety in the warehouse as well as improve the WWU trainings. Workers need to want to learn (Daniel, Interview, November 16, 2012), and more people need to be educated (Richard, Interview, December 4, 2012). Dedication and repetition are also vital in improving the health and safety of workers.

If we were to keep doin’ it, keep doing it, and actually have these guys come to the office, take a training course, take a test, perform these actions; how to lift with a box, how to maneuver around these obstacles... And then every week, or every two weeks, or every three weeks, keep doing it that way they’re on ball, they know exactly what to do, they know how to do it and there’s no ifs ands or bus because it’s a natural thing for them now, (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012).

Practice by doing is a well-known strategy for learning new things and breaking bad habits. When interviewing Cesar about how the health and safety trainings at WWU could be improved, he suggested that we simulate a trailer in order to practice lifting, stacking, loading and unloading boxes.

Now that’s going to do one or two things. It’s going to teach the person how to play Tetris, because a lot of people don’t know how to build walls for
nothing. And to build a perfect wall, a stable wall, you have to know how to do that. And you don’t make columns; columns always fall apart. You actually use them like bricks and that’s actually a perfect example, because now they go ahead and build a perfect wall and at the same time they get to show you how to lift these boxes. Cause every box is different. You’ve got these small boxes the size of shoeboxes that weigh fifty pounds, then you have major giant boxes that only weigh ten pounds, but they’re the size of refrigerators, (Cesar, interview, November 16, 2012).

Warehouse Workers United provides workers with a sense of community that carries into the workplace. According to Cesar, about one-fourth of warehouse workers belong to WWU and they are spread across all three shifts. Although many workers are working in their own self-interest in order to provide for their families, there is also a shared sense that workers have each other’s backs and look out for one another. Workers feel as though by working together as a team they can more efficiently get the work done. Workers’ sense of community also varies depending on the group and workers have expressed feelings of animosity between the temporary workers (which are of the majority) and the direct employees. Daniel shared with me that he has seen tags in the bathrooms saying ‘NFI vs. Temp’. Richard also expressed feeling as though the direct hires “act like they are bigger than us”. WWU members often feel as though non-WWU members are not as community-oriented and act more in their own self-interest than in the interest of other workers in the warehouse. Richard, however, is convinced that as changes continue to happen, more and more workers will continue to join in the fight for
justice. “Some [workers] don’t agree with Warehouse Workers United, and some do... But the ones who don’t, if were fighting for better pay now, I think they've all got our back. They're all gonna join.” (Richard, Interview, December 4, 2012).

**Conclusions:**

Through my internship at Warehouse Workers United, I have come to better understand the warehouse workers struggle and the ways in which WWU as an organization has worked toward improving the lives of these workers. I dove into my internship headfirst, attending various marches, protests, and rallies throughout the semester and evaluating the health and safety trainings at WWU for the upcoming grant year. As the semester progressed, however, it became more and more difficult to engage at the office and we were often turned away due to a lack of work or extenuating circumstances. Getting interviews with workers and time in the community became frustrating and harder to do each week. Although my experience petered out toward December, I still feel as though I was able to get enough information that my knowledge of the workers’ struggle was sufficient to complete an ethnographic research paper.

Temporary warehouse workers in the Inland Empire face issues of job insecurity, health and safety violations in their place of work, and retaliation from their employers. They feel victimized, unsafe at work, and out of control of their current situation. Warehouse Workers United has been fighting for workers rights and health and safety reform within the warehouse. The warehouse workers are not able to unionize because of the nature of temporary employment
(subcontracting), which denies them a contract and hinders their ability to fight against these violations, let alone understand what their rights are and how to protect themselves. Warehouse Workers United is an organization put in place as an alternative to a warehouse workers union, and has been educating workers on health and safety within the workplace through conducting health and safety trainings for two years.

While improvements have begun, health and safety in the warehouse is only just beginning to be brought up to the Occupational Safety and Health Act standards. While the new staffing agency offers promises for a better future, temporary laborers continue to be underpaid, and do not receive benefits or health care, which are basic worker rights. In addition, they must still deal with the nature of temporary employment, the main issue of which is job insecurity. Areas for future research would include answering the questions: Are corporate policies supporting the exploitation of workers and the health and safety violations in the warehouses? Why aren’t current labor laws protecting temporary workers? Answering these lingering questions would involve a thorough investigation of corporate policies and labor laws, which would ideally work to find the source of health and safety issues in the workplace and what must be done in order to enforce safe labor practices and policies in US warehouses.
Works Cited


