

“I’ve held my breath for five years.”

A Firsthand Account of Workforce Precarity in Western North Carolina

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Master’s Project

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¹ One Fair Wage, "Take off Your Mask so I Know How Much to Tip You: Service Workers' Experience of Health & Harassment During COVID-19," 2020.

² One Fair Wage, "Locked Out By Low Wages: Service Workers' Challenges With Accessing Unemployment Insurance During COVID-19," 2020.

Preface

This report is primarily the product of my involvement with **Just Economics of WNC** and its regional partners. A center for policy advocacy, community engagement, and direct political engagement, Just Economics acts on its goal of ‘creating sustainable livelihoods’ through initiatives pertaining to living wages, transit, and affordable housing. Notably, Just Economics is among the principal implementers nationally of ‘Living Wage Certification.’

While Just Economics’ footprint is currently largest in Buncombe County, its network is successfully certifying a growing number of businesses throughout Western North Carolina. One purpose of this project is to assist in furthering policy and community discourse on the topic of living wages and sustainable economic development beyond Buncombe County, and in the spirit of creating sustainable livelihoods in the region.

In 2021, a troubling report³ on the best places in the United States for working people was released by OXFAM, an international organization with the mission of alleviating global poverty. The report included a ranking system for the 52 territories (50 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico) whose workforce conditions it had measured.

The rankings were based on three metrics:

1. Wages, including adjustments to account for cost of living and other relevant distinctions.
2. Worker and workplace protections pertaining to special circumstances like hazardous conditions, pregnancy, sexual harassment, and paid family leave.
3. Rights and protections around unionization and organizing, including preventing retaliation, ‘right to work’ status, and exemptions for specific industries.

There was also a parallel ranking which specified best states for working women, taking into greater account the additional cost of single-parent child rearing, because women so disproportionately and in such large numbers occupy this category.

With a score of only 6 out of 100, and only 3 for working women, North Carolina ranked 52nd out of 52; the worst state to work in America.

³ OXFAM, “Best and Worst States to Work in America 2021,” 2021.

Introduction

Planning is largely related to the security and optimization of our social and environmental lives, by way of recognition and scrutiny of circumstances and conditions which can ultimately be manipulated for collective gain. This often means planning for tangible infrastructure and land use, such as transportation networks, flood and storm infrastructure, and housing. It too can pertain to the *intangible* economic infrastructure, including wages, benefits, and protections. The impact of these factors is equal to, if not greater than those of the physical infrastructure that you can touch, feel, and see.

As a student of this often-intangible domain within planning, my aim is to understand how the invisible networks of economic inputs relates the security and *insecurity* of individuals and communities, and ultimately, to take a stance on these issues by way of community engagement, policy advocacy, and direct organizing. Specifically, this interest has gravitated towards labor – encompassing both public and private policy related to protections, wages, and the construction of work. To materialize the analytical approach in real work, the thematic question is posed:

What do members of the low wage workforce have to say about the state of work in Western North Carolina?

The report presents a credible firsthand account of the relevant experiences of a self-identified low wage worker of a rural county of Western North Carolina. The worker is a public employee in a sanitation department referred to as ‘Ian,’ but his real identity and place of work remain confidential throughout.

From his testimony, tensions in the mechanics of work can be exposed and understood, and appropriate policy and organizing solutions can be advocated for and informed by this knowledge. The conditions presented in the case vary in their

specificity to the sector, geography, and individual circumstances of the worker, but the information is useful to a broader civic audience, nonetheless.

Rather than presume a direct external validity to work in other sectors or geographies, the testimony serves to illustrate what kinds of threats to security workers can face as a combined result of the law, their workplace policy, and the economy. Looking forward, this report doubles as a possible model for continuing practical synthesis of workforce perspectives – to raise their input to the forefront of economic development discourse and workforce policy construction in future settings.

Methods

The interview subject is a public employee within a rural county of Western North Carolina. To protect his confidentiality, the county of his employment is not named throughout this report. He is referred to using the alias 'Ian,' which was chosen by him.

The featured synthesis is based solely on his recounting of events as he experienced them. The interview took place and was recorded in his home on March 15, 2022.

Ian was recruited for the interview by direct invite, which he accepted under the terms of confidentiality. Prior to the invite, I had met Ian when he approached me to discuss labor issues in August 2021, identifying me by a shirt which indicated my interest. We have checked in with each other irregularly since that interaction.

Some other instances of information in the report are drawn from observations and interactions which I have experienced working in labor organizing and advocacy spheres of Western North Carolina.

The report is intended and constructed to amplify perspectives from members of the workforce without challenge.

Ian's Account

“I was handed a dust mask and told to go to work”

How the ‘Essential Workplace’ Created Risk During the COVID Pandemic

Sanitation service being an essential public service, Ian's department had him interacting with members of the public assigned to his collection sight daily for the entire duration of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in March 2020. Especially considering the risks associated with work conducted in person at that stage of the pandemic – prior to the development of vaccines or even well-developed public knowledge of best practices for containment – the circumstances of his work were extreme.

As many in Western North Carolina and around the United States eliminated non-essential or luxury outings and limited their visits to essential vendors like grocery stores, visits to the trash collection center remained the integral component of household waste management. During a period of national sanitization and reclusiveness, Ian came into direct contact with thousands of trash bags containing used facial tissues and masks, recycled beer bottles and soda cans, and other waste materials carrying biological matter from individuals spanning an entire departmental district. The department's employees had received an educational training on handling hazardous waste in the years prior to the pandemic, though this had lasted only ten minutes – the only training he had received in 5 years of working for the department.

The duties of his job that pertained to interaction with the public, including assisting with handling of waste materials and exchanging cash bills for bag-tags required by residents to use disperse waste, came into conflict with the interests of his health. Confronted with users of the facility who denied the importance of COVID precautions and the COVID-conscious alike, Ian risked transmission of the virus as no measures

were implemented to protect employees or account for the biohazardous nature of the position.

Summarizing the extent of workplace COVID precautions throughout the pandemic, Ian made a striking testament to the disregard of employee safety exhibited by the public employer – “I was handed a dust mask and told to go to work.”

With the knowledge that those who were potentially sick would likely still make necessary visits to the collection site, Ian confided that he seriously questioned his ability to stay safe. At the site responsible for storing the solid waste of multiple communities, there is no running water available, and employees must share a portable toilet which is cleaned every other year with water, rather than a disinfectant. Despite the profession’s demonstrated vulnerability to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, neither additions to workplace policy nor innovations to existing unsanitary policy were implemented to protect the low wage employees of the department.

The glaring workplace inadequacies to protect its employees from illness were still less distressful than the job benefits in place for workers when they did become ill. When Ian became sick with flu-like symptoms, which he speculates is related to his work, he was expected to remain out from work for 10 days. His paid sick time, however, was only supplemented for 40 hours – half the time needed to cover his lost earnings from sickness. By that time, his paid sick time had already been depleted from previously taking an additional 5 days off to care for a family member who had contracted COVID. Because his employer had no paid family leave to cover this situation, there was no supplemental paid time off in that instance.

Emphasized by the already impractically low wage that he was receiving, Ian and his family’s experience with sickness and quarantine was marked by the economic insecurity it inflamed as he went weeks without his usual wage.

At that time, and for the entire first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ian worked full-time for \$14.00 an hour. It wasn't until early 2022 that the county provided a pay-raise which brought his wage to an amount between \$15-16 an hour. The raise was appropriated as a relief payment for public employees to absorb the financial shock of COVID, but without any notice or explanation of the benefit, Ian remains unsure if the raise is a bridge raise or permanent. Citing a total absence of communication, his first knowledge that he would be receiving a raise was on receipt of payment.

Rounding out his concern about the mishandling of the COVID pandemic was Ian's concern for the community members, who shared in his risk each time they came to use the public service – the dangers of handling biohazardous material with little to no protection being bi-directional. By neglecting to incorporate even baseline COVID protections or revise existing policy to account for the considerable increase in work-related danger, the public employers put members of its workforce in a state of medical and financial insecurity.

“I think I would be absolutely screwed.”

Consequential Gaps in the Construction of a Job

Discussing the need in the recent past to consider use of public assistance as a full-time public employee, Ian described how his position doesn't have clear avenues for promotional advancement within the organization, nor professional training and educational opportunities. He knew of only one opportunity, where he could obtain a commercial driver's license to drive department vehicles, but they would only reimburse employees for the license and class fees the following year. This would require an unfeasible immediate financial expense, and driving trucks safely was otherwise not possible for him because of depth-perception issues realized during prior experiences operating class-A vehicles two decades ago.

Aside from obtaining the license, or receiving pandemic relief payments, Ian cited length of employment as the only other opportunity for wage growth in the department – not incorporating variables such as work performance or qualifications, or job title itself. Pertaining to collective bargaining opportunities, the tenure-based wage structure complicates organizing efforts – the structure stratifies employees, eroding potential for creation of a community of interest among them.

As for other benefits included the job, Ian credited the department for covering the cost of employee health insurance directly, but he noted the insurance policy was only good if he “could afford to use it,” because of how few items it covered and the large co-pays.

His approval further waned when asked about paid family leave and coverage for his own sickness or relatives. Ian estimated that with the short limit on paid sick days available to him, should he himself become seriously sick or injured that he would be completely without income in a matter of days. Expanding on previous comments about running down sick days to care for relatives in the absence of a paid family leave policy, Ian has served as a support for multiple family members who have experienced significant illness at considerable financial expense.

Recounting a recent experience when Ian had been called to pick up his sick child from school, he described being concerned over budgeting his sick time and maintaining operation of the site he is responsible for in the absence of formal solutions. With no secure option, he asked, “What do I do? ... Even if I were to leave, it would take someone half an hour to an hour to get somebody there to relieve me ... I’ve got maybe 10 hours of sick time left.”

It wasn’t the only time his child’s need for medical attention came into conflict with his circumstances. After an incident where his child was feared to need surgery, the x-rays

and examinations landed Ian with a \$600 bill with added deficit from income lost to take time to accommodate his child's medical attention.

Towards understanding the workplace precarities Ian and those in similar positions experience, the \$600 bill tells a story of its own. Unlike his own coverage, which is paid for by the county, the insurance plan does not cover family members it would have cost him \$350 annually per child to extend coverage at the price four years ago. Like many in his situation, Ian calculated that he could not afford the extended insurance and instead took on a greater risk for the potential cost of medical care for his child. Had his child needed the surgery, the cost could have plunged Ian into a financial state of irreversible debt, something which his full-time job certainly would not rise to deliver him from.

Because of his combined low income and the high cost of coverage for dependents through his public employee benefits package, his child qualified for Medicaid which has remained their primary source of medical funding. However, during the period of his child's recent incident, he observed that Medicaid was not handling payments as they had in previous years, and that ultimately, they did not cover his child's medical expenses. While searching for a reason that Medicaid would not cover his child – a process that pegs children's eligibility to their parents' income – it occurred to Ian that the coverage lapse coincided with the relief payment he was granted. If now he earned too much for his child to have medical coverage through Medicaid, the relief raise would have ironically dealt greater financial burden than relief to Ian.

Determining Medicaid eligibility is a complicated task for either myself or Ian to accurately determine. Though, his suspicion that his raise could have either legitimately or erroneously voided his child's coverage is plausible and is consistent with my observation from discussing similar cases with other members of the workforce in Western North Carolina across sectors. If true, it is a remarkable case of offset benefits reinforcing the need for rigorous evaluation of the circumstances of work in Western

North Carolina, and a powerful testament to the need for inclusion of members of the workforce in all levels of policy determination. If local government leaders and administrators are going to structure employee packages so that public employees require public assistance to subsist, they should approach changes to the structure with delicacy, as it can alter employees' eligibility for assistance to a cost greater than their benefit as Ian's case would suggest.

“My boss wanted me gone.”

Framing Favoritism and Retaliation as a Workplace Fixture

During his search for greater resources to promote the professional development of employees, Ian encountered instances of unequal distribution of funds and information, a finding obscured by compromised transparency between public administrators. While some employees were given reimbursements or incentives to obtain advanced qualifications, Ian and others were told this was not a program provided by the county. He speculated that personal relationships explained this discrepancy and reported that negative personal opinions of him by superiors (on bases other than work performance) impacted relationships and possibilities for advancement within his department. Ian's individual experience aside, without rigorous transparency and safeguards against the kind of favoritism his experience exposes, opportunities for professional development and upward mobility within the department is left open to discrimination on a range of factors without accountability.

Whereas training and professional development measures were not made available to Ian and his coworkers, performance of responsibilities beyond the scope of their job descriptions and qualifications was customarily expected of them for matters of convenience. Ian specifically noted the expectation of operation of riding lawn mowers and excavators – heavy machinery – neither of which were formally recognized duties or tasks which he and other non-specialists were trained for. A possible labor violation, this created a uniquely precarious workplace environment for the public employees.

With de facto job responsibilities but without training on the operation of heavy equipment, operators and others on the worksite were put at significant risk of injury. The physical and medical risks of operation aside, Ian noted the significant liability this created for the workers. Had the operator damaged equipment, injured themselves, or injured another person, they might be personally liable for acting outside of their job duties.

“If I had flipped a backhoe – or even a lawn mower for that matter –I would’ve been screwed. Because I was not doing what’s in the actual [job description] of what [my position] is supposed to do ... You have to [operate heavy machinery] if you want to be seen as someone who is working.”

Ian elevated his concern over difficulty or ineligibility to receive worker’s compensation for injuries obtained while performing non-duties at the workplace, a concern for anyone whose formal job duties are unequal to their expected or customary job duties.

Injuries related to duties that are within the purview of his job are also of concern to Ian, as he has experienced great physical pain and subsequent financial burden as his claims of injury remain stalled or ignored by his department and county administration. What he cites a result of counting hundreds of dollars in small bills, ripping tags, pinching garbage bags and buckets, and other repetitive manual tasks which he is required to perform daily, Ian has developed an ongoing case of carpal tunnel. Without readily available workplace support, nor the expectation based on experience to pursue this, and during a period of earning \$14.00 an hour, Ian has incurred over \$1,000 in medical bills for the examinations, referrals, and treatments related to his work-related injury.

Relating to communication with his direct supervisors, Ian noted that he “was afraid to ask,” about potential benefits, and that what measures he did take in addressing the injury returned personal hostilities harbored by his boss. His communication with the

department of human resources stalled, and from his experience with the department allocating funds to workers unevenly, he was not surprised or motivated to pursue internal channels.

For him, the personal hostility he described was a fixture in his work environment that continues to this day. When asked about instances of retaliation, Ian summarized, “[My boss] wanted me gone.”

During the 3.5 year period he had worked since his boss had taken over the position, disagreements and incidents between them had led him to believe that his boss was searching for avenues to terminate his employment. The tension was primarily related to professional matters, in which Ian’s legitimate questions or complaints about duties, protections, and other job-related matters were met with hostility. On multiple occasions, Ian reported that his boss “dressed [him] down” and berated him condescendingly in front of other employees. To Ian, the reaction took form in the way of a kind of personal harassment, as his professional complaints were dismissed as unreasonable manifestations of his political beliefs.

As a testament to the inappropriateness of the behavior and repudiation Ian was subjected to, the county became involved, and a series of changes were made to avoid confrontation between Ian and his boss. Ultimately, Ian was transferred to a collection site on another side of the county where he now operates alone, and the department head is no longer allowed to supervise site activities directly.

It was the second time that transfers had been used by the department to mitigate a concern with Ian. While this time for conflict mitigation, the first time Ian reported was an instance of retaliation – where his placement in an undesirable and considerably distant site was guided by punishment for complaints he had made. In the absence of other protections, and a limited confidence in the formal channels of complaint based on past experiences, Ian felt the primary security in his job came from the scarcity of

available labor willing to do his job – that he would not be fired because he could not be replaced.

“I work for a county I can barely afford to live in”

Defying Insecurity in a ‘Rural’ Economy

The current predicaments Ian faces pertaining to workplace health & safety, benefits, mistreatment, and even ability to subsist on the job package are all within the purview and responsibility of his public employer to address, though it’s not the first time Ian has encountered such precarity from his work within the county.

Previously Ian had worked locally as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) and ultimately left because of the stress, exacerbated by wages and working conditions. In that position he made \$8.00 an hour, which remained his wage through the earliest years of the 2008 recession, until two years later, when he received a raise to \$11.00 an hour. He had looked at advancing his career by enrolling in nursing school, but this would prove a financially unattainable goal with his wage at the time. Working in a memory care unit primarily comprised of elderly patients with dementia, Ian worked through extraordinary circumstances. After six-weeks of recovering from surgery, during his first shift back (an overnight shift), Ian was responsible for 62 patients. He explained this was possible because of the absence of a mandated patient to care ratio in the State of North Carolina, at least at that time.

Faced with a 30-day notice to vacate his apartment because of the sale of his rental, and with a newborn, Ian sought public and supplemental resources to limited avail. While they received Section 8 vouchers, they could not find available units with landlords who would accept them. Despite having full time employment in healthcare, his family was forced to consider living in charitable shelters.

Ian now lives in an apartment complex that he can afford at his current wage, albeit strenuously, but it took him four years to find it. Until the recent pay raise, it and previous apartments had exceeded 50% of his income, meaning one of his bi-monthly payments was set aside exclusively for housing – and still fell short. While scarce, Ian says available affordable units do exist, but that certain barriers make it difficult to compete for them. The units that are available locally are owned by very few landlords, and often go unadvertised and instead allocated through personal channels – hence the years of searching for a suitable unit for him and his family.

To finance his and his family's life Ian has resorted to large volumes of debt, especially to get through the extraordinary economic pressures of COVID. While he has recently closed several credit cards and consolidated to a lower-interest personal loan, he is undoubtedly trapped in a debt cycle. Speaking to his inability to earn enough to subsist, he expressed his disillusionment, "How on God's green earth am I supposed to get ahead when I make just enough to be ok, but I want to live too?"

When asked what pay he and other low wage workers would need to be okay, Ian responded decisively, "17.00 an hour would not be unreasonable." That amount, he said could ensure payment of rent, bills, and other necessities with enough of a cushion to get by or save for an emergency. Compared to his current wage, roughly a \$1.50 pay raise from the county would buy him a measure of security.

Conclusion

As this project originated within the meeting spaces of policy advocacy organizations, it is useful to discuss the experience and lessons which were obtained during the process of reaching this final report. The motivation for the project and ultimate interview with Ian was simple: to gain perspectives on the conditions of work in the modern workforce of Western North Carolina. Without a more defined scope, however, this task was administratively more complicated than originally thought, as was the ability to derive meaningful information from it.

On the front end, decisions needed to be made on the appropriate modes of outreach, recruitment, and information gathering. The differences between the various combinations of short and long-form surveys and interviews were great, and over-extending was plausible given the volunteer or part-time scale of the organizing effort. On the back end, decisions needed to be made pertaining to the handling of information. After we had obtained whichever information we sought, what would be done with it, who would it be given to, what impact could be harnessed or what goal could be achieved with it?

Balancing feasibility, time, impact, and integrity, the decision was made to conduct a long-form interview and produce a long-form report to maximize critical comprehension and storytelling capability of the subject's testimony. The model exemplified by this report is one which may be used to conduct information seeking and community engagement campaigns in future cases and with improvements. The greatest value of this model lies in its ability to present individual oversights and experiences as true factors in a greater workplace or community ecosystem.

The insights gained from this account and similar testimony are invaluable to public administrators, elected officials, planners, and anyone else concerned in a professional capacity with economic development. For those who value economic sustainability and

resilience, Ian's account emphasizes the enormous importance of prioritizing the security of members of the workforce to achieve these goals. In no small part because of the glaring lack of security measures built into his position, Ian, an operator of an essential public function, faced unsafe and unfriendly working conditions, years of housing vulnerability, debt related to workplace injury, and a spectrum of circumstances which contributed to the overall precarity of his position. In addition to the distress faced by workers themselves, inadequate workforce policy may create conditions unfavorable to economic development as the job itself creates labor supply issues, interruption to services, legal liability, and other issues demonstrated by Ian stemming from job-related insecurity.

While economic development policy should reflect a posture that values the efficient and plentiful operation of business and services, this should not be achieved at the expense of the workforce, and rather workforce security should be recognized as a valid component of a healthy economy.

For local government employers in North Carolina this call is even greater. As state wage and workforce policy relegates its workers to operate in the lowest-tiered environment for their security, the policy created by counties and municipalities has potential to mediate or reverse the legal condemnations which preempt them at the state legislature. In the case of Ian, all manners of local adjustments could improve the security of him and his peers, including basic department-level protections against COVID or more comprehensive healthcare coverage.

The statement from Ian was given under plausible concerns for retaliation and under the condition of confidentiality for his protection. It was given because after five years of holding his breath, he found an opportunity to apprise his experiences through a platform which might have otherwise been unavailable. The commendable act is one of many made by individuals on behalf of labor in what today may be the worst state in the United States for working people – acts made to its great benefit.

Processed in this report for the purpose of generating targeted policy discourse, it exposes striking legitimate concerns on a range of issues, covering workplace health and safety, hostile dynamics within his department, incomprehensive employee benefits, and housing vulnerability. With the severe consequences of such circumstances in mind, the account warrants an audit of the specific conditions present in the department and re-evaluation of the public employer's job policies. For the state of work at large, it invites a renewed sense of urgency to reject economic insecurity and precarious workplace conditions – to replace it with policy and planning that advocate for the creation of sustainable livelihoods in Western North Carolina.