Local

Forum aims to better working conditions

Suggestions include earning a livable wage, being paid on time, fair treatment

By Holly Hines
Iowa City Press-Citizen

Workers, panelists and activists gathered in Iowa City on Thursday to speak about wage theft and other workplace issues at a Local Workers Speak Out forum.

Juan Becerra of North Liberty, who is currently employed assembling hygiene products, was among the speakers at the forum, organized by the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa at the Iowa City Public Library.

Becerra said that while working in construction in Iowa, he faced unfair treatment and discrimination on the job. He said he’s been afraid to speak up to employers about issues he’s encountered at work.

Becerra said examples of discrimination he’s faced include working with an individual who called all Hispanic employees “Julio” and working with an individual who wore a helmet with a Nazi symbol printed on it.

“That’s something that needs to stop, and that’s why I’m here,” he said. “I want everybody to be treated equal.”

During the forum, leaders with the Center for Worker Justice presented a list of demands for improving conditions for workers:

- Right to form a union.

See FORUM, Page 4A

Forum

Continued from Page 3A

- Livable wages.
- Getting paid on time with a pay stub.
- Secure schedules.
- Workplaces free of discrimination and racism.

Several other workers also spoke Thursday about poor work conditions in Iowa, including Effrin Hobbs of Iowa City.

Hobbs said he’s sought work through staffing agencies in Iowa during the past several years. He said his schedule is never regular and that he spends many hours waiting to see if positions are available.

“I can’t even plan anything with my family,” he said.

Hobbs said he’s also faced racism and hurtful comments at work.

Colin Gordon, senior research consultant for the Iowa Policy Project, spoke as a panelist about data the Iowa Policy Project and Center for Worker Justice collected through interviews with about 300 workers in the Iowa City area.

Gordon said a majority of respondents, or about 150, reported that they are contingent workers who don’t know what hours they will work on a day-to-day basis.

He said that about a quarter of respondents reported working unpaid overtime amounting to about $40,000 in wages lost.

Gordon said researchers are continuing to conduct interviews in the Iowa City area.

Jesi Case, president of the Iowa City Federation of Labor, said the Federation and Center for Worker Justice plan to form a committee to focus on work related to demands organizers presented at the forum.

Case said issues workers in Johnson County often face vary from employer to employer. He said workers may encounter wage theft, irregular schedules and harassment at staffing agencies, while workers in construction may face misclassification.

“It almost depends on what industry we’re talking about,” he said.

He said workers in the hospitality industry tend to face all issues at a high rate.

Misty Rebik said before the forum that organizers hoped the forum would spur elected officials, employers and others to take action and change.

She said the center also hoped to raise overall awareness about issues workers in the Iowa City area may face in addition to wage theft, such as discrimination and irregular scheduling.

“We’re hoping to educate the community about the reality of the workplace in the Iowa City and Coralville area,” Rebik said.

Reach Holly Hines at hhines2@press-citizen.com or at 887-5414.