Temporary Workers and Health & Safety;
A Case Study of Warehouse Workers in the Inland Empire

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December 2012
Applied Methods and Qualitative Research
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In the star filled night
Of the desert sky
In the searing day
Many good men ride
On the crest of a wave
In oceans of freight
We eke out a living
In patience we wait
Some good men reach a limit
And find out too late
That all the hard work and labor
Will not go to waste
At the end of our lifetimes
We’ll remember and look back
On desert nights, with starry skies
And honest work
And changing lives
Of interim things,
Like casual work
And finished chapters
In our lives book
-
Pancho Escaleche
“Poet at large (or small)”
8-8-87

Introduction

It’s blistering hot—at least 90 degrees—and giant semi-trucks are everywhere. A sea of people, the words “Warehouse Workers United” printed in bright yellow on their blue shirts, swarm the entrance to the NFI warehouse, blocking the trucks for minutes at a time before letting them pass into and out of the parking lot. This scene takes place in Ontario, the heart of both the Inland Empire and the warehouse industry in the US, but across the nation similar situations are occurring. We’re here on strike, the warehouses workers and I, and the feeling in the air is an interesting mix of frustration and hope. I always find myself surprised by how the frustration doesn’t prevail in the hearts and minds of these temporary workers; their working conditions are plighted with constant issues, yet they continue to fight for their rights because they have some semblance of hope for a better future. We march back and forth between the sidewalks that
sandwich the entrance/exit road, holding signs and chanting phrases such as “We are the workers, the mighty mighty workers, fighting for justice, fighting for our rights,” and “We’re fired up, can’t take it no more!”

One of the organizers yells, “Break the line!” and we scatter to one side or the other, waiting for the trucks to pass so we can start circling again. Sergio and I step to the side of a plexiglass sign with the name and address of the warehouse, and there, etched into it and barely visible, is the poem above by Pancho. We look at each other and back at the poem, perplexed by its location and relevance too; the men and women here are in the midst of experiencing what Pancho wrote about 25 years ago. Interim or temporary labor has been on the rise for the past half-century, and tension between workers and corporations has culminated to a boiling point here in the Inland Empire. Warehouse Workers United members are simultaneously apart of an individual and global fight for their rights as workers without permanent contracts, who can’t unionize and are fired and hired at will. Out here, in Southern California under the desert sky, these men and women continue to eke out a living in the oceans of freight. Their hard work and labor will not go to waste, and we’re here striking to ensure just that.

Its three days later now, and we’re back in the Warehouse Workers United (WWU) office. There’s air conditioning, and no picket signs, but other than that most aspects are the same. Each and every worker is fired up, and for good reason too. They are a part of the local, regional, national, even international movement for labor unionizing and labor rights. As temporary workers, they are denied the basic peace of mind that they will have a job come tomorrow. For all they know, even if they do get called in, perhaps they’ll fall off the back of a ramp, sprain an ankle, be fired or retaliated against. The corporations that hire temporary workers do so through a staffing agency, and can hire a different worker from a long list of
options the second they fire a current employee. The warehouse conditions pose a whole other group of problems. Access to water, breaks, safe equipment, enough shade or cool air, and just plain respect are all lacking. Because of the constant health and safety violations in the workplace, and the retaliation that some workers find when they speak up about the problems they and their coworkers are experiencing, WWU has launched a number of strikes in the fall of 2012 order to get the attention of those in power at Wal-Mart, and media attention as well.

While temporary labor and the power dynamics between workers and corporations have been studied time and time again, there is still a need for more investigation for no other reason than the problem still exists. Specifically, the voices of workers in the Inland Empire who work for NFI, which carries goods that go to Wal-Mart, have yet to be heard. In the office, at the picket line, and while marching from Ontario to LA on a 50-mile pilgrimage, I’ve spent the past semester listening to the WWU members’ experiences as warehouse workers. They have their own individual tales—Christian is a leader, while Marco fights back quietly and subtly—but each has plenty to say about current conditions, most specifically regarding health and safety in the workplace. Health and safety are hardly the only issues these workers confront on a daily basis, but they are some of the most prominent, and right now, as fall turns to winter and we head into 2013, WWU is ramping up an other training program to educate the workers on health and safety. This paper looks to tell the narratives of temporary workers and reveal the realities they repeatedly face in regards to health and safety, worker’s rights, and how being a part of Warehouse Workers United has affected their experience in the workplace.

Coming into my internship at WWU, I had little knowledge about temporary work, and didn’t understand why workers and corporations were in such strong opposition to one another. While all of the qualitative data I gathered throughout the semester was fascinating, I also found
it necessary to research the history of contingent labor, and contextualize the situation that is currently going on with what has happened in past decades. As previously mentioned, power dynamics and temporary labor have been studied by academics in many different scenarios, and there is a significant amount of literature on this topic. In order to get a well-rounded view of what WWU members are dealing with and what has happened since World War II concerning corporations and health and safety enforcement, I will first discuss previous findings and research.

**Literature Review: Temporary Labor and Corporations**

The growth of temporary labor, specifically since the end of World War II, has impacted the work environment and workers’ experiences in various ways (Valenzuela 2003; Theodore & Peck 2002; Fuller & Vosko 2007). As the labor market has moved towards more flexibility, yet social welfare has not, organizations and contingent workers find themselves in opposition to one another (Belous 1995; Chamber & Castanheira 2006). The history of labor and the fluctuations of the economy, as well as a multitude of other factors, have affected how both global and national labor is situated today (Fuller & Vosko 2007; Theodore & Peck 2002; Houseman, Kalleberg & Erickcek 2003). In looking at how workers are affected, as well as the motivations of organizations, we can begin to unpack how temporary labor works and why it is continuing to grow. Many disciplines have studied temporary or contingent work, yet literature on health and safety violations in the workplace and their impact on workers is lacking. My research on this topic highlights health and safety, as well as Warehouse Workers United’s role in empowering workers, but before delving into that it is essential to situate ourselves in the historical debate between temporary laborers and organizations.
The workforce of a corporation generally has two distinct parts; the core workers and the contingent workers. The core workers have a significant stake in the organization, have job stability, and have an implicit contract with the employers that if they follow the rules or norms and meet certain standards, they’ll receive some measure of advancement and have long-term employment. Contingent workers, on the other hand, have a weak affiliation with the organization, do not have this implicit contract, and are not a part of the “corporate family” (Belous 1995; 865). Temporary labor, as defined by Valenzuela (2003), is “distinguished by hazards in or the undesirability of the work, the absence of fringe and other typical workplace benefits (i.e. breaks, safety equipment), and the daily search for employment.” (308). While there is a wide variety of contingent work (Feldman, Doerpinghaus, & Turnley 1995), and the workers have a different level of commitment to organizations depending on the amount of respect they are given (Chambel & Castanheira 2006), on the whole temporary laborers find themselves marginalized and exploited (Valenzuela 2003).

Non-permanent work has grown significantly in the past half century. During and right after World War II corporations needed temporary laborers to supplement permanent workers and fill in during particularly busy times (Theodore & Peck 2002; Fuller & Vosko 2007; Belous 1995). In the 1990s, in the face of a growing tight labor market, companies used temporary workers to handle the variations in demand (Houseman, Kalleberg & Erickcek 2003). As a manufacturing-dominated industrial complex decreased and was replaced by a service-dominated economic complex, the contingent workforce grew (Valenzuela 2003). Simultaneously, organizations realized the benefits to using this workforce to combat the daily, seasonal, and cyclical fluctuations of the economy (Theodore & Peck 2002; Belous 1995; Fuller & Vosko 2007; Feldman, Doerpinghaus, & Turnley 1995). Temporary employment is a part of a
broader trend of the externalization of work and a move towards market-based employment relationships (Fuller & Vosko 2007) as well as flexible labor markets (Chamber & Cantanheira 2006; Wiens-Tuers & Hill 2002). Even though the labor markets have become flexible, the social welfare system has not (Belous 1995), which has consequently pitted temporary workers and large corporations against each other. The logistics discipline has been laggard with respect to social responsibility, and has instead focused almost solely on economic responsibility (Murphy & Poist 2002). While this may be financially beneficial to large corporations, the workers are left to deal with the consequences, which come in many forms.

Many scholars have researched the idea that contingent workers are denied basic necessities, such as training and benefits, and how there is no legal enforcement or incentives for corporations to change their habits. The ethos of the temporary staffing industry ranges from secretive to shady (Theordore & Peck 2002), and almost every study done on temporary labor reveals that these workers are denied benefits and face constant job insecurity (Belous 1995; Fuller & Vosko 2007; Valenzuela 2003; Wiens-Tuers & Hill 2002; Smith 2008). Human capital theory holds little hope that nonstandard workers will receive the training they need or be advanced. These workers aren’t trained because the companies see no need to invest in a temporary worker who could easily be replaced (Wiens-Tuers & Hill 2002; Theodore & Peck 2002), and denying these laborers the foundations necessary for dialogue ensures that they won’t have their voices heard (Aronsson 1999). Employers and organizations decide to violate federal and state labor laws because the probability of punishment is low and fines are cheap. The laws for the contingent work force are hazy, definitions and regulations are easily stretched, and their enforcement is weak (Belous 1995). Existing labor laws essentially do not protect non-standard workers, and organizations find the benefits of breaking the law to outweigh the costs of doing
so (Valenzuela 2003; Belous 1995). As mentioned previously, the economic wellbeing of the organization is of top priority, and other concerns such as the wellbeing of the workers is pushed to the bottom of the ladder or forgotten all together (Murphy & Poist 2002).

From an organization’s point of view, using temporary labor makes perfect sense. Feldman, Doerpinghaus & Turnley (1995) revealed through a study on corporation management that temporary labor is administratively simpler, more effective in realigning the size of the workforce to cyclical changes, and less expensive. It also relieves the pressure on companies to raise the wages for regular employees (Houseman, Kalleberg & Erickcek 2003). It is attractive to employers seeking to deal with the demand fluctuations in competitive markets, and is associated with the general trend of casualization (Fuller & Vosko 2007). The ultimate obtainment of flexibility is garnered from the employment of contingent workers, and by classifying day laborers as independent contractors rather than employees, the employer is exempt from having to protect them (Valenzuela 2003). Because there are so many benefits for corporations to using temporary labor, it is difficult to motivate them to advance workers to permanent positions or simply use direct-hire practices from the beginning.

Many different disciplines have explored the topic of temporary labor with a different focus or technique. Sociologists have concentrated on how temporary workers have been affected by not receiving what permanent workers do, while economists have focused mainly on flexibility and how labor plays into the market economy. Law review boards, logistics/transportation/managerial academics, and plenty of other investigators have all researched different areas of the broad topic as well, and some researchers have even touched upon the topic of health and safety. Aronsson (1999) discusses how the freedom to pursue health and safety issues has declined, particularly with non-permanent employment contracts, and then
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go on to say that contingent workers often find it hard to act as informants or critics in relation to poor work environments. The rise of temporary employment on a larger scale has also contributed to the decline of health care and pension coverage (Belous 1995). Workplace injuries are often gone unnoticed or not attended to properly, which Valenzuela (2003) argues is direct evidence of exploitation. The fear of retaliation coupled with the short-term nature of employment has defied effective OSHA monitoring (Smith 2008). Because of this, day-labor centers or the equivalent are necessary in order to inform workers of their rights, educate and train them, and help them organize against the corporations. While all of this information is relevant, and some of it even directly relates to my research on health and safety in the Inland Empire workplaces, as well as WWU’s role in training workers, there is a lack of empirical data on employee reactions to temporary work (Feldman, Doerpinghaus, & Turnley 1995). My research looks to expand on the topic of temporary labor in general, and health and safety in particular, as well as empower workers whose voices go unheard by large corporations.

Research Methods and Setting

To get to either the WWU office or the NFI Warehouse from the I10 freeway, take the Milikin exit. The office will be on your left about a mile down, in a parking lot with various other small businesses. There’s grass and some trees, but it’s no eye candy. Most of the other buildings near by are staffing agencies that doll out contingent workers to the warehouse corporations. If you’re going to the warehouse, keep going until you hit Philadelphia Ave, turn left and keep driving. Don’t let the pungent smell of slaughtered cows or the lack of vegetation deter you, you’re almost there. See that huge ominous building on the right? With all the trucks, and cement as far as the eye can see? That’s it—the workplace, for thousands of laborers in the
Inland Empire. You’ll probably hit traffic on your way there, and the smog build up in the air is likely to affect your lungs and overall health if you continue to go back. There’s little to no accessible public transportation in case you don’t have a car, but who are we kidding, it’s the Inland Empire, you have to own a car.

The Inland Empire is a fascinating place, like no other metropolitan region in the nation or even the globe. It has the largest concentration of warehouses on the planet, and you can even see a distinct white splotch in the area from outer space on Google Maps. The cities of San Bernardino and Riverside make up the bulk of it, but smaller cities such as Ontario are not to be forgotten. Ontario is the hub of transportation, with an airport, a rail system, and some of the largest and most populated freeways (Ilgen 2003). Cargo is constantly going in and out of the area, exemplified by entire lanes of the freeway dedicated solely to semi-trucks. The IE is an inevitable warehousing capital due to its geographic location directly next to Los Angeles, which holds the LA port and the Long Beach port. These two ports together funnel 43% of every single import into the US, and receive a large majority of Asian imports as well (Bonacich & De Lara 2009). This smog-filled area has extremely high unemployment, yet offers available land and low wage labor which helps the logistics industry continue to grow. With this industry comes temporary labor, whose flexibility matches well with seasonal variations of the flow of goods. This helps corporations cut labor costs and avoid or deny the responsibility for pay and working conditions of the work force. The temporary employment industry is disproportionately concentrated in the Inland Empire, according to Bonacich and De Lara (2009). This is where WWU comes into play.

Warehouse Workers United is an organization that began in 2009, but considering how new it is to the age-old industry, it hasn’t been afraid to forge ahead and break down existing
barriers. It’s supported by Change to Win, a labor coalition of five million workers in North America. WWU works with local community groups as well as national coalitions such as UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program (OSHA) and various others as well. There are multiple factions within the organization, including the recently founded Warehouse Workers Resource Center. Founded in 2011, the center does many things including allowing workers and families access to services, hosting ESL classes, and offering Know Your Rights workshops. The organization’s mission is to improve working conditions and ensure that major retailers like Wal-Mart and its subcontractors follow the law and treat workers with respect. The organizers and workers stand for good jobs with decent wages, access to healthcare and other basic rights and benefits including a workplace free of intimidation and retaliation. That’s the formal overview of WWU, however informally it acts as a community center, allowing workers to congregate, form relationships, and feel empowered as a temporary worker in an industry that doesn’t allow for that. Kids are constantly running around, there is usually food of some sort, and occasionally familial-like celebrations occur such as baby showers or birthday songs. There are new faces every day, but on the whole most everyone knows everyone else, and the sense of community is surely what implicitly keeps drawing the workers back.

Depending on what’s going on with strikes, trainings, retaliations, you name it, the WWU office ebbs and flows with workers, organizers, family members and supporters or organizations in solidarity. Vero and Sheheryar, two of the head organizers, are usually around somewhere. The chances that they are frantic or stressed is high, but their passion for the cause and the workers is obvious from minute one. The workers vary in age, race, even gender. The average WWU member is a bilingual Latino male in his late 20s with a family, no health care coverage, previous warehouse work experience and plenty of stories about atrocities in the workplace.
These men and women are paid below the living wage and have no benefits, not to mention they work in one of the most polluted areas in the nation and receive no compensation for the physical effects they endure. Some have joined recently while others are regulars who have taken on the responsibility of leadership and have recruited others. They live nearby, and spend the majority of their time either at the warehouse or here at WWU.

I’ve never worked in a warehouse before, and before September 2012 I’d never met anyone else who had either. I didn’t understand the ins and outs of temporary labor, or how necessary organizations like WWU are when workers aren’t able to unionize and fight for their rights. As a 19-year-old female intern from the Claremont colleges, I didn’t fit in at WWU right away. I was coming from a completely different background than just about every other person I met who walked through the doors at WWU, most notably because of my race and class. My white privilege affects every part of my positionality both explicitly and implicitly. It’s given me many opportunities and also held me back from fully understanding my race and how it connects to other people and their race as well. On the other hand, while I was afforded white privilege and a college education, I was still significantly younger, more naïve, and a different gender than the majority of workers. It was an awkward mix; in some ways I held power because of the structures in society, and in some ways I felt vulnerable. Navigating interactions, as well as finding what needed to be done and accomplishing it, was tricky to say the least. While I was afforded the privilege of leaving the office everyday to return to the comforts of an upper-middle class lifestyle, the workers did not have this same experience. They could not escape the reality of exploitative working conditions, and were in the very middle of the issue while I was on the outside looking in. The distance I had from what I was studying played a significant role in the
research I was able to gather, as did the fact that I had little at stake to lose in speaking up on this topic while the workers I interviewed had much to sacrifice.

It just so happened, however, that three weeks into my internship we (and 100+ other supporters in solidarity) set off on a 50-mile march from the Ontario warehouse to East LA to strike against Wal-Mart for violating health and safety standards. While I only walked the first 12 miles from Ontario to Claremont, the all day excursion turned out to be the perfect opportunity to break the ice, talk to people and begin relationships within this new community. As we trekked along Foothill Blvd and sweated through shirts, socks, and bandanas, I chatted with Pablo about his job at the NFI warehouse versus being a perfume salesman. Sergio, who I discovered the poem with later in the month, described his experience as a leader at WWU, and introduced me Hank, an organizer at Our Wal-Mart, another non-profit working for labor rights and simultaneously supporting WWU and the larger labor movement. The march illustrated things that probably would have taken me a while to grasp otherwise, such as the magnitude of the movement, the physical and mental drain on the workers, their personal stories, and what it takes to be heard by large corporations in our nation today. These may sound like lofty ideas, but they became extraordinarily apparent while walking on that hot late summer day.

Many things happened around this time in early September: new members joined, the workers began striking, and WWU had to take inventory on their health and safety trainings in order to get new grant money for the upcoming year and future trainings. Before long I was working on a write up to present to Kaiser about the need for health care, calling WWU members to talk to them about health and safety trainings, and discussing the violations at the workplace with Christian, Diego, and many others. I informally interviewed around 20 workers about their health care coverage, and conducted a phone survey about the effectiveness of health and safety
trainings. I then used qualitative and quantitative data to write up a comprehensive overview of health and safety in the workplace and health care. WWU conducted a focus group with 15 workers in order to investigate the trainings and how to alter them for the upcoming year. As it turned from October to November, and then November to December, I began interviewing workers more specifically on work conditions and how the trainings at WWU have helped them, if at all. My internship at WWU started off at a running pace, then slowed down to a jog and oscillated between that and a brisk walk for the remainder of the time. The information I gathered while working there was a large compilation of observations, interviews, listening to stories, overhearing organizers and workers, and working with raw data.

I found that narrative inquiry and participant observation yielded the best and most poignant information regarding my topic of research. Interviews allowed me a glimpse at the personal effects of this line of work, health and safety violations, and how effective the trainings at WWU have been thus far. The workers I interviewed were generous and forthcoming with information, and had passionate opinions on the topic that were necessary to hear first hand in an interview format. The five key workers I interviewed for this paper are Christian, Diego, Nate, Vince and Ricardo. I had various informal conversations with Pablo as well, and use the stories he told me to supplement the other formal interviews. They are all members of WWU and work at the NFI warehouse. Christian is a leader, and was often at WWU when no other workers were there throughout the past few months. He is Latino, in his late 20s, and is married with two young children. Diego, another leader, is Latino as well but doesn’t speak Spanish. Nate is White, in his early 20s, and is the least involved in WWU. Vince is Native American, lives with Nate in San Bernardino and is around the same age. Ricardo is Latino, and joined WWU after
the first strike. I met Pablo while on the march, and only saw him at the WWU office one other time. He is in his early 20s and is Latino.

Narrative inquiry alone did not paint a full, well-rounded portrait of WWU as an organization and the community as a whole. To supplement the interviews, I used participant observation, which was conducted informally over the entire semester at various locations. The strikes clearly produced different information than did collecting and entering quantitative data while at the office, but both were equally significant. In both instances of gaining information, my positionality came into play, as well as ethical considerations.

Coming into a community poses an opportunity for great accomplishments or unhealthy impositions. As a qualitative researcher, I was given information and therefore power over how to represent it. Factors such as my own positionality, the role I played as a temporary intern, and the activities at WWU affected this information, as well as how I received it. My line of research involved reflexivity and the understanding that my background, opinions, feelings at the time and relationships with the participants all influenced the project and its product. I knew that how I relayed the information and knowledge I received was equally as important and influential, a responsibly I was comfortable accepting but wary of none-the-less. While I gained informed consent from all of the people I formally interviewed, and have used pseudonyms in this research paper, I was still concerned about entering the community with my own agenda as well as portraying the individuals or the community unrealistically or unfairly to an outside audience. Many ethical considerations played into writing this research paper, and I attempt to use the workers’ voices to explain the current warehouse conditions and the WWU organization in as fair and just a manner as possible.
Theoretical Context: Structures of Violence

Warehouse workers here in the Inland Empire as well as across the nation and globe experience multiple forms of violence on a daily basis. Violence in the form of injuries and infractions on health and safety are clear and visible, yet this is not the only kind of violence that exists in this line of work. I will later look at my research findings through the lens of the structures of violence, but before doing so I will elaborate on each kind of violence that can be found in temporary working conditions.

Johan Galtung, the founder of the theory of structural violence, discusses the topic of violence with regard to outcomes versus means. He argues that violence should be thought about as that which prevents us from achieving realizable social goals, ie access to drinking water, adequate health care, etc (Nevins 2003). If we think about violence in terms of outcomes, he continues, we realize that death by bullet is no more reprehensible than one caused by practices and social structures. Galtung claims that when there is no identifiable perpetrator of the violence, or it arises from seemingly just practices, the violence is structural or indirect (Nevins 2003). Usually structural violence goes unnoticed or unchallenged, and is often seen as “natural”. Bourgois (2001) expands on this idea, describing structural violence as the “chronic, historically entrenched political-economic oppression and social inequality,” which is commonly associated with abusive working conditions. Bourgois also cites three other kinds of violence, and while one of them doesn’t apply to warehouse workers (direct political), the other two—everyday violence and symbolic violence—do pertain. Everyday violence is defined as daily practices and expressions of violence on the microcosm level. Symbolic violence, on the other hand, is the “internalized humiliations and legitimations of inequality and hierarchy ranging from sexism and racism to intimate expressions of class power.” It is also partially exercised through the
unwitting consent of the dominated. Violence is implicitly and explicitly exhibited in warehouses and warehouse work, and plays an important role in how the workers consciously and subconsciously view their job.

**Data Analysis**

Through my qualitative methods of inquiry and observation, three large themes emerged: health and safety violations in the workplace and lack of enforcement, lack of worker’s power and respect in the warehouse, and the positive affects of WWU on workers’ lives. Each of these themes has subcategories, and I found that most of the interviewed workers had similar opinions regarding each topic. While they only begin to scratch the surface of the warehouse work experience, the voices and ideas of these workers should surely be heard, and seem to connect and continue the research that has already been done (and discussed earlier in this paper) on workers and corporations.

**Health and Safety Violations**

The strikes and marches that have occurred over the past few months with WWU members have focused on the topic of health and safety violations at the NFI warehouse. This is because they are some of the most evident problems that workers face along with, but not limited to, low wages and a lack of benefits. The corporations or supervisors do not enforce safety, and the workers aren’t properly trained or taught about the dangers that are prominent in the workplace. During the march, Pablo explained to me that he wasn’t able to hear the supervisor who trained him and the other new workers he was with on his first day. Coworkers helped him figure out the basics, and he taught himself the rest, but the lack of formal training hindered his
safety. Diego explained during his interview that, “The health and safety was not enforced at all. At all, and I mean literally at all.” Later on in the interview Diego revealed that he was hit by a forklift, and other members at WWU mentioned this accident as an instance of unenforced safety in the workplace. Another warehouse worker, Nate, recounted that, “they don’t care about safety sometimes, because people get hit with the forklifts and they’re still driving them.” While rules and regulations might technically be apart of the warehouse system, and the situation has improved in the past few months, each and every worker agreed that the enforcement is currently not up to par and the amount of injuries provides quantitative evidence for this notion.

Injuries in the NFI warehouse come in all shapes and sizes. Some workers reported having chronic back pain, such as Vince, while others only mention a few scrapes and scratches every now and then. Of course Diego is a perfect example of a serious injury, and other stories were similarly severe, yet went unaddressed by supervisors. When asked about other stories of injury, Diego talked of a friend who fell off a ramp:

This guy, one time was trying to load up these boxes. And well, I don’t know what happened but he ended up taking like one step back, wrong, and I see this guy falling all the way down. We were up like four and a half feet, maybe five, and he fell backwards. So he fell and I went over there and tried to ask if he’s okay, and I advised don’t get up, don’t move. The supervisor passes by and I told him to call the ambulance, but he said, “he said he’s fine,” so nothing was done.

This is just one example of a serious injury gone unaddressed by supervisors who are fully aware of the situation yet decide to do nothing about it. While Diego wasn’t surprised by the situation he encountered, he was upset just talking about it during the interview, and ended the thought shaking his head and sighing. The workers constantly run into metaphorical walls and barriers
instated by the supervisors, and end up frustrated and sometimes physically injured. Nate’s
coworker sprained his ankle, but was not even given the rest of the day off. These injuries
exemplify everyday violence, the perpetrator being the supervisors at the warehouses. The
workers are forced to endure this violence due to the supervisors’ ability to fire them on a whim.
Ricardo recounted a story about a friend who was injured when “the bumper gave, and the guy
fell through and he cut his whole arm. They threatened to fire him. They told him that if he tries
to do anything they will fire him.” Even though the bumper gave because of broken equipment,
at the fault of the supervisors, the worker and his injury went unaddressed because of threats.

Health and safety violations that occur because of broken equipment are rampant in the
warehouses. Worker after worker that I interviewed had an anecdote or fact to discuss regarding
this topic. Diego explicitly told me that even though some conditions have improved, “there’s
still broken equipment everywhere.” Christian talked of an instance when “one of the bumpers
next to the dock where the trucks back into it, it actually broke off.” Ricardo, while describing
the work environment at the NFI warehouse, mentioned that “the cars are all still broken” even
though the ramps were fixed. Not only are the workers forced to deal with broken or unstable
equipment, but they are not given health coverage through their jobs to combat the dangerous
conditions. At one point in the middle of the semester I was given the task of informally
interviewing workers about their health care coverage in order to draft a written letter to Kaiser
asking for coverage. None of the workers had health care, and only some of their children or
family members had it because of another working parent or grandparent. The warehouse
workers are confronted with every day violence in the workplace due to broken equipment and
unenforced dangers, are threatened by their bosses, and don’t even have health care. If this isn’t
reason enough to strike I don’t know what is, but wait, there are other problems as well.
Lack of Respect and Power at the Warehouses

Warehouses workers and members of WWU deal with a long list of problems at the warehouses, both physical and mental. The supervisors or bosses have almost complete power, and according to the workers, only pretend to care about the dangerous or unfair conditions. According to Christian:

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 main 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 eight hours a day in a hot trailer at 120 degrees, dehydrating, having heat flashes, that’s a problem. The workers are overheating, and people die from that. They don’t care.”

This lack of empathy or action on the part of the supervisors plays into the symbolic violence that the workers are also privy to while on the job. Because the supervisors clearly know what is going on but take no action to stop the cycles, the workers internalize the current conditions as “natural” and eventually begin to consent to being dominated. The fact that corporations don’t care enough to make changes to dangerous conditions is not something to be taken lightly, but during my interviews, the workers discussed being “blown off” or disrespected by their bosses in a casual way. When asked about the consequences of complaining about health and safety to a supervisor, Vince responded: “They just, you know, brush you off. That’s what it seems like. They tell you want you want to hear.” The workers presently don’t have the ability to overcome the immense disparity in power within the hierarchy at the warehouses. They are either brushed off, as Vince discusses, or retaliated against in serious and tangible ways.
The workers have been retaliated against in small and large ways, especially since the strikes began this past September. After the first strike, while at the WWU office, I asked one of the organizers if the workers were going to get their jobs back, and was told that even if they technically did, they would likely be told once at work that there was nothing to do, and be sent home. During my interview with Ricardo, I asked him what would happen if he spoke up too much, and he answered without a moment's hesitation that they would immediately fire him and hire someone else, who was less vocal or openly opinionated. Workers are retaliated against for voicing their concerns, going too slowly, getting injured on the job, you name it. WWU members are also explicitly retaliated against for belonging to the organization. Christian explained his experience as a WWU worker, saying: “It’s so stressful at work, especially now that I’m wearing the WWU shirt. And now they know that I’m in WWU, they’re retaliating against me, telling me that I can’t do this, I can’t do that… and… it’s just stressful.” The retaliation is overt, unfair, and mentally traumatic. The workers are oppressed and experience unfair working conditions, both of which are related to structural violence. While retaliation is not physically violent, it produces a similar outcome where workers are not able to reach their goals, and has been going on since the beginning of factory work. The social inequality that workers face, coupled with the physical strains of warehouse work, produces highly pressurized work that, as Christian told me, “is not only stressful on the body, but the mind as well.”

The NFI warehouse and jobs that are affiliated with Wal-Mart in any way are particularly stressful compared to other similar jobs. All of the workers at WWU unanimously voted their current working situation as the worst. Why? As Vince so succinctly put it, “The pressure. The pressure that they put on you there. The pressure and the stress is more then anywhere else.” A plethora of factors create this extraordinarily stressful situation, including heightened quotas and
the inability for workers to unionize because of the two-tiered system. Christian used to work at a UPS warehouse, and stated that, “FedEx and UPS have their unions, and they’re very well organized, very respectful, they don’t put the pressure on as much as this warehouse that I’m working at now here in Mira Loma.” As previously discussed, because the workers I talked to are hired through temp agencies and not directly through Wal-Mart, they aren’t able to unionize, and simultaneously confront problems that stem from working alongside actual direct-hires. Temporary employees experience significantly worse working conditions than direct-hires do at the same warehouse. Diego explicitly stated that, “Direct employees don’t get the pressure that we do.” Because of this discrepancy, the workers are essentially prohibited from informally coming together to fight against the corporation because they are instead pitted against each other. This is exemplified by Ricardo’s sentiment that “they [the direct employees] act like they’re bigger than us.” As long as the two groups of workers are in opposition to each other, the corporations hold even more power. Diego explained that there is graffiti in the bathroom about direct-hires versus temps, and that the direct-hires are not apart of the temporary workers’ communities. The temporary workers see the direct-hires as having more power and respect simply because of their working contract and not because of their work ethic. This directly relates to the core problems that the WWU members have when on the job; they are not respected nor empowered at the NFI Mira Loma warehouse.

*Warehouse Workers United and Its Affects*

Warehouse Workers United has been around for almost four years now, and while I don’t have the knowledge or authority to make any claims about its affects since its birth, over the past few months the organization has made significant strides in its fight for labor rights. Not only has
it gathered more members (Nate, Vince and Pablo all joined right before the first strike and march), but conditions in the workplace have somewhat improved. When questioned about the visible affects WWU has had on the warehouse, Ricardo responded that, “they give us vests now instead of us paying for it. There’s water now, stations, more fans. Oh, and they’ve fixed the ramps now.” Most of the changes happened after the organizers and 10 of the workers including Ricardo went to Arkansas, where the Wal-Mart headquarters is located. They performed delegations and were eventually able to sit down and have a meeting with managers high on the corporate totem pole in Little Rock. In comparing and contrasting the warehouse before and after the meeting, Diego proclaimed:

Before they wouldn’t do anything. We would complain and they would just brush it off.
Now they do something. They tell us to red flag it and put the request in. Sometimes it actually changes. Not that it’s enough, far from it. But they’re actually doing something about it now.

Clearly these changes are only a start, and what lies ahead is daunting to say the least, but Wal-Mart is showing the first signs of respect by just listening to the workers. As with any big changes, little steps must be taken first, and the workers understand that more than anyone. These steps come in many shapes and sizes, including the health and safety trainings that WWU has conducted for the past two years that are about to start again.

The funding that is used to put on the health and safety trainings at the WWU Resource Center comes from a grant that required an evaluation of the effectiveness before embarking on another year. Due to this requirement, WWU conducted a focus group to ask workers what they’ve learned thus far that’s actually made a difference in the workplace. The group of 15 or so members almost all mentioned that simple education on basic rights and the dangers that exist at
the warehouses has made a significant impact. Not only did the trainings teach them how to deal with the dangers but also educated them about how to stand up for the rights, let alone understand what their rights even were. When I asked Christian in his interview what he thought about the trainings, he answered similarly to those in the focus group, saying, “That’s one of the key things about these trainings, is helping people get more educated.” Education means power, something that the workers lack and yet desperately need in order to combat the multiple forms of violence in the workplace.

Both the trainings and WWU in general help make change and help unite the workers that are unable to formally unionize. Not only are many new workers joining WWU currently, but they are staying involved. When asked why they still belong to WWU, both Diego and Nate mentioned that they wanted to make a change but knew they couldn’t do it on their own—WWU helps make the fight for a better work environment possible. The workers are also able to fight against structural violence by discontinuing their age-old oppression, and stop symbolic violence by not consenting to domination. By organizing, the workers are able to find power in numbers, and at the same time find a place within a community. The role that WWU plays in making the community possible is one of its main functions. Not only does the office act as a home base for meetings but it’s a safe space for workers to come to, and their families as well. The day after a strike in mid October, the organizers held a small baby shower for the wife of one of the workers at the office. The mother and father to be stood up during the celebration and thanked everyone for supporting them and being like family. The warmth and support that engulfed the office that day was obvious and inspiring for everyone, myself included.

The community that is fostered at the WWU office also carries over to the workplace. In an industry that discourages community, WWU members find small doses of support at the
warehouse from coworkers who also belong to the organization. Diego admitted that, “there’s a few of us there [at the warehouse] that look out for each other.” Just knowing that other workers have their back has given slight relief to some of the members I talked to. This support, along with every other form of empowerment that WWU provides gives workers hope, particularly for the future. In the midst of so much injustice and frustration, having hope is remarkable and essential. Clearly changing the warehouse and conditions is a slow process, but it cannot be achieved without dedication. Workers have been battling unfair conditions for centuries, and continue to do so today. Future generations will have to confront issues, whether the same or new, but this inspires instead of deters workers who have joined WWU. Christian, Diego, Nate, Ricardo, and Pablo have all continued to be apart of the organization because they see the changes that have been made and know that WWU will allow them to better their own work as well as fight for the larger national labor rights cause. Vince knows this too, and understands the implications for the future of warehouse workers; “I believe that changes will happen. You know, I want to better that place [the NFI warehouse]. Because what if my little brother, my cousin worked there. I don’t want them struggling like I do.”

**Discussion**

Temporary or contingent labor can be found in every state, every country, and every continent throughout the world. There are an infinite amount of scenarios that could be studied by researchers looking to further the debate about labor rights and problems, and how workers and corporations interact. WWU and the Mira Loma NFI warehouse is just one case study, which lent itself nicely to the discussion on health and safety violations and the role of collective organization in combating these problems. The literature on the topic of temporary labor is
abundant, and connects with many of the themes I found in my interviews and observations; the challenges temporary workers face, the existence of power hierarchies and violence between employers and employees, as well as the agency and empowerment that collective organizing and action hold. There is, however, significantly less research on health and safety, which makes this study all the more necessary. My research is similar to the research that has already been done, but it’s emphasis on health and safety takes the topic in a new direction that directly connects with labor organizations across the globe that are striking and fighting for better health and safety conditions.

Most of my findings were along the same lines as previous research that has been conducted with temporary workers and large corporations. As discussed in my literature review, many academics have found that supervisors exploit contingent workers for many reasons, including their weak affiliation to the corporate family and the fact that most of them aren’t trained or invested in because there’s a long line of new temporary workers waiting to take their place. All of the workers I talked to mentioned instances that agree with these ideas, particularly the fact that they are constantly reminded of how easily they can be replaced. Other primary topics that current literature covers and my research agrees with include temporary workers’ fear of retaliation, lack of safety enforcement in the workplace, and the inability for contingent workers to critique poor work conditions. Clearly the WWU members/NFI employees I talked to are not experiencing altogether new and undiscovered conditions. This doesn’t mean that their voices should go unheard though. On the contrary, their personal anecdotes personalize the broad topic and give insight into the specific health and safety problems that aren’t addressed along with the importance of organizations such as WWU in empowering workers.
Information on health and safety is not easily accessible or copious at this point in time. Whether about enforcement, laws, workers’ experiences, you name it, the research out there leaves much to be desired. While some might critique research specifically on workers’ experiences in the warehouses as too qualitative or extraneous, it reveals the hardships in a storytelling manner that is relatable and influential. Speaking as an intern who initially had little investment in the temporary labor movement or health and safety problems, hearing the stories and accounts from WWU members made the issue all the more real to me. I believe that if the true accounts from temporary workers were widespread and publicized, the movement might find even more support. And while current laws that protect contingent workers are severely lacking, they do exist yet are sometimes simply not followed. We need better labor laws, but we also need more enforcement of the ones that are already in place. More media attention coupled with further research and sharing of information on the specific topic of health and safety, and workers’ experiences, would hopefully alleviate the situation.

Many other subcategories of temporary labor must also be addressed by academics, social activists and workers for the movement to make any headway towards change. Collective organizing and action is one area I see growth and possibility in, and from what my interviews and observations told me, workers also view being apart of a community or group as necessary. More research on this would surely be helpful, specifically on what types of actions work and how workers can protect themselves from being retaliated against for joining an organization. Violence must also be addressed—everyday, structural, and symbolic. Oppression and internalization of “natural” practices must be omitted, although I cannot say how to best go about doing this. If I had more time, money, and resources I would love to delve deeper into the
theoretical and practical side of the issue of violence in the workplace and how workers are affected by it.

Finally, I want to discuss education. Not just childhood education (although this is vital, and plays a part in temporary labor and those who partake in it), but educating workers on their rights and the dangers that can be found in almost every warehouse across the nation and the globe as well. Existing literature falls short in discussing the importance and simultaneous lack of education for temporary workers. The education that organizations provide, such as the health and safety trainings conducted at WWU, can not only ease stressful or dangerous work conditions but can also potentially save limbs or lives. According to academic research, most problems that workers face relate directly to lack of knowledge—they are not properly trained at the workplace, they are not aware of the chemical and machinery dangers, they don’t know their rights to breaks, water or shade, and they often don’t know how to be a part of an organization or community because there are no formal unions within this job sector. If workers are educated on many different topics including health and safety, we can begin to eliminate the pervasive problem of unjust temporary labor conditions. Education is certainly not the only answer, but without it, the problem cannot be fully addressed. All of my findings, from health and safety violations to the role of WWU, relate to the need for knowledge and the current dearth of it and research about it.

**Conclusion**

Let’s return for a moment to the sidewalk in front of the NFI warehouse. We’re here again, a handful of WWU members and I, but we’re not picketing. This time we’re bringing lunch to the workers who got their jobs back after going on strike. Has every problem gone
away? Hardly. But these workers were able to strike for their rights under the umbrella of Warehouse Workers United, go directly to the Arkansas headquarters, sit down and talk with Wal-mart CEOs, go back to work, and see small changes. One could look at this mini story arc as either discouraging or hopeful. There are still thousands of changes to be made, and the conditions in both the NFI warehouse and other warehouses everywhere are downright deplorable. That being said, changes have to be made one step at a time, slowly but surely, and the experiences that many WWU members have had within the past few months display just that. One of the first steps in the process of making change is being heard, which is both what has happened through the strikes and marches that WWU has put on and what I’ve attempted to begin doing through this research paper.

The topic of temporary labor is humongous, and even when whittled down to just health and safety hazards and WWU’s role in workers’ lives, there is still an infinite amount of research to be done. If I were to continue researching this topic, I would look at other warehouses and organizations, to compare and contrast with the ones I’ve already looked at. I would also research different strategies in the labor movement for making change, and would interview more people and observe for a longer period of time at both the NFI warehouse and WWU. The research I’ve done barely begins to unpack the core social and structural issues in our nation and the world, and with more time and money I would also investigate international corporations and how globalization and the economy have affected temporary labor (which much of the literature I looked at mentions). Just thinking about all of the different possibilities for further research is both exciting and utterly overwhelming. My own research was extremely limited, considering I was only able to conduct five interviews and only had a semester to integrate into and investigate WWU and its members. No matter what other research techniques I would employ if I continued
this project, I would conduct more interviews. The ones I did get were not only informative but heartfelt and insightful, and allowed me a glimpse into a world I had no idea about beforehand.

I learned almost everything I now know about temporary labor in general and NFI/Wal-mart/WWU specifically through this research process, considering I came into my internship with close to no background knowledge. Through both qualitative and personal methods of research as well as investigating the literature on the topic of contingent labor, learning about the Inland Empire through my Critical Community Studies class and looking at structures of violence, I was able to learn about an extremely pertinent social problem and movement. I gained knowledge and understanding, as well as relationships in a completely new community that I was initially nervous about entering. My experience at WWU this semester had it’s ups and downs, but I’m positive will be incomparably more memorable than my other educational experiences. I was hopefully also able to give back to the community of WWU as well as take from it. Not only did I participate in and give support during the multiple strikes and the march, but I helped evaluate the health and safety trainings, and research health care for temporary workers here in the Inland Empire. With all of that said, I also experienced a good amount of frustration, because as is typical in community organizing, my schedule and the schedule of WWU did not always match up. While I will not be continuing my engagement with WWU in the future, I’m infinitely grateful that I had the chance to do so this semester.

Just as Pancho’s poem reminds us, at the end of our lives we will look back at the finished chapters in our lives’ book. I will certainly look back and remember this experience as an intern at WWU. But I will also remember how fast that chapter of my life ended, and how temporary labor was not my constant reality. The workers I talked to and became friends with, who gave me a hug every time I walked into the WWU office, face contingent work and it’s
consequences every day. They are not able to escape it, regardless of how awful they are treated. Out in the 90-degree heat, they work with little water and shade, no breaks, and heavy cargo. They strike, they fight back, and continue to work at the NFI or similar warehouses. They also continue to come back to WWU to partake in its actions and reap the benefits of its community. Their work and their membership to the organization truly are honest, just as Pancho’s poem said. Their work is honest, and in patience they wait for social justice to arrive.

Work Cited


