

Catholic Migration Services Helps Immigrant Workers

By Maureen Hussain

Ramon* worked as a butcher in the same market for over three years. He was paid a flat weekly salary with no overtime, even though he was working 72 hours per week. His boss treated him badly – demanding that he put in long hours without any breaks, pressuring him to work faster and faster, and becoming angry rather than concerned when he got injured on the job. Even though Ramon had the same level of work experience as his co-workers, his boss paid him half as much, simply because he was Latino.

Ramon knew that what his employer was doing was wrong and felt that he should be paid at least minimum wage. But like many people, he did not know that he had a legal right to do something about it. He did not realize that most labor laws, including the laws about minimum wage and overtime, apply to everyone, not just to citizens or immigrants who have “papers.”

When he learned about Catholic Migration Services at a housing meeting at St. Sebastian’s parish, Ramon decided to come to the office in Sunnyside to speak with an attorney about his problems at work. The attorneys in the Immigrant Workers’ Rights Program at CMS listened to his story and helped him to file a lawsuit against his employer. It took time and effort, but Ramon finally got paid.

The Immigrant Workers’ Rights Program at CMS provides free legal representation in wage and hour disputes to workers who live or work in Brooklyn or Queens. In addition, CMS also operates Linea LABORAL, a bilingual hotline that provides workers information about their rights, assists individuals with filing complaints about workplace safety and minimum wage and overtime violations, and refers workers to complementary services provided by other organizations. Linea LABORAL is a collaborative effort of CMS, the U.S. and New York State Departments of Labor, the New York City Office of the Comptroller, and the consulates of Mexico, Guatemala, Chile, El Salvador, and Honduras. All workers, but especially those in New York and New Jersey, are invited to call 877-52-LABOR (877-525-2267) with their questions and concerns. Callers are not asked to disclose their immigration status, and information is kept confidential.

While each person’s story is unique, there are aspects of Ramon’s experience at his job that are unfortunately all too common. Immigrant workers like Ramon are especially vulnerable to labor exploitation by unscrupulous employers who threaten to fire them for standing up for their rights or even to report them to immigration authorities. When employers are allowed to evade the law, it hurts not only the individual workers who are abused, but also the larger community: wages for all workers are depressed, and employers who follow the law properly cannot compete and are forced to close their doors or lay people off. By calling Linea LABORAL, learning about their rights, and speaking up to enforce them, workers can improve their own lives while making a positive impact on their communities.

** To protect the privacy of the worker, names have been changed.*