

September 23, 2026

MAKING TEMPORARY WORK, WORK FOR NEW ORLEANS

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TO THE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL,

For years, NOWCRJ organizers have built trusted relationships with temporary workers across New Orleans. Through this work, and in partnership with the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), we have documented recurring patterns of labor exploitation while identifying practical solutions informed by workers themselves. We offer this paper as both a policy roadmap and an invitation to collaborate in building a fairer temporary labor system for New Orleans.

You hold the power to deliver one of the most meaningful worker victories in the South, and most of it requires no new law at all.

This paper documents, from worker testimony and the public record, how the systems around Mardi Gras cleanup labor have not worked for the people who make our city's signature celebration possible, and it hands you the fix in two parts. Part One is seven wins your administration can deliver before Carnival 2027 under existing authority, beginning with a public Labor Compliance Audit of city contracts that remaining federal ARPA funds can lawfully finance before they expire December 31, 2026. Part Two is the New Orleans Fair Work Ordinance, which makes the protection permanent for every temporary worker in the city, built entirely within the authority state preemption leaves untouched.

The mandate is already yours. New Orleans voters have said yes twice: sixty-three percent approved a living wage in 2002 before the state Supreme Court struck it down, and more than eighty percent approved the Workers' Bill of Rights charter amendment in 2024. What those votes still lack is enforcement, and enforcement is precisely the power you hold. Every claim that follows traces to a worker who lived it, a public record that documents it, or a law already on the books.

THE SECOND PARADE

Mardi Gras generated roughly \$891 million in 2023, about three percent of the city's entire economy. When the last float passes, the second parade begins: 200 to 500 informal workers per parade day moving through the dark with rakes and bags, clearing what the Sanitation Department counts as an average of 1,123 tons of Carnival waste a year, so the city wakes up spotless. They are hired through a patchwork of city contracts, staffing intermediaries, and on-the-spot arrangements that strip away nearly every protection attached to a standard job. They are overwhelmingly Black and brown New Orleanians, joined by immigrant and formerly incarcerated workers for whom temp work is often the only open door. Nationally, temp workers earn roughly 22 percent less than permanent employees for the same work, and nearly one in four reports wage theft. Mardi Gras is the window, not the exception: the same model runs through hospitality, warehousing, janitorial, construction, and event staffing citywide. Fix it here, where the city's own hands are on the contracts.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Since early 2025, our organizers have interviewed more than forty cleanup workers, and our February 2026 report with the Center for Law and Social Policy gathered extended testimony. Here is one shift, told by the people who worked it.

It begins with a last-minute text and a line. Because jobs are first come, first served, workers wait for hours, unpaid, with no guarantee of work. This year, one unhoused worker slept on the street for days to hold his place, ultimately working sixty hours. Ayanna, eighteen, described orientation as hundreds of people under tents told to fight for what they wanted. Sylvester, a lifelong New Orleans East resident with an old conviction, watched agencies demand voter cards as proof of eligibility, a document the state's disenfranchisement laws denied him.

The work itself is hard, and the workers do not object to hard work. They object to what surrounds it: twelve- and fourteen-hour night shifts clearing glass, dust, and storm drain sludge in thin vests and thin gloves, with limited water, food that sometimes amounted to chips and soda, and no first aid on site. When our organization raised the issue of protective equipment with officials, the reported answer was to buy gear as disposable as possible, because workers might not bring it back. In a campaign named We Are Not Disposable, that word choice made our argument for us. Chad, a father of two from Gentilly, worked doubles on a failing back while his family cycled through evictions. Capri, a young mother working overnight on Bourbon Street, was grabbed by a man in the crowd and found no security there to protect her.

Then comes the second fight: getting paid. Workers described hour-long waits to clock out around handwritten timesheets in unheated warehouses, then \$25 rides home on a \$15.50 wage

after the buses stopped. Sylvester and Kyle each lost a full day's pay, about \$180, when a ticketing system that agency staff themselves could not explain sorted them into the wrong bus group.

"They didn't have real tickets. They just asked for numbers."

Kyle S., Mardi Gras cleanup worker, in *The Exploitative Mechanisms of Precarious Work* (CLASP and NOWCRJ, February 2026)

In 2026, the pay itself came late again: workers were told they might be paid as early as the first week of March or as late as the first week of April for February work, though Louisiana law requires disclosure of pay dates at hiring and timely payment. When our organizers met with JOB1 leadership on March 4, the day workers should have been paid under the state's fifteen-day requirement, they were told it was unreasonable for workers to expect payment within two weeks of Mardi Gras. Workers also described a quieter lesson learned across agencies: raise a concern, and the calls stop. Four questions recurred that no worker could answer: Who hired me? Who supervises me? Who is responsible if something goes wrong? Who do I call when my pay is short? That is not confusion. That is design: a chain of departments, contractors, and staffing agencies fragmented so completely that every party can point at another while the worker absorbs the loss.

ONE SYSTEM

The workers of the second parade handle what the party leaves behind: toxic plastics, broken glass, chemical dust, storm drain sludge, then go home, disproportionately to New Orleans East, Gentilly, and the Lower Ninth Ward, to neighborhoods that stay littered and underserved while the tourist corridors they polished gleam by sunrise. Anthony, a young musician funding studio time with cleanup shifts, described appliances and toys dumped in flood zones near his family's home in the East as the backdrop to immaculate parade routes. The system that treats workers as disposable treats their neighborhoods and environment as disposable, and it is one system. So is the fix: safe jobs and safe neighborhoods, together.

THE CITY ALREADY HAS THE LAW

New Orleans is not starting from zero. The Living Wage Ordinance, in force since 2016, requires city contractors to pay a living wage, now \$16.37 per hour, plus paid sick days, adjusted annually for inflation. It directs the Chief Administrative Office to monitor compliance, makes contractors responsible for subcontractors, and makes violations a breach of contract. The Council strengthened reporting in 2020. What the record lacks is any accounting of its use: City Hall's own custodians earned \$7.25 an hour more than a year after the law took effect; sanitation

workers on a city contract were paid below the living wage in 2020 because a temp agency stood between them and the law; and in 2026 the cleanup wage sat at \$16.01 an hour while inflation ran 2.4 percent, with no explanation of why the annual adjustment was not made or which contracts are monitored at all. Much of this record predates the current administration and arrived through inherited contracts and systems. The failure belongs to the structure. The fix can belong to you, and no one gains more from an audit than the officials charged with enforcing the law.

PART ONE: SEVEN WINS BY CARNIVAL 2027

Seven deliverables within existing authority, ratified by the workers themselves.

1. Conduct the Labor Compliance Audit. A public audit of Living Wage Ordinance and HireNOLA compliance across covered contracts, starting with Mardi Gras cleanup and sanitation, with published findings and back pay recovery. Remaining ARPA administrative funds are a lawful funding source and expire December 31, 2026. This administration has made auditing its signature discipline; apply it to whether public dollars reach workers as the law requires.
2. Certify the living wage on time, every year. Calculate the CPI adjustment when January data lands, notify every department, contractor, and grantee by February 1, and require compliance by the next payroll.
3. Pay workers on time, with dates they can plan on. Definitive pay dates disclosed at hiring, payment within the legal window, and pay for mandatory orientation and required waiting time.
4. End the line. Advance scheduling with reasonable notice and partial pay for canceled shifts. No one should sleep on a sidewalk to hold a job cleaning our streets.
5. Equip the work. Respirator-quality masks, restroom requirements, goggles, and cut-resistant gloves provided free, plus water and food on long shifts, and first aid on site.
6. Get workers home safely. No-cost late-night transportation after transit stops, meeting insurance and safety standards.
7. Enforce HireNOLA in the open. Publish covered contracts, local and disadvantaged worker participation rates, and current goals.

PART TWO: PASS THE NEW ORLEANS FAIR WORK ORDINANCE

Part One protects workers on city contracts. The Fair Work Ordinance extends protection to every temporary worker in New Orleans, entirely within the city's uncontested powers over licensing, transparency, safety, contracting, and its own operations. The relationship to the 2024 charter amendment is simple: the Workers' Bill of Rights made the promise, and the Fair Work Ordinance keeps it. Its worker-ratified provisions:

1. Agency registration and licensing, shared liability for businesses using unregistered agencies, and a public registry of repeat violators barred from city licenses and contracts.
2. Transparency: written notice of pay, worksite, hours, employer of record, and every deduction, in the worker's language, before any assignment.
3. No fees or cost shifting for transportation, equipment, background checks, or protective gear.
4. Safety as a condition of operating: training in the worker's language, required protective equipment, and hazard disclosure by agencies and host businesses alike.
5. Records that protect workers: multi-year recordkeeping, itemized pay statements, and a presumption favoring the worker when required records are missing.
6. Real protection against retaliation: a rebuttable presumption for adverse action shortly after a worker asserts rights, with joint and several liability between agency and host.
7. The right to refuse strikebreaking at any worksite experiencing a strike, lockout, or labor dispute.
8. A pathway out of permatemping: no restrictions or fees blocking permanent hire by a host business.
9. An Office of Labor Standards receiving complaints in multiple languages, investigating proactively, and partnering with worker organizations as co-enforcers.

Because temporary staffing disproportionately concentrates Black workers, immigrant workers, justice-impacted workers, and other workers facing labor market exclusion, improving standards within this sector is also an important racial and economic equity strategy.

None of this is experimental. Every provision is adapted from laws already in force, and already tested against industry lawsuits, in New Jersey, Illinois, and Philadelphia. New Orleans would not be going first. It would be going smart, and going first in the South. The fuller prize, a true wage floor and equal pay across the private economy, requires ending state preemption, a fight our members intend to lead. A Council that passes this ordinance sends Baton Rouge the message our voters have now delivered three times.

Responsible staffing agencies and employers are often undercut by competitors who reduce labor costs through wage theft, unsafe conditions, or unlawful deductions. Consistent standards help create a level playing field while rewarding businesses that already comply with the law

THE OPPORTUNITY

Picture Carnival 2027: workers paid on time at a certified wage, equipped and scheduled with dignity, and a Mayor and Council standing beside them to announce that New Orleans has become the first city in the South where temporary work comes with permanent rights. The eighty percent who approved the Workers' Bill of Rights were not voting against anyone. They were voting for leaders willing to enforce it. Part One is within your power before Carnival. Part Two is within your power this year. Be those leaders, and the workers of the second parade will stand with you the way they have always stood for this city. We are not disposable, and with your partnership, we will never again be treated as if we were.

SOURCES AND FOUNDATIONS

The Exploitative Mechanisms of Precarious Work: National Insights and New Orleans' Worker Voices. Lulit Shewan, Center for Law and Social Policy, in collaboration with the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, February 2026. Worker testimony above is drawn from this report and from more than forty worker interviews conducted by NOWCRJ organizers and volunteers since early 2025.

Verite News reporting by Madhri Yehiya, February 13 and March 26, 2026, on cleanup worker conditions, the \$16.01 wage against the 2.4 percent CPI increase, first come, first served hiring, late payment, and the March 4 meeting in which JOB1 leadership called the two-week payment expectation unreasonable; republished statewide by the Louisiana Illuminator and News From the States. NOWCRJ correspondence to JOB1 regarding 2026 pay dates. New Orleans Department of Sanitation Carnival waste figures as reported by the Tulane Hullabaloo, March 2026.

City of New Orleans Living Wage Ordinance (2015, effective 2016; amended 2021), including CAO monitoring, subcontractor responsibility, and breach of contract penalties; 2020 council legislation strengthening compliance reporting; contemporaneous reporting on City Hall custodial wages (2017) and sanitation subcontracting through temporary staffing (2020); HireNOLA local hire program.

American Rescue Plan Act State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds: City of New Orleans allocation and dashboard; U.S. Treasury rules on eligible administrative and compliance uses; December 31, 2026 spending deadline.

New Jersey Temporary Workers' Bill of Rights (2023); Illinois Day and Temporary Labor Services Act as amended (2023, 2024); Philadelphia Protect Our Workers, Enforce Rights (POWER) Act (2025); Louisiana Revised Statutes 23:642; New Orleans Campaign for a Living Wage v. City of New Orleans (La. 2002); New Orleans Workers' Bill of Rights Charter Amendment (November 2024); National Employment Law Project temp worker survey data.