Formalizing “Informal” Work: Uniting Contingent Warehouse Employment

Laura Gutierrez
Ontario Program, Spring 2011
INTRODUCTION

Globalized industries of production have reconstructed systems of power to widen the gap between labor and capital. Shippers have reduced their costs by creating a distribution system that depends on low-wage, temporary workers. Reinforcing these structures of power is the use of what research literature terms “informal” work. In contingent, nonunion workforces there are no existing terms that guarantee an employee consistent or stable work. Instead, these workers may be terminated from their employment for any reason, at any time. The use of second-party staffing agencies adds to the insecurity of employment further, for as those agencies work independently they also work as direct supervisors in job sites. In an attempt to create a more efficient industry of distribution, these second-party employers sever the connection between companies and employees and decentralize the system of power, as demonstrated by the logistics industry. This system of employment works to circumvent the type of labor power that would allow warehouse workers stable employment and livable wages. Laborers in “informal” workforces face wage exploitation and substandard working conditions, and remain undocumented in their workplaces. Furthermore, the use of informal work is often implemented into already marginalized populations, handicapping their ability to defend themselves even further. While many workers may suffer these issues in nonstandard workplaces, they are unwilling to report these incidents of exploitation out of fear of losing their jobs. Though the effects of “informal” work appear to have haphazardly occurred, the use of “informal” work is ingrained in the economics of many industries.

Despite living only miles away from the largest single concentration of warehouses in the world, I was unaware of the significant presence of the logistics industry. Mindful of how the warehouses reflect a global industry I began my research curious about the reason for which this intersection of northern migrating labor and eastern moving goods occurred and how it reflects international relations. After doing some research, however, my point of interest shifted. As I learned of the working conditions and treatment of warehouse workers my focus turned to the local level effects. When beginning my research I envisioned presenting a display of labor-worn faces, tales of hardship, and inspiring stories of struggle. The need, however, to rid myself of this victimizing framework through which I saw the industry soon became apparent. While I remain impressed by the strength of warehouse workers in their attempt to change, I began to wonder why these workers face these injustices and why this type of work is particularly vulnerable to exploitation. It became obvious that the unstable and powerless nature of warehouse work could be attributed to the use of staffing agencies. In an industry that holds such power I wondered why then informal work had to exist.

The Inland Empire—the region that includes both San Bernadino and Riverside counties—has been the locus of growth for Southern California. This region’s population is expected to grow from 3.9 million in 2005 to 4.9 million in 2015.1 While many attribute this growth to the opportunity of employment (mostly in warehouses), there is a need to consider why the warehouses are located in the region. My research is an attempt to prove contingent work depends on the exploitation of labor in certain populations and to challenge the use of temporary agencies.

As the logistics industry plays an increasing role in shaping the growth of the Inland Empire, local warehouse workers have personally endured the consequences of the greater global economy. Warehouse workers, a population largely made up of Latinos, face existing

---

Nonstandard working conditions that in turn create particularly vulnerable environments for already marginalized populations. However, as a result of systematic fractures of contingent warehouse work, warehouse workers have become an invisible force. Aware of these injustices, Change to Win (CTW) and Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice of California (CLUE-CA) worked in partnership for three years to build Warehouse Workers United (WWU). Today, WWU’s innovative approach to social change relies on the warehouse workers themselves to be the catalysts of change at their job sites. Approximately 1,500 warehouse workers have participated in WWU’s activities, which include rallies, resource fairs, and training programs. In addition, countless community supporters are committed to bettering the working conditions in warehouses and building a better future for workers and their families throughout the Inland Empire.

Unionizing warehouse workers in this industry is the ultimate goal. While working in accordance with similar organizations throughout the country, WWU plans to leverage the power of the workers in the global economy through an act of resistance that would significantly disrupt the movement of goods. Organizers understand the enormity of this task, though, and continue to work towards smaller, more cumulative goals. WWU seeks to create tangible change through educational programs for warehouse workers that promote the involvement of workers themselves in the movement. While much of WWU’s work is in research, an equally important goal is to engage and strengthen the community of workers to become part of the movement.

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Temporary employment is often informal work offered by one person to another. The vast number of temporary agencies is unique to the warehouse work in the Inland Empire. The use of temporary agencies has become normalized in this industry because of its dependence on cheap labor. Use of temporary agencies is a relatively new phenomenon in such industries and the prominence of the warehouse industry is unique to the Inland Empire. A phenomenon similar to agricultural and construction day labor represented in literature, both workforces are subject to practices that delegitimize the work of individuals with unstable employment, lack benefits, and unlivable wages.

During the last century deindustrialization in the United States has caused a decrease in the role of workforces, which in turn has given rise to new industries like logistics industry. Manuel Castells, a global systems theorist, explains the social underdevelopment that has resulted from the rise these new industries. For Castells their restructuring was a result of the information age: a time of tremendous economic growth globally². Castells explains that the information age is a two-edged sword: while countries can “leapfrog stages of economic growth by being able to modernize their productions systems and increase their competitiveness faster than in the past,” a significant fraction of populations suffer whose educational level and cultural/technical skills do not fit the requirements of this new globalized network³. Not only does the expanding power of our globalized information age increase division between societies, but Castell also contends that the information age has changed labor relations at the local level as well.

---

³ Castells 11
The trends of global inequality that have risen since the onset of the information age, Castells believes, are rooted in the relationship between production and consumption. Castells defines the “relationships of production” as the means through which workers provide for their livelihood through labor. For Castells, the information age redefined the relationship of production in drastic ways. He analyzes three conditions that he believes are direct effects: the individualization of labor, the overexploitation of certain peoples, and social exclusion.

Individualizing labor is a process “by which labour’s contribution to production is defined specifically for each individual with little reference to collective bargaining or regulated conditions.” The information age is the exact reversal of the industrial era of the previous century, when populations of peasants and craftsmen were brought into socialized conditions of labor where they could take ownership of their work. Unlike the industrial era, today’s workers face de-socialized working environments that limits the opportunities to regulate their working conditions. Individualized workforces have transformed the social relationships between capital and labor, management and workers, and between workers themselves.

Secondly, the literature describes how marginalized groups face over exploitation, including an imposition of unfavorable norms of compensation [and] labour conditions on certain categories of workers” such as immigrants. The third relationship of production Castells describes is “social exclusion,” a process that occurs when certain individuals or populations are barred from access to social positions that would allow them to adequately provide for themselves in an autonomous way.” Within the context of existing systems of power and values workers are unwilling and often unable to change the exploitative system that controls their livelihood. Lastly, the fourth type of relationship of production is what Castells refers to as perverse integration. While Castells describes criminal activity as perverse integration, it can also be used to explain the rise in nonstandard forms of work as well. Similar to criminal behavior, a significant number of people are being excluded from access to regular jobs and are forced to “informal” work.

All four relationships Castells describe to represent the changing labor systems are represented in the warehouses of the Inland Empire. Billions of dollars worth of consumer goods pass through the warehouses of this industry every year, giving this region of the world a critical role in the global economy. The use of staffing agencies, whose employees act as direct supervisors in these warehouses, has increased this shift in labor relationships even further. While the relationships of this labor market appear to be “informal,” Castells’ theories suggest how ingrained the injustices are to the industry.

As the population of immigrants continues to rise, the Latino population has been target for systematic exploitation. Abel Valenzuela describes the rise of contingent employment in prominent Latino communities. In the past three decades several trends (i.e., labor demand and public policy) have led to the largest wave of immigration in the history of the United States. This growth has also contributed to the rise of “informal” (contingent) work. Contingent

---

4 Castells 16
6 Castells 16
7 Castells 17
8 Castells 16-17
employment is the unstable kind work, with the most unpredictable work hours—as well as “the absence of traditional workers’ rights and benefits.” Valenzuela reveals that in the past three decades nonstandard employment (day labor, temp agencies, short-term and contingent work, and independent contracting) has become a substantial factor of the economy and “an important employer of immigrant and other marginal workers in large and midsized cities.” In the Inland Empire a predominately Latino warehouse workforce face these same issues of nonstandard working conditions as a result of being hired through temporary staffing agencies.

Similarly, Chacón Akers and Mike Davis, urban theorists and author of No One is Illegal, explain the particular vulnerability and exploitation of immigrant workers. For Akers and Davis the legal status of immigrant workers adds fuel to the exploitation against them. The authors believe that the Latino worker’s legal issues mask class division and discrimination that truly exist within the workforce. Most critics of nonstandard work focus on the citizenship of workers, but this argument works only to overshadow the greater labor issues existing in informal workplaces. Instead, these critics must focus on the wage exploitation, substandard working conditions and unstable employment immigrants face doing “informal” work. While already marginalized because of their citizenship, warehouse workers are particularly vulnerable to the inherent exploitation and alienating effects of the logistics industry.

“Informal” work not only allows for the exploitation of employees, but this form of control is actually ingrained in new, globalized industries. Stimulated by the use of temporary staffing agencies, the new relationships of production have led to further exploitative working conditions in nonstandard work.

COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH

My entry into Warehouse Workers United was casual and quiet. My first day was spent filling binders in the office and then later attending a workers’ meeting. I quickly fell into the routine of working in the office on Mondays and joining workers’ meetings on Thursdays. This was my way of easing in. It was not until I joined Arturo, a WWU organizer, one afternoon that I realized what a stranger I still was to many people in the organization. “Can I ask you something?” he asked me, “what are you doing here at Warehouse Workers United?” His question seemed to solidify my feelings of seclusion from the workers, but I was also relieved to explain myself with someone outside of the office. I admitted to Arturo that I had taken particular interest in the industry because it offered me a new lens through which to see my international and intercultural studies. Clearly unconvinced, after pausing for a second Arturo responded, “but there must be a reason that you have chosen to stay here.” I had to think this over for a while for I had never defined the connection I felt with WWU. “Well my father is Colombian” I began. Hesitating in fear of over-generalizing the workers or the Latino community, I admitted to feeling connected with the predominately Latino population. Though my father comes from Colombia I never felt comfortable identifying myself as a Latina. Growing up in an affluent suburb north of Chicago, I had felt completely disconnected from the culture and native language that I knew shaped my father’s Latino identity. Arturo seemed

---

11 Valenzuela, 307
surprised that I had created such a disconnection from the Latino population. “Your story isn’t anything different from the rest of ours,” he stated. “We all have different stories but they are ultimately the same.” I realized then that I had created undeserving guilt for myself. I had felt disconnected from the Latino population previously because I’d felt so separate from the culture.

The logistics industry of the Inland Empire marks a point where the northern migration of labor meets eastern movement of goods. This global intersection creates a particular lens through which to see the world. Shaped by where they originated, these workers redefine the meanings of labor relations. Social constructivism seeks to create meanings as they are directed to populations of people in the context of prevailing institutions and values. My understanding of the warehouse industry was guided by my curiosity towards ways these prevailing systems of power shape the lives of workers. My research is an attempt to understand the issues through the perspective of workers as both organizers and subjects.

In response to the overwhelming accounts of workplace injuries, Warehouse Workers United and Change to Win worked in partnership with CLUE-CA and LOSH to address the health and safety violations that had become rampant in the warehouse industry of the Inland Empire. The team created a program that would train warehouse workers on the best ways to recognize and prevent health and safety hazards in warehouses and by educating them on their rights and responsibilities under OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) regulations. By receiving the Federal Department of Labor’s Susan Harwood Pilot Training Grant, the team was able to launch a worker-training program.

This grant allowed OSHA-trained warehouse workers to conduct over 60 needs-assessment surveys of coworkers in the industry. From these needs assessments I was asked to create a document to describe the health and safety issues in the warehouses. As I grew more intimate with the information I was better able to understand the effects of warehouse work and the systematic problems of temporary agencies as they affect the lives of workers. This piece will ultimately work in accordance with a larger white paper to address the community regarding the warehouse industry.

Since the beginning of the OSHA program it was apparent that the program not only has provided the workers with practical training to confront the health and safety issues, but has also proved that through this education the workers are empowered to take an active role in their workplaces and community. The training has created a network of knowledge from which workers may become more politically involved in the labor issues they face. The workers are not only able to understand their rights and expectations but also gain the expertise to become part of the efforts to change the industry. Additionally, this training has prepared workers with tools to conduct interviews with fellow workers to survey the health and safety needs. This project depends uniquely on the knowledge and experience of these interviewers as a source of invaluable information and a means to reaching out to the greater workforce. The program marks a moment of triumph in the lives of the individual workers, one that proves the power of knowledge in gaining ownership over one’s work. The power of this movement was initiated by the experiences of warehouse workers and will be propelled by their passion for change.

The structure of power that supports the warehouse industry perpetuates unsafe working conditions. Reinforcing the warehouse’s system of power is the use of temporary staffing agencies whose employees act as direct supervisors in warehouses. The use of staffing agencies decentralizes the accountability within the industry from the overseeing companies to the disconnected staff of supervisors. The fragmented system of authority within warehouses often makes it unclear who is the employer and who has authority over the health and safety of
workers in the warehouse. Therefore, if a worker were to report an issue or injury the disconnected system of power hinders them from doing so effectively. The use of staffing agencies in warehouses supports environments where workers are hired at will (can be fired for any or no reason) and are therefore often less likely to report injuries or hazards. The following conclusions were drawn from the personal experiences of these warehouse workers.

**EFFECTS OF WAREHOUSE WORK**

The goods that end up on retail store shelves have already traveled thousands of miles and been passed through the hands of many workers by the time they get to an inland distribution center. In the hundreds of facilities in the Inland Empire, the typical scenario is as follows:

As trucks stand idle at the warehouse loading deck workers must be prepared to receive an average of 15,000 pounds (though may sometimes reach upwards of 20,000 pounds) of merchandise each truck carries. Trucks shuttle merchandise from the nearby harbors to the warehouses where they will be repackaged and redistributed. By the time the trucks have parked a worker has already carried a 25-pound pallet to the deck. A pallet is a wooden structure that supports each level of boxes as they are stacked for transportation and storage. As one worker begins to remove the goods from the truck’s attached container their partner continues to build the tower of pallets and boxes. An overwhelming number of workers describe inhaling thick layers of dust that are accumulated on the boxes.

1.1. CHEMICALS AND AIR POLLUTANTS

Day after day Rolando was exposed to open containers of chlorine in a warehouse with little ventilation. Though the employer provided masks they did not prevent Rolando from feeling dizzy from the unavoidable fumes of chlorine. Rolando’s supervisor suggested that if a worker took issue to the way issues were handled under his management that they were better off finding another job. For Rolando, having a job meant too much to ever leave the warehouse. One day Rolando spilled chlorine on his skin that resulted in an extreme burn on his hand. After reporting the incident to his supervisor he was sent to the company doctor. The doctor covered Rolando’s burn with a Band-Aid. In an attempt to improve the conditions under which he worked, in a later instance Rolando suggested to the supervisor that the provided gear was inadequate in protecting him from the chemicals. Later that day Rolando was fired.

The data collected makes it is apparent that warehouse workers are exposed to poor air quality on a regular basis while at work. In addition to the gasoline from trucks on the loading bays and forklifts/other machinery that was initially recognized to exist in warehouses, other contaminants were also found in cleaning materials, shipping boxes, and the merchandise being filtered through the warehouses. When describing the tasks she would complete when working in warehouses, one worker described feeling nauseous after constantly using a certain marker to label boxes. Not recognizing the dangers of inhaling these fumes, this worker revealed how many of these toxins and environmental hazards become normalized in warehouses. In addition to other cumulative sources of air contamination, one worker recalled using a substance similar to paint thinner to remove price stickers on merchandise. Additionally, many workers noted being effected by the dust and dirt that covers the shipping boxes as they enter the warehouses.
The effects of this constant exposure to air contaminants were widespread. One worker even described the black mucus he would see when blowing his nose after working in the warehouses. Even with the use of masks and other protective equipment, workers are unavoidably surrounded by harmful chemicals while working in warehouses.

Once the boxes are removed from the trailers and built onto pallets, they are then directed in one of two ways. Pallets are either quickly sorted and redistributed out of the warehouse or are wrapped and kept in the warehouse as stock. Workers are responsible for covering the remaining goods with a complete roll of plastic wrap.

1.2. ERGONOMICS

With all his strength Juan Carlos pulled a pallet jack well over 1000 pounds of merchandise across his warehouse floor. Recognized he had overexerted himself Juan Carlos reported the incident to the agency’s supervisor who then sent them to their affiliated doctor. Though the company covered the consultation with the company’s doctor, Juan Carlos was only given painkillers and told to return to work. After two weeks the pain in Juan Carlos’ back was unbearable as he continued to perform physically demanding tasks in the warehouse. Admitting his pain to his direct supervisor he was told to go home and she would discuss the issue with the boss, see what they could do and call him later. That was over a year ago.

The study of ergonomics defines the physical capabilities and limitations individuals face in performing certain task or using equipment. A warehouse worker’s ergonomics reveals the many ways workers routinely threaten their health and safety. Though it is difficult to define the source of many long-term effects of warehouse work, due to the extreme conditions and pressures of warehouse workers are ultimately forced to exceed their capabilities. Ergonomic related injuries often of caused by performing physically repetitive tasks, working in the same position for long periods of time or working in extreme physical positions. However, in many cases ergonomic related injuries occur in a single incident of overexertion but whose injuries will last a lifetime.

From the loading decks the pallets are then carried across the warehouse to be stored. Some workers are able to use a forklift: a motorized vehicle that is used to lift and transport the pallets across the warehouse. Others must instead transport the merchandise using a pallet jack. A motorized forklift that a worker walks behind, a pallet jack is mounted on wheels inside the end of the machine’s forks and is operated manually.

1.3. DANGEROUS MACHINERY

David works in a warehouse transporting merchandise on a forklift. In addition to forklifts David’s warehouse also uses Raymond Lift Truck to complete similar tasks. A lift truck is a machine much like a forklift but driven while standing up, only moves forward and backwards and is nearly eight feet tall. One day as a worker drove the Raymond Lift Truck through the warehouse David drove the forklift on a perpendicular path towards the Raymond Lift. Forklifts are always driven backwards to avoid collisions with the forks that protrude from the front of the machines; therefore, David was unable...
to see or hear the Raymond machine has he approached it. As David noticed the impending collision he attempted to stop the forklift by releasing his foot from the accelerator. However, there was a block of wood restricting the accelerator from releasing and David could not stop his forklift. Finally, in a moment of desperation, David placed his foot between the Raymond Lift and his forklift to lessen the impact of the collision. David’s leg was crushed between the two machines. David was taken to the hospital where his foot was amputated. David is still able to at the warehouse using a prosthetic.

In most warehouses, forklifts are used to help lift and transport the heavy loads workers are burdened to handle. However, forklifts have also been described to be one of the greatest causes of injuries in warehouses. Forklifts are large machines that require mechanical and experiential understanding. Many workers have admitted suffering injuries caused simply by getting in and out of these large machines. In addition to the inherent dangers of forklifts, the surrounding environments of warehouses have been described to increase the hazards of forklifts as well. One worker explained that forklift hazards are intensified by “a lot of dirt on floor so forklift would slide when brake would be hit,” they described. Many workers are concerned of improper uses of the forklifts like excessive speed and dangerous driving as well. One of these workers recalled that “while loading trailer [s/he] would stand on forklift blades to load up high (blades were up 3-4 feet or higher).” Though the forklifts are often needed to organize and transport cumbersome merchandise in warehouses, it is obvious that a combination of environmental hazards and mechanical errors make these machines an even greater risk to the health and safety of workers.

Once the merchandise is transported across the warehouse either on a forklift or a pallet jack, they are then stored on shelves that often reach up to 80 feet in height. Though there are existing laws that regulate tasks that are done at extreme heights, many warehouses do not provide the equipment required to abide by them. Therefore, while many workers do not have the safety equipment to store these boxes, they are still responsible for reaching these heights to store the boxes.

1.5. EXTREME TEMPERATURES AND LACK OF WATER

George works in a warehouse with temperatures well over 100 degrees and little ventilation. He remembers a coworker fainting under the heat while working one day. The paramedics were called and the coworker was carried out of the warehouse. George never saw that coworker again.

In addition to being exposed to contaminated air and dangerous machinery, many warehouse workers face these issues under extreme temperatures. The hazards of these temperatures are often exasperated by insufficient ventilation, access to water and inconsistent breaks. Many workers described working in warehouses as hot as 125 degrees and others as low as 10 degrees. One worker even admitted bringing gloves and a hat to work in the extreme cold. Most warehouses do not have air conditioning and have no alternative ventilation system. Recalling one instance that the heat became unbearable, a worker remembered having to bring a personal fan to work. In addition to little ventilation, a significant number of workers noted little to no access to water in the warehouses. In the cases that water was accessible, many workers
described it being restricted in a number of ways. One case a worker did have access to water; however, no cups were provided in the surrounding area. Another worker described that the water was far from their workstation, making it unproductive to retrieve water when it was desired.

2. CAUSES OF NON-UNION STRUCTURE

Sheheryar Kaoosji of Warehouse Workers United, states that the industry has unregulated and rapidly moving logistics industry has grown in an era of declining labor organization. As Kaoosji states, there are two root causes for the injuries and hazards we observe in warehouses. First, he argues, is the lack of authoritative health and safety administration at both the state and federal level that “has allowed employers to get away with egregious violations of basic workplace health and safety laws, such as requiring training, IICPs, and equipment maintenance.” Secondly, Kaoosji believes that it is not entirely the responsibility of the government because workers should feel comfortable reporting hazards and injuries to employers. “Without any employment protection,” Kaoosji states, “workers are reluctant to do so [report injuries or hazards].” Kaoosji concludes that under the present structure of employment, “a worker can be dismissed in seconds with no economic or legal effect on the employer;” therefore, there can be no expectation that workers will report such problems in the environment that exists today.

2.1. LACK OF TRAINING/ PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES

When asked if their employer or someone in charge at the warehouse provided any type of health and safety training an overwhelming number of respondents reported that nothing of the sort was provided. In the case of George for example, if the warehouse would have provided sufficient water, proper ventilation, or had educated his coworker on the signs of dehydration his illness could have been avoided. Though many of the health and safety hazards in warehouses are preventable, without the proper training workers are unprepared to face these hazardous working conditions.

2.2. PRESSURE

In addition the absence of precautionary measures in warehouses, workers are forced to work under extreme pressure as well. Many workers must complete tasks against a deadline or quotas. Additionally, many workers are paid for the number completed tasks and are similarly encouraged to work faster. The pressure of time forces many workers like Juan Carlos to take extreme measures to complete tasks. In an attempt to meet quotas, finish on time or complete a certain number of tasks, workers often overexert themselves physically without feeling the physical impact until later.

2.2.2. FEAR OF BEING FIRED- AT WILL EMPLOYMENT

To be hired at will means a worker can be dismissed for any or no reason. Workers with collective bargaining agreements can generally not be dismissed except for a real reason. However, in a nonunion workforce like a warehouse, there are no existing terms that guarantee an employee consistent or stable work. Instead, these workers may be terminated from their employment for any reason. The use of staffing agencies augments the insecurity of employment
further, for staffing agencies are less invested in their employees than in standard workplaces. Many workers admitted to suffering an injury but for fear of losing their job did not report the incident.

2.2.3. PRESSURE TO NOT REPORT ACCIDENT

Without the need to justify the dismissal of employees, staffing agencies are likely to be so disconnected from their employees to care for their wellbeing. Therefore, an outspoken or injured worker would only be seen by his/her supervisory as a diversion to the productivity of the warehouse and eventually be terminated. Furthermore, many warehouses create additional incentives for workers to avoid injuries. One worker remembers receiving a gift card after two weeks of no reported injuries in her warehouse. Though no injuries were reported it does not account for the many injuries that went unreported by employees who did not want to risk losing the prize for the group. The pressure to not report accidents in warehouses allow injuries to go unrecognized and untreated.

2.2.4. VERBAL HARASSMENT

Though most injuries in warehouses occur because of the unique system of employment, verbal harassment is used as an extreme measure of control within these workplaces. In order to meet quotes and deadlines, most workers admit to being verbally pressured by their supervisors. One worker remembers her supervisor admitting that he believed Mexican’s were worthless, since the incident this worker felt too intimidated to speak their supervisor. Verbal harassment between workers and supervisors is not only dangerous for the mental health of the individuals, but has the power to discourage workers from reporting hazards and injuries.

Many workers can attribute long-term physiological and physical issues to their work in warehouses. On a personal level many workers face a future of chronic pain and debilitating consequences of injuries. One worker describes feeling frustrated when his hand and back aches to the point of incapacitation. One woman admitted, “I feel bad and I am ashamed when my husband wants to hold my hand.” In addition to the physical effects that persist even after leaving the workforce, workers carry the frustration of their unstable work out of the warehouses and into the homes of their families. Upset with issues of unstable work, injuries, and humiliation, many workers reported feeling upset when returning home. Though the effects of warehouse work are often hard to distinguish, it is apparent that this work has significant impacts on the families and communities of warehouse workers.

Formalizing the Informal

Understanding the effects of contingent warehouse work, I sought to identify how the exploitation of workers became so imbedded in the industry of distribution. I first met Elisa over a plate of pupusas, a Salvadorian dish of cheese-filled corn tortillas. She spoke with pride as she announced that her daughter, a prestigious high school soccer player, was being recruited by several universities. Elisa is a native English speaker, daughter of warehouse workers, and an outspoken participant in WWU. I would later meet her parents, Claudia and Javier, in the home they shared with Elisa and her brother.

Elisa and Claudia’s commitment to improving the warehouse industry became my
inspiration to research the personal, human effects of warehouse work. I discussed my research with the women in their home in Fontana. As Elisa and I sat at the table Claudia began boiling water for coffee. I remembered the last time I had visited their home, with Arturo, who later pointed out what a sacrifice it was for them to offer us fruit. As Claudia filled my cup with coffee I was honored to be her guest. It did not take long before our casual conversation began to reveal their experiences in the warehouses. Perhaps due to their connection with Warehouse Workers United, these women understood the industry in great depth. Elisa and Claudia shared an understanding of the inconsistency and unprofessionalism of the industry, and the reason for its injustices. The use of temporary agencies is a choice, Elisa explained, the choice of “greedy people” who “don’t care about the supposed little people.” Elisa went on to describe her working life under a temporary staffing agency.

When I worked in Crocs everyone decorated their cubicles with pictures and stuff like that, but I never did. People would ask me “why don't you put stuff up?” And I would say, ‘because I don't’ know if I’ll be here tomorrow.’ I know I’m working for an agency. I don't want to have to return the day they let me go. The day they tell me not to come back, I won’t have a reason to come back.

The women continued to discuss how temporary staffing agencies only worked to serve the company rather than the workers; how the transiency of their work lives affected their home lives. A transient lifestyle became part of how they decided what to eat and how to care for their health. They went on to explain how some people received benefits and other did not, but neither could explain how these individuals were chosen. In some cases workers were only allowed to work 38 hours rather than a full 40 hours, a tactic that allowed employers to avoid paying benefits. “I know the economy is bad,” Elisa began, “but I can’t even live in a one-bedroom apartment, pay my minimum bills, and groceries just for myself…you end up renting a bedroom.” The women kept emphasizing their understanding that the unlivable wages are a choice the companies make to strengthen their profits.

Although Elisa has only worked in the offices of warehouses, her position was no exception to the often short-lived employment offered by staffing agencies. The effects of warehouse work were obvious, but I was still curious as to why it was so difficult for workers to be hired directly. Elisa quickly responded with great emphasis:

Because they are greedy, they are greedy. They’re not going to care about the so-called little people. As long as the people above are traveling, going on vacation, getting their bonuses. They like it that way. They don’t want to give it up.

It is apparent that temporary agencies are arbitrary to the system of employment. In fact, “informalities” appear to be ingrained in the industry and encouraged by the supervisors. The women went on to explain how their work was shaped by their supervisors to support the unprofessionalism of warehouse work. Elisa described how her hard work was discouraged while working in the office of one warehouse.

I was in charge of all the Internet orders at Crocs. When I was in the system checking and I would see that a customer asked for second-day delivery yesterday. I would go out into the warehouse and look for the product there. I had to go through two or three different
steps just to make sure that it would be processed… I knew an e-mail would be ignored and then it’s on me because I’m the one that’s going to be told I’m not doing my job. So I felt like I have to go out and do it myself. One time my supervisor told me ‘you’re too passionate about your job.’

Another way the women see warehouses perpetuate an unstable and unprofessional environment is when they and their peers were discouraged from ever knowing too much about the industry. Elisa remembered being hired by an agency as an assistant to the office’s manager, Ray. Ray knew everything there was about the company and its warehouses and went above and beyond to support his employees. She recalls how people worked happily under him; he would play music in the office to create a comfortable working environment and even brought in his personal computers for the office. Only days after Elisa began as his assistant, Ray was fired by the agency. Though Ray knew his job inside and out, the agencies were able to fire him for no justifiable reason. The women speculate that he was fired because he knew too much. Encouraging a disconnection between individuals and their work entrenches the “informalities” of warehouse work. The use of temporary staffing agencies is the ultimate way warehouse work continues to promote this unstable and delegitimized workforce.

From “Doña Claudia” to “Viejita”: The Rise of Temporary Agencies

Before temporary agencies Claudia was hired directly by companies and described her job as having been “beautiful.” Doña Claudia, as her supervisors would call her, remembered how the companies would host picnics, give employees a month of paid vacation and even offer the day of for her birthday. “How they’ve changed our lives to become so ugly,” she reflected. Claudia described how after ten years of working in the warehouse she received a gold watch for her commitment to the company. At one point Claudia was even awarded Employee of the Month for her creativity. Elisa remembered when her work was still valued in the warehouse industry.

Right on my last day I got balloons, flowers, you name it. Right as I was swiping out my boss just about grabs my hand and says ‘Elisa how much are they paying over there?’ That’s unheard of now. They don’t care for you as a person. Those were the good old days when people respected what you did, and now there’s no such thing. Whatever happened to respecting individuals for what they do?

As the proliferation of temporary agencies rose, the value of individual workers was buried in the past. The increasing power of temporary staffing agencies weakened the professionalism of warehouse work. Staff positions have become blurred between individuals, for example. Human resources used to be respectable job, Claudia described, today this position suffers from a lack of professionalism as boundaries are blurred and favoritism is often the norm. The ambiguity of job descriptions not only allows for favoritism among workers but also ingrains the “informal” nature that incapacitates warehouse workers. Today Claudia, once called “Doña Claudia” by supervisors, is now referred to as “la viejita,” or “the little old lady.” Understanding warehouses before the use of temporary staffing agencies suggests a need to consider why they were implemented in the beginning.

The women explained how immigrant populations are most vulnerable to exploitation in
the industry. For many immigrants, income received through temporary agencies is better than in their home countries. “There in Mexico,” Elisa explained, “the minimum wage is like 50 dollars a week.” It is for this reason they concluded, that many immigrating professionals work in the warehouses here in the United States. The women’s experiences support what the literature suggests: that persons already marginalized for their ethnicity and legal status, are virtually defenseless when faced with exploitative working conditions.

The women went on to explain the transformation of the industry from before and after the implementation of temporary staffing agencies. As suggested by Castells, the women understood that the deindustrialization of the country meant the deportation of manufacturing jobs to places like Eastern Asia and Central America, leaving little work in the United States for immigrant populations. They claim that temporary agencies began around 1995 when the government gave money to the industry to provide training to the unemployed. “Cross-training,” Claudia defined, was a system that allowed the distribution industry to train individuals for three or four months at a time. However, this system of subsidized “cross-training” quickly became corrupt, for after the few months had passed companies would let go of the employees and begin training with new workers. Though no literature actually exists on “cross-training,” Claudia insists that this overturn of workers began the unstable and informal nature that is now legitimized by temporary staffing agencies. Companies are able to exploit workers through temporary staffing agencies because most workers are desperate to obtain these wages and unable to speak out against the injustices.

CONCLUSION

At the root of our conversations regarding disrespect, exploitation, and unprofessionalism was a general concern for the future of the community. A surprising relationship between global and local began to unearth when talking with Elisa and Claudia. As I understood it, the warehouse industry was detracting from the local identity of the Inland Empire. However, the women were concerned with how the warehouse industry was driving out a seemingly desirable image from the community. To my surprise, this image was not that of small, locally owned businesses but rather national supermarkets like Vons and Ralphs. The women shared with me how they wanted their community to be branded by the names of these well-known companies. However, there is little political representation in Fontana, an absence the women believed that jeopardizes the integrity of their community. They understood the depreciation of Fontana to be a viscous cycle; as long as they maintained a certain look they would not receive the respect of policy makers who could represent them politically. Their vision for Fontana was restaurants with the color coordinated storefront awnings and national supermarkets. These visions spoke towards a lack of representation. The Inland Empire continues to be politically underrepresented region while it grows at unprecedented rates.

The use of temporary staffing agencies is just one way the vulnerability of this region is exploited. While many warehouse workers are undocumented and may never be able to defend themselves politically, it is difficult to lose hope for improvement. As long as the warehouses remain ununionized, issues of health and safety will continue to impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers and their communities. As I listened to how Elisa and Claudia recognize the injustices they face in the warehouses, however, I can feel the passion that can move the workforce towards uniting. Since the industry itself is clearly unwilling to change its reliance on cheap and undocumented labor, a union would protect the rights and needs of its workers. Union
representation would allow warehouse workers to take ownership of the issues they face while on the job. While exchanging decent wages for honest labor may increase the costs of goods, it would also increase the spending power of whole communities, allowing them to play a greater role in the economy as consumers. A union would require employers to justify the termination of an employee under strict guidelines, ensuring that workers would no longer face the unstable nature of temporary work. Furthermore, a union would allow workers to establish an internal government system that would allow workers the opportunity to create committees that would negotiate health and safety rules in the work place. A union would bring safe and secure work to warehouses, giving workers a voice—and allowing them to build a solid future for their families and communities.

Works Sited

