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Immigrant Rights Advocates Secure \$1 Million in Unpaid Wages and Claims

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JACKSON, MISS.— With the recovery of more than \$1 million in unpaid wages and worker compensation claims, 585 immigrant laborers helping to rebuild Mississippi’s hurricane-battered Gulf Coast now have reason to celebrate International Workers Day on May 1.

The payments, recently announced by the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance (MIRA), mark a major victory for the organization whose campaign against wage abuse is sending a clear message to employers across the construction, shipbuilding, and hospitality industries on the coast.

“It’s made companies aware they can’t continue to exploit the workforce and it’s created a reputation for MIRA--that MIRA will make justice be served,” said Vicky Cintra, MIRA’s organizing coordinator who has just been appointed to the United States Commission on Civil Rights as a member of the Mississippi State Advisory Committee.

“The success MIRA has had with this campaign shows what can happen when a community pulls together and demands its rights,” said Guadalupe Gamboa, a program officer for Oxfam

America, which has supported MIRA's advocacy efforts. "What's worrisome, though, is the scale of the problem, and the fact that a small organization like this is shouldering a task that federal and state agencies should be responsible for. Those agencies don't have enough inspectors and lack bilingual staffs. The absence of robust oversight results in the widespread wage abuse we have seen on the Gulf Coast."

Concerned by the mistreatment immigrant laborers faced when they arrived to help with the recovery, MIRA launched its drive to address wage abuse within weeks of Hurricane Katrina's strike. To date, it has helped workers recover \$907,637 in back wages, \$89,398 in worker and longshoreman compensation claims, and \$3,184 in reduced court fines and bonds.

The alliance has used a variety of tactics, such as demand letters and direct confrontation, to convince contractors to meet their obligations. In four of the cases, employers owed back wages totaling \$100,000 or more.

The most egregious among them was a drywall company for the Beau Rivage Resort & Casino, in Biloxi, Miss., which underwent a \$550 million makeover following Hurricane Katrina. The drywall contractor had failed to pay its workers \$250,000 in wages. Other delinquents on MIRA's list have included roofing contractors, hospitality employers, and construction companies.

With an immense amount of reconstruction work still waiting to be done, the Gulf Coast has attracted about 100,000 new immigrants, according to recent census estimates. Many of them are Spanish-speaking and face a range of hurdles on their arrival here. MIRA, with Oxfam's support, has grown rapidly into a powerful and vocal proponent for these newcomers.

"When we first started out on this journey, the going was rough and we had to use all activist tactics and strategies at our disposal," said Cintra. "Now, I can call the CEO of a company and get through to them and directly report abuses against workers in their employ and they will respond. Before, the abuses went unknown, unreported, and unresolved."

Despite their success, MIRA officials say what's really needed to effectively address wage abuse on the Gulf Coast is for government enforcement agencies to do their job. Mississippi, they note, is the only state in the union without a department of labor, whose responsibility it is to enforce wage-collection laws. MIRA, in collaboration with labor organizations, community activists, and civil rights groups has for years been advocating for the establishment of such a state agency.

"It's only when you have a mechanism for effectively

enforcing labor laws that you will see an end to the type of wage abuse that has become so widespread on the Gulf Coast,” said Bill Chandler, executive director of MIRA.

For more information about MIRA, visit www.yourmira.org

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