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Unions join to organize carwash workers

Leaders target 18,000 workers in Southern California. They also tell consumers what businesses to avoid.

By Sonia Nazario, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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Two of the nation's largest unions formally announced a campaign to organize Southern California's 18,000 carwash workers and offered consumers recommendations on how to avoid carwashes that violate minimum wage laws.

"We will do whatever it takes to clean up the carwash industry," said Jon Hiatt, general counsel for the AFL-CIO, which launched the campaign with the United Steelworkers.

At a news conference, union leaders urged consumers to ask owners about their pay practices, and to avoid carwashes that charged less than \$8 for a complete wash or that the unions had targeted for picketing.

The unions said their first major target in the campaign would be the Pirian family, which owns up to eight carwashes in Los Angeles County. Labor organizers plan to picket at three Pirian-owned washes on Saturday, including the family flagship, Vermont Car Wash, on North Vermont Avenue near Hollywood Boulevard, owned by Bennie Pirian.

One Vermont Car Wash worker, Pedro Guzman, said many workers were paid \$40 a day for more than 10 hours of work. Others got tips only.

"We just want to be paid for the hours we work," he said.

Bennie Pirian did not return calls seeking comment. In a recent interview, Pirian's attorney, Jack Zakariaie, said no one at the carwash worked for less than minimum wage. He said workers sometimes would come in hours before or stay after their scheduled shift, working just for tips. Pirian would ask them to leave but they wouldn't, Zakariaie said.

A Times investigation of carwashes in the state's southernmost counties, published Sunday, found that many owners pay less than half of minimum wage. Two-thirds of those inspected by the state's labor department since 2003 were out of compliance with one or more labor laws. Although some violations were minor, others were fundamental: underpaying workers, hiring minors, going without workers' compensation insurance and denying meal breaks.

The newspaper published an online database(latimes.com/carwash) that shows which Southern California carwashes had paid or settled wage claims in the last five years or were fined by the state for labor law violations.

Sam Olivito, executive director of the Western Carwash Assn., declined to comment on the organizing drive.

Patrick Shea, president of Beacon Bay Enterprises Inc., which owns seven carwashes in Orange County, said that any unionizing would boost prices for consumers and hurt carwash owners.

"This is basic economics. Prices will go up, volume will go down."

He added: "There are a lot of good businesses out there who treat their workers well."

At the news conference, former California Assemblywoman Jackie Goldberg accused the state of largely failing to implement a 2003 law she sponsored that was meant to create better tools and more funding to crack down on the industry.

"If you don't pay any wages at all, we call that slavery -- don't we?" she said, adding, "We are going to take this fight from the statehouse to the streets."

In an interview, Dean Fryer, a spokesman for the California Department of Industrial Relations, said the state had been stepping up enforcement since last year.

"We are moving forward aggressively and with commitment to root out the illegal operators in the carwash industry," he said.

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