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The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

## Justice for Nail Salon Workers

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD MAY 11, 2015

Across the country, countless workers in the nail salon industry, mainly immigrant women, toil in misery and ill health for meager pay, usually with no overtime, abused by employers who show little or no consideration for their safety and well-being. It is a world of long days and toxic chemicals, where the usual protections of government have failed, at all levels.

In shining a light on one ugly industry, a recent report in *The Times* has also illuminated a far larger problem that occurs wherever greedy employers meet vulnerable workers. Farm laborers, nannies, carwash workers, day laborers, dishwashers, busboys, construction workers, garment workers, janitors — it's a sweatshop economy, and Americans have gotten used to its bounty of cheap services and goods, basking in ever-cheaper luxury while ignoring the pain and injustice that make it all possible.

What to do? The problem seems overwhelming. The answer is not boycotts or scattershot raids or customers guiltily slipping a little more cash to their manicurists. Cultivating justice in the world of low-wage immigrant labor is going to take concerted attention and serious effort at all levels of government, along with increased support for, and greater involvement by, the workers themselves.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo has announced a task force of New York state agencies to fight wage theft and health abuses in nail salons. His impulse is decent, and his ideas are good, like requiring bonding for salons to ensure that workers will be able to collect stolen pay. But if he wants lasting results, he has to have a long-term strategy. Workplace enforcement in the immigrant economy is notoriously

haphazard and limited by language barriers. The state needs to hire many more translators and bilingual inspectors. Workers' rights groups applaud Mr. Cuomo's announcement, but they are right to press for details, and to ask — once the state steps in, then what? If workers are not organized, if they lack a support system, ill-advised crackdowns may leave them worse off than before.

This where the federal government must help. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration needs better outreach and services to protect women who suffer from exposure to toxic salon chemicals. These problems are not going to be solved by lunchroom safety posters, but by stricter standards and enforcement.

The Department of Homeland Security, awash in funding in this age of border paranoia, has lavished its energies on the wrong immigration violators. What if it retrained some of its deportation agents as labor inspectors, focusing on bottom-feeding employers, to build fairer workplaces to benefit all American workers? At the very least it should protect more whistle-blowers through its special visa programs for undocumented-immigrant crime victims to make sure no one is exploited in silence.

Finally, even though a broken immigration system leaves many undocumented workers vulnerable to abuse and wage theft, they still must be a part of this solution. Mr. Cuomo's announcement referred to a "community-based partnership" with local organizations "to identify violators and to encourage workers to come forward."

This is where government must build upon many years of work by grass-roots labor organizations. One example is the New York Healthy Nail Salons Coalition, led by the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, and Adhikaar, which means "rights" in Nepali. Adhikaar, based in Queens, has been giving Nepali nail salon workers health and safety training and encouraging the creation of "green" salons using nontoxic products.

Workers' organizations like these play a role in bridging the gaps where government and law enforcement fall short. Like the "carwasheros" in Los Angeles and New York, the farm workers and street-corner day laborers who have set up workers' centers across the country to fight for better wages and workplace safety, the workers of nail salons can stand up for their rights — as they should, with our support.

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