



Behind the Skyline

Labor Conditions in South Florida's
Commercial Construction Industry



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Acknowledgements

We dedicate this report to the construction workers who build under the sun and make South Florida possible; whose labor and contributions too often go unnoticed.

Many hands made this report possible. We are grateful to the hundreds of construction workers across Miami and Ft. Lauderdale who trusted us with their stories and reflections. We also want to thank the members of WeCount!'s Comité de Trabajadores de Construcción, who contributed testimonies and their own expertise on navigating the crisis of labor standards in South Florida's construction industry and shaped the solutions included in this report.

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WeCount! is a membership organization of immigrant workers and families organizing to raise standards in the construction industry across South Florida, towards a South Florida where all of us can live and work in our full dignity.

Introduction

Across South Florida: development is booming. With record-setting construction employment, this should be a great time to be a construction worker. Historically, jobs in the construction industry have been regarded as “good” blue-collar jobs that provided a pathway into the middle class through family-supporting wages, opportunities for advancement, and the prospects of a comfortable retirement at the end of a career. However, the results of this WeCount! study of working conditions in the commercial construction industry in Miami and Fort Lauderdale reveal that in most building trades occupations, wages are low, employment benefits are not provided, and health and safety risks are common. The impacts on workers are significant—they face economic hardships, have few opportunities for career advancement, and must cope with heightened risks of injury on the job. Health and safety in the workplace is of particular concern for construction workers, as the industry has seen the number of injuries and deaths rise with industry growth. While South Florida is known for its expanding skyline, marked by the visibility of tall buildings and cranes overseeing the coast, the dangerous and precarious conditions under which construction workers labor remain largely invisible, though government statistics present a reminder of the hazards involved; on average, a construction worker dies on the job in Florida every four days.¹

“Over the past 30 years, the number of high-skill, high-wage jobs on the one hand and low-wage jobs on the other has increased, resulting in a polarized economy that greatly benefits a few while others struggle to meet their basic needs.”

Economic inequality is also widening in Florida. The state is home to six of the top fifty most unequal cities in the United States, with Miami ranking number five and Fort Lauderdale ranking fifteenth.² This trend has largely been driven by a decline in middle-class employment opportunities. Over the past 30 years, the number of high-skill, high-wage jobs on the one hand and low-wage jobs on the other has increased, resulting in a polarized economy that greatly benefits a few while others struggle to meet their basic needs. Much has been written about Miami’s housing crisis. In 2022 then-HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge went as far as to call Miami the epicenter of the nation’s housing crisis. Less has been written about the conditions of the workers tasked with building and repairing the region’s housing supply. In South Florida: essential construction workers are struggling to afford a roof over their own heads.

Many workers in the US experience fluctuating work schedules, and increasing numbers work multiple jobs in different industries due to the seasonality and instability of their industries. Construction workers in South Florida are no strangers to such insecurity. All outdoor workers are subject to lost wages when rain or other weather events stop work, but construction workers must also deal with work stoppages due to construction permitting delays, financing issues, or poor management, as well as delays caused by other contractors when work is not completed on schedule. Construction workers, especially those employed by small companies with fewer contracts, may frequently experience layoffs when work is slow. The irregular nature of construction jobs most deeply impacts the lowest-paid workers in the industry, who may have to go days or weeks without work. With the cost of living rising sharply across South Florida, the bitter irony is that the very workers who are helping to build cities like Miami and Fort Lauderdale can no longer afford to live there.

The Florida construction industry is facing record labor shortages, and is consistently unable to meet the need for skilled labor that the demand for new development requires. At the same time, the impacts of the climate crisis are exacerbating precarity and risk for workers: from the record levels of extreme heat across South Florida to the intensifying storms. The current lack of uniform safety, quality, and labor standards, along with low wages and the absence of adequate protections and protocols in the South Florida construction industry, are unsustainable and pose great risks to the future of an industry that is essential to the local and national economy.



Photo: Gary Cameron/Reuters

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Survey Method

This report presents an analysis of a summer 2024 survey of 302 construction workers employed on commercial projects in the Miami and Fort Lauderdale areas. The survey was conducted in person and in both English and Spanish. WeCount! obtained a database of active construction projects, and limited the survey to workers who are employed on active new commercial construction projects with a minimum value of \$10,000,000. From this database, a sample of commercial and mixed-use projects was created through the assignment of identification numbers to each site, and then a random number table was used to randomly select worksites. Survey teams comprised of trained interviewers were given the addresses of selected sites each day, and they visited these sites during lunch hours and at the end of the workday. Interviewers were instructed to collect surveys from between 1 and 10 workers per site, with more surveys collected from the larger construction sites.

Workers were invited to participate in the survey, and those who participated were given a \$25 gift card. Each worker who agreed to participate was first asked two screening questions: “are you at least 18 years of age?” and “do you own your own construction company?” If they were under 18 or owned their own construction company, they were not permitted to complete the survey. If the worker satisfied the screening criteria, interviewers secured the consent of the worker before proceeding with the survey, which took 15-20 minutes to complete. The workers who were surveyed were full-time construction workers, 99% of whom usually work 40 hours per week or more.

Employment and Wages

Average hourly wages across the construction industry in the South are lower than those in other regions of the country,³ and the responses to the WeCount! survey reveal a pattern of consistently low wages in South Florida’s commercial construction industry. The median hourly wage of the commercial construction workers surveyed is \$19.00 (Table 1). Heavy equipment operators, sheetrock installers, ironworkers, and electricians reported the highest wages, while laborers, drywall installers, and those working plumbing jobs reported the lowest. Nearly half (48%) of laborers and 17% of drywall installers earn less than \$15 per hour. Given that the majority (56%) of respondents have worked for their employer for one year or more and 27% have worked for their employer for three or more years, the low median wages reported by survey respondents suggest that there is little earnings progression over time.

Table 1: Wage profiles of commercial sector building trades occupations				
“What type of construction work do you do on this site?”	Share of Wage Data Sample¹	Average Hourly Wage	Median Hourly Wage	Percent Paid Less Than \$15 an Hour
Carpenter (n=36)	14%	\$19.90	\$19.50	6%
Laborer (n=29)	10%	\$15.08	\$15.00	48%
Electrician (n=22)	9%	\$19.73	\$20.00	0%
Heavy equipment operator (n=17)	7%	\$22.76	\$22.00	0%
Framer (n=14)	5%	\$20.57	\$19.00	7%
Plumber (n=13)	5%	\$16.38	\$16.00	8%
Ironworker (n=13)	5%	\$18.54	\$20.00	15%
Drywaller (n=12)	5%	\$17.02	\$17.00	17%
Bricklayer (n=10)	4%	\$21.20	\$18.00	0%
Tiler (n=8)	3%	\$19.19	\$19.00	-
Sheetrock installer (n=6)	2%	\$21.13	\$21.00	-
Rofer (n=3)	1%	\$18.00	\$18.00	-
Other (n=91)	35%	\$19.28	\$19.00	19%
TOTAL n=260		\$19.14	\$19.00	

¹ Totals exceed 100% of the sample providing wage data because respondents could select more than one construction type.

To put these wage rates in context, we compared workers' wages to the cost of living in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL metropolitan area using the Living Wage Calculator developed by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.⁴ It establishes a benchmark for determining the wage rates required for meeting minimum standards of living and thus can be used to assess the adequacy of hourly wages with respect to local living costs. Using just the living wage standard for a single adult with no dependents, 86% of construction workers earn hourly wages that are too low to meet this standard. Given that respondents indicated that they support two family members with their income (an average of 1.9 dependents), this is a conservative measure of the financial difficulties confronting construction workers in South Florida.



Arturo *Electrician*

“We need a fair salary. That affects everything, even the food you can buy. Your salary impacts your entire life. I could live in a better place, but with my salary right now I can’t even dream of it.

We need to be properly classified for workers’ compensation and we need employer-paid health insurance.”



Wage Theft

Wage theft—the nonpayment of wages to workers for hours worked—is an all-too-common problem for workers in construction and other low-wage industries.⁵ In addition to being against the law, wage theft exacerbates the financial difficulties facing workers and their families.

Wage theft can take several forms, including the nonpayment of overtime wages and failure to pay employees for work completed. However, when questioned about instances of wage theft, workers typically use a more narrow definition, where wage nonpayment is taken to refer only to instances in which an employer fails to pay the employee for work completed. Twelve percent of respondents reported that they had been victims of wage theft while employed in the construction sector in Florida. Construction contractors owe these victims of wage theft an average of \$1,484 (Table 2). Furthermore, in addition to the outright nonpayment of wages for work completed, 31% of construction workers who qualified for overtime pay with their current employer (because they worked more than 40 hours in a workweek) reported that they did not receive that pay.

**Table 2:
Nonpayment of wages**

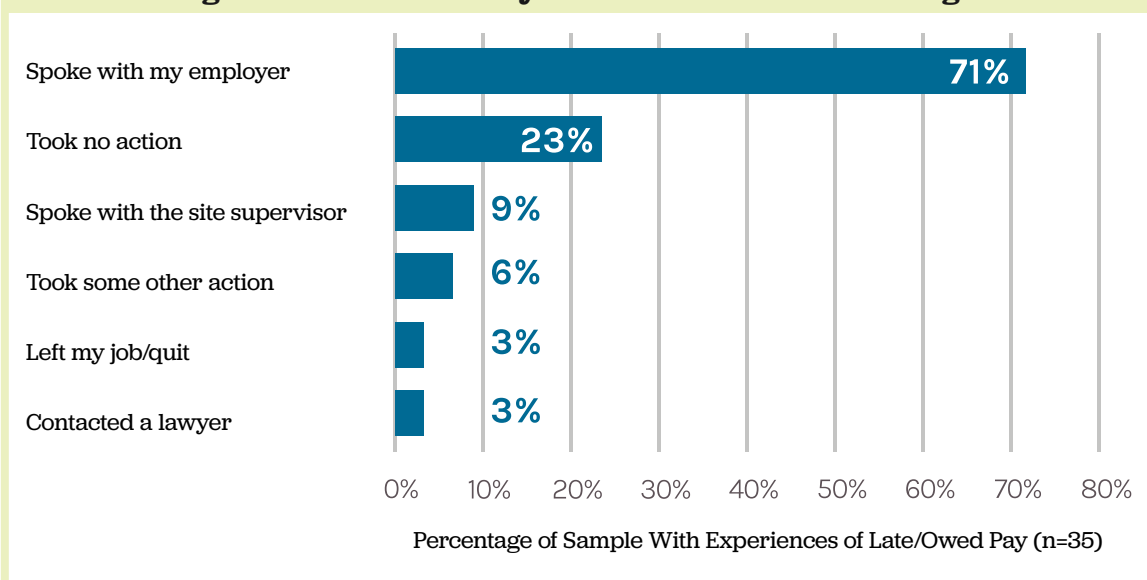
“In the last year, how many times were you not paid some or all of your pay while working construction in Florida”		Total amount owed to worker		
<i>Number of times</i>	<i>Percent (n=35)¹</i>	<i>Minimum owed</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Average owed</i>
Once	43%	\$100	\$3,000	\$987
2-4 times	51%	\$200	\$3,900	\$1,466
5 times or more	6%	\$1,000	\$3,000	\$2,000
Total	100%	\$19.14	\$19.00	\$1,484

Notes

1. While 38 total workers reported experiencing late pay issues, 2 had only worked on their site for 1 day and were thus excluded from the sample, and 1 did not provide further information about their experience, making for an analysis sample of n=35.
2. Percentage totals across categories exceed 100% as workers could select more than one response.
3. No workers experiencing late pay issues reported contacting a government agency to recover what was owed.

Workers who seek to recover unpaid wages typically face significant obstacles. Court proceedings can be lengthy and costly and, in many cases, even when workers receive a judgment in their favor, they face additional difficulties actually collecting back wages. When asked to select actions they took to recover these owed wages, most workers reported having attempted to speak with their employers (71%) or site supervisor (9%), though in 23% of the cases, no action was taken (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Actions taken by workers to recover owed wages



Employers also may take action to dissuade or punish employees who attempt to redress wage theft. In some instances, employers retaliated against workers who sought to recover unpaid wages. Retaliation included firing or suspending the worker (6 respondents), threatening to call immigration enforcement authorities and/or parole officers (3 respondents), and cutting hours or otherwise lowering wages (2 respondents).



Mauricio *Ironworker*

Wage theft happens a lot, it affects us a lot. For example, in some jobs they lie to you about how much they are going to pay you, but when you see the first check because of the need, you stay. **I've helped build at least 1,500 apartments. But I don't have my own apartment, I rent.** If I had the opportunity, I would have my own home. There is no stability when you rent. I pay \$1,600 in rent alone per month. Construction salaries are not enough for how expensive life has now become in Miami. Additionally, our salary depends on the hours we can work. It is difficult not to be able to fully take care of my family. We have to improve the construction industry.

“That respondents who have been victims of wage theft are not seeking to recover their wages under these laws is a clear indication that targeted outreach is needed to reach workers in the construction industry”

It is worth noting that no worker reported contacting a government agency to recover unpaid wages, even though, for example, both Miami-Dade County and Broward County have model local wage theft ordinances. That respondents who have been victims of wage theft are not seeking to recover their wages under these laws is a clear indication that targeted outreach is needed to reach workers in the construction industry, a sector that has long been known to have high levels of wage theft. The nonpayment of wages not only hurts workers and their families but also negatively impacts employers that “play by the rules” and pay workers what they are legally owed. When construction contractors that violate the law are able to maintain profitability, underbid competitors, and secure market share through wage theft, this illegal practice can have industry-wide ramifications, dragging down wages and working conditions across the sector.

Financial Hardships

Low wages, wage theft, and violations of overtime laws create financial hardships for construction workers and their families. More than eight in 10 (81%) construction workers reported that at some point in the previous year, they did not have enough money to cover their rent or mortgage, 57% did not have enough money to cover medical expenses, and 55% did not have enough money for groceries or utility bills (Table 3). These astounding figures reveal a painful reality facing the South Florida construction workforce: the workers who are building Miami and Fort Lauderdale are struggling to afford to live in these cities.

Table 3: Financial hardships faced by construction workers and their families in the past year	
Hardship	Percent Workers Reporting
Not enough money for rent or mortgage	81%
Not enough money for groceries or utility bills	55%
Not enough money to cover medical care for self or family	57%

Benefits

Compounding the problems of low pay and wage theft in South Florida’s commercial construction industry is the lack of employment benefits provided to workers (Table 4). Just one in four workers (25%) receive employer-provided medical insurance. This statistic is all the more troubling given the physical strain of most construction occupations and the high rates of on-the-job injury in the industry. Moreover, the lack of employer-provided medical insurance is especially concerning for South Florida workers with low incomes, given that Florida is one of 10 states that chose not to expand Medicaid coverage following the passage of the Affordable Care Act.

Other types of employment benefits also are rarely provided to construction workers in South Florida. WeCount! survey data revealed that just 23% receive paid sick days, 22% receive paid sick days, 18% receive paid vacation or personal time, 14% have employer-provided life insurance policies, 13% are offered enrollment in a retirement or pension plan, and 7% are eligible for paid family leave.

**Table 4:
Employer-provided benefits offered to construction workers**

Type of Employment Benefit	Percent of Sample Receiving Benefit
Medical Insurance (n=295) ¹	25%
Paid Sick Days (n=288)	23%
Paid Vacation or Personal Days (n=285)	18%
Life Insurance (n=290)	14%
Retirement/Pension (n=291)	13%
Paid Family Leave (n=281)	7%

1. Respondents could select “I don’t know” or “I do not wish to answer this question” for each type of benefit; these responses were coded as missing and removed from the percent calculation.

Payroll Fraud

Payroll fraud occurs when employers misclassify employees as independent contractors. Misclassified workers often lose the basic protections of employees—such as the right to be paid at least the minimum wage and time and half for overtime hours—and they must pay their employer’s share of payroll taxes. There is considerable confusion on the part of workers regarding their employment status with construction contractors in South Florida, which could be a sign of widespread payroll fraud. Forty percent of respondents indicated that their

employer deducts taxes from their paycheck and issues a W-2 form, as should be the case, while another 40% reported that their employer does not deduct taxes and they were unsure what tax form, if any, would be issued. Five percent were unsure whether taxes were being deducted. An additional 14% clearly were being misclassified as an independent contractor.

Misclassifying employees as independent contractors is advantageous to the employer because the business evades the responsibility of paying employment taxes, which enables the company to keep costs low and be more competitive when bidding for construction projects. These employers generally do not provide benefits, workers' compensation insurance, or unemployment insurance, and they do not pay time and a half for overtime hours, all of which further lowers their labor costs. Construction contractors that misclassify their employees are able to submit much lower bids on projects and, therefore, harm employers that properly pay for benefits, employment taxes, and overtime. Employers that are committed to correctly classifying their employees must then look for other ways to cut costs to stay competitive.

Skills Training

Formal training programs play a crucial role in providing both construction employers and workers with the necessary skills to ensure a well-trained and safe workforce. But, over the years, the system of construction worker training and advancement has broken down. This breakdown can be partly explained by the proliferation of small firms in the construction industry, where there is little room for upward mobility (and therefore little incentive to train employees), and partially because workers have only limited access to training programs. Half (51%) of the workers surveyed reported that they have never participated in a formal construction training program in the U.S.,⁶ and 68% reported that they have never participated in an apprenticeship program.

The breakdown of the training and advancement system in Florida's construction industry and nationwide has had negative consequences, both for workers and for the industry. Low participation in formal training means workers are not benefitting from the types of systematic skill assessments conducted by formal training providers nor are they accessing the other useful performance-measurement tools explained in these programs. Furthermore, the absence of credentials provided by formal training programs hinders workers' upward mobility in the industry. More often than not, construction skills development, if it is happening, is occurring informally on the job. A 2016 study of the construction industry in six large southern cities, including Miami, found that the vast majority (91%) of workers who reported that they had not

“...On-the-job “training” may consist of nothing more than supervisor instructions to observe a co-worker and “just copy what he does’ or ‘observe his technique.”

participated in a formal training program indicated that they developed their skills informally on the job.⁷ Because of the informal nature of skills development, it is difficult to assess the quality of this learning or its effectiveness. Other research has found that this on-the-job “training” may consist of nothing more than supervisor instructions to observe a co-worker and “just copy what he does’ or ‘observe his technique.’”⁸ Evidence suggests this decline in formal construction training program participation is a significant factor in widespread skills shortages impacting the entire industry. A 2023 national study conducted by the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), for example, found that “68 percent of firms report applicants lack the skills needed to work in construction” and 88% reported that they are having difficulties filling positions in crafts such as concrete workers, carpenters, and cement masons.⁹

Workplace Health and Safety

Health and safety risks faced by construction workers have been well documented, and despite improvements in recent years, they continue to experience high rates of injuries and fatalities. The section explores findings from our survey that add to existing research about workplace injuries before emphasizing the unique risks that heat stress exposure presents to construction workers in South Florida

Safety Training

Jobsite health and safety is affected by numerous factors, including the presence of safety managers, the company/worksite culture regarding worker protections, and the type(s) of training available to workers. Site-specific safety training is a common-sense activity to safeguard against injuries on the job and is required for many construction tasks, such as working at heights. Fortunately, most workers (74%) report that their employers have held some kind of safety meeting or safety training at their current worksite. However, only 21% of workers reported that they had received CPR/first aid training, while just 20% had received heat safety training.

Other important health and safety trainings include the 10-hour and 30-hour programs from the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The OSHA 10 Hour Construction Industry Outreach Training

Workers with OSHA 10 safety training	46%
Workers with CPR/first aid training	21%
Workers with heat safety training	20%
Workers with OSHA 30 safety training	11%
None of these	42%

Program is designed to raise the awareness of entry-level construction workers so that they can recognize and prevent hazards on the job and know their rights to a safe workplace. A critical component of the OSHA 10-hour training is informing workers of how to report workplace hazards to OSHA, enabling workers to seek independent assistance with workplace hazards. However, less than half (46%) of survey respondents reported that they had received a 10-hour OSHA-certified safety training at any point during their career as a construction worker (Table 5). The OSHA 30-hour Construction Industry Outreach Training course is a comprehensive safety program aimed at construction supervisors. Just 11% of survey respondents indicated that they have received OSHA 30 training.



Personal Protective Equipment

Access to safety equipment that is in good condition is essential for preventing injuries or fatalities on construction sites, though many respondents indicated that their employers fail to provide various types of basic safety equipment. **A significant portion of the workforce WeCount! surveyed reports that their employers do not provide the following basic safety equipment:**

- Safety glasses: 34%
- Gloves: 36%
- Hard Hat: 48%
- Earplugs: 50%
- Harnesses: 60%

One-third (30%) of respondents reported they did not receive any employer-provided safety equipment.



Santos *Ironworker*

I have been working in the construction industry in South Florida for three years. I've seen young coworkers get badly injured. I have seen too many colleagues get injured. Us workers in the construction industry suffer many abuses from contractors. Oftentimes developers and general contractors just want to see who charges them less. It shouldn't be like that, they should also consider the workers. In the industry here in Miami, you have to have your own work tools and safety equipment. You buy that with your own money, but the company should pay for that. There are companies that don't even want to buy safety glasses or gloves. It's the workers who suffer the most, whether it's thundering or raining, I still have to be at work. **I came to Miami to look for a better opportunity. We deserve a lot more than how we are being treated right now in the industry.**

Coping with Extreme Heat

Across South Florida, 2024 was another year of record-breaking heat. The month of May was the hottest on record¹⁰, and the heat records continued to be broken throughout the summer, as residents coped with multiple excessive heat advisories. Hot, humid temperatures like these pose a great risk to construction workers. Construction workers who worked outdoors in Miami were exposed to average high temperatures of 89.5 degrees in May, 88.2 degrees in June, and 90.8 degrees in both July and August.¹¹ Furthermore, these temperatures were approximately 15 degrees hotter for workers who labor in direct sunlight—such as roofers, rebar workers, and foundation pourers—making exposure to high temperatures a key concern for workers in these occupations.¹² Under such conditions, taking regular breaks in shady areas is necessary to stay healthy while undertaking heavy physical labor in environments as warm as Southern Florida. Fortunately, 86% of respondents reported that their worksites had shaded areas for rest breaks.

With average temperatures rising across the United States, the US OSHA has issued guidance to protect workers from the dangers of extreme heat. When the heat index is above 91 degrees, OSHA recommends that employers schedule frequent rest breaks in the shade and allow workers to acclimate to the heat. Once the heat index reaches 103 degrees, OSHA recommends that employers enforce scheduled rest breaks, limit workers' physically demanding activities, and reschedule work for cooler times of the day, when possible. If the heat index is 115 degrees or higher, OSHA recommends that all non-essential work be rescheduled and that workers refrain from undertaking strenuous activities.

Using the daily highs for temperature and humidity in Miami, between May and August 2024, there were no days in which the heat index was below 91 degrees (Table 6). Despite heat indices in South Florida that exceeded 103 degrees 56 times and exceeded 115 degrees 38 times between May and August 2024, 14% of the sample reported being allowed no breaks at all beyond a lunch break, and 75% received just one rest break along with their lunch break. Under these conditions, inadequate rest breaks unnecessarily expose workers to heightened risks of injuries and even fatality.



HOMESTEAD, FL, 2024 – Members of WeCount! marching to honor lives of workers lost to extreme heat and demand basic human rights for outdoor workers, such as access to water, shade and breaks.

**Table 6:
Number of days the heat index in Miami reached the given threshold or above, May-August 2024**

Heat index	May	June	July	August
91F	30	30	31	31
103F	8	20	27	29
115F	10	10	7	11

Source: Calculations based on <https://www.wunderground.com/history/daily/us/fl/miami>

Regardless of what the temperature is, all employers are required to provide drinking water to their employees. While the majority (58%) of respondents indicated that either their employer or the general contractor provided water at their worksites, one-third (33%) indicated that they and their co-workers had to supply water, and 6% indicated that no water was available at the worksite. As a result of the environmental conditions and management decisions impacting construction worksites in South Florida, workers experience signs of heat illness. When asked whether they have experienced dizziness or nausea due to working in extreme heat, 14% said they experienced these symptoms frequently, 44% said they experienced them sometimes or occasionally, and 43% said they never experienced these symptoms (Table 7). Fully one-quarter report that either they or their co-workers have fainted at the worksite.

**Table 7:
Percent reporting experiencing dizziness or nausea from working in heat**

Frequently	Sometimes	Occasionally	Never	Percent seeing fainting at worksite ¹
14%	27%	17%	43%	25%

1. This calculation reflects both respondents who reported they themselves fainted while at work and those who reported seeing an immediate colleague faint on their worksite.

Workplace Injuries

Ten percent of respondents suffered an injury requiring medical attention while working at a construction worksite in Florida. Of those who were injured, 44% missed four days of work or less, 37% 10 and 30 days of work, and 19% missed 60 or more days of work. In most cases, medical care was paid for by the business owner or through the company’s insurance, though 12% of respondents reported that care had to be paid for by themselves, their family, or a friend.



Luciano *Carpenter*

Nowadays, the work is harder because the heat has increased. As part of my work I place columns in every floor, I work in full glare of the sun. What [the employers] are paying is very little for such a risky job. The cost of everything has increased: rents, insurance, food. But our salaries have not been increasing with the same speed as the bills. **My insurance goes up every six months, my rent every year, but my salary hasn't gone up in three years.**

Working in extreme heat, you get exhausted a lot faster. [Employers] shouldn't be able to put pressure on you when there is extreme heat, it is very dangerous. For example, workers should be wearing glasses at all times. Sweat, when there is extreme heat, fogs up your glasses. Working in the cold is not the same as working in the heat. **In the summer is when I have seen the most accidents. We, as workers, should have more frequent breaks.**





Where We Go From Here: Building a Better South Florida

Given the conditions described in this report, perhaps it is unsurprising that although just 7% of respondents are members of building trades unions, 62% expressed interest in joining a union. This overwhelming support reflects the clear benefits that union membership offers in the construction industry. Unionized construction workers typically earn higher wages, have access to better healthcare and retirement benefits, and enjoy stronger job protections compared to their non-union counterparts. According to a 2022 report published by the Illinois Economic Policy Institute: on average, union construction workers earn 46% higher incomes, are 6% less likely to live in poverty, are 34% more likely to have private health insurance coverage, and are 6% less likely to rely on Medicaid.¹³ Union construction workers are also more likely than their non-union counterparts to work in safer environments where labor standards are consistently enforced. Unionized workers also have greater access to training and apprenticeship programs, which help them advance in their careers and stay competitive in a rapidly changing industry. Expanding unionization in South Florida's construction sector would not only improve the livelihoods of workers but also enhance the quality and safety of construction projects across the region. On average, unionized worksites have 34% fewer health and safety violations and fewer on-the-job fatalities when compared to their non-union counterparts.

By investing in the expansion of unions and other worker-led initiatives, South Florida can build a stronger, more equitable future for the construction industry.

Recommended Solutions to Raise Standards in the Construction Industry

1. Codify Worker Protections Against Extreme Heat and Extreme Weather in Development Agreements

Codifying worker protections against extreme heat and extreme weather in development agreements is crucial for ensuring the health and safety of South Florida construction workers. These agreements should include a comprehensive Heat Illness Prevention Plan that guarantees the provision of adequate potable water, regular rest breaks, and access to shaded areas during work hours, and additional protocols for excessive heat days. Additionally, contractors should be required to provide training on heat safety first aid, equipping workers with the knowledge needed to prevent and respond to heat-related illnesses. In light of South Florida's vulnerability to major storms, hazard pay should be considered for workers impacted by extreme weather events. Such provisions are necessary to create safer working conditions and ensure that construction workers are not forced to choose between their livelihoods and their health.

2. Expand the use of responsible and union contractors that pay prevailing wages and offer employment benefits to construction workers while ensuring higher levels of build quality

Expanding the use of responsible and union contractors that pay prevailing wages and offer employment benefits is a vital step toward improving labor conditions and raising the quality of construction work in South Florida. Contractors that adhere to these standards not only provide workers with fair compensation and benefits, such as healthcare and retirement plans, but also contribute to safer, more efficient worksites. When workers are paid fairly and receive benefits, they are more likely to stay with employers over the long-term, leading to a more skilled and experienced workforce. By prioritizing contractors who pay prevailing wages, developers can ensure higher levels of quality in construction, reduced turnover, and improved safety, ultimately benefiting workers, the industry, and the community at large.

3. Partner with Independent Monitoring Organizations to Minimize Risks and Prevent Chronic Violations of Workers' Rights

Independent monitoring organizations provide impartial oversight, ensuring that labor standards are consistently upheld at job sites. By conducting regular audits, monitoring workplace conditions, and responding to worker complaints, independent monitors can identify and address issues before they escalate into widespread violations. Partnerships also deter unscrupulous contractors from exploiting workers through wage theft, unsafe working conditions, or the denial of benefits. Developers that work with independent monitors demonstrate a commitment to ethical labor practices, fostering greater accountability and transparency in the industry while protecting workers' dignity and safety.

4. Expand Worker Training and Access to Department of Labor Registered Apprenticeship Programs

Expanding worker training and access to Department of Labor-registered apprenticeship programs is crucial for empowering South Florida construction workers with the skills needed to advance in their careers while ensuring a safer, more capable workforce. These apprenticeship programs provide structured, hands-on training that not only enhances workers' technical abilities but also improves their understanding of workplace safety standards. By creating more opportunities for workers to access these programs, developers can help build a pipeline of skilled labor while promoting upward mobility for workers who often face barriers to career advancement. Moreover, apprenticeships ensure a higher level of professionalism and craftsmanship on job sites, benefiting both workers and employers, while contributing to a more resilient and equitable construction industry.

5. Invest in Worker Ownership

Investing in worker cooperative ownership is a transformative strategy to improve labor conditions and empower construction workers in South Florida. Worker cooperatives offer a model where workers have direct ownership and control over their workplace, allowing them to make decisions that prioritize fair wages, safe working conditions, and long-term sustainability. By investing in this model, we can help create a construction industry rooted in worker self-determination, where gains are shared equitably and decisions reflect the collective interests of the workforce. This approach fosters greater job security, increases worker retention, and promotes a culture of mutual accountability and quality work. Moreover, cooperative ownership strengthens workers' economic power and builds a more just and resilient construction sector.



MIAMI, FL (July 2024)
Construction Worker
Assembly hosted by
WeCount!

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