

TOGETHER WE GO FAR

A Call for a Multi-sector Southern Worker Movement



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Georgia is one of only five states that lacks a mechanism to consider environmental justice¹ in environmental decision-making. Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities, particularly Black workers and immigrant workers, disproportionately suffer the negative impacts of environmental hazards but have little voice over their impact on their livelihoods and everyday life. Injustices in the workplace, including toxic chemicals, unprotected work environments, and extreme heat or cold, are dangerous realities for BIPOC workers that result in greater risk for injury, illness, and death.

Climate change is an environmental justice issue. Many BIPOC workers in Georgia work outdoors and are more exposed to extremes in temperature and weather, poor air quality, and disease carrying pests. They also work in hot indoor environments that lack adequate air conditioning and ventilation. Achieving climate equity² in the workforce means that all workers—regardless of their race, color, gender, age, sexuality, national origin, ability, or income—work in safe, healthy, and fair communities.

In order to have an expansive and highly effective worker movement, we must support the most vulnerable among us, including Black people, immigrants, queer and trans folks, women, low wage workers and every worker living at the intersections of these identities.

During the summer of 2022, Demo Lab South conducted a statewide study focusing on BIPOC workers. This study aimed to explore their perspectives on addressing health and environmental concerns within their workplaces, as well as the effects of climate change on these issues. Key informant interviews with Black farmers, Vietnamese nail salon workers, and Latine poultry plant workers demonstrated complex and nuanced information about worker's needs and potential solutions. The three industries were chosen because they remain largely unorganized and vulnerable to corporate safety failures, are frequently overlooked by government outreach in Georgia, and are impacted by the intersections of immigration, climate change and labor rights.

This study was conducted during a historical moment for unions and labor rights in the United States. As professional actors, writers, hotel and auto workers gain momentum towards fair wages and working conditions, organizers are being called across the country to ensure the same is done in industries with low visibility and little to no union representation. It is our hope that the findings from the study will serve as a catalyst to engage Georgia's BIPOC workers in conversations around the intersections of gender, immigration, health, and environment, and promote sustainable long-term change.

1 Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. (<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>)

2 Climate equity is the goal of recognizing and addressing the unequal burdens made worse by climate change, while ensuring that all people share the benefits of climate protection efforts. (<https://www.epa.gov/climateimpacts/climate-equity>)

BUILDING A SOUTHERN MOVEMENT STRATEGY

There are approximately 3,000 Black farmers³, over 3,000 Latine poultry plant workers⁴, and thousands of Vietnamese nail salon workers in Georgia⁵. There is an imminent opportunity to unite Southern workers across sectors to advocate for rights they have long been denied including fair wages, safety protocols, legal protections, and more.

Georgia has the fifth largest number of Black farmers in the U.S.

Gainesville, Georgia is the self proclaimed “poultry capital of the world.”

More than half (54%) of all immigrant owned businesses in Georgia are nail salons owned by Asian Americans, namely Vietnamese immigrants and refugees.

The current worker landscape raises several critical questions:

- Why haven't these workers been organized in the past?
- What challenges exist to organizing these industries?
- What opportunities exist for these worker groups to organize?



3 Suggs, E. (2021, March 26). Black farmers in Georgia looking to benefits from massive aid package. ajc. <https://www.ajc.com/news/black-farmers-in-georgia-looking-to-benefits-from-massive-aid-package/2M4P2XIC3ZDZJAEALBPOGKY5Y2Y/>

4 Ahmed, C., Bass, M., Lancey, A., Lovick, M., & Fossum, J. (2020, July). Mapping power in poultry processing plants in Gainesville, Georgia. The University of Texas at Austin School of Law. https://law.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2020/11/Final-Report_Gainesville_Website.pdf

5 Georgia Secretary of State. (n.d.). Professional Licensing Boards - active licenses. Professional Licensing Boards - Active Licenses. <https://sos.ga.gov/professional-licensing-boards-active-licenses>

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN GEORGIA NOW?

Black farmers, Vietnamese nail salon workers, and Latine poultry plant workers make up key unorganized groups of workers of color in Georgia.

- Black farmers are up against historical economic divestment from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)
- Latine poultry plant workers are up against a conglomerate of poultry plant corporations that are valued in the billions of dollars
- Vietnamese nail salon workers are up against lack of effective regulations on harmful work conditions

Despite the passage of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, Black farmers still have limited protections. This act reauthorized and expanded support for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (SDFRs) across a range of USDA programs, including farm credit programs, crop insurance, conservation programs, as well as provisions to incentivize research on issues faced by SDFRs. It has been five years since this bill passed, yet there is no resource hub that provides technical/research assistance, funding opportunities, and equipment assistance.

Due to inadequate federal and state support, the burden is placed on Black farmers to create informal systems for themselves to borrow equipment and share best practices. In addition, Black farmers historically have experienced income inequities stemming from generations of systemic racial discrimination.



The Center for American Progress found that in 2017, the average full-time white farmer brought in \$17,190 in farm income, while the average full-time Black farmer made just \$2,408.

Many civil rights advocates say the USDA's own practices have resulted in the loss of land and generational wealth for Black families.

Georgia has about 9,500⁵ active licensed nail technicians, many of whom work in mom and pop salons and are Vietnamese immigrants or refugees. Few studies exist focusing on the health and safety conditions in nail salons in Georgia and on the labor issues of nail salon workers more broadly. According to a national report,⁶ the majority of nail salon workers are low wage earners, who are predominantly immigrant women. They are also vulnerable to many short- and long-term occupational health conditions. Currently there are no efforts at the state level to support improvements in areas such as language rights, labor protections, and industry standards.

In January 2021, six workers were killed in Gainesville, Georgia after a negligent liquid nitrogen leak. Five out of six were Latine workers. Poultry plant workers, primarily immigrants, were reluctant to report what they had observed due to concerns about potential retaliation from their employers. This included fears of employer-initiated actions such as contacting local law enforcement or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which could lead to possible deportation proceedings.⁷

Although the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined the organizations responsible for the negligent gas leaks, the systems which led to these preventable deaths still largely exist. Workers who are concerned about job loss, combined with fear of deportation are less likely to report corporate failures. Poultry plant workers received temporary deferred action through the Department of Homeland Security, offering limited protection from deportation and allowing them to work legally. Despite the existence of some protections for immigrant whistleblowers, these safeguards are short-term and do not offer the sustained, lasting protection needed to ensure workplace safety for all workers in Georgia.

The intersections of race, class, and immigration status and its impacts on Georgia's working class cannot be ignored. Despite the differences between these three industries and the significant challenges they present, the time has come to call for bold action and revolutionary courage to organize and ensure long-term, sustainable protections for all workers in Georgia.

6 Sharma, P., Waheed, S., Nguyen, V., Stepick L., Orellana, R., Katz, L., Kim, S. Lapira, K. (2018). Nail File: A Study of Nail Salon Workers and Industry in the United States. UCLA Labor Center and California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative. https://www.labor.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/NAILFILES_2019jan09_FINAL_5a.pdf

7 Anand, S., Zambrana, E., Stevens, A., & Lapointe, M. (2023, January 27). Two years after deadly nitrogen leak at Georgia Poultry Plant, a big step forward to protect immigrant workers reporting labor abuses. <https://www.nilc.org/2023/01/27/two-years-after-deadly-nitrogen-leak-at-georgia-poultry-plant-a-big-step-forward-to-protect-immigrant-workers-reporting-labor-abuses>

WORKER EXPERIENCES IN GEORGIA

In order to understand the experiences of Black farmers, Vietnamese nail salon workers, and Latine poultry plant workers, Demo Lab South conducted a series of key informant interviews in the summer of 2022.⁸ These interviews revealed a number of issues that cut across all groups around worker and human rights. The workers also shared a strong desire to build community support to organize to address these issues.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, “Every worker should enjoy decent and safe working conditions. This requires, at a minimum, the regulation of working time, the appropriate payment of wages, and effective oversight of occupational safety and health.”

However, the Black farmers, Vietnamese nail salon workers, and Latine poultry plant workers we interviewed revealed that their working conditions are far from decent or safe.



⁸ Demo Lab South developed a set of questions to learn about the workers' perceptions on health and environmental issues. These questions addressed five key areas of concern: (1) health and safety, (2) environmental issues, (3) economic opportunities, (4) community and politics, and (5) future support. In total, 7 Black farmers, 6 nail salon workers, and 6 poultry plant workers were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Workers were interviewed either via Zoom, phone, or in-person. The study was approved by Kennesaw State University's Institutional Review Board. A detailed description of the methods can be found here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yC_RRcJKWL3kibqAP4_F4ecVLtjvoKNI/view?usp=sharing

The following are direct quotes and themes that emerged during the key informant interviews conducted with the three worker groups.

Extreme Weather and Temperature

As Georgia's climate continues to change, extreme heat events have become much more common. Black farmers in Georgia experience climate issues such as hurricanes, droughts, and weather changes. Climate change brings many challenges to farmers. Due to rising temperatures and irregular weather patterns, farmers have been forced to adapt. These are some experiences the Black farmers shared:

“Climate is measured every 10 years or so with your average temperatures. We've moved from zone 7 to zone 7b, and in some areas it's closer to 8a. So, it is getting warmer. With that we have more erratic extremes. It throws off harvest times. ... a crop you may have produced for years is behaving differently or the conditions around it [are] influencing it differently.”

“Climate change definitely impacts us ... You know one of the things that we're finding is that we cannot do any outside labor past 11 or 12 o'clock because it gets so hot. We just can't do it. It took us a while to learn how to grow in this environment. Once we had it figured out, we [had] to change everything because climate change has really affected how crops grow. So stuff we used to plant later in the season, we could plant earlier, but things like onions, we haven't had a good onion crop, [in] about 2 years, 3 years”

Laborers such as poultry plant workers have been forced to work in extreme temperatures, hot or cold while being exposed to harmful chemicals. These conditions are compounded by the repetitive nature of the work and its severe impact on their bodies, specifically their shoulders, arms, and backs. They also lack organized agencies for support and advocacy. These experiences were highlighted in the interviews as well:

“It would be very good if there were organizations... to help all the people in the chicken farms, starting with work teams that serve us. Maybe some type of OSHA or the equivalent of OSHA... something that at least holds [the company] to a certain standard. Besides that, that’s just for the machinery... but working conditions and overworking people in extreme conditions, like 90-degree rooms or places that are known to overheat people.”

“Most people, as time goes by, complain a lot about the joint pains and I think it’s because of the cold, because we work in the cold there. It’s undoubtedly necessary because it’s food products, right? So, when you spend a long time working in those cold places, there are consequences like back pain, but you still ignore it and keep working.”



9 Occupational Safety and Health Administration. (n.d.). Health hazards in nail salons - chemical hazards. [https://www.osha.gov/nail-salons/chemical-hazards#:~:text=Formaldehyde%20\(nail%20polish%2C%20nail%20hardener,eyes%2C%20nose%2C%20and%20throat.](https://www.osha.gov/nail-salons/chemical-hazards#:~:text=Formaldehyde%20(nail%20polish%2C%20nail%20hardener,eyes%2C%20nose%2C%20and%20throat.)

Exposure to Harmful Chemical

Black farmers in Georgia shared their experience with worsening soil health. Through prioritizing small community farming, sustainable planting and harvesting techniques, and honoring ancestral traditions, these farmers provide sustenance to their communities. However, chemical pesticides interfere with these practices and disturb the healthy ecosystem by contaminating the soil and crops.

“I think of harmful pesticides and herbicides... Personally, something I’m dealing with right now at one of the farms I work at, I’m trying to grow rice, but because I’m in a pecan orchard, and it’s sprayed heavily with zinc, the rice is getting too much zinc and it’s killing my rice off. It’s not in the same plot. It’s just surrounding the area but because of run off, because of drifting, it is impacting other crops.”

Nail salon workers also face health hazards working with chemicals such as formaldehyde and isopropyl acetate which affect breathing and irritate the body’s respiratory system as well as eyes and skin⁹. Nail salon workers are exposed to hazardous work materials daily, and they are especially at risk if they do not wear protective equipment such as gloves and safety glasses or if the salons they work in are poorly ventilated.

“We use a lot of like chemicals in our business. We use like the monomer or acetone callus remover and also very strong products. The monomer especially has very strong fumes and sometimes it’s like unbearable for a lot of people, but it’s what we need to sculpt our nails with so that is that. I mean, I’m sure over time it’s gonna be like, not right for our system, but I don’t know if we can do anything about that, but we have to wear a glove and a mask and stuff to just keep protect ourselves from the harm, I guess, but partially.”

Federal agencies such as OSHA enact regulations to try and prevent workplace injury, however, nail salon workers are constantly exposed to the fumes from the products they use and dust from sanding nails. Although some salons use good ventilation systems, some still bend rules and use banned products or do not offer quality ventilation.

Irregular and Low Wages

Black farmers, Vietnamese nail salon workers, and Latine poultry plant workers all spoke about irregular and low wages. Because they lack basic benefits and protections afforded most traditional full-time workers (health insurance, paid leave, overtime pay, and minimum wages), they find themselves out on a limb and without protection from harm.

Black farmers speak about the challenges of making a profit and the need for health insurance.

It makes it very difficult for us small farmers doing small scale production to be able to be properly compensated because if it costs me \$8 to produce that tomato, but the market only will sell that tomato for \$1.50 then there's no way to recoup that.

If you talk to more people who farm, [they] probably don't make enough money to cover your basic needs... just health insurance is a big deal... Most smaller farms and a lot of Black farmers, at least one person has to work off the farm just to make sure that they have insurance.

Nail salon workers's income is commission-based which makes income unpredictable and difficult to save or plan for the future. Because nail salon workers are classified as contractors, it denies them access to sick time, overtime, workers compensation, breaks, and other benefits.

You're basically working off of commission. So your income fluctuates... In the summer, you make a lot more. ... [In] the winter times you're pretty much just sitting there waiting on customers. You have to in the summertime work your butt off and save what you can to support you and your family in the winter months.

Poultry plant workers talk about how minimum wage or near minimum wage is insufficient to meet a family's basic needs.

The money is not enough because you have to pay the babysitter, you have to buy food for them to eat, you have to pay the rent, you have to pay for everything you need to survive.

It often happens that if we take care of our children, babysitting charges us \$50 or \$60 dollars a day when we earn only \$90 dollars a day or \$60 dollars a day depending on the hours worked. I think the biggest issue within the poultry industry is the low wages.

There's people that have been working there for like 20 plus years but they're still getting paid the same or less than new hires... You expect if you've been working there that many years, you get a raise or something, but they're still getting paid the same as new hires. It's kind of an issue that a lot of people have got going on where I work.

Racism and Discrimination in the Workplace

“Immigrant workers are critical to the success of our economy, yet they are among those who suffer the most exploitation and abuse at work, and then suffer further from intimidation and retaliation when they stand up for their rights.”

- Stuart Appelbaum, President of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union

Experiences of BIPOC workers are complex when racism, immigration status, and language barriers come into play. Even though federal and state laws protect all workers regardless of immigration status, some workers experience unfair treatment due to their status. In addition, many refrain from voicing their concerns because of their limited understanding of their rights and because they are afraid of retaliation. In addition to the systemic discrimination they experience, Black farmers also experience racism on a daily basis:

“White people walk up on my land and literally I’ll be on a tractor. They’ll stop me, [and say] ‘Hey, who owns this place? I want to talk to the owner. I wanna do something over here and I wanna use this field’ ... [not realizing that I am the owner]. I respond, ‘Yeah, no, you should leave and come back and say hello ...’ Then I’d say 90% of them realize. ‘Oh, he’s ain’t easy,’ and they correct. I’m sorry, but that’s America. They see the worker less than ... and there was no value.”

Workers with limited English proficiency frequently encounter challenges in accessing crucial health and safety information because of language barriers. When employers fail to address these language obstacles, it places the burden on limited English proficient workers to get safety information from colleagues, family, or community members.

“The people who can’t voice their concerns, whether it be a language barrier or just intimidation factors because ... for whatever reason they can’t jeopardize or they don’t even want to think of jeopardizing, opposing somebody that could possibly terminate them.”

Even when workers are treated unfairly by their employers or co-workers, they often do not report these incidents. Many vulnerable workers fear that their reporting could lead to loss of employment or other immigration-related actions by abusive employers or co-workers.

“They also treat you badly because you don’t have your documents. We as people who do not have documents, we deserve all the rights because we are workers, essential workers who have occupations, who need to be treated better because we come to work, we do not come to cause them problems. I wish there was someone who would listen to all this and really do something”.





Desire for Community Support

Black farmers, Vietnamese nail salon workers and Latine poultry plant workers all called for the development of worker groups and community organizations that can support their needs.

“A network of farmers, but it needs to be something, you know where they can, share resources, and also just feel like they can have, like an informational hub full of information on Federal grants or non federal grants, trainings, and education.”

“I believe the most important thing would be to have a good workers’ union, a strong union where all the workers have significant support... I think having a union that unites all of us who work in the poultry industry would be very beneficial because it would provide us with better benefits and more consideration.”

“Like, the rail workers going on strike asking for seven days sick leave... it sounds like these type of things would also be useful for the nail salon community... Like in having health insurance for sure and also paid sick leave, maybe paid/pay time off and things like that.”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As Demo Lab South moves this work forward, we are reminded of a Latine poultry plant worker when questioned about solutions. He shared, “These are things that no one has ever asked us about.” For Georgia to have a multi-sector people centered worker movement, we must start with the workers and support them in creating pathways to organize for what they want.

The following steps are necessary for long-term systemic change:

Build Infrastructure

Georgia lacks a strong union and worker-centered culture as Georgia has historically been a right-to-work state. We must build organizations or unions that represent these workers. This will be a stepping stone for organizing these workers for their rights and advocating for policy changes. In addition, this will encourage leadership development among workers from each sector.

Create Education and Training Opportunities

Educational opportunities for workers on their rights and training opportunities in civic engagement, labor organizing, and racial equity work are critical and urgent. We will utilize the train-the-trainer models to train workers as community organizers. These opportunities and resources will be provided in multiple languages.

Advocate for State and Local Policy Protections

We must work with worker groups to advocate for the issues that are important to them. Workers interviewed asked for Medicaid expansion, a worker’s bill of rights, and more chemical emissions and sanitary regulations.

Demand Corporate Accountability

Companies need to be held accountable for basic worker safety and dignity. Poultry plants should be shut down until they are safe for workers. Health and safety committees for workers should be implemented across the South, offered in multiple languages. Whistleblower protections should be established in major companies for all workers regardless of immigration status.

A call for an empowered worker collective for a healthy and thriving economy.

Georgia organizers are presented with a critical opportunity to unite Southern workers across race and industry towards building a movement to protect all workers. There are several imperative considerations in building a multi-sector, multi-racial, Southern worker movement:

- When workers receive support for organizing to advocate for environmental protections, it benefits all residents of Georgia by leading to cleaner air, water, and other positive environmental improvements.
- When communities of color are able to hold decision making power for themselves and their communities, the outcomes are overwhelmingly positive, long lasting, and benefit even those outside of their immediate communities.
- When multicultural, multi-racial organizing opportunities are created, the isolated worker groups across the state are united for a more powerful, sustained, collective voice.

About Demo Lab & Partners

Demo Lab South is dedicated to building political and electoral power in the South through building Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) power, increasing movement infrastructure, and supporting shared campaigns and actions. Racial equity is our core value as we increase the ability of BIPOC communities to build, mobilize, and sustain civic engagement and voting power.

Demo Lab South works to:

- Build increased political power of BIPOC communities across the South
- Increase influence on the who, how, and what of visible decision making
- Develop, maintain, and leverage relationships with people and institutions with influence over and access to critical social, cultural, or financial resources.

As a result, we envision:

- Inclusive and supportive policies for BIPOC communities
- A system that represents and includes BIPOC communities
- A community driven government that centers racial, economic, and environmental justice.

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