



# STREET OF SHAME

**RETAIL STORES ON  
KNICKERBOCKER AVENUE  
BUSHWICK, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK CITY**

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**Department Store Union (RWDSU/UFCW)**



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## **Street of Shame: Retail Stores on Knickerbocker Avenue**

### A REPORT

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Bushwick, a section of Brooklyn bordered on the North by Flushing Avenue, on the South by the Cemetery of the Evergreens, in the East by St. Nicholas Avenue, and in the West by Broadway, is home to more than 100,000 people. Many of the people living here are recent Latin American immigrants from Mexico, primarily from the impoverished province of Puebla, the Dominican Republic and Ecuador. Many others are citizens from Puerto Rico, a good number of whom have been living in the area for years.

Running through the center of Bushwick is Knickerbocker Avenue, one of the major shopping streets in the neighborhood. The street extends nearly a mile from the Knickerbocker Avenue stop on the M line of the subway to just beyond Maria Hernandez Park. Along this vibrant Avenue of stores are more than 175 stores employing hundreds of people from the neighborhood.



Knickerbocker Avenue is similar to many other shopping streets that are scattered throughout New York City and it has always been a vibrant shopping area. From the 1950's to the early 70's mostly mom and pop shops inhabited the street with only a few small chain stores existing alongside them. The shops were owned and patronized by the immigrants who had arrived early in the last century and by their U.S. born sons and daughters. Walking the streets along with store customers were business agents from the retail unions of New York City. More than fifty percent of the stores were covered by union contracts that provided pay above the minimum wage and modest health and time-off benefits.

Today the situation is different. On the street many stores, such as Jimmy Jazz, VIM, Pretty Girl, 99 Cent City, Footco USA, and others are part of small chains that have stores located in similar shopping areas throughout New York City. Almost all the stores on the Avenue now either pay the minimum wage or below the legal wage. Some stores that pay the minimum wage do not pay the legal overtime pay rate of time-and-one-half for all hours worked beyond forty hours in a week. There are

workers who are paid \$260 a week for 84 hours of work; that pay amounts to \$3.10 per hour. Almost none of these shops pay a living wage or provide any health benefits. The majority of stores do not even provide time-off benefits. In some of the shops female workers, who make up the majority of the employees on the Avenue, have had to endure sexual harassment from the owners. As one walks down the street on a bitterly cold day one can see workers required to stand in the cold for their entire workday of 10 hours or more. On a retail strip where once more than fifty percent of the shops were unionized there are only two union stores, Rite Aid and Met Food. That is two out of nearly 200 stores.

## A SAMPLING OF THE VIOLATORS

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### **Super Star 99 Inc.**

#### **353 Knickerbocker Avenue**

This store, whose owner may have as many as four other stores located in the New York City metropolitan area, employs five people working six or seven days per week for at least eleven hours a day. For these 66 or 77 hours per week of work the pay ranges from \$265 to \$320 or from \$3.44 per hour to \$4.85 per hour. Some of these workers are required to stand outside of the store in the cold for their entire shift. Needless to say, this store is in gross violation of both the minimum wage and overtime pay laws.

### **Moshe Linen**

#### **342 Knickerbocker Avenue**

This store employs three workers who work six days a week for ten hours a day and are paid two hundred and forty dollars for their week's work. Employees in this store not only have to suffer minimum wage and overtime violations but also confront sexual and physical abuse from the owner. As reported in the December 26, 2004 edition of the *Daily News*, a female employee reported that her supervisor groped and choked her.

### **Associated Supermarket**

#### **229 Knickerbocker Avenue**

This grocery store, which might be only one of several the owner has in the New York City area, employs more than 30 workers some of whom earn between \$250 and \$300 per week for working nine and a half hours per day for six days per week. The wages earned in this store violate both the minimum wage and overtime laws.



### **Morris Discounts**

#### **348 Knickerbocker Avenue**

Two out of the three workers earn \$5 per hour for working 11 hours a day for six days a week. Both the minimum wage and overtime laws are violated.

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**Footco USA****431 Knickerbocker Avenue**

Some of the salespeople selling sneakers at this store are paid \$4.75 per hour while others are paid the minimum wage of \$6 per hour. This small chain has another location on the Avenue at 365 Knickerbocker under the name of NY Sneakers and eight other stores located on some of the main shopping streets of New York City.

**VIVI For Ladies****354 Knickerbocker Avenue**

The two female sales clerks selling women's clothes work fifty-four hours over a six-day period and earn \$4.50 per hour. This store which is just one of several, most of which are located in New Jersey, does not provide any health insurance or time-off benefits.

**SS and Farms Market****317 Knickerbocker Avenue**

At this greengrocery store the four workers earn between \$320 and \$330 a week for working six days at 12 hours per day. Both the minimum wage and over-

time laws are violated and the employees do not receive any benefits

*Note:* The situation has changed at this store due to the efforts of the Awake Bushwick Campaign and the New York State Attorney General's Office. In March the storeowner was required to pay over \$28,000 in back wages to four workers. Also, the workers' pay went up to \$6 per hour, and they are receiving overtime pay for overtime work. Overall, they are working 24 hours less each week, but they are still earning basically the same amount as they had previously earned.

**Blue City****452 Knickerbocker Avenue**

Seven to eight employees work 10-hour days and fifty-hour weeks with the pay scale determined by each worker's immigration status. Recent immigrants receive \$5.00 per hour while others are paid at the minimum wage of \$6.00 for each hour of the fifty hours worked. Though some workers receive the legal minimum wage, none receive the legally required overtime rate, and no one receives health benefits.

## POVERTY WAGES

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With no enforced floor on wages, benefits and working conditions on Knickerbocker Avenue, even stores that are not in violation of the labor laws have no incentive to raise their pay levels or improve working conditions for their employees. Not even one of the shops along this bustling retail corridor, other than the two unionized ones, come close to paying a living wage and almost none provide health benefits for their workers. Many of these shops, whose employees receive only the bare minimum mandated by the law, are parts of chains that have a good number of stores throughout the New York metropolitan area. Though six dollars per hour is the new minimum wage in New York, it is still not enough to live a decent life in New York City. As for health benefits, the employees must make use of the Public Health System or publicly financed medical insurance that is paid for by taxpayers, not the employers who benefit from their workers' labor.

### A SAMPLING OF POVERTY WAGE STORES

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#### **Mini Max**

##### **437 Knickerbocker Avenue**

This is one of four locations for this business that sells clothing and assorted houseware supplies. One of the three other locations is also located on Knickerbocker under the name *House of Linen* and the other two are both on 5th Avenue in Brooklyn. One year ago the owner, after legal action and a boycott at the 437 Knickerbocker store organized by the community group *Make the Road by Walking*, agreed to settle back wage claims of over \$65,000 brought by several employees because of the owner's failure to pay the minimum wage and provide overtime pay. Now the employees are paid the minimum wage but are still without health benefits.

#### **Jimmy Jazz**

##### **421 Knickerbocker Avenue**

Jimmy Jazz and the store Hyperactive at 420 are parts of a chain whose branches can be found in many neighborhoods in New York City. The stores are located in the Lower East Side, on 125th Street in Harlem, in the Fulton Mall in Downtown Brooklyn and elsewhere. The entire chain consists of 26 Jimmy Jazz stores and eight Hyperactive ones. The chain does well, but the workers in the Knickerbocker store suffer with minimum wage jobs and no benefits.

#### **Pretty Girl**

##### **441 Knickerbocker Avenue**

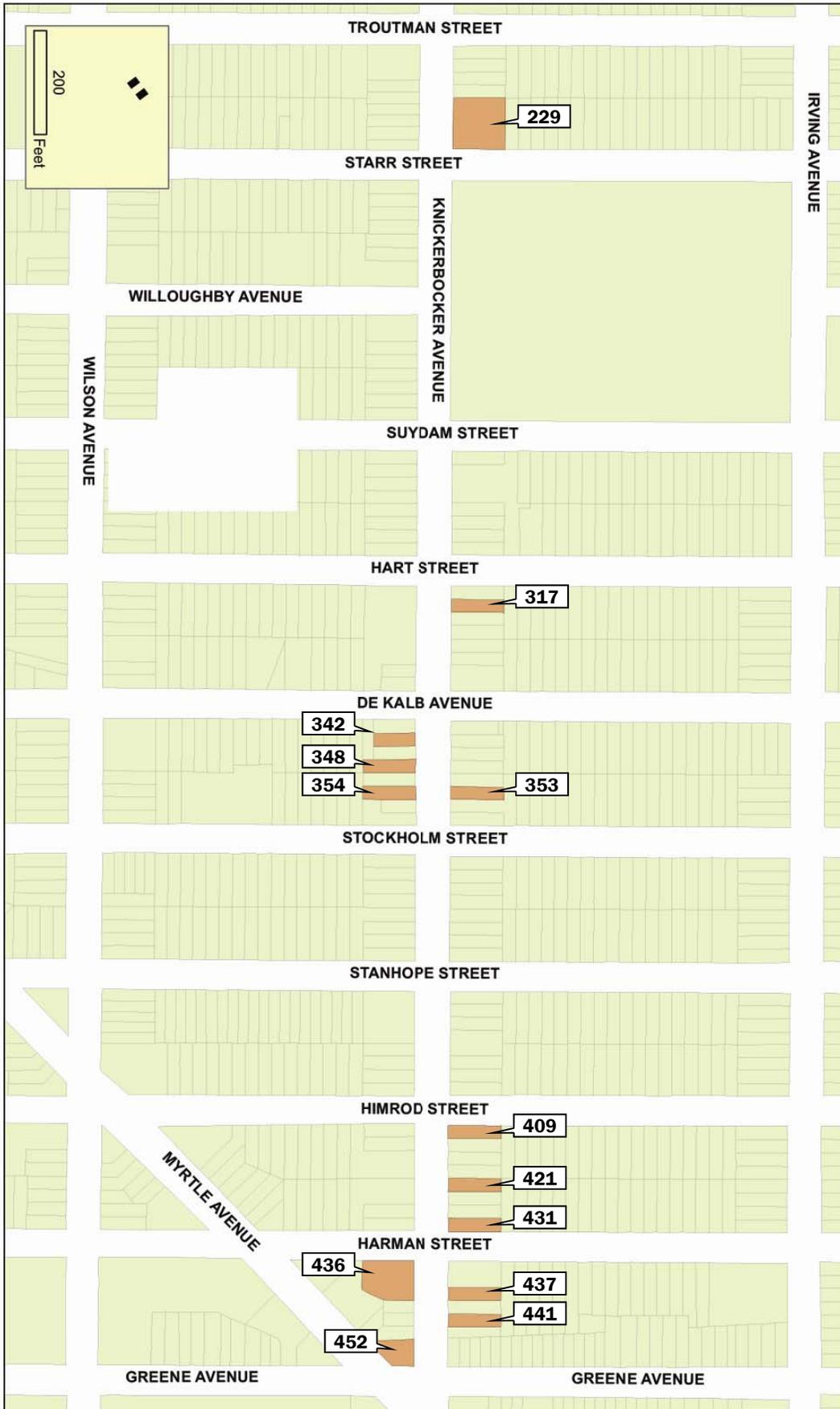
This women's apparel shop is one branch of a chain of 22 stores that are located throughout the New York metropolitan area. In this shop on the Avenue the female employees earn the minimum wage and receive no benefits.

**Porta Bella****409 Knickerbocker Avenue**

This men's apparel shop is part of a chain consisting of 19 stores located throughout the metropolitan area—including 125th Street, 34th Street and Broad Street in Newark, NJ. Here, as in all the other Porta Bella shops, the employees are paid the poverty wage of \$6.00 per hour and receive no benefits.

**VIM Jeans****436 Knickerbocker Avenue**

This is another popular chain in the City. The VIM Jeans chain has 30 stores located in such areas as 14th Street in Manhattan, the Fulton Mall in Downtown Brooklyn, 125th Street in Harlem, Fordham Road in the Bronx and elsewhere. Though this chain is large the workers' pay is not—employees earn \$6.00 per hour and have no benefits.



## Testimony of Sofia Campos

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My name is Sofía Campos. I'm from Tepeojuma in Puebla. I live in Brooklyn and I am a member of the organization Make the Road by Walking. I moved to New York in 1993. I began working in the store Minimax in December of 1998. I worked from 9 in the morning to 7:30 at night, six days a week. I earned \$240 per week, when I should have been earning \$358, if I had been paid the minimum wage.

During my time at Minimax, I felt frustrated and humiliated. As a Latina, we did not receive the same treatment as the people who were the same nationality as the bosses. They shouted at us, they demanded that we work without rest, even when there was nothing to do, they insisted that we keep moving things around. Fortunately, we came to Make the Road by Walking in search of solidarity. The organization and the community came together to boycott Minimax for 6 months and to file a lawsuit for back wages. Finally, we were able to win \$65,000 in illegally withheld wages.

I want to say to all the workers who are being mistreated that you should not be afraid. You should get involved with community organizations and fight for your rights.

I want to thank all of the people who supported me in my struggle, to my group, Workers in Action, and to the press who helped my store become known.

## Testimony of Mariana Garcia, Worker at Minimax

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I believe that every mother deserves a just salary to support her children. When I worked at Minimax, I earned \$4.60 an hour and they never paid me overtime. This is not just. I believe that every mother deserves to work reasonable hours in order to be able to care for her family.

When I worked in Minimax, I worked sixty hours per week and I only had Wednesdays free. I did not have enough time with my son. There was one time when I asked to change my day off for a Saturday, because it was my son's birthday. The boss denied my request. I asked if I could leave a few hours early so that I could eat dinner with my son on his birthday. The manager said no. That was not just.

I believe that every human being deserves decent treatment in the workplace. The managers at Minimax shouted at us with frequency, and they often used obscenities. This is not just.

We want a just salary, a reasonable work schedule, and decent treatment for all of the workers on Knickerbocker Avenue.

## About the Awake Bushwick Campaign

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Awake Bushwick is a campaign to improve wages and working conditions for workers on Knickerbocker Avenue. As a community, we can use our money and our buying power to support stores that respect our neighbors who work in them. We can also use our buying power to pressure abusive employers to stop exploiting members of our community.

## Supporters

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Over 3500 Bushwick residents and consumers

Make the Road by Walking

Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU)

New York City Jobs with Justice

Member of the United States Congress, Nydia Velazquez

St. Joseph Patron Church

St. Brigid's Roman Catholic Church

St. Martin's Church

St. Barbara's Church

San Romero de Las Americas Church

All Saints Church

Bushwick Housing Independence Project

Latin American Integration Center

New York Civic Participation Project

Working Families Party

Long Island Free Space

Action for Community Empowerment

Mirabal Sisters Cultural and Community Center

Coalition of Immokalee Workers

Agricultural Missions

Landless Movement of Brazil