Feet in 2 Worlds
The Shifting Immigrant Hustle

In the last episode of the season, host Shaka Tafari speaks with three women who work at the intersection of labor and immigration. They discuss the most pressing threats to immigrant workers, as well as the ways immigrants can resist these threats and support one another.

Our guests include: Mary from Mujeres Inspiradas en Sueños, Metas, y Acciones (MISMA); Saba Waheed, director of the UCLA Labor Center, and Jessica E. Martinez, executive director of the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health (National COSH).

Shaka Tafari: From Feet in 2 Worlds, I'm Shaka Tafari and this is The Hustle.

I was 16 years old, sitting in a movie theater, when I found out my mom had been deported. I walked the mile home in silence, and somewhere along the way, I told myself, *"This is the only time I'm gonna cry about this SHIT."* Tears weren't going to help me on the journey ahead.

Looking back, Mama had been preparing me for this all along. Those long hours selling oils and incense with me and my brother on the beach were survival lessons. She gave me hustle. She taught me perseverance. Because of her, I never felt ashamed of my circumstances. But the very next day after I got the news is when my hustle began. We were living in Section 8 housing, and without her, the rent was on me. Mama was sent back to Jamaica with nothing, so I had to step up financially, and I had a younger brother to think about.

At school, I was the senior class president. I had to keep teachers and the system out of my business, so I doubled down on school, stayed visible, and played the part. And while holding it all together, I was also in contention for one of L.A.'s most competitive awards — the Posse Foundation Scholarship.

I was hustling on all fronts: to provide for my mother, to support my brother, and secure a future for myself.

Today, the hustle looks different, though. Immigrant workers and their families are under attack. As if building a life in this country wasn't already hard enough, we're now up against exploitative labor practices, state-sanctioned threats, and a system that weaponizes hate speech to distort the truth about who we are.

Yet we push forward because we've always had the strength to turn struggle into strategy and pain into our superpower. Shout out to the people who fight daily to protect our rights, amplify our voices, and make this country live up to its promise. Because no matter the odds, we've never just survived — we've always reshaped the ground we walk on.

In this episode of The Hustle, I talk to two experts who can give us the big picture on current threats to immigrant workers. While it seems that being deported is the worst possible outcome, our conversation reveals to me that there is a less obvious, more sinister, and longer lasting danger to immigrant workers. Before we get into it, though, I want to open this episode with a glimpse into the life of someone else who is very much in the hustle.

Mary: My name is Mary and I was brought to the U.S. when I was nine years old. And I feel like this is my home. I love this country, and I love to be here.

Shaka: Mary has worked as a nanny, a house cleaner and a caregiver for the elderly in Texas. We heard about home care workers organizing to end the 24-hour workday in New York City. But workers in the domestic care sector around the country face similar challenges. Like the Chinese home care workers we spoke with in that episode, Mary found community and purpose by organizing other domestic workers.

But actually — Mary isn't her real name. It's a pseudonym. She was nervous to talk to me — to speak publicly at all, really, at a moment when immigrants are being targeted.

Shaka Tafari: Tell me a little bit about your parents. When they came here, what type of work did they find?

Mary: So I remember their first job was in a nursery and then they also worked in a farm where they raised chicken and also picking up vegetables from the farm.

Shaka: Did you ever join them on those work days?

Mary: Sometimes on the weekend.

Shaka: On top of her other jobs, Mary told me about the organization she works with.

Shaka: So I know you're a part of an organization called MISMA. Can you describe MISMA for me?

Mary: It stands for Mujeres Inspiradas en Sueños, Metas, y Acciones. It's Women Inspired in Dreams, Goals, and Actions. We are a non-profit and we help domestic workers know their rights and we empower them.

Shaka: You may remember from our home care episode that the workers fighting for their rights received little institutional support. Instead of relying on their union, they

relied on support from the Ain't I A Woman campaign. And they organized together. Mary says that togetherness is at the root of MISMA, too.

Mary: I remember this particular time where they were talking about overtime pay. I realized that in my job as a caregiver, I was working more than 10 hours a day but I was not getting overtime pay. And I remember saying to myself, I need to learn more about this because I was not gonna allow that happen to me again, but I was also gonna inform other workers, so it wouldn't happen to them either.

Shaka: So it's fair to say that this group helped you learn the value of your work?

Mary: Mm-hmm. That's something that happens often to our members that we don't give the value to our work. After pandemic, we realized that our job is very important. We had nannies, house cleaners that work with doctors, and they were very important people that needed to be in their job. I remember talking to one of our members — she worked with a doctor. After the pandemic, they asked her if she could stay in the house so she wouldn't be exposed to other people that might had the virus. So she had to stay in their house for more than a month.

Shaka: Wow.

Mary: Mm-hmm.

Shaka: So, did she get overtime?

Mary: Yes. Yes.

Shaka: Okay.

Mary: Thank God. She's with a wonderful family that do pay her overtime.

Shaka: For Mary, it wasn't just about informing each other. It was also about just having a space to talk about whatever they needed.

Mary: The first times I came to MISMA, they had social coffee, they call it, that we can meet and talk about anything we want. I really like that we have this for our members because a lot of our members are alone here in the States, they don't have family members, so they don't have nobody to talk to. So I love that we give them this space. And I really like when we had it in person, but since the beginning of the year we had to start doing it virtually again.

Shaka: That sense of togetherness is so important for domestic workers. But it's become even more difficult in the current moment.

Mary: More than 50% of the domestic workers are immigrant and don't have a status. So with all this immigration situation going on, they are afraid of even driving to a place to meet because we've heard on the news there are raids going

on and traffic stops. And then like if they don't show a license or a status, they be calling ICE.

Shaka: After speaking with Mary, I was reminded of Juan and Maria, the Venezuelan couple in Denver we talked to in our first episode. They told us how afraid they were to leave their house or take public transportation, which limits the jobs they can take. How is this fear changing the hustle or possibly reshaping our economy? To get a broader perspective, I spoke with two women here in L.A. working at the intersection of labor and immigration.

Saba Waheed: My name is Saba Waheed. I am the director at the UCLA Labor Center.

Shaka: Saba Waheed has led research and advocacy efforts focused on improving conditions for workers for years. Also joining our conversation: Jessica Martinez, who works for the National Council on Occupational Safety and Health, or National COSH. It's a bilingual federation of 25 grassroots worker organizations that focuses on improving health and safety in some of the most dangerous industries in the nation...which, you guessed it, are fueled by immigrant labor. Anyway, we got to sharing about our own immigrant backgrounds and the way that shaped our work.

Shaka: Before we get into the real crux of the interview, a little bit about myself. I am the child of two Jamaican immigrants who have been deported back to Jamaica, and they were deported back in 2004, so a lot of the reason why I'm a part of this podcast is one: because I don't think I've ever really recovered from those wounds of that situation in my life. And I just kind of always have these conversations with immigrants or people, children of immigrants. Saba, is there a story or is there a moment in your life where you said, this is what I'm gonna be doing for the rest of my professional career?

Saba: My family are all immigrants. We came here from Pakistan, so you know, kind of growing up in a pretty traditional immigrant family. But when I was in New York, I used to volunteer with the New York Taxi Workers Alliance and I would often be there late at night where they would come in, after driving their shifts and just, talk and reflect. It was around 9/11, and workers would be talking about their work, but also what was happening in terms of the country, in terms of, you know, the detentions and special registrations, but also the war. And so it was really my opening in terms of labor rights, immigrant rights. So, here at the UCLA Labor Center, we work very closely around immigrant rights and worker rights issues. And we continue to do research, documenting what the conditions are and making sure that we're lifting up the stories on the ground, and using that to raise visibility on the issues, but then also impact policy.

Shaka: Thank you very much. And Jessica?

Jessica E. Martinez: I come to you from the city of Los Angeles, but I am also, like you, the proud daughter of working-class immigrants who, like so many, left their homeland in search of, like, safety, fleeing civil unrest. And my roots are deeply

planted in the soil of struggle and taking action. As a young student at the university, at UCLA specifically, I would walk to class each day at this prestigious academic institution while workers who looked like my family, who looked like home, were laboring in kitchens, cleaning buildings, um, and holding up the the very infrastructure of campus life, all while juggling low wages and insecure jobs at the time. So I started finding what we call other good troublemakers, on campus. And together we organized, and we co-founded the Student Worker Front at UCLA. And we stood shoulder to shoulder with campus food service workers to fight for union recognition, for dignity and for living wages.

But for me, in particular, it didn't stop at wages. I was deeply concerned with health and quality of life and through my experience doing house visits, long conversations with workers, I learned something else, which is workers weren't just fighting to make ends meet, they were fighting to make it through their shifts essentially without pain, illness, or injury. And that realization really lit a fire. I discovered in that journey, public health, which is my technical education. And it was a beautiful merge of labor for me and public health where I was able to exercise what I do now is advocate for occupational safety and health with a very strong background as a labor educator and organizer.

Shaka: We're going to take a short break, but when we get back, I speak with Saba and Jessica about the deadly consequences of being too scared to speak up at work.

[BREAK]

Shaka: One of the first things Trump did when he came to office this year was strike down a 50-year-old program at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, called the whistleblower protection program. That program protects all workers who report workplace violations. And critically, immigrant workers who came forward received protection from deportation. That program was there for a reason — because immigrant workers are in danger every day in some industries.

Saba: By stripping the key components of the government in our system, by attacking immigrants and other related communities, it is trying to actually roll back worker rights and worker protections back to a hundred years ago. He's trying to take us back to 1925 and 1930 and let's get the 12 hour work day back.

Jessica: To Saba's point, there's previous efforts to remove OSHA protections. So immigrant workers — in particular, Black, brown workers, have the highest and the most disproportionate impact in terms of health and safety, having the most injuries in the workplace, the most fatalities. And these deaths are not accidents. They are the result of exploitation and silence, driven by fear of retaliation, fear of deportation. And under the current administration, the fear is growing. So immigrant workers may be less likely to report unsafe conditions, wage theft or abuse due to fear of retaliation and ICE involvement. So, you know, we have our work cut out for us.

Saba: When we think about government, you know, I always ask this question: in whose interest is this government functioning? And when it comes to, like, the power between workers and immigrant workers and community and say, business and companies, you want the government.

They're the referee in that relationship. And if they're siding towards company, then our workers get disempowered or companies get emboldened. And so, right now we are in a place where it's really hard to see this government functioning in the interest of workers.

You know, this is why we're seeing workers go out into the streets and our communities going out into the streets. And why we're having to take more bold actions in a scary time, um, is again, to demand a government that actually represents the workers in our communities.

Shaka: The rollback of worker protections and the fear of deportation — it's real. But the throughline in this series is that we have to get creative. If the government won't step up, if employers are exploiting us, if the threats are increasing, then we gotta do what immigrants have been doing for forever: make a plan B, then a plan C, a plan D, E, or F...whatever it takes. And we have to do it together.

We saw this work for the pecan shellers in San Antonio in 1938. They went on strike and endured imprisonment and police brutality until their demand for higher pay was met. We also saw this with the 1980s garment workers' strike of Chinese women in New York City. And we see it in the persistence of home care workers today who are going up against the state, demanding better working conditions and pay. Jessica and Saba told me about some of the creative responses they're involved in, from focusing on state level changes to public shaming campaigns.

Saba: The powerful thing, you know, about states like California, is the state is willing to continue to defend where maybe nationally things are being rolled back. Whether it's developing and supporting policies like Sanctuary City or there's a bill this year to create, like, a national relations board that could be used on the state level instead of on the federal level if the federal level's not gonna work.

Jessica: Part of the work that we've moved forward is if workers cannot trust government agencies during this current administration, that we need to change our strategy and that is ensuring that employers know that we are paying attention and that we will hold you accountable to your legal responsibilities.

Which is why National COSH releases our Dirty Dozen Report. The Dirty Dozen basically represents 12 of the worst employers in the United States that have been nominated by our network.

So this year's Dirty Dozen report surfaces, you know, some of these threats to worker safety. Specifically on preventable deaths, injuries, and illnesses. We're talking about, you know, pretty egregious conditions for workers.

Shaka: Jessica shared a couple of particularly shocking stories of unsafe working conditions.

Jessica: One of our Dirty Dozen was Miracapo Pizza based in Illinois. We know that this woman, this worker, very young, called Leily Lopez Hernandez, an immigrant worker, was sent to clean machines without training or the authority to stop them.

Shaka: Leily Lopez Hernandez ended up dying from being pulled into the machine.

Jessica: She lost her life because profit was prioritized over safety. And these are the extreme stories that we hear time and time again.

We're also seeing a surge in child labor with over 4,000 children exploited in 2024 alone. Duvan Peréz is a 16-year-old Guatemalan worker killed at Mar-Jac Poultry in Mississippi. Just little less than two years ago, he tragically lost his life while cleaning a machine at the Mar-Jac Poultry in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

So OSHA cited the company for 17 safety violations and proposed over only $212,000 in penalties. So this incident again underscores the exploitation of child labor intersected with immigrants, and the severity of the working conditions of the poultry industry in particular.

We release this report every year, so I do wanna also take this opportunity to do a little plug and invite your audience members to go to our website and check out the Dirty Dozen report.

Shaka: I mean, gone are the days where immigrants have to be quiet about all the disrespect. I'm like, all right, let's just blow it all up. You know what I mean? Post it on Instagram, put it on Twitter. Let's Dirty Dozen it. Let's do all of the things. You know what I'm saying?

Jessica: We're doing all of that. You need to follow us, Shaka!

Shaka: As we were reporting The Hustle, I got to thinking about the economic functions of immigration crackdowns. Like Jessica and Saba have demonstrated, just the threat of mass deportations creates a more exploitable workforce.

In one of our earlier episodes, we went to Rock Springs, Wyoming — the site of the 1885 Massacre of Chinese miners by white miners. This was three years after the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese workers from entering the country. Chinese immigrants already in the country had to keep their heads down. The company employing them took advantage of their vulnerable immigration status and paid them less than the white miners at first. Eventually, the company slashed the white workers' pay, too, and that culminated in violence. So it’s an old tactic for big industry to use border policy to manipulate and exploit the immigrant workforce.

Ultimately, industry and our government know that immigrant labor is essential to our economy. I asked Jessica and Saba what they thought.

Shaka: So if immigrants did not exist in the United States one day, like how long do you think the system would sustain itself? Would it sustain itself, or how much chaos would we be in?

Jessica: It's really hard for me to imagine, to be quite frank, a society without immigrants. Immigrant workers have always been like, essential to our economy. This title of essential got coined during COVID, but you know, in the work that we've done, it was almost like a reality check. Like we've been knowing this, you know, um, they're an essential part of our economy from construction to agriculture, to food production.

Saba: Let's take it back to the roots of this country — that it's built on forced labor. And when we think about how we even became the economic thriving system that we are today, it was from slavery. And when you think about the time where we transitioned from slavery to another economy, you still have immigrant workers working 12 hour days, 16 hours days for low wages and extremely exploited.

And so when it's time to get the labor relations on board and actually put things like the eight-hour work week and health and safety protections, you know who were excluded? Domestic workers, those working in our homes, and agriculture workers, those working in our fields. That started off being held by Black workers and then eventually over time taken over by immigrant workers.

We're talking about an economy that has thrived over exploitation, and then it's just continually looking for the latest workforce that can do that work and that immigrant workers are kind of front and center in that. Like sixties, seventies, eighties, as we start to lose a lot of big industries and they were offshore, they were, you know, replaced by technology, it was immigrants coming into our cities that kept our economies afloat. That was definitely the case for Los Angeles.

You know, the jobs changed, right? They became service sector, whether it was construction, domestic work, restaurant, retail, nail salons. All of these industries were then rebuilt through immigrant work and that work is what actually came back and sustained our economies, whether through taxes, through, you know, building our neighborhoods, all of these things.

So they're so integral now into our economy, if you take them out, you'll have like Detroit in the 1980s, and I don't mean this as a dish on Detroit. I mean, it is when a community gets disinvested in and gets ignored, and then you don't have labor, you don't have work, you know the sectors that really help places thrive. That's what happens. You know, we're, we're talking about jobs leaving the country. The same thing would happen when workers leave the country.

And I do wanna say, like, even when, you know, we talk about these deportations, you know the end result is not to have them leave, it's to bring them back on visas and then bring them back in even worsening conditions in stricter kind of guidelines. That's the plan is like, well, we want to control this workforce even

more so, you know, talking about, you know, companies that are gonna take advantage, and so as the deportation machine is going into effect, it's not going to work. It's going to shut down our cities, it's going to impact our economies.

Shaka: Saba and Jessica gave us a birds-eye view of national and state level worker campaigns. All of that is necessary and important, but I wanted to give Mary the last word. Even though the fear of deportation was the undercurrent of so much of our conversation, we left off on a surprisingly hopeful note. I asked about her two daughters and I could see her light up.

Mary: I love doing this work and I love that they're seeing me doing this work. My older daughter — she's 13 years old — and last year, they were talking in their school about what they wanted to be when they grow up. And she choose three options, but one of them was to be a lawyer because she wants to defend our community. And I feel very proud of her because I feel like she's seeing everything I'm doing and that get her inspired too, to keep helping the community.

I do get very excited when our members share that their kids are gonna turn 18 and they're gonna be able to vote because that's gonna be their voice. And maybe with that vote, something can change. My daughter, she's gonna turn 18 in four years and she's very excited about that too.

Shaka: I mean, I think that's a wonderful note to end it, you know what I mean? Thank you so much for being here.

Mary: Thank you. Thank you. I really appreciate this opportunity.

Shaka: Over seven episodes, we've heard from immigrant workers raising their voices from underserved communities — not for praise, but because it matters deeply to them. I was out of work when I got the call for the opportunity to host this podcast. The person who recommended me is an immigrant still fighting for their place in this country. And yet, they spoke my name with confidence. That moment reminded me what solidarity really means — how our communities find strength in one another, even in uncertainty. The American hustle is shifting, shaped by the politics of the moment. But one thing remains constant: storytellers like Mary, Saba, and Jessica will always be here, honoring our histories, embracing the complexity of our lives, and creating space to be heard.

Thank you for listening.

Shaka: The Hustle is hosted by me, Shaka Tafari. Today's episode was produced by Maria Luisa Tucker. It was edited by Feet in 2 Worlds' editing fellow Lushik Lotus-Lee with additional editing by Mia Warren and Quincy Surasmith. Feet in 2 Worlds' Managing Director is Mia Warren. Our Managing Editor is Quincy Surasmith. Our Development Coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Jocelyn Gonzalez is our technical director and engineer. Additional engineering by Iggy Monda. Fact-check is by Julie Schwietert Collazo. Original theme music by Gautam Srikishan. Additional Music is from Blue

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