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Domestic Policy Subcommittee
Oversight and Government Reform Committee
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Katrina Clean Up

My name is Jeffrey Steele. I currently live in Montgomery, Alabama. Over the years, I've worked a number of jobs in a wide range of fields from mortuary science to culinary arts. I have a license in environmental clean up from Clark College in Atlanta.

Before Katrina, I had been working at the World Congress Center and Atlanta Dome in Atlanta, Georgia. I worked there during the day and, at night, ran a men's shelter in Atlanta that was connected to the Hosea Williams foundation. I was working at the shelter when I met displaced New Orleans residents who had evacuated to Atlanta after Hurricane Katrina hit. More and more people from New Orleans were coming in every day.

I decided I wanted to be part of history. I wanted to help rebuild New Orleans and help do right by the people who had been abandoned after the hurricane. For me, it was like the civil rights movement and I wanted to be part of it. What I found once I got there was the horrible treatment given to the workers who were rebuilding the city. There were terrible working and living conditions and hazardous work with practically no safety training. Early on I tried to hook up with FEMA and the Red Cross to help out in New Orleans, and then heard about a contractor from Atlanta who was looking for workers. The Reverend Carroll Harrison Braddy had flyers up all over Atlanta – "Free Room and Board. Free Food. Pay \$10 /hour." I left on Oct 16, 2005 from Atlanta on a van with others who had been recruited by Braddy who called his company "Workforce Development Corp., Inc."

After over 12 hours on the road, we got into Slidell around 6:00am on October 17th and got straight to work. We didn't get off until about 6:00pm that night. We had had nothing to eat since we left Atlanta. When we finished that night, we came back over the lake to New Orleans to take a shower and sleep, but there was no place to eat – no restaurant or grocery stores were open. We went to the park to eat because relief workers were feeding people in the park. When we came back we ended up sleeping in the van we had come down in. We had nothing to eat. We stayed somewhere off Elysian Fields.

That next day on October 18th, we got up around 5am after sleeping in the van. We were able to go to a man's house off Rampart Street to brush our teeth and wash off. That man was someone the contractors used to help provide places for their workers to stay. Braddy kept putting the man off with the money he owed him for housing. He wrote bogus checks – he probably still owes that man.

It wasn't until a week after we arrived that we were taken to get free shots that the Army medic units were providing. It was a few weeks before we got a quick 1 hour safety training run by ECC and a fit test for our aspirators. ECC had supervisors driving around all the time observing crews working in New Orleans as did the Army Corps of Engineers. Omni Pinnacle, Phoenix and Global and Copeland Construction were around in the beginning and used Braddy's workers.

About two weeks after getting to New Orleans, Braddy was supposed to pay us. We waited in the parking lot until 9:00 or 10:00pm that night after we had finished working. I got about \$230 in pay - I should have gotten about \$1400, not including any extra for overtime. There was never any overtime or any benefits. Braddy said he had taken out money for rent and taxes to explain why I had gotten so little. I said, "How could you take out rent and we didn't have any place to stay for the first few days?" He told me I would have to go to court to get my money from him.

On October 19th, they rearranged things at that house on Rampart. All of the guys from Atlanta who had come down with me – about 7 of us – stayed in one room and slept on the floors. Someone had to get MRE's for us to eat. On October 29th, we were put everyone out of that house around 10:00 or 11:00pm at night because Braddy hadn't paid the man. About 65 folks had to pack up and move to the Clyde Banks apartments on the West Bank. Mike Noble was a contractor who arranged for housing for his workers and let Braddy put his workers there. He seemed to be the only decent contractor at the time. Noble was bringing guys out of Memphis and Nashville and Mississippi. All of his guys at that time were supposedly getting paid regularly.

On or about November 4th, there was a work shutdown. The guys who owned their own dump trucks and their own equipment stopped working because they had not been paid by Copeland and Brian Carter. The TV news came out along with the National Guard just in case anything bad happened.

Braddy's guys from Atlanta and I ended up moving from those West Bank apartments to a house in Algiers. It had 6 small bedrooms – about 40-60 guys stayed in that one house. It had 2 ½ bathrooms. But around midnight on November

4th, Braddy came to the house and said that all those doing the removal of white goods (refrigerators, stoves, washing machines and dryers) and debris had to move to the world trade center in New Orleans. He said the house would only be for Waste Management workers. There were men still in the shower who had to get out, pack up and move out. Mike Noble had put all the guys who worked for him (Express Staffing - a subcontractor for Waste Management) and Braddy's workers into that house in Algiers. But Noble decided he wanted his guys from Waste Management to stay there instead.

We moved into the world trade center on the 25th floor on November 12th. All the other guys and I moved across the bridge and stayed at the world trade center. I stayed for only one night. The next day, I moved out and stayed with one of the supervisors after I found out he was a Mason like me. We moved into the hotel Marvin Copeland (Copeland Construction out of Miami) had rented out on Elysian Fields. That supervisor worked under Brian Carter (Phoenix and Global) and Copeland (Copeland Construction). Braddy was a subcontractor under Phoenix and Global and Copeland Construction and Omni Pinnacle - all three were supposedly subcontractors for ECC.

There were supervisors who worked for both companies somehow. (I did paperwork – signing in, giving applications for people coming back into New Orleans.) Steve and Mike were also supervisors for both companies. James was the big cheese for Copeland – the superintendent. He owned JNE which was another subcontractor.

After the money thing went down around Nov 1st, I had decided that I didn't want to owe Braddy any more money for housing. I was still working for Braddy at that point even though I had started a new assignment working – keeping account of what group had what equipment and doing the time sheets for the different crews out of New Orleans as well as Atlanta.

On November 11th, Brian Carter paid his workers off. Marvin Copeland was supposed to pay the independent contractors and dump truck operators and then pay Braddy. Copeland and Carter paid everyone but Braddy which meant I didn't get paid.

After the November 12th move to the world trade center, I kept working through the 19th on Braddy's payroll, but I was handling the paperwork for those other contractors. The rest of Braddy's workers stayed at world trade center November 13th through November 19th but didn't go back to work because Brian Carter and Copeland had shut Braddy down. Braddy's workers didn't have anything to eat.

On November 19th, I came back to find Braddy's workers outside the world trade center, packed up. I saw management employees from ECC going into the building and told Braddy's workers that we should go and talk with them. Some 80-90 workers went up to ECC on the 30th floor. I even tried to get the news people there with us. When we got to the ECC offices, I told the man there that these men had no money to eat and so forth. He went into their petty cash and gave Braddy \$300 to get food for the workers. That morning around 10:00 am, Braddy took those guys some place to feed them. He then gave his uncle some money and had his uncle drive a school bus loaded with about 30 workers from New Orleans back to Atlanta the week before Thanksgiving. I heard when they got to Atlanta on that Sunday that morning their wives, children, girlfriends greeted them and asked where the money was for all the work they had done.

I had been able to eat because of different Masonic brothers who were working in town – they were looking out for me. They worked directly for Copeland. I wasn't going to leave New Orleans without my money. I switched over completely to work for Copeland who still had crews cleaning Elysian Fields and worked November 21, 22 and 23rd. We were off the 24th through the 27th for Thanksgiving.

On November 28th, James who had supervised for Copeland started up his own company called JNE. JNE put their crews on cleaning up Louisiana Ave and asked me (and a few others) to work for him. I was supposed to be getting \$18/hour. I began working for JNE on November 28th. I loaded equipment, did some flagging and continued to do paperwork. I worked November 29th, 30th and on December 1st & 2nd. We then had to move out of the motel we were in because Copeland's money had run out. We also had to move all the equipment out of the rooms in the rain. I worked at least 16 hours that day. I worked Dec 3rd through the 24th for JNE. I couldn't go to Alabama for my mother's 60th birthday on December 15th because I was working. I caught the bus to Alabama on December 24th for Christmas. JNE paid me for the previous 4 weeks work right before I went to Alabama. I got about \$300 when I should have received approximately \$7000. While I was home for Christmas, I heard that Braddy had gotten his money. On December 26th, Braddy wired \$400 to me in Montgomery - but he still owed me approximately \$4,500. Braddy said he only owed me about \$1800. On December 27th, I picked up my money from Western Union.

I got back to New Orleans on December 29th. I had moved back to that house in Algiers in Algiers. One of the supervisors's brought me my check from JNE - \$999 for the first two weeks instead of the \$3500 JNE owed me – for 98 hours/week work @ \$18/hour not including any overtime rate.

The money wasn't coming in like it was supposed to from JNE either, so I started working for Mike Noble from Express Staff – another subcontractor under Waste Management. Noble's company was based in Nashville, Tennessee. I have his number and others from Waste Management. I started by doing security and managing the house.

I worked up for Noble until September, 2006. I ran the house, took guys shopping, counseled those on drugs, took anyone hurt to the hospital in East Jefferson, coordinated labor for (3) other Waste Management contractors in three other parishes and drove daily through the towns of Houma, Slidell, Hammond, etc to drop the workers off and pick them up. I started around 3:30am every morning and got back to the Hendee house around 9:00 – 10:00 am. I then got back out on the same circuit at around 2:00/3pm to get all the guys picked up when they got off. I'd usually get back around 7 – 8:00pm at night. Monday through Saturday. Those hurt on Waste Management trucks, I took to the hospital to be seen. They knew me there at the hospital. I told them to send the bills to Express Staff.

A lot of the guys I took around every day were day laborers that I picked up off Lee Circle – some Mexicans. One of Noble's supervisors, Linda, kept trying to get me to pick up only Spanish-speaking workers because the contractors could push them to the extreme. I let them spend the night at the house sometimes.

I think Linda didn't like the way I made sure black workers got work in addition to Mexican workers. She was connected to someone in the US Embassy in Mexico. She was going over to get people here to work. When a lot of these guys' visas were up, some went home and some didn't. One day, one of the Mexican workers was working and a tire blew off a nearby truck and broke his shoulder. They said they would pay him a percentage of his check each week. Noble didn't have workmen's comp. Linda wanted that worker to sign papers that said she would handle his money. That man never came back and he probably wasn't ever paid.

I remember one day that Noble wanted to know who was writing checks – Linda was paying Waste Management and not paying workers. Local workers were supposed to be paid a little more than workers from Atlanta. Their checks weren't right either. A woman for Local 100 started trying to help the guys organize for little bit. Linda said I was trying to recruit guys for union. I said I was.

When Linda went out for surgery, I was covering everything. For three weeks, I did everything – getting back after 10:00pm at night. Noble even said he wanted me to run my own contract at some point in the future. I was on the phone with him every morning at 3am and at night at 10pm. When Linda came back, though,

she started picking on me even though every thing had run smoothly while she was out.

We fell out with each other. I got a two week suspension from her. I stopped working for Noble around the 15th of September. I asked for the money he owes me. Mike Noble finally wired me money for the extra week he owed me – he still owes me for another week though. I should have been paid at least \$800/week for all I did I was doing a lot of different jobs. But he said I was on salary – and I only could expect to get \$550 a week. At least he didn't take money out for rent. He paid me what he said he would accept that last week at the end.

After Noble, I started working for US Boats for Costal Catering (out of Houma). I was working as a cook between Houma and Morgan City. I was cooking for offshore workers from September 2007 through February 2007. I stopped because I got injured on the job one day. At first it was a swollen thumb. I still can't grip anything or open a car door. I'm in pain. I am scheduled for surgery on June 27th to repair it. They owe me compensation for my injury on the job. I have no health insurance.

Efforts to Gain Fair Compensation

I started to try to get my money back when I met one of the local union members in New Orleans. He put someone from the AFL-CIO in touch with me. She asked me to tell my story at workers rights rally on May 2, 2006 - which I did. She put me in touch with the Loyola Law Clinic to see if they would take my case. I finally spoke with them in July/August, 2006. I met them face to face in September. In September/October, 2006 the law clinic attorney left me a message saying that they had turned my case over to the Department of Labor (DOL).

When I hadn't heard anything for a very long period of time, I checked back with the law clinic in early January. I was told to call Debra Brown at the Department of Labor – she had been assigned my case and supposedly had some questions. I called her in February, 2007 and she asked if I had Braddy's or Copeland's numbers. I asked her if she could get that information from government computers more quickly than I could. I didn't have their numbers. I contacted the woman from the AFL-CIO and got her to send me whatever she had written down about what had happened to me. While we were talking on the phone, she went on the internet and got even more information on my previous employers.

In March/April, 2007, Debra Brown from the DOL called and asked if I had any more information for. That's when I gave her the information I had gotten from the AFL-CIO. (I used to have a lot of documentation, but lost it in the moves from house to apartment and so forth and also in the moves between contractors.) In

that conversation, Debra Brown said that she would submit my claim. When I called back a month later to find out what was happening, she said that when she found out something she would let me know.

I didn't hear anything back from the DOL until last Wednesday, June 20th when Debra Brown's supervisor, Barbara Hicks, called me and immediately fired question after question as if I were under interrogation and accused me of cutting her off when I would try to answer and said that it would help if I didn't jump around. She kept asking if I had failed to receive pay for only three days in October, 2005 when I first got to New Orleans and kept saying that it was easier to collect from the bigger employers each time I told her who I had actually worked for. She never asked me to tell her from start to finish what had happened to me in New Orleans. She ended the conversation just as abruptly as she had started it by saying she wanted me to get her information on my previous contractors even though she asked me for phone numbers I had already given to Debra Brown at the DOL months ago. The supervisor told me to call her when I had more information. She never said what the status of my claim was or what to expect when she hung up.

The Loyola Law Clinic sent my case to the Department of Labor in September/October of last year, but I do not know if I am any closer to any resolution in the form of back wages that I worked hard for and should have received. Instead, I have been treated as if I am the bad guy.

I went to New Orleans to help and to be part of history. I did the dirty, hard work that was needed. Yet, I was exploited by contractor after contractor who crammed us into filthy living spaces, provided next to nothing to eat, offered practically no safety precautions or equipment and paid workers late and so much less than even promised. If this is how this country allows employers to get away with treating hard working citizens while companies make a profit – then shame on us. I've worked hard all my life and I pay taxes. I'm a United States citizen. I've been working since I was 9 years old. I've never been to jail and I've never asked the government for nothing. If another catastrophe happens in this country, I hope you never let any one else treat workers and the people they are trying to help like they did in New Orleans.

