

Council President Fielkow Begins Official Process For Criminalizing Wage Theft

News Release

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New Orleans
City Council

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New Orleans, LA - June 30, 2009 - City Council President Arnie Fielkow heard compelling testimony today concerning New Orleans incidents of wage theft from laborers, many of them Hispanic, in an information-gathering hearing during the Council's Special Development Projects and Economic Development Committee meeting.

Council President Fielkow, concerned with escalating reports of wage theft and believing there has been too little focus placed on stamping out immoral and unethical contractor fraud, invited a variety of local labor advocates and law experts to testify about their knowledge of wage thefts occurring in New Orleans.

Council President Fielkow's goal was to compile expert information regarding existing state and federal laws with the ultimate goal of crafting an ordinance criminalizing the activity.

"We will be taking the advice and expertise from the authorities and victims who testified today, and will draft an ordinance to introduce to the full Council," said Council President Fielkow. "I have every hope and expectation that all seven members will vote to criminalize this terrible conduct."



Jacinta Gonzalez, Congress of Day Laborers

According to the local Congress of Day Laborers, a recent survey of 300 Hispanic day laborers indicated systematic abuses of wages for completed work. Eighty percent of those 300 interviewed experienced a total of 12,000 days unpaid and a total of \$400,000 of unpaid work.

Victims of such wage theft appeared before the Committee to notify members of their recent experiences. One witness was hired by a contractor, performed work, attempted to collect his pay and was threatened by the contractor, who ultimately called the police. When the police arrived, the unpaid worker was arrested and subsequently jailed for four months.

"There was no opportunity to explain what happened...and I spent four months in jail," said Josue Diaz, a local day laborer.



Saket Soni, New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice

Groups in attendance advocating for just such legislation included Larry Bagneris from the Mayor's Human Relations Committee, the Congress of Day Laborers, New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, Loyola University's School of Law, Catholic Charities and Louisiana Association of General Contractors.

Homeowners and native New Orleanian laborers also testified to the recent spate of wage theft offenses on the part of some contractors.

Council President Fielkow said he believes, "the vast majority of contractors are honest people but regrettably in life the small few create a bad name for the majority," however he assured those in attendance that he would "take action to protect those most vulnerable in the New Orleans community."

"I can also assure you that just as July and August are the hottest months in New Orleans, we hope you can come back in August when we apply the heat to these offenders in the form of new city law."

Council President Fielkow intends to have new legislation prepared and on the Council agenda by mid- to late-August, just in time to

commemorate the Labor Day holiday.

New Orleans City Council

The New Orleans City Council is the legislative branch of New Orleans city government. The Council considers and enacts all local laws that govern the City of New Orleans. The Council also approves the operating and capital budgets for the City, as recommended by the mayor, and continually monitors revenues and expenditures for local government operations. The City Council is also the regulatory body for public utilities. It also reviews and has final say on many land use and zoning matters, as well as considers major economic development projects for the City. As a Board of Review for Orleans Parish, the Council examines appeals of property tax assessments for real estate taxes, and certifies tax rolls to the Louisiana Tax Commission. Other responsibilities of the Council include overseeing the operation of the public access television in Orleans Parish.

The City Council is comprised of five districts and two councilmembers-at-large. Council President and Councilmember-at-Large Arnie Fielkow; Council Vice President and Councilmember-at-Large Jacquelyn Brechtel Clarkson; District "A" Councilmember Shelley Midura; District "B" Councilmember Stacy S. Head; District "C" Councilmember James Carter; District "D" Councilmember Cynthia Hedge-Morrell; and District "E" Councilmember Cynthia Willard-Lewis.