

JUSTICE DEMANDED

***FOR THE REFUGEES
EMPLOYED AT
W & K STEEL, LLC***



**Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a
never-failing stream!**

Amos 5:24



W & K Steel, LLC

W & K Steel LLC is a steel fabrication facility located in Rankin, Pennsylvania. W & K provides fabricated structural steel for the construction of both public and private facilities in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Michigan and Illinois. W & K employs approximately 35 workers in the fabrication shop with an additional 20 in management and clerical.

Of the 35 shop employees, 14 are refugees from foreign countries placed for employment at W & K by the Catholic Charities and the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Pittsburgh (JF & CSP).

The refugees employed at W & K Steel are exposed to extremely unsafe working conditions and are paid less than other workers performing the same tasks.

They are trapped. Trapped by the culture they came from; trapped *in* a culture they cannot understand.

Unlike their American co-workers, the refugees are unaware of their rights. They are afraid to speak out or to stand up — fearful of the consequences.



***“Woe to him who
builds his palace by
unrighteousness,
his upper rooms by
injustice, making
his subjects work
for nothing, not
paying them for
their labor.”***

Jeremiah 22:13

The Refugees

A little over a dozen of the refugees at W & K were placed there for employment by the Catholic Charities and the JF & CSP as a ministry to help these families leave their violent and abusive countries. The ministries' goal is to give the refugees the opportunity to live a respectful life with dignity here in America.



There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards those of your people who are poor and needy in your land.

Deuteronomy 15:11

Most of the refugees at W & K are from Burma, a country that the CIA reported as a source of human trafficking for forced labor. This is a government that brutally suppresses any type of protest. The refugees came here to escape from oppression, only to find themselves in America, working in unjust conditions. But they tolerate the unsafe working environment, shoddy housing and substandard wages, because what they fear most is being sent back to Burma.



Political oppression in Burma.

Charity?

Catholic Charities and the Jewish Family & Children's Service of Pittsburgh arrange housing and employment for the refugees. When the refugees arrive, they are given little cash and brought to the housing development where they will begin their new life of freedom here in America.



Unfortunately, it isn't as generous as it sounds. The housing arrangements are dilapidated apartment buildings with cockroaches and leaking ceilings. Most of the refugees are families with children. The cash they've been given to start their new lives barely covers the cost of the housing, let alone utilities and food. The refugees have stated that they are left to fend for themselves and get little help with adjusting to life in America.

One refugee was put to work at W & K Steel running a saw that cuts steel beams. He lives in a small two bedroom apartment with his wife and five children. He works an average of 50 hours a week and grosses approximately \$25,000 annually, with overtime. The U.S. Poverty level for a family of seven is \$32,000.



"...and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing."

~1 Corinthians 13:2

Philippians 2:3-4

Tired, Hungry...and Kept Poor



Life in Burma...

The wife of one refugee working for W & K Steel told us her husband *had* to work overtime everyday in 2008 to earn just \$24,000 for the year. He is paid a mere \$9 an hour. At 40 hours per week that is less than \$18,000 annually. With six children, the family is now suffering because he has not been given much overtime this year. The family pays \$620

per month for rent and W & K does not provide affordable health insurance. They worry that without the overtime, *they cannot support their family*. Last year her husband hurt his back on the job, but was afraid to report it to the company. He still has problems with his back.

The refugees have expressed over and over that they do not complain to their employers for fear of losing their jobs.

They are also afraid to request assistance from the Catholic Charities or the JF & CS case workers, convinced that what little help they are receiving from these organizations will stop.

They are ensnared in our culture with no assistance or knowledge of workers' and human rights in this country...leaving them feeling as though they are in servitude to their employer, betrayed by seemingly friendly charities and vulnerable to the abuses of modern day slavery.



...and work at W & K Steel.

***“Do not be overcome with Evil, but overcome Evil with Good.”
Romans 12:21***

American Workers Speak Out On Behalf of the Refugees!

The American workers at W & K don't fare much better. They complain of being lied to by the management, unfair evaluations, unsafe working conditions, more work being placed on them with less time to safely perform their tasks, unaffordable health care that continually changes without notice, low pay, favoritism, and a lack of respect and dignity at work. The American workers are also concerned with the unfair treatment of the refugees. They report the refugees are not respected by the company; they are exploited because they are hardworking and loyal employees; and, most important to W & K Steel, they won't say anything.

The American workers have brought several safety issues to their production manager, Scott Eicher, who ignores their concerns. Workers need to weld and use electrical hand tools to do their jobs. But leaks in the roof are so bad, there are puddles on the floor in the welding areas that cause workers to get electric shocks throughout the day while working.

"The one Burmese man I worked with, Aung Khang, told me that he was paid only \$9.00/hr and he did the same job I did and had more responsibilities."

Sean Lehr-Nuth,
former W & K Steel employee

As in most steel fabrication shops, workers are required to apply paint and anti-corrosion coatings to the steel. This is generally done in a well-ventilated area separated from the rest of the shop by plastic sheeting or other types of partitioning. The paint is sprayed on by workers wearing respirators. At W & K, the paint is applied in a corner of their unventilated shop. All of the workers

are exposed to fumes from the paint.

Additionally, workers are expected to run large presses and shears that cut steel beams, but have no guards to protect against severing fingers and hands.

The American workers are concerned, stating that the refugees receive half the pay and are lied to about raises. Yet the refugees are afraid to speak out or stand up out of fear of losing their jobs and being sent back to Burma. An American worker who is concerned for the refugees asked, "What would happen if one of them got disabled or killed at work? Who would provide for his family?"

We feel as Americans that it is our duty to defend the defenseless and expose the wickedness of the unjust.

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Philippians 2:3-4

To Whom It May Concern,

I was employed at [the] W & K Steel fabrication shop in October and November of 2007. I had previous experience in two different welding fabrication shops. After a quick interview process, I was hired on at \$11.50/hr. I was surprised at how big the shop was, and that it had no heating or ventilation besides a large fan up near the roof. I was given a tour of my work area, mostly to familiarize me with the materials and tools I would be using. I was never shown where the first aid kit was or where any personal protective equipment was stored. Some of the daily routines of the other workers were shocking. Two of the Burmese men—Aa Oo, and another man whose name I don't remember—

were in charge of cutting large structural I-beams on a giant saw. They would climb on top of the 20 foot high pile of beams to hook them onto the overhead crane and lower them onto the saw. The beams were stacked one on top of another with no regard for safety; if a beam or a worker had slipped on this pile, the results could have been catastrophic. The paint booth was another very unsafe feature of the shop; it was actually a paint corner where steel was sprayed with red oxide paint and it got everywhere and wafted all throughout the shop. The one worker that was actually painting would wear a respirator, but I could smell the fumes all day, so everyone in the shop breathed in the toxic chemicals. As I said, there was no ventilation. Also, trucks would back right into the shop and be left running, with the exhaust spreading around the shop for all the workers to breathe in. I was never shown where to get a respirator, ear plugs, or safety glasses; work gloves were the only safety equipment I had access to. The company was much more interested in me producing for them than my personal safety. The roof leaked and when it rained, large puddles would gather on the floor, often near wall outlets. The electrical system was very outdated and the outlets were often loose in their housing or even hanging off the wall. There were a few ethnic groups of refugees employed at the shop. The one Burmese man I worked with, Aung Khang, told me that he was paid only \$9.00/hr and he did the same job I did and had more responsibilities.

Sean Lehr-Nuth

On Strike!!!

W & K Steel, LLC September 8, 2009
98 Antisbury Place
Rankin, PA 15104

ATTENTION: Edward Wilhelm, Celeste Wilhelm, Walter Kuhns, Scott Eicher

Due to the listed situations at W & K Steel, LLC that are beyond the control of me and my coworkers, I hereby give notice that we are on **STRIKE IMMEDIATELY** until the following conditions are corrected, implemented and met.

Safety Conditions

- Standing water on the floor
- Water running down into electrical panels
- Frayed extension cords with exposed bare wires in the standing water.
- Electrical shocks due to malfunctioning welding machines and exposed wires.
- No ventilation
- Fumes from paint
- Very low lighting and visibility
- Exposure to extreme cold weather
- Exposure to hazardous wastes that are not properly disposed of.
- Proper safety training for all employees and have a safety committee and program that is actually implemented.

Wages

- Equal pay for equal work. Wage discrimination must stop!
- Consistency in regards to Holiday and Vacation pay.
- When sent on a prevailing rate job, employees are to be paid the prevailing rate including overtime.
- Overtime hours should be on an as needed basis with adequate notice, requested by the supervisor and not held against anyone that cannot stay at last minute.
- No more one on one evaluation for raises.
- Raises are to be implemented on a set date.
- Equal raises for all employees.

Treatment of Foreign employees

- Proper training in the use of equipment, machinery, torches, grinders, etc.
- Translation for all refugees during safety meetings and company meetings.
 - Translation *must* be in the foreign workers language.
- Proper training in the use of the cranes and rigging.
- Formal job training to acquire addition skills to better serve their employer.
- Respect towards foreign workers by the management.
- Discriminatory remarks towards the foreign workers by management and coworkers must stop.

When these conditions and issues have been successfully corrected and stated in writing that they will remain corrected, we will return to the positions we are currently employed in at W & K Steel, LLC.

Thank You for your prompt Attention to these serious issues.

Timothy Hand

Aung Oo

My name is Aung Oo. I came to the United States in February 2006 as a Karen refugee from Burma with my family. In Burma there is a civil war. We could not stay in our village due to the ethnic cleansing program by the military government of Burma. We always lived in fear and danger. So, I abandoned our homeland and fled to a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border. But living in the refugee camp was difficult because we lived behind barb wire fences in a small bamboo house and it was very crowded. We were not allowed to go outside the camp to work so I had no way to support my family. My children were not allowed to go outside of the camp to study or get a higher education. Living in the refugee



camp was like being an animal in the zoo that could not go outside. In 2004 by the grace of God, thousands of the Karen people left the refugee camps and came to the United States through the Refugee Resettlement Program. I came here legally with the invitation of the U.S. Government. We have no citizenship in Burma because the Military Government does not consider us as their people. I knew very well that there are always difficulties for us living in a new homeland. But, for the chance of citizenship, freedom, opportunity to work and an education for my children made me decide to come here and to stand on my own. I started working at W & K Steel, a steel fabrication plant near Pittsburgh, I was paid \$7.50 per hour my first year. I have worked there for three years now and make \$9.50 per hour but the company pays me half compared to the American workers. There is wage discrimination for the other refugee workers at the plant also. There is no safety in the plant and I am afraid of being hurt and not being able to support my family. I have a family of six. I have to keep working. We are looked down upon by the company. I am on strike right now because I believe that in the United States all workers should have equal rights and equal opportunities and equal pay for equal work. I stood up and went on strike not only for myself but for all the refugee workers in the shop because our community is suffering. I know that we are exploited, so we really need your help.

Thank You,

Aung Oo

Hello, My name is Tim Hand and I have gone on strike against W & K Steel located in Rankin, PA. Let me tell you some reasons why some workers have gone on strike .

I work in the fabrication plant at W & K Steel. We fabricate structural steel that is used to support Buildings, roofs and stairs. The plant is in very poor condition with very unsafe working conditions. When it rains water pours onto the shop floor running down the electrical panels forcing us to stand on the water while we weld and use electrical power tools. The extension cords being used are frayed and not taped or repaired exposing bare wires so the risk of being electrocuted is very high.

Management was told of the problem with some of the outlets that are hanging out the proactive wall boxes but we were told to just be careful.

Ventilation is poor and we are constantly exposed to the fumes from the paint and workers have complained of becoming dizzy from the fumes.

Because of the lack of training and bad working conditions we have had several accidents,

FOR EXAMPLE;

A few months back an employee was using the overhead crane, which he was never trained on and he has been there for about seven years. When he went to lift a beam, the beam dog slipped off causing the beam to fall off the table hitting another employee (a refugee) in the leg and knocking him to the ground. Management told the employee that he was alright and to go back to work. After several days the employee went to the hospital and was told to take off 3 weeks.

The company should have known the equipment was unsafe. The beam dog that was used had been thrown away several weeks before because the safety latch was broken. A foreman in the shop dug it out of the trash and put it back into use. Safety in the shop is not a priority with the company, just productivity and profits.

Another accident was when an employee was told to run a mag drill without training.

He was drilling holes in a beam, and when he finished drilling, the bit had several metal shavings wrapped around it, so he reached in to clear away the shavings from the bit, and the metal shavings wrapped around his hand cutting his fingers badly, he will be scarred for life.

There are many recent refugees and immigrants who work at the shop also. Discrimination, Exploitation, verbal abuse and disrespect towards the refugees is a major issue.

The refugees are paid half of what I make, even though they perform the same work as me.

This is wage discrimination in my eyes and it is not right. Just because they do not speak English very well, does not give anybody the right to exploit them or pay them less.

Just recently on September 4, 2009, the shop manager came down to the locker room where we were changing to go home for the Labor Day weekend after working all day, he ordered two of the refugees to punch back in and get back to work. When they told him that they had plans and already worked eight hours, the manager verbally abused them and told them that "this is not a free country, get your *A* back to work." It was obvious that they were intimidated by him and they put their heads down and went back to work.

I have witnessed many abuses and brought them to the company managers and owner on several occasions and they have never addressed our concerns with any permanent solutions.

I had no choice but to go on strike and demand justice.

I would like for you to stand with us during our fight for justice at W & K Steel and sign our Appeal for Justice.

Timothy Hand



About Us

THE THREE RIVERS COALITION FOR JUSTICE



The Three Rivers Coalition for Justice is a human rights based organization comprised of community leaders, labor advocates, political leaders, religious leaders, students and the general public that have united together to expose the unjust treatment of the workers and refugees in our region.

We believe all employers should treat their workers ethically with respect and dignity, with fairness of pay and hours. We believe all workers have the right to earn a living wage, in a safe environment free from harassment, discrimination, favoritism and abuse. We believe that all that profit from the exploitation of workers are morally responsible for the treatment they receive and should be held accountable.

Our goal is to shed light on the unjust conditions to which the workers at W & K Steel are subjected and to provide the public with information and opportunities to assist us in helping the workers and refugees employed there improve their standard of living.

APPEAL FOR JUSTICE



I believe workers in America should not be mistreated or abused in any way. I agree that as Americans, it is our duty to defend the defenseless and expose the wickedness of the unjust.

I would like to enroll in the Coalition of Community and Civil organizations, student groups and private citizens showing support for the striking refugees and workers employed by W & K Steel LLC.

W & K Steel should be held morally responsible for their treatment of the refugees they have employed. I also denounce any general contractor, developer, public or private entity that profits from the mistreatment of workers; and believe entities that do so should be held accountable.

PLEASE PRINT

Print Name _____ Occupation _____

Organization _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone () _____ - _____ E-Mail _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Please mail to:
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3riverscoalitionforjustice@gmail.com