By Stephanie V. Siek
GLOBE STAFF

WALTHAM — Brandeis University students packed a room to listen to three of the people who clean their classrooms and dormitories.

The panel discussion allowed the Central American immigrants to break through barriers of class and language, step out of the shadows in which they usually work, and tell their stories.

Francisca Escobar, 38, left El Salvador a week after her brother was killed in the aftermath of the country’s 12-year civil war. Lidia Alonzo, 35, fled to the United States from an abusive relationship in her native Guatemala. Jose Jimenez, 42, decided to look for work in North America after realizing that what he earned in El Salvador wouldn’t be enough to both repay a loan he’d taken out and support his family. The three addressed about 100 Brandeis students in Spanish last week as two volunteers translated.

The panel was organized by the Brandeis Labor Coalition, a student group that campaigns on behalf of both contract workers and direct employees of Brandeis. Its mission is not just to advocate for better working conditions but to let the custodians know they’re respected.

“We do a lot of different projects all over the board, like picking up [lunch] trays so they don’t have to do it, to throwing worker appreciation banquets and barbecues, talking to the union to see what should be done that isn’t being done,” said coalition member Jennifer Suhd-Brondstatter.

Escarob, Alonzo, and Jimenez work mostly nights, weekends, and holidays at Brandeis but are employed by Hurley of America, a cleaning firm contracted by the university.

Hurley employees earn $11.35 an hour; custodians employed directly by Brandeis earn $14.20 per hour. Hurley workers get no personal days and only one sick day each year, with no carry-over; Brandeis employees get up to four personal days and 12 sick days per year, with a carry-over provision.

Escarob, Alonzo, and Jimenez say that their status as contract workers and immigrants shouldn’t prevent them from getting the same wages and benefits as Brandeis employees doing the same job. They say the Brandeis Labor Coalition gives them a voice that the administration can hear.

Alonzo said she has approached Brandeis several times about applying for a job, but she has been told that she would have to interview for the job in English, a language in which she is not fluent. At Hurley, she said, she’s able to get along without knowing English.

Escarob is union steward for the Service Employees International Union, which represents the Hurley workers. She has spent nearly 4½ years on the night shift, which she said has almost tripled the workload of the typical day shift. But she says working at Brandeis is “OK,” compared to the $160 a week she earned when she first came to America.

Escarob sends money back to El Salvador to support her two daughters and the four orphaned children of her brother, but she hasn’t seen them in eight years. Her immigration status prevented her from returning home when one of her daughters recently underwent surgery, for which she helped pay the bill.

“You come to this country thinking that . . . your life is going to be a lot better, but it’s not true,” said Escobar.

Silvia Arrom, the head of Brandeis’s Latin American Studies Department, spoke at last week’s panel about the historical and economic factors that prompted Central Americans to come to the States. Arrom said many left El Salvador to flee the US-backed military dictatorship and the civil war that devastated the nation’s economy.

“Today, 17 percent of the Salvadoran population is in the US, and remittances from the US are the single largest source of foreign exchange,” Arrom said in an interview. “Consequently, the conditions these migrants encounter here have significant repercussions in El Salvador.”

Arrom praised the efforts of the labor coalition. “It is high time that migrant workers cease being the invisible janitors and gardeners who are contributing to the quality of life as we enjoy it in the US, and at Brandeis specifically,” he said.

The coalition’s roots go back to 2002, when a contingent of students affiliated with AHORA, a Latin-American student group, organized a petition drive for a living wage for Brandeis employees. In 2003, they organized as a separate entity to press for better labor practices. Suhd-Brondstatter said the coalition now has 15 to 20 regular members and about 80 students on its mailing list.

Suhd-Brondstatter and fellow member Erin Hull say that Brandeis has been receptive to their concerns about inequalities between Brandeis and Hurley workers and that they intend to meet with the administration soon to press their case.

Brandeis spokesman David Nathan said that Brandeis directly employs 60 custodial workers; it contracts with Hurley of America and JUD Inc. for another 15 to 20. Nathan said the university feels that the compensation offered to the contract workers is fair.

“The university has the responsibility, rooted in its foundational pillar of social justice, to offer competitive and equitable wages and benefits to its employees, and is committed to contracting only with companies that share this philosophy,” said Nathan. He said that Brandeis administrators aren’t privy to negotiations between contractors and the union.

Brandeis has been using outside custodians since 1999, when the university decided to add an overnight cleaning shift. Nathan said the Brandeis custodians’ union did not want to work that shift, so the university had no choice but to look at contractors. The contract workers did not replace existing Brandeis-employed custodial workers and their numbers have remained “static,” he said.

Hurley of America CEO Barton Munro said the company offers wages competitive with those of nonunion employers.

“There’s always going to be a difference between what a college might pay and what an outsourcing initiative is going to pay,” said Munro. “The college is an educational facility, not a cleaning operation.”

Dan Nicolai, who represents Hurley workers for the Service Employees International Union, said that other universities, including Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have held contractors to the same wage standard they use for their own employees. He said Harvard pays its workers $13 per hour.

Stephanie V. Siek can be reached at ssiek@globe.com.