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New Weapon in Day Laborers' Fight Against Wage Theft: A Smartphone App

By **LIZ ROBBINS** MARCH 1, 2016

Just past sunrise on 69th Street, near the No. 7 subway station in Jackson Heights, Queens, men in backpacks and work boots gather in groups, many on their cellphones.

They are workers at one of the largest day laborer stops in New York City, hoping to be hired. Most are undocumented immigrants who have reported being cheated by employers. In the fight against wage theft, their phones could soon become their biggest allies.

After three years of planning, an immigrant rights group in Jackson Heights is set to start a smartphone app for day laborers, a new digital tool with many uses: Workers will be able to rate employers (think Yelp or Uber), log their hours and wages, take pictures of job sites and help identify, down to the color and make of a car, employers with a history of withholding wages. They will also be able to send instant alerts to other workers. The advocacy group will safeguard the information and work with lawyers to negotiate payment.

“It will change my life and my colleagues' lives a good deal,” Omar Trinidad, a Mexican immigrant, said in Spanish through an interpreter.



Day laborers waiting for employers at 69th Street and Roosevelt Avenue in Queens. Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

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Mr. Trinidad is the lead organizer who helped develop the app. “Presently, there is a lot of wage theft,” he said. “There has always been wage theft, and the truth is we’re going to put a stop to that.”

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The app has its soft launch on Tuesday night, with beta testing to be held later this month at the Jackson Heights day laborer stop that stretches for a mile along 69th Street. Day laborer centers in Brooklyn and on Staten Island will also be testing the product, which is available in Spanish and English.

Mr. Trinidad, 35, suggested the name for the app — *Jornalero*, which means day laborer in Spanish.

The plan is for the app to spread to all 70 of the city's day laborer stops, and then to workers in all kinds of jobs across the country.

The *Jornalero* app began as a project of [New Immigrant Community Empowerment](#), known as NICE, in Jackson Heights, and then expanded in scope when the group's parent organization, the [National Day Laborer Organizing Network](#), based in Los Angeles, secured more funding.



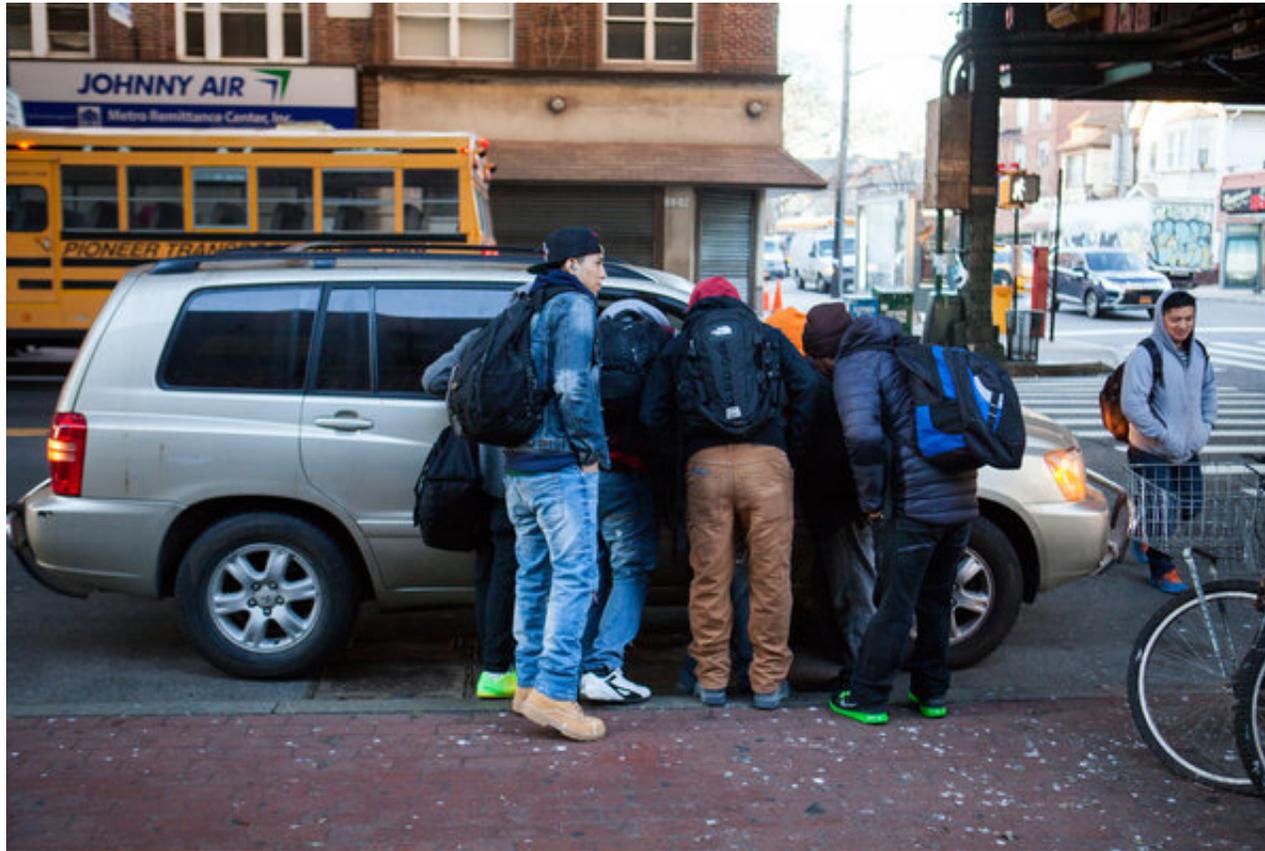
Omar Trinidad, a construction worker, is the lead organizer who helped to develop the Jornalero app.

Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

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Day laborers talking with a potential employer at 69th Street and Roosevelt Avenue in Queens.
Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

“It’s going to be a gift that the day laborers are going to give to the working class in America,” said Pablo Alvarado, the executive director of the national day laborer group.

The project has been a collaboration of workers, artists, organizers,

lawyers, unions and academics. Sol Aramendi, a photographer based in Queens and an activist with NICE, first joined Hana Georg, a local electrician, to propose the idea to construction laborers, who were immediately enthusiastic. [The Worker Institute](#), a program within the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, ran forums for workers across New York City to see what they most needed in an app.

The workers wanted an easy way to track payments, record details about unsafe work sites and share pictures to identify employers. Most of all, they wanted to do it all anonymously.

Alyx Baldwin, a designer who had established a [mesh network](#) that kept the Red Hook section of Brooklyn connected to the Internet after [Hurricane Sandy](#), began the design work with those priorities in mind.



Sol Aramendi, a photographer based in Queens and an activist with New Immigrant Community Empowerment, was one of the first to suggest creating an app for day laborers. Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

A San Francisco group, [Rebel Idealist](#), took over the design at the beginning of this year, after the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades pledged \$25,000 to support the app. Mr. Alvarado said his organization also received \$15,000 from the Ford Foundation.

Previously, when workers were robbed of their wages, Mr. Trinidad said,

they were unable to respond; because of their immigration status, they were often afraid to report the theft or did not know how.

The app has workers record their hours and wages, which are then saved in a profile. That profile, which lists a phone number but no name, is linked to the organization's database. If a worker reports not being paid or being underpaid, NICE will contact the employer. If necessary, lawyers from [the Urban Justice Center](#), who conduct monthly clinics at NICE, will help recover lost wages.

“The app is not just reactionary,” Manuel Castro, the executive director of NICE, said. By keeping records, he said, workers will be prepared to prove they have not been paid. “Just in case something happens, they have it stored,” Mr. Castro said.

He added: “We’re launching this as a way to learn more about how to use technology.”

Mr. Trinidad will be leading training sessions on the app. He is supporting two children back in Mexico, and after three years of guiding this app, he is eagerly awaiting its arrival. “It’s like a new baby,” he said.

In New York, the rights of day laborers have [gained traction in the City Council](#), which granted \$500,000 in August to expand workers’ centers throughout the boroughs.



Manuel Castro, the executive director of New Immigrant Community Empowerment.
Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

Pepe Soto, 40, a construction worker from Peru, said day laborers could be easily duped by contractors or subcontractors when asking for payment.

“They’ll say, ‘Wait for me, I’ll be right back.’ And we’re naïvely standing around,” Mr. Soto said on Monday on 69th Street, three blocks from NICE’s day laborer center. “This way we can be more alert. If he leaves, we can take a picture of his car.”

As one of the leaders on the street, Mr. Soto will be spreading the word about the new app and reassuring fellow workers that it is safe to use. “We’re here all day, so our phones are our best friends,” he said.

Isvett Verde contributed reporting.