

OHIO COALITION FORMS TO FIGHT WAGE THEFT

A statewide Ohio coalition to fight wage theft and independent contractor misclassification emerged from a meeting in Columbus on May 11 sponsored by the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center and Policy Matters Ohio. About 60 people, including lawyers, union officials, low-income and immigrant-rights advocates and policy researchers, as well as state legislators and Ohio and U.S. enforcement agents, attended the gathering.

Telemarketers, day laborers, insulation contractors, stadium cleaners, iron workers, restaurant employees: These and others have been victimized by wage theft in Ohio, and are fighting back. Some workers are not paid at all, while others are not receiving the minimum wage or overtime pay. Others are being misclassified as independent contractors, so their employers avoid paying workers' compensation, unemployment compensation and income taxes.

Speakers from worker centers and attorneys from the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and the private bar outlined their efforts to combat this abuse, and suggested measures to do so. Representatives from the National Employment Law Project, Ohio Attorney General and the U.S. Department of Labor answered questions about enforcement of the state and federal wage laws.

The State of Ohio, which loses hundreds of millions of dollars a year in workers' compensation, unemployment compensation and income-tax payments due to misclassification, has stepped up its efforts to crack down, including targeted audits, computer tracking and information-sharing between agencies. Speakers detailed a bill in the state Senate (SB 195) and another expected to be introduced in the House (since introduced, it is HB 523), which would make misclassification more difficult and provide additional tools to fight it. A separate measure (SB 212) pending in the Senate would allow the state to pursue all unpaid back wages of affected Ohioans, not just the minimum wage, a limitation placed by existing law. U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown also has introduced an anti-misclassification bill.

Attendees at the Columbus meeting agreed to establish three committees for the emerging coalition: Legislation; Public Education and Outreach (including a web site); and Agency Enforcement. A steering committee and a listserv also will be created. More information is available from Brennan Grayson of the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center at bgrayson@manleyburke.com