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THE EXPLOITATIVE MECHANISMS OF PRECARIOUS WORK

NATIONAL INSIGHTS AND NEW ORLEANS' WORKER VOICES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

▪ Executive Summary	3
○ Key Findings.....	3
○ Key Recommendations.....	4
○ Why New Orleans.....	4
▪ Methodology →	
▪ Background	5
○ Temporary Precarious Work Arrangements.....	5
○ The Economy of Precarious Work.....	6
○ Scale and Composition of Precarious Work.....	7
○ Federal Policy Gaps.....	8
○ New Orleans Labor Landscape.....	8
▪ Policy.....	8
▪ Organizing.....	9
○ Neoliberal Outsourcing Reshapes Event Labor.....	10
▪ Temp Work, Tourism, and Extractive Practices in New Orleans.....	11
▪ Temporary Work Creates Low-Wage, Insecure Employment.....	11
▪ Spotlight: Mardi Gras Temp Workers	13
▪ Recurring Gaps and Worker Sentiments	18
○ Administrative Dysfunction.....	18
○ Health and Safety.....	18
○ Transportation Deficits and Spatial Inequities.....	19
○ Skill Erasure and Blocked Mobility.....	19
▪ Paths Forward for Temporary Workers Work	19
▪ Protecting Existing Policy and Enforcement.....	19
▪ Federal, State, and Municipal Guidance.....	20
• Restoring Worker Power Act (2020).....	20
• New Jersey Temporary Workers Bill of Rights.....	22
• Illinois Day and Temporary Labor Services Act.....	24
• Philadelphia POWER Act.....	26
▪ Conclusion	28
▪ Endnotes	29

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an economy increasingly defined by precarious employment and contingent labor, temporary workers face persistent structural disadvantages. This is especially true for those recruited for short-term events, outsourced public contracts, or staffing agency placements. While labor protections formally exist, enforcement gaps and employer cost-shifting enable systemic abuse. For instance, nearly one in four temporary workers reported experiencing wage theft during their assignments.¹ At the same time, U.S. labor standards enforcement is dramatically under-resourced: the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) reports recovering more than \$273 million in back wages for almost 152,000 workers in fiscal year (FY) 2024—but even this represents only a fraction of the estimated losses across sectors.²

This report examines the hidden dynamics of temporary labor through an in-depth case study of event-based workers in New Orleans. Like many other cities, New Orleans is a place where the tourism and festival economy magnifies the risks of outsourcing, rapid work cycles, and worker invisibility. By situating worker testimonies within broader patterns of contract fragmentation, supervisory ambiguity, and racialized labor segmentation, we show how the “gigged out” staffing model undermines worker stability, safety, and dignity.

The report is structured in three parts. First, we map national conditions of wage theft, misclassification, and enforcement shortfalls relevant to temporary work. Second, we present a three-part case study of New Orleans event-based workers, including worker spotlights and thematic analysis of recurring harms. Lastly, we propose a suite of policy responses that advocates, worker centers, policy administrators, and public sector actors can leverage.

KEY FINDINGS

- ✦ **Structural invisibility:** Temporary workers are systematically excluded from core protections (equal pay, benefits, credible oversight) because they are subcontracted, misclassified, or inserted into opaque employment chains.
- ✦ **Cost-shifting and record-keeping failure:** Employers shift risk onto workers by withholding documentation, eliminating consistent oversight, and exploiting gaps in record retention and transparency.
- ✦ **Enforcement dysfunction:** Despite growing public awareness, regulatory capacity remains weak; federal investigator staffing is at a 52-year low, constraining proactive action, and local enforcement in New Orleans is non-existent.
- ✦ **Intersectional vulnerability:**³ Workers are disproportionately Black, Latino, and immigrants.
- ✦ **Leveraging local alternatives:** Municipal ordinances and permanent Offices of Labor Standards show promise as strategic responses. For example, the Protect Our Workers, Enforce Rights (POWER) Act in Philadelphia demonstrates how record-keeping mandates, bad actor registries, and enhanced investigatory authority can turn labor law rights into enforceable realities.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✦ Expand coverage: Include temporary and staffing agency workers in all core labor protections (i.e. minimum wage, overtime, paid leave, health and safety).
- ✦ Establish parity and transparency: Require “equal pay for equal work” where agency-placed workers perform the same job as their direct-hire peers, and mandate disclosure of assignment terms.
- ✦ Strengthen record retention and burden-shifting: Employers must maintain detailed records, including for hours, pay, and assignment terms. The absence of such records should aid workers’ claims, rather than hinder them.
- ✦ Build enforcement infrastructure: Fund regulator-to-worker ratios that allow proactive inspections, create searchable registries of repeat violators, and tie contract/license eligibility to compliance.
- ✦ Center worker-driven accountability: Support worker centers and community-based organizations as enforcement partners, incorporating testimonies, real-time documentation, and collaborative investigatory tools into policy design.

WHY NEW ORLEANS?

While national data shows the rise of contingent, outsourced, and event-based labor, these structural dynamics become especially visible in high-intensity urban event contexts. New Orleans’s Carnival economy exemplifies this.⁴ The city routinely hires temporary crews—often under-resourced, rapidly deployed, and mediated through staffing company intermediaries—to clean, secure, and manage the public space impacts of Mardi Gras. Contract posting such as 2017’s sanitation job fair highlights this pattern, where the city recruited “temporary employees ... to assist with sanitation during the Mardi Gras season.”⁵ A dense patchwork of contractors, subcontractors, city departments, and staffing firms creates the conditions under which the structural invisibility of precarious workers most sharply manifests. As the city engages large-scale public operations under tight timeframes, workers often face ambiguous employment relationships, limited documentation, and fragmented accountability, making New Orleans a compelling lens for examining how national fault lines in the staffing industry play out in ground-level practice.



BACKGROUND

TEMPORARY PRECARIOUS WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Precarious work can be generally described as a non-traditional form of employment that is unstable, uncertain, and insecure, and where the workers, rather than businesses or the government, take on the risks related to their jobs and receive few non-wage benefits or legal protections.⁶ Temporary contract work is a form of precarious work. This type of employment is characterized by its short-term nature and lack of a standard employee-employer relationship. In the United States, thousands of employers (often referred to as “host employers”) use subcontracted work to extract short-term labor from millions of job seekers, most often using staffing agencies as intermediaries.⁷ It is also commonplace for local, state, and federal government subagencies to buy temporary labor through these private intermediaries for specific projects. These working arrangements are limited to a specified period based on the needs outlined and decided by employing organizations.

Due to the absence of a standard definition, there is no single method to measure precariousness.⁸ Certain elements of unstable employment are reflected in other quality-of-work concepts, such as temporary work and non-traditional work arrangements. The ideas of precarious work, contingent work, gig work, and various work arrangements are interconnected; for instance, certain individuals in standard work setups may face unjust treatment, which is a feature of precarious work.⁹ Although a growing body of work addresses non-traditional employment arrangements (e.g., contract, temporary, on-call, agency work),¹⁰ many analyses do not explicitly connect these arrangements to the broader concept of employment precariousness or investigate how such arrangements produce precarious outcomes.

Temporary workers often perform the same type of work as those in similar positions who were hired directly.¹¹ The key difference lies in their working conditions; temp workers often work for less pay and fewer benefits and have little to no job security. Both host employers and the staffing agencies that they work with have exclusive decision-making power over the payment practices. Profit is at the center of these practices, relegating temp workers to inequitable pay structures, subpar wages, and wage theft with largely no institutional or legal protections. This form of work is attractive to employing agencies to cut costs and maximize revenue; host employers and government agencies save money by not hiring full-time employees, and staffing intermediaries profit by taking a certain percentage of the fees charged to the hosts for this labor. In other words, it is common practice for private agencies to extract much of their revenue by charging markups on worker wages. These workers constitute the most vulnerable segment of the workforce, and they are often classified as, but not limited to, immigrants, domestic workers, day laborers, young workers, the unemployed, and the formerly incarcerated.

The growth of the temporary work industry since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed egregious patterns of pay inequity and poor job conditions. According to industry estimates, between 13 and 16 million U.S. workers find work via staffing agencies each year.¹² Both the labor and recruitment practices of host employers and staffing agencies have created a

multitude of job quality issues for workers in these roles. Existing data reveals deep-seated problems related to job access, hiring discrimination, access to benefits, health and safety, and mobility within the national temp industry. Agencies have also been found to engage in discriminatory practices at various stages of the hiring and enrollment process.¹³ Accounts of anti-Black discrimination have increased since the beginning of the pandemic-driven staffing agency surge, and take the form of employers utilizing coded language to seek non-Black individuals for employment, manipulating eligibility criteria unlawfully, designating Black candidates to “less favorable” positions,” or the unabated occurrence of interpersonal racism in the workplace.

Workplace practices that degrade worker voice and autonomy only serve an economy that favors and centers employers over laborers. Temporary help agency work, independent contracting driven by cost pressures, on-call scheduling, and platform-based gigs allow firms to adjust quickly to fluctuations in demand. However, these arrangements shift the burden of unpredictability and job instability onto workers, who often face irregular hours, uncertain pay, and limited access to benefits. This isn't a neutral shift in job design; it's a structural reconfiguration that normalizes insecurity as a condition of employment.

Temporary workers' voices shared in this report were hired on seasonal, short-term employment contracts with immediate hire. In this practice, workers typically arrive at staffing agencies on a designated day without a guarantee of work. If chosen, they are retained and typically provided a work assignment immediately. This arrangement allows a company to hire a large volume of workers “on the spot” through an intermediary to complete certain tasks within a fixed period of time. Employers frequently adopt this practice for short-term, labor-intensive work. These contracts are often characterized by long working hours, unstable pay, surveillance and monitoring, and little to no benefits. However, the quick hiring can be appealing to those who are unemployed or are experiencing poverty. Thus, employers can exploit such degrees of desperation and workers “consent” to these conditions.

THE ECONOMY OF PRECARIOUS WORK

The Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that in July 2024, 11.9 million workers, or 7.4 percent of all workers employed in the U.S., were independent contractors on their sole or main job. They also reported that 12.8 percent of multiple jobholders had a second job that was contingent, or “exact-in-duration.” As of July-August 2025, approximately 2.5 million people were employed through temporary help and staffing agencies in the U.S., a slight increase from the previous month, indicating a steady number in a robust but potentially slowing economic environment.

The diversity of arrangements masks a common feature: employment relationships that reduce or remove the protections, benefits, and predictability typically associated with standard full-time employment. Measurement challenges and definitional inconsistency across public surveys and private studies complicate a single precise headcount, but multiple data streams indicate that these forms of work are widespread and deeply embedded across both low-wage service sectors and higher-skill professional work.

Unstable employment negatively impacts workers' health and well-being.¹⁴ Unstable jobs subject employees to dangerous and harmful work environments that threaten their physical well-being and can restrict individuals' control over their work and personal lives, resulting in psychosocial stress. Ultimately, some of the most important effects of unstable employment include social and economic hardship, which impact general well-being. Research has demonstrated the health effects, including mental health impacts, of certain features of unstable employment, such as job insecurity and temporary positions.

The existence of precarious work in multiple essential industries allows employers to maintain a flexible workforce, increase the use of contingent workers, utilize relaxed job quality standards, and obtain most discretion in hiring and firing as well as employment outcomes. By design, precarious work provides few opportunities for advancement or stability. This framework supports and emboldens the interests of business and capital, operating in tandem with the debilitation of worker voice and power. Black and Latino workers are also overrepresented in hazardous jobs where temporary staffing is used.¹⁵ Research has shown that certain temporary staffing agencies participate in racially biased hiring or job placements; these agencies and their clients have been shown to use coded language to indicate their preference for or aversion to workers based on race or gender.

SCALE AND COMPOSITION OF PRECARIOUS WORK

The landscape of precarious work is diverse. Large, documented staffing firms place millions of workers annually across health care, warehousing, manufacturing, administration, and events, often on short assignments or seasonal contracts.¹⁶ App- and platform-based work have created dense pockets of "independent contracting" in rideshare, delivery, and freelance digital services, where workers are commonly paid per task or project and lack traditional payroll protections in ways where they are treated and controlled similar to employees. One study found more than 7.3 million app-based workers in the U.S., with the app-based economy contributing over \$212 billion annually.¹⁷ Parallel to these are millions of sole proprietors and non-employer businesses that show up in Census and tax data rather than payroll records; these include couriers, cleaners, tutors, and creative freelancers whose earnings and hours vary widely. In 2022, there were 29.8 million non-employer businesses with \$1.7 trillion in receipts.¹⁸ Aggregate indicators show growth in non-employer receipts and persistence in temporary placements during periods of hiring flexibility, but variances across occupation, geography, and worker demographics mean aggregate figures obscure sharp inequalities in earnings stability and access to benefits.¹⁹

FEDERAL POLICY GAPS

Although many federal labor laws like the Fair Labor Standards Act and Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) apply to temporary workers, in practice they are often not protected due to loopholes, weak enforcement, and an ambiguity around which employer—a staffing agency or host company—is ultimately liable. This latter strategy to avoid responsibility has resulted in calls for “joint employer” laws to hold both entities culpable in case of a violation

United States labor and social policy largely evolved around a standard employer-employee model, producing regulatory and programmatic gaps for contingent workers. Employment classification rules underline access to minimum wage, overtime, unemployment insurance, employer-sponsored health coverage, retirement plans, and labor protections;²⁰ when workers are classified as independent contractors or placed through third parties, eligibility for those protections can disappear or become difficult to enforce.

Data collection is fragmented, which weakens the evidence base for policy and enforcement. Many administrative and survey systems capture payroll employment but undercount non-employer activity and platform-mediated transactions. Enforcement capacity at wage, tax, and workplace safety agencies varies with funding and political priorities, leaving many contingent workers reliant on complaint-driven remedies that are slow, costly, or unfeasible. Legal ambiguity also hinders complaint-driven remedies and reporting by creating confusion over who is the legal employer, increasing the fear of retaliation and making it difficult for workers to access clear, effective reporting mechanisms. This confusion creates a significant power imbalance, discouraging workers from utilizing complaint-driven systems and making it easier to maintain illegal practices. State and municipal experiments have produced a patchwork of rules addressing classification, wage transparency, and platform obligations, but the result is regulatory fragmentation rather than uniform coverage across the workforce.

NEW ORLEANS LANDSCAPE

Policy

Right-to-work laws and a pro-employer political environment in Louisiana weaken unionization campaigns, collective bargaining leverage, and political pressure for stronger worksite enforcement. Longstanding state policy environments favor employer flexibility and a reduction in their liability for maintaining safe worksites. For example, the state government does not have a Department of Labor, but instead “Louisiana Works,” formerly the Louisiana Workforce Commission. Its primary functions are to maintain a limited Workforce Development Program (including an online hiring hall), a Workers Compensation Fund, and an Unemployment Insurance Fund. These two funds are regularly altered by the legislature to reduce payments owed to workers. Currently, Louisiana Works focuses on only two passive complaint-based

investigations of labor law violations: minors and medical payments. Very few industries face regulation directly from Louisiana Works.

Due to this political climate, state-level protections are sparse and leave gaps for event-based and temporary workers. Louisiana relies on federal minimums for many basic worker protections, and there is no statewide paid sick leave or universal hazard pay mandate that would cover short-term event workers.²¹ Pre-emption and limited local authority reduce the ability of municipalities to set stronger standards for contractors. City procurement and contracting rules historically have prioritized cost and operational speed over labor standards, constraining the types of worker protection clauses the city of New Orleans can require in rapid-event contracts.²² The practice of contracting workers for large events creates accountability gaps through subcontracting and informal hiring. Public and private vendors retain broad ability to hire through subcontractors or ad hoc direct hires for short-term crews, which can obscure the entity responsible when wages are late, equipment is withheld, or safety measures fail. Procurement and contract language rarely includes explicit joint-employer clauses, living-wage requirements, or basic incident/retention protocols for temporary staff. The absence of these clauses means that contractors can meet minimal administrative requirements while avoiding enforceable obligations for food, transportation, personal protective equipment (PPE), or secure clock-in/clock-out systems.

The fragmented data and recordkeeping on nonpayroll and direct-hire temp placements also impact monitoring and enforcement. Administrative systems capture payroll employment more consistently than one-off direct hires and informal placements, producing undercounts and weakening the evidence base needed to enforce labor standards or redesign procurement rules. Legal and administrative barriers faced by formerly incarcerated and undocumented workers, populations that disproportionately seek work with staffing agencies, also restrict formal recourse. Identification, voting-status checks used in some hiring processes, and limited re-entry supports not only exclude people from stable hiring pipelines but also reduce their ability to challenge wage theft or unsafe conditions.

Organizing

Rank-and-file city worker formations have recently secured concrete municipal gains that reshaped the local political terrain for contractor accountability.²³ The New Orleans City Workers Organizing Committee won a \$15/hour floor for city employees, and city council action in 2023 to establish stronger rights for city employees created new institutional leverage for bargaining and procurement demands. Citywide policy campaigns led by coalitions like Step Up Louisiana successfully placed worker protections into municipal governance through the Workers' Bill of Rights, which voters approved and which organizers and advocates are translating into implementation strategies, such as a proposed Workers' Commission and Healthy Workplace policies, that create new entry points to educate municipal contracts on worker protections.²⁴

The City of New Orleans maintains procurement and contract systems that are actionable leverage points for organizers: public contract records, bid tabulations, and an accessible contracts search provide documentary routes for advocates to identify vendors, monitor

contract terms, and push for inclusion of enforceable labor clauses in event and service contracts.²⁵

NEOLIBERAL OUTSOURCING RESHAPES EVENT LABOR

The expansion of temporary, event-based, and contingent labor around municipal functions can be understood as part of a broader neoliberal project that systematically shifts responsibilities and risks from public institutions onto private actors and individual workers. Beginning in the late twentieth century, policymakers and administrators embraced market-based reforms, privatization, and contracting as ways to reduce public payrolls, accelerate delivery, and signal fiscal discipline.²⁶ A common consequence has been the transfer of routine public service tasks like sanitation, crowd management, and event clean-up into private and contingent labor markets, where cost-minimization incentives encourage flexibility but also lower job quality and weaken long-term public accountability.

Outsourcing public functions to temporary labor intermediaries produces predictable institutional effects that are visible in the Mardi Gras cleanup context documented in this report. Contracting fragments responsibility across multiple vendors and subcontractors, erodes managerial capacity within public agencies to monitor day-to-day working conditions, and substitutes short-term transactional relationships for the more durable employment relationships historically found in the public sector. Research has noted that these reforms reshaped job quality by dismantling internal labor protections and normalizing flexible staffing practices, changes associated with heightened job insecurity, reduced worker voice, and managerial strategies that prioritize cost containment over health, safety, and continuity of service.²⁷



This public-to-private transfer also alters the political economy of enforcement. When services are delivered through layered contracting chains, regulatory and administrative remedies become complaint-driven, evidence-dependent, and procedurally complex; the burden of proof effectively shifts onto individual workers, transferring responsibility away from companies and employers and onto people who often lack the time, energy, or understanding of the relevant laws and procedures to pursue claims. As a result, wage theft, misplacement, and safety lapses are harder to detect, attribute, and remedy.

TEMP WORK, TOURISM, AND EXTRACTIVE PRACTICES IN NEW ORLEANS

In New Orleans, labor abuse, injustice, and precarity are deeply entrenched within the temporary and contract workforce, particularly among those hired on the spot for tourism and event industries. A significant portion of these workers are immigrants, who have historically faced exploitation due to their vulnerable immigration status. Following Hurricane Katrina, many Latino workers were recruited for reconstruction efforts but encountered substandard living conditions, wage theft, and inadequate safety measures.²⁸ These laborers were often housed in overcrowded trailers without proper facilities and subjected to hazardous work environments without adequate protection.

The tourism sector's reliance on temporary labor exacerbates socioeconomic disparities, as these workers frequently occupy low-wage, unstable positions without benefits such as health care, paid leave, or opportunities for advancement. This employment model disproportionately affects marginalized communities, with Black workers and individuals with low incomes bearing the brunt of exploitative labor practices. The average unemployment rate for workers of color in Metro New Orleans was 11.2 percent from 2011 through 2015, significantly higher than the rate of 5.8 percent for white workers.²⁹

The transient nature of the workforce, combined with language barriers and legal constraints, made it difficult for workers to negotiate better labor conditions or seek redress for abuses. This situation highlights the vulnerabilities faced by immigrant laborers in disaster recovery efforts and clearly highlights the need for comprehensive protections to prevent exploitation.

TEMP WORK CREATES LOW-WAGE, INSECURE EMPLOYMENT IN NEW ORLEANS

Temporary workers involved in Mardi Gras festivities most often find themselves in positions with minimal job security. In 2023, the City of New Orleans announced temporary positions at \$15 per hour, with the potential to work up to 100 hours during the two-week Mardi Gras parade season.³⁰ These roles, including tasks like trash pickup and mask distribution, are

essential, yet they offer limited financial stability and few benefits.³¹ According to a 2023 study, Mardi Gras accounted for over 3 percent of New Orleans' gross domestic product, underscoring the event's economic significance.³² However, the workers who facilitate these celebrations often remain economically marginalized.

Vulnerability to Economic Shocks

The reliance on temporary labor for events like Mardi Gras exposes workers to heightened economic vulnerability. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Latino workers, many of whom were undocumented, were recruited for reconstruction efforts.³³ They faced hazardous conditions, including exposure to toxic debris, and were susceptible to wage theft and work-related injuries. Such vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the transient nature of event-based employment, leaving workers without a safety net during economic downturns or unforeseen disruptions.

Commodification of Culture

Mardi Gras exemplifies the commodification of New Orleans' rich cultural heritage. The 2023 Mardi Gras celebration brought in \$891 million, nearly double the estimated amount from 2014.³⁴ While the city reaps substantial economic benefits, the workers, who are predominantly from marginalized communities, receive minimal compensation and recognition. This dynamic reduces cultural expressions to marketable commodities, enriching a few while perpetuating the exploitation of those who preserve and present these traditions.

SPOTLIGHT: MARDI GRAS TEMPORARY WORKERS

The following narratives illustrate the systemic failures of temp employment from the perspective of Mardi Gras cleanup workers. Their testimonies illuminate recurring patterns of administrative disarray, unsafe conditions, racialized neglect, and the moral cost of disposability

SYLVESTER R.

For Sylvester, Mardi Gras cleanup laid bare how the temporary labor system weaponizes vulnerability. He worked overtime hours – six days, two doubles, and roughly seventy hours without overtime pay. A lifelong resident of New Orleans East, he described lining up before dawn after receiving a last-minute text, only to discover that being placed in the wrong bus group would cost him an entire day's wages. The sense of powerlessness in that moment, he explained, came not just from the lost salary but from the realization that he had no channel to contest it. Sylvester, who carries the stigma of a past felony conviction, was further excluded when agencies demanded voter cards to prove employment eligibility, a document inaccessible to him due to Louisiana's disenfranchisement laws. These experiences combined to form a luck of the draw system, where the most marginalized—particularly formerly incarcerated Black men—were consistently denied fair treatment. His commute home underscored the risks layered on top of low pay: when buses stopped running, he walked through flood-soaked, dimly lit blocks at through the night, with hope he would not be harassed. For Sylvester, temp worker justice is not simply about cleaning streets; it's about confronting a system that devalues workers' time, labor, and dignity, while trapping those already marked by the criminal legal system in cycles of exclusion.

CHAD P.

For Chad, the Mardi Gras cleanup grind was inseparable from the precariousness of his personal life. A thirty-three-year-old father of two from Gentilly, Chad had already cycled through landscaping, warehouse shifts, and sanitation gigs when he joined the temp crew. The work meant 14-hour double shifts, often from dusk until dawn, performed at a punishing pace. Supervisors requested that crews move faster even as Chad's back was in pain and his swollen feet barely carried him forward. This was labor done for survival rather than stability: while tourist routes sparkled each morning, his own family lived through repeated evictions and the uncertainty of rotating couches for shelter. He emphasized that the pay itself was unpredictable—not only capped at \$15 an hour but eroded by unpaid hours spent lining up before dawn or waiting through chaotic clock-out delays. Safety was another concern. Chad recalled festival goers hurling bottles at workers and cars weaving dangerously close to cleanup lines, with no security presence to intervene. What lingered most in his account was the sense of

injustice: the same city that invests heavily to guarantee a pristine tourist image by sunrise neglects the neighborhoods where its workers live, neighborhoods like New Orleans East that remain littered and underserved year-round. To Chad, the Mardi Gras shifts symbolized a broader racial and environmental inequity, where Black workers sustain the city's cultural economy yet are denied stability, safety, and investment in their own communities.

CAPRI S.

Capri's testimony reflects the layered struggles of being both a mother and a temp worker in an industry that fails to account for either caregiving responsibilities or women's safety. At twenty-six, she balanced four overnight cleanup shifts with subsidized housing and SNAP assistance while raising her young daughter. Each evening, she swept beads and debris around Bourbon Street, a site where the hostility of intoxicated crowds was palpable. Capri recalled one man attempting to grab her, forcing her to yell for help in a moment where she realized the absence of security put her at constant risk. The dangers of the job extended into the commute: since buses didn't run after 3 a.m., she spent \$25 a night on Uber rides home, cutting sharply into her \$15.50 hourly pay. The job also left her confronting hunger; she remembered surviving on chips and soda across multiple nights because no meals were provided. She illustrates how women workers in the temp industry carry compounded burdens—navigating harassment, food insecurity, and child care gaps—while contributing essential labor that sustains the city's largest tourist events.

ARTHUR C.

Arthur, who was raised in the Lower Ninth Ward and lives in the 7th Ward, spoke from the perspective of a veteran of temp labor. Having cycled through jobs in warehouses, construction, and kitchens, Arthur described Mardi Gras cleanup as both familiar and grueling. During his first year on cleanup, the crews worked double shifts hauling refuse and clearing clogged storm drains filled with foul-smelling gray sludge. The conditions were as degrading as they were exhausting. Arthur recalled the inverse swap of physical and administrative labor: after hours bent over raking, he faced another hour-long wait to clock out, trudging blocks to an unheated warehouse where workers crowded around hand-written timesheets. The absence of daily meals left workers scavenging for food, with many only able to haphazardly find snacks and water. Phones died, leaving people unable to call for rides home. Arthur's story displays how temp work reduces people not just to cheap labor but to expendable bodies, stripped of rest, nutrition, and safety. His story illustrates the cumulative indignities that define festival cleanup: a relentless extraction of time and energy from workers without regard for their humanity.

CHRIS L.

Chris's experience highlighted how opacity and retaliation are embedded in the temp system. A 29-year-old warehouse temp, he entered Mardi Gras cleanup expecting hazard pay and straightforward instructions. Instead, his 12-hour shift was riddled with confusion: supervisors gave conflicting directions on bus pickups, and the only equipment provided was a thin vest. Chris calculated that his promised \$15 an hour shrank considerably after taxes and unexplained deductions, but when he tried to raise questions, he was warned that, "you complain, you don't get called back." Having worked across four other temp agencies, Chris recognized this as the norm: a deliberate silencing of worker grievances enforced by the threat of losing future shifts. He also observed how skill was disregarded entirely—novices and seasoned workers performed identical tasks for the same pay, erasing any incentive for advancement. What his story exposes is a labor structure where transparency is absent by design, pay is unpredictable, and workers have no independent mechanism to contest unsafe conditions or missing wages. The Mardi Gras cleanup economy is not merely precarious; it is actively organized to deny accountability.

"You complain, you don't get called back."

Chris L.

KYLE S.

Kyle's Mardi Gras shifts illustrated how administrative sloppiness can translate directly into wage theft. His story began with a bus ticket mix-up: meant to streamline assignments, the Account Based Ticket (ABT) system—a cloud-based system temp work agencies use to track attendance, shifts, or job assignments—instead left him stranded in the wrong group, costing him \$180 for a full day's labor. "They didn't have real tickets. They just asked for numbers," he recalled, exposing how a fragile system left workers bearing the cost of its failures. For 10 hours, Kyle raked beads, bagged debris, and cleared drains without a supervisor present to monitor or verify his work. He invested in protective boots himself, but his surgical mask provided little defense against the dust, leaving him coughing up particles for days. No first-aid support was available, further underscoring the disregard for worker health. Kyle's testimony demonstrates the sheer instability of temp work: pay was not determined by labor performed but by whether workers were placed correctly in a chaotic system, and safety depended entirely on what individuals could afford to purchase themselves. His story captures how Mardi Gras cleanup reflects a broader reality in temp labor, where even basic accountability mechanisms are missing, and workers are punished for errors not of their making.

ANTHONY N.

Anthony, a 22-year-old Vietnamese American, entered Mardi Gras cleanup with the dual perspective of a gig worker and an aspiring musician. By day he delivered food, by night he worked drywall piece-rate jobs, and he saw the festival cleanup shift as one more way to fund his studio time. Earning \$15.50 an hour for a 10-hour shift, he joined others in raking debris and clearing drains, describing the work as a collective effort that revealed “how hard people work together.” Yet even as he found moments of camaraderie, Anthony’s attention turned to the broader landscape of neglect in New Orleans East, where his family lived. He noticed piles of dumped appliances and discarded toys sitting in flood zones, a toxic backdrop that stood in stark contrast to the immaculate tourist areas cleaned daily after parades. For Anthony, the contrast highlighted environmental inequity: his community, largely immigrant and working-class, lived amid systemic neglect, even while their labor sustained the city’s most profitable cultural events. Anthony’s story demonstrates how younger workers navigate precarity with creativity—stretching every dollar, recycling cans for extra income, and tying survival labor to personal dreams—yet remain subject to the same cycles of exploitation and neglect as their peers.

For 10 hours, Kyle raked beads, bagged debris, and cleared drains without a supervisor present to monitor or verify his work. He invested in protective boots himself, but his surgical mask provided little defense against the dust, leaving him coughing up particles for days. No first-aid support was available.

Kyle S.

CHARLIE P.

For Charlie, a Honduran immigrant living in New Orleans East, survival has always depended on piecing together informal work and extending solidarity to those around him. His daily life is a patchwork of yard-cleaning jobs, small favors for neighbors, and temporary cleanup shifts during Mardi Gras. Despite the instability, Charlie embodies a kind of ethic rooted in mutual aid: he is the person who shows up when someone else cannot, who gives cash gifts when others are short, who says, “If you need me more, bro, I’m coming all day.” But this ethic of generosity coexists with constant precarity. Charlie admitted plainly that, after years of stringing together underpaid gigs with no benefits or security, “I’m looking for a steady job.” His Mardi Gras experience revealed the everyday hazards of such temp work. Communication was haphazard. He often received crucial details about pay only because another worker texted him, worried about receiving pay. He spent hours outside warehouses in the cold rain at 3 a.m. with no shelter, cramming into buses for warmth or charging his phone in shop windows to stay awake. While gloves and vests were handed out, protective masks, goggles, or even guaranteed water breaks were missing. Charlie’s story underscores not just the instability of immigrant labor but

also the way public contracts and agencies structure vulnerability into the very conditions of work, leaving men like him exposed, exhausted, and still searching for permanence.

REVA J.

Reva entered Mardi Gras cleanup from a place of deep instability. Forty years old and recently relocated to New Orleans East, she hoped to find steady footing through family ties and dreams of opening a hair-braiding business. But with her ID and Social Security card lost on a bus ride, she could not access regular work. Instead, Reva became a “standby” temp worker, lingering in two-hour overnight lines without pay until a crew ran short and allowed her to join. Reva managed only two shifts during the festival, both marked by the sharp contradictions of temporary labor. She recalled the small kindnesses that made the work tolerable: a lead worker showing her the ropes with patience, fellow workers sharing water, and a box of chicken divided among hungry crew members. Yet these gestures contrasted with the absence of basic protections. With no bus service at 3 a.m., she scrambled for expensive Uber rides that ate into her earnings, while working with only rakes and thin ponchos, and without masks or boots, to shield her from wind-blown debris. For Reva, Mardi Gras cleanup was simultaneously “relaxing” in the sense that it gave her something to do amid housing instability, yet also precarious, reminding her that survival in New Orleans meant depending on chance openings, underpaid labor, and the goodwill of others. Reva highlights how temp work traps women like her at the intersection of displacement, low pay, and institutional neglect.

AYANNA W.

Eighteen-year-old Ayanna entered Mardi Gras cleanup as a recent high school graduate with culinary ambitions but quickly discovered that the work bore little resemblance to a job and more to an endurance contest. Orientation itself felt chaotic and hostile: hundreds of people crammed under tents for hours, supervisors encouraging competition by telling them to “fight to get what you want.” Ayanna described it as a kind of Hunger Games, in which a disorganized scramble that set the tone for the work that followed. Once on the job, the conditions aggravated her health. Dust clouds from leaf blowers triggered severe allergies, forcing her to take “five pills a day” just to breathe, while the makeshift gear she relied on—borrowed goggles and a scarf—did little to protect her. Shifts stretched from pre-dawn bus rides to 3 a.m. clock-outs, leaving her swollen, fatigued, and breaking out in rashes that lasted days. No masks, reliable water breaks, or humane pacing were provided; exhaustion and exposure became the baseline. Ayanna spoke with clarity about the indignity of these conditions, not wanting money to strip her of her humanity. Her perspective reflects not resignation but rejection—an unwillingness to accept bottom-tier treatment as the price of survival. Mardi Gras cleanup was less a job opportunity than a lesson in how quickly dignity can be traded away in a system built to exploit.

RECURRING GAPS AND WORKER SENTIMENTS

Administrative Dysfunction

Workers describe chaotic, manual, and brittle administrative systems—crowded competitive orientations, ad hoc Account Based Ticketing handwritten timesheets, and fragmented clock-out procedures. These failures frequently translate into workers being sent to the wrong location, unrecorded hours, and outright unpaid shifts, producing wage loss that is procedurally normalized rather than treated as exceptional. Workers also saw pay instability. Delayed pay, unexplained deductions, and pay contingent on correct placement recurred across worker stories. Several workers framed complaints as a direct threat to future work, reporting explicit warnings not to contest deductions or conditions. The combined effect is a durable mistrust of employers and hiring agencies, and a pragmatic silence that suppresses formal reporting and weakens collective leverage.

Health and Safety

Worker accounts described respiratory exposure from dust and leaf blowers, repeated contact with glass and contaminated flood sludge, lack of PPE beyond a vest and thin gloves, and no on-site first aid. Workers linked these exposures to both immediate symptoms like coughing, rashes, and pain, and to longer-term worry about cumulative harm. The consequence is a sense of bodily disposability; some workers perceive that the system tolerates or expects physical deterioration as the cost of producing clean public space. This is also the case for some forms of basic provisioning and care. Workers reported unpredictable meal provisioning, irregular water breaks, and supervisory pressure to work through exhaustion. Long shifts with limited rest and no predictable breaks created acute fatigue and increased the risk of injury. Workers also faced threats to personal safety. The absence of security measures left them exposed to rowdy and intoxicated crowds, reckless drivers, and volatile street conditions. Late-night shifts compounded these dangers: unreliable transit meant some workers had to walk home through unsafe areas, increasing their vulnerability to harassment, assault, or robbery.

Spatial Inequities

Temp workers repeatedly described Mardi Gras labor as a mirror of New Orleans' entrenched inequities. The tourist corridors and festival grounds that they cleaned were heavily resourced and maintained, while the neighborhoods where many workers lived remained neglected, reinforcing a sense of racialized spatial injustice. At the same time, access to these jobs was shaped by exclusionary screening practices and documentation requirements. Reliance on voter cards or IDs created "standby" statuses that disproportionately affected those with prior convictions, unstable housing, or lost papers. These administrative hurdles not only restricted entry into the labor pool but also deepened feelings of humiliation and structural rejection among marginalized workers. For workers, these practices codified existing inequalities by channeling marginalized workers into insecure, low-status roles while visibly reinforcing the

divide between celebrated public spaces and neglected communities.

Skill Erasure and Flattened Mobility

Experienced workers repeatedly described receiving the same pay and tasks as novices, despite demonstrated skill or certifications. This flattening of compensation and opportunity engendered frustration and resignation: skilled labor is devalued, and upward mobility is effectively blocked within the event-based temp economy.

THE PATHS FORWARD FOR TEMPORARY WORKERS

Precarious workers routinely lack basic, enforceable rights. Temporary, event-based, and on-the-spot hires are often excluded in practice from the legal and administrative scaffolding that safeguards standard employment, leaving them to shoulder financial risk, health hazards, and the administrative burdens of proving hours worked or contesting nonpayment.

Protecting Existing Policy and Enforcement

Safeguarding existing protections requires active stewardship at the federal level where core enforcement agencies set baseline standards and investigatory authority. The U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division (WHD) and OSHA remain primary mechanisms for wage, hour, and safety enforcement; maintaining clear WHD guidance, robust investigatory staffing, and field-ready enforcement protocols during peak event cycles reduces the likelihood that violations become normalized in on-the-ground contracting arrangements. Equally important is the use of robust "know your rights" sessions and public campaigns that empower temporary workers to understand the protections available to them, recognize when violations occur, and organize collectively to seek redress. These proactive education efforts complement enforcement by ensuring workers themselves are equipped to act as the first line of defense against exploitation.

At the state level, Louisiana's workforce and labor agencies are the operational partners for federal standards and the first line for routine employer oversight.³⁵ Ensuring that local labor offices have accessible complaint intake, multilingual capacity, and the ability to compel payroll and rostering records is essential to turn worker reports into enforceable cases rather than unresolved grievances.

Policy durability also requires vigilance against shifting federal priorities and regulatory rollbacks. Agency guidance, rulemaking, and enforcement emphasis can change with administrations, making it important for city and state actors to institutionalize local protections (for example, through binding procurement clauses and local ordinances) so worker rights do not depend solely on federal enforcement cycles.³⁶

Federal, State, and Municipal Guidance

When implementing policy, addressing and mitigating these harms requires coordinated action at multiple scales, so risk and responsibility shift away from individual workers and onto the institutions and contractors that profit from contingent labor.

The following bills provide a map for the creation and implementation of local, state, and federal protections for precarious and nontraditional workers by translating core job quality principles into concrete statutory tools.

RESTORING WORKER POWER ACT

The Restoring Worker Power Act (RWPA), introduced in 2020 by Representatives Joe Kennedy III (D-MA) and Emanuel Cleaver II (D-MO), represents the first comprehensive federal proposal in over two decades aimed at establishing enforceable labor standards for temporary, contingent, and contract workers.³⁷ Although the bill has not yet passed, it functions as model legislation that could recalibrate national labor law around equitable pay, transparency, and joint accountability between staffing agencies and host employers.

Purpose and Scope

RWPA responds to the widespread misclassification, wage theft, and regulatory ambiguity that have characterized the U.S. temporary staffing industry since the 1990s. The bill would ensure that the millions of workers employed through staffing firms or short-term direct-hire arrangements receive parity in pay, safety, and collective bargaining rights relative to directly employed peers. By design, it targets structural vulnerabilities documented among Mardi Gras cleanup workers and other precarious labor forces: inadequate transparency, diffuse responsibility between agencies and clients, and retaliation against workers asserting basic rights.

Wage Parity and Pay Protections

The bill mandates that temporary or agency-placed workers receive equivalent pay to directly hired employees performing “substantially similar work” at the same establishment. This provision directly counters the two-tier pay structure common in contingent employment, where host companies externalize cost by paying staffing agencies discounted rates. Parity clauses would also apply to overtime and fringe benefits when provided to comparable employees including health insurance, retirement contributions, paid leave, and other supplemental benefits such as disability or life insurance.

Agency Registration and Oversight

Under the RWPA, all staffing firms would be required to register with the DOL and disclose placement data, fee structures, and compliance records. Registration would allow federal oversight similar to the state systems now operating in New Jersey and Illinois, establishing a verified database of agencies authorized to operate nationally.

Limits on Exploitative Practices and Misclassification

The Act prohibits agencies and host employers from charging recruitment or placement fees to workers, misclassifying them as independent contractors, or assigning labor under conditions that conceal wage rates or duration of employment. It also codifies a joint-employer presumption: when both an agency and host firm control essential terms of employment, each is responsible for compliance with wage, safety, and discrimination laws.

Transparency and Worker Notice

The RWPA requires written disclosure of key employment terms—wages, expected hours, assignment length, safety requirements, and benefits—prior to placement. Payroll statements must itemize hours worked, rates, and deductions to prevent wage theft and improve auditability.

Anti-Retaliation and Collective Activity

Temporary workers frequently report dismissal or blacklisting after filing complaints. The bill explicitly prohibits retaliation and affirms the right of all covered workers to engage in concerted activity, including collective bargaining and mutual aid. This provision would extend core National Labor Relations Act protections to contingent workers currently excluded by ambiguous employment status

Enforcement and Remedies

The DOL's Wage and Hour Division would gain expanded authority to levy civil penalties, award liquidated damages, and pursue debarment of non-compliant agencies. Private rights of action would enable workers or designated representatives to sue jointly liable parties in federal court, with attorney fee and penalty provisions designed to make enforcement accessible.

NEW JERSEY TEMPORARY WORKERS BILL OF RIGHTS

Enacted in February 2023, New Jersey's Temporary Workers Bill of Rights (TWBR) establishes the most comprehensive state-level protections for temporary and day labor employees in the country.³⁸ Jointly authored by worker advocates and state legislators, the law codifies baseline standards for pay equity, recordkeeping, agency registration, and anti-retaliation. Its scope is significant, extending to hundreds of staffing firms supplying labor to New Jersey's warehouse, logistics, manufacturing, and janitorial industries.

Legislative Intent and Context

The TWBR responds to a decade of documented abuses within New Jersey's \$8 billion temporary staffing sector, including wage theft, unsafe conditions, and fee-shifting. Advocates from Make the Road New Jersey and New Labor documented instances of workers earning less than minimum wage after transportation and equipment deductions. The legislation was designed to restore equity and transparency in a labor market dependent on immigrants and workers with low incomes.

Wage Parity and Pay Transparency

The TWBR requires that temporary workers receive the same hourly rate and benefits as direct employees performing "substantially similar work" at the same establishment. Staffing agencies must provide itemized pay statements listing hours, rates, and deductions, closing long-standing loopholes that enabled underpayment and wage obfuscation.

Written Notice and Disclosure of Assignments

Prior to placement, agencies must furnish written assignment statements detailing pay rate, location, hours, and transportation costs. This requirement addresses a common abuse where workers arrived at sites without knowledge of expected conditions or hours, a pattern mirroring temporary event hires in New Orleans and other cities.

Prohibition of Unlawful Fees and Cost-Shifting

The law bars staffing firms from charging transportation, background check, or equipment fees that reduce take-home pay below the statutory minimum. Agencies are required to provide receipts for any lawful deductions and may not charge workers for safety gear or protective equipment. PPE must be provided outright at no cost to the worker, not reimbursed after purchase.

Agency Registration and Recordkeeping

Temporary help service firms must register with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOL) and post a surety bond of \$200,000 as a condition of licensure. They must retain records of placements and pay for six years, creating a verifiable trail for audit and enforcement.

Anti-Retaliation and Enforcement

The TWBR prohibits employers from disciplining or terminating workers for filing complaints, asserting rights, or participating in investigations. It establishes a private right of action allowing workers to sue staffing firms and client employers for violations, with provisions for liquidated damages, attorney fees, and civil penalties up to \$5,000 per offense. The NJDOL also has the power to suspend or revoke licenses for repeated violations, placing non-compliant firms on a public registry.

Structural Impact

The TWBR reshapes labor governance in New Jersey by formalizing state-level oversight of a previously opaque industry. By mandating pay parity and advance disclosure, the law transfers risk and informational burden from workers to employers, creating a transparent labor market in which rights are auditable and enforceable. The statute serves as a practical bridge between federal model legislation and municipal initiatives, demonstrating how state action can operationalize worker justice in industries dependent on precarious labor.

ILLINOIS DAY AND TEMPORARY LABOR SERVICES ACT

Illinois has built one of the most detailed state-level systems for regulating the staffing industry. The Day and Temporary Labor Services Act (DTLSA)³⁹, first enacted in 2006 and amended in 2023, was designed to confront abuses in day labor and temp agency placements by imposing obligations on both the agencies and the client companies that rely on them. Unlike many other state statutes, Illinois' law has a dual accountability structure: staffing agencies must register with the DOL, and host employers can be penalized if they contract with unregistered firms. This closes a common loophole where responsibility is deflected onto intermediaries.

Statutory Scope and Registration

Illinois regulates day and temporary labor through the DTLSA, requiring labor service agencies to obtain and maintain state registration before placing workers. Registration ties agencies to disclosure, bonding, and compliance obligations that are enforceable by the Illinois Department of Labor.

Third-Party Client Responsibility

The DTLSA assigns responsibility not only to agencies but also to the client companies that use them. Client firms can be cited when they knowingly contract with unregistered agencies, creating a shared compliance duty across the labor supply chain.

Comparable Pay and Benefits for Extended Assignments

When a temporary laborer is assigned to the same client for an extended period (measured in total hours within a 12-month window), the client must provide pay and benefits no less than those offered to its lowest-paid direct employee performing substantially similar work at that worksite. Benefits may be provided in kind or through cash equivalents when the client's benefit structure cannot be directly extended to the temporary worker.

Assignment Notice, Language Access, and Worksite Specifics

Agencies must issue written assignment notices before dispatch, detailing the worksite, nature of tasks, expected hours, pay rate, and any transportation or equipment costs. Notices must be provided in a language the worker understands, ensuring the worker can assess risks, costs, and obligations in advance.

Safety Orientation and High-Risk Site Placement

Before placement at sites with heightened hazards (e.g., warehousing, manufacturing, construction), the DTLSA requires baseline safety information and orientation. Clients must not obstruct the provision of site-specific safety rules, and agencies must ensure workers receive the necessary instructions to operate safely at the assigned worksite.

Records, Pay Statements, and Inspection Rights

Agencies and clients must maintain accurate records of placements, hours, and wages. Workers must receive itemized pay statements that list hours worked and all deductions. The Illinois Department of Labor can inspect records to verify compliance, and failures in record maintenance can support findings of underpayment or misassignment.

Anti-Retaliation Protections

Retaliation against workers for asserting rights, raising concerns, or participating in investigations is prohibited. Blacklisting or removal from future assignments due to complaint activity constitutes a violation under the Act.

Enforcement Tools and Penalties

The DTLA authorizes civil penalties per violation, with enhanced penalties for repeat or willful noncompliance. The Department may suspend or revoke agency registration for persistent violations. Clients implicated in violations—such as contracting with unregistered agencies or failing to meet extended-assignment pay obligations—can face direct penalties.

PHILADELPHIA POWER ACT

Philadelphia's **Protect Our Workers, Enforce Rights (POWER) Act**, enacted in May 2025, marks a comprehensive municipal strategy to expand local authority over labor standards enforcement.⁴⁰

The Act amends three existing chapters of the Philadelphia Code:

- *Paid Sick Leave (§9-4100: Promoting Healthy Families and Workplaces)*
- *Wage Theft (§9-4300: Wage Theft Complaints)*
- *Protections for Domestic Workers ordinance (§9-4500)*

And introduces two new chapters:

- *§9-6500: Protecting Victims of Retaliation*
- *§9-6600: Enforcement of Worker Protection Ordinances*

Expanded Definitions and Coverage

The POWER Act significantly broadens the definitions of “employee,” “employer,” and “domestic worker,” extending coverage to part-time, temporary, live-in, and contract-based workers who were previously excluded under narrow interpretations of municipal labor laws. By redefining “wage theft” to include violations of state and federal labor laws for work performed in or contracted through Philadelphia, the Act asserts municipal jurisdiction even in cases involving out-of-state contractors or staffing intermediaries. This expansion closes long-standing loopholes that allowed employers to escape accountability by outsourcing or misclassifying workers.

Strengthened Recordkeeping and Burden Shifting

A central innovation of the Act is its recalibration of evidentiary burdens. Employers must now maintain detailed employment records—hours, sick leave accruals, and pay data—for a minimum of three years. Failure to maintain or produce these records can result in presumptions favorable to workers in wage theft or retaliation cases, shifting the burden of proof from workers to employers. This framework is particularly significant for temporary and day laborers who often lack formal documentation or pay stubs, making it easier for investigators to substantiate wage theft claims without requiring perfect paper trails.

Ordinance-Specific Amendments:

Paid Sick Leave

The POWER Act strengthens Philadelphia's Paid Sick Leave ordinance by refining accrual rates and clarifying calculations for tipped employees. It extends eligibility to broader worker categories, including certain part-time and domestic workers, and increases penalties for employer noncompliance.

Wage Theft Complaints

Amendments to the Wage Theft ordinance enhance enforcement powers for unpaid wage claims and worker misclassification. Notably, the Act codifies the right of any worker, regardless of immigration status, to file wage theft complaints with the Office of Worker Protections.

Domestic Workers Bill Of Rights

The Act revises and strengthens the 2020 Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, mandating written contracts in both English and a worker's preferred language, establishing advance notice of termination, and specifying standards for meal and rest breaks. These updates directly address enforcement challenges faced by domestic workers who often labor in isolation without formalized employment agreements.

Anti-Retaliation And Enforcement Infrastructure

The new Chapter §9-6500 (Protecting Victims of Retaliation) establishes a robust anti-retaliation standard across all covered ordinances. Employers who discipline, suspend, or terminate workers within 90 days of a protected activity—such as filing a complaint or participating in an investigation—face a rebuttable presumption of unlawful retaliation. This critical presumption effectively transfers investigatory leverage to the worker and discourages punitive responses to rights assertion.

The accompanying §9-6600 (Enforcement of Worker Protection Ordinances) centralizes authority within the Office of Worker Protections (OWP) and codifies the position of Wage Theft Coordinator to oversee investigations and coordinate multi-agency enforcement. The Act also authorizes the OWP to impose civil penalties of up to \$2,000 per violation and to order restitution covering back pay, damages, and legal fees. Repeat offenders—those with three or more violations or who fail to remedy prior determinations—are listed on a public Bad Actors registry, making them ineligible for certain licenses and municipal contracts.

Structural Impacts

Beyond expanding rights on paper, the POWER Act advances an institutional model of enforcement that privileges proactivity over reactivity. By granting the OWP the power to investigate patterns of abuse and to suspend business licenses, the Act shows how a city can be empowered to deter violations before they proliferate. Centralized data collection

and the Bad Actors registry create a feedback loop linking regulatory violations to tangible economic consequences.

By aligning enforcement power, evidence standards, and transparency mechanisms, the Act rebalances responsibility for fair labor practices toward employers and away from the individual precarious worker. In doing so, it offers a replicable municipal framework for safeguarding temporary and marginalized workers where state and federal enforcement remain inadequate.

CONCLUSION

Temporary and event-based labor in New Orleans reveals how fragmented contracting, thin oversight, and racialized neglect turn “flexibility” into disposability. Worker testimonies documented predictable failures such as incorrect assignments, unpaid hours, unsafe conditions, and retaliation. These are not aberrations but features of a system optimized to minimize cost and deflect responsibility. Policy experiments at the federal, state, and municipal levels show that stronger rules can narrow gaps, yet enforcement capacity, data integrity, language access, and procurement design remain decisive constraints.

A credible reform agenda must realign incentives and power. That means shifting evidentiary burdens onto employers when records are missing; hardwiring pay-and-benefit parity with standardized audits; tying registration, licensing, and public contracting to compliance; and funding co-enforcement with worker centers to make rights usable in real time. It also requires explicit municipal authority where preemption blocks local action and building pathways out of “perma-temp” cycles toward permanent, dignified employment.

The stories of Mardi Gras cleanup workers are crucial to centering worker voice to specify harms as they unfold on the ground, mapping the institutional mechanics that convert those harms into routine outcomes, and translating testimony into concrete levers—legal, administrative, and contractual—that can be activated now. The imperative is to guarantee operational accountability that temporary workers can feel on the job. With parity audited, records verified, retaliation deterred, and public contracts conditioned on enforceable standards, cities like New Orleans can replace disposability with dignity, turning the labor that sustains public life into work that sustains the people who perform it.

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