
It's About TIME! Campaign for Workers' Health & Safety

sponsored by:

Chinese Staff & Workers Association,
National Mobilization Against SweatShops
& Workers' Awaaz

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TESTIMONY OF MRS. YOU DI LIAO
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, SAFETY, AND TRAINING
HEARING ON "WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH FOR IMMIGRANT AND LOW WAGE WORKERS"
Wednesday, February 27, 2002, 2:00 PM
430 Dirksen Senate Office Building

My name is Mrs. You Di Liao. I am here today to represent the *It's About TIME! Campaign for Workers' Health and Safety*, which is sponsored by the Chinese Staff & Workers' Association, National Mobilization Against SweatShops and Workers' Awaaz. I am also here to represent all the workers in this country who, like myself, are stripped of our health and our dignity day by day.

For more than ten years, I worked in a garment sweatshop. From sunrise to well after sunset, I hung garments in a unionized factory. Each week I worked 6-7 days a week, 14 hours a day, like many thousands of garment workers. These crushing hours put me under intense stress. On July 4, 1997, while reaching for plastic garment bags, I collapsed and hit the floor. I then suffered a stroke, and was hospitalized for 40 days. When I left the hospital, I had no arm to work with and no leg to walk on.

I am only one of hundreds of thousands of injured workers in New York State and the millions of injured workers across the country. If you are not injured now and you're working long hours, it's just a matter of time before you develop serious health problems or injuries. How could it be that in the United States it is legal for bosses to force us to work these overtime hours and fire us if we dare to refuse? In a country that prides itself on its human-rights record, countless working people are being killed slowly. It's not enough to look at deaths on the job or the lack of bi-lingual education on health and safety. What about the majority of us--people who are robbed of our health little by little, day in and day out, until there is nothing left of us?

When we are injured, we must wait four, eight, or even 12 years for our cases to be resolved by the New York State Workers' Compensation Board. This is true in many other states. Meanwhile, we have nothing to live on. Our families fall apart. Because of our successful efforts to reform the Workers' Compensation Board, injured workers have received some benefits. But when we do receive Workers' Comp benefits, our payments are as low as \$40 a week. Who can live on \$40 a week? Some of us have no choice but to go back to work in pain. Others of us turn to public assistance. Some of us become homeless. We are treated like garbage.

Yet no state or federal law declares that these delays and long work hours to be violations of our human rights. However, they do violate international law under the NAFTA agreement, which President Clinton signed in 1993. As you know, the NAFTA labor-side companion agreement lists 11 labor principles. One principle requires that the signatory governments take actions necessary to prevent occupational accidents and diseases. Another principle requires adequate compensation for work-related injuries and illnesses. In signing NAFTA, our Federal government committed itself to taking a role to address workplace injuries. Last October, a delegation of injured workers, including myself, traveled to Mexico to file a petition charging the New York State Workers' Compensation Board for violations of the health and safety provisions under the labor side-agreement of NAFTA. But so far, the U.S. National Administrative Office has done nothing in response.

We call on this sub-committee and the Senate as a whole to take immediate action to address the long work hours and the delays in Workers' Compensation benefits that are destroying the lives of working people across this country. We ask that you commission a report by the General Accounting Office looking into the extent and the cause of delays in the New York State Workers' Compensation Board. We urge that you demand an explanation from the U.S. National Administrative Office about why it has not responded to our NAFTA petition, and what it plans to do. We ask you to develop a program to implement the Federal government's commitment, in its signing of NAFTA and its labor-side agreement, to ensuring fair and timely compensation to injured workers. And last, we call on you to introduce a federal law that prohibits mandatory overtime.

We cannot wait any longer. Our lives are at stake. We urge the Senate to take leadership in protecting and promoting the human rights of working people in this country. To maintain our health, our families and our homes when we are injured, we must have immediate and just compensation. And to ensure that more workers do not become injured and worked to the bone, we must have control over the hours that we work. All of those here with me today—and thousands of others who could not be here—are here because we are sick and tired of being sick and tired. We want a fighting chance at a life of good health and dignity. We hope you will join us in this endeavor.

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