

HEAT, HUSTLE, AND YOUR RIGHTS

A Young Food Worker's Guide to
Staying Safe and Building Power

By young workers, for
young workers



CENTER FOR WORKING CLASS STUDIES

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WHO IS THIS ZINE FOR?



This zine is for anyone working in the food service industry, with a focus on young workers. Whether you are new to the job or have worked in food service for years, you'll find information about workplace safety, your rights, and how workers can build power together in this zine.

YOUNG WORKERS IN FOOD SERVICE DESERVE RESPECT

In July 2025, there were 21.1 million employed youth (people ages 16 to 24) in the United States. The leisure and hospitality industry employed 25% (5.4 million) of these young workers, the largest share among any other industries.

In focus groups conducted by Labor South with young food service workers during the summer of 2026, many wanted those in their community to understand that they deserve respect, adequate pay, and protections for their essential work. Many young workers enter food service as a first job while balancing school, family responsibilities, or other work.

DID YOU KNOW?

Young workers have helped lead major movements for workplace change throughout history. Young people have organized, marched, gone on strike, and joined together to demand safe and fair workplaces. Young workers have and continue to be a strong voice for change, through efforts to unionize the workplace and social justice activism.

Reflection Question: What is one thing you wish someone had told you before your first job?

COMMON PROBLEMS IN FOOD SERVICE

Every workplace has challenges, but some put workers at risk. Some workplace problems may be unsafe or unfair, while others may violate labor or safety laws. Knowing the difference can help you understand when to ask questions, document what is happening, seek help, or take action.

Put a check next to any of these that you (or a co-worker) have experienced.

SAFETY HAZARDS

- ☐ Hot oil or grease
- ☐ Sharp knives or slicers
- ☐ Slippery floors
- ☐ Heavy lifting
- ☐ Extreme heat or hot kitchens
- ☐ Toxic cleaning chemicals
- ☐ Blocked exits
- ☐ Locked doors
- ☐ Lack of protective equipment
- ☐ Other: _____



WORKPLACE PROBLEMS

- ☐ Lack of safety training
- ☐ Inconsistent or unpredictable schedules
- ☐ Being scheduled for too many hours
- ☐ Understaffing
- ☐ Pressure to work while sick or injured
- ☐ Yelling, threats, or physical aggression from managers, co-workers, or customers
- ☐ Sexual harassment
- ☐ Not having enough breaks
- ☐ Fear of speaking up about safety or workplace problems
- ☐ Other: _____

I'm expected to solve everyone's problems without manager pay.

- 22 year-old worker, casual dining

Reflection Question: Have you received adequate training to do your job safely?

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Knowing your rights can help you recognize when something is wrong and know where to turn for help.

YOU DESERVE TO BE PAID FOR YOUR WORK

When an employer does not pay you everything you are legally owed, it may be wage theft.

Examples can include:

- Working before clocking in
- Working after clocking out
- Missing overtime pay when you are legally entitled to it
- Illegal or unauthorized paycheck deductions
- Managers changing or falsifying time records
- Missing or improperly withheld tips
- Being required to attend unpaid meetings or training when you should be paid

Keep track of your hours and pay. Save pay stubs, schedules, and other records when possible.

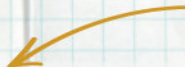
KNOW THE RULES

If you are under 18, additional rules may apply to the hours you can work and the types of jobs you can perform or equipment you can use. Workers who are 16 years or younger may have additional protections under federal and state child labor laws. Check your state's child labor laws to learn about age-specific work restrictions and protections.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO SPEAK UP

Workers have legal protections when they act together to improve their working conditions.

Depending on the situation, workers may be protected when they:

- 
- Ask questions about workplace safety
 - Discuss wages and working conditions with co-workers
 - Raise concerns about workplace problems
 - Ask for better training or safer conditions
 - Work together with co-workers to improve their workplace

All of the above are legally protected activities. Retaliation by your employer is illegal. If you believe you are being punished, threatened, or treated differently for exercising your rights, document what happened and seek help from trusted co-workers, worker justice organizations or federal agencies like the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division, or the National Labor Relations Board.



DID YOU KNOW?

Workers do not have to face workplace problems alone. Connecting with co-workers and learning about your rights can be the first step toward creating change.

You have rights, but some employers may still retaliate. If possible, talk with trusted co-workers and raise concerns together. Keep notes and save messages in case you need them later.



I didn't really get formal training. We don't have many safety requirements.

- 18 year old hostess/busser

Reflection Question: Would you be supported if you are injured or treated unfairly at work?

BUILDING POWER TOGETHER

WHAT IS ORGANIZING?

Organizing means workers coming together to identify shared concerns, build relationships, and take collective action to improve working conditions.

Workers can organize in many ways. They can:

- Talk with co-workers about shared concerns
- Build solidarity and support one another
- Take collective action
- Participate in mutual aid
- Work with a labor center or worker organization
- Join a union or vote to form a union
- Advocate for safe and fair workplaces

WHY ORGANIZE?

One worker speaking alone may be ignored. Workers acting together have more power.

When workers build trust, share experiences, and act collectively, they can push for change that may be difficult to achieve alone.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO UNIONIZE!

Labor unions are organizations where workers join forces to improve their working conditions. Through their union, workers negotiate as one with their employer on wages, benefits, health and safety, and other workplace rights and benefits. Employees are entitled to work together on common issues, even if they don't have a union.

Reflection Question: Do you know any organizations that support workers in your community?

THE POWER OF WORKERS: THEN AND NOW

Workers have a long history of coming together to demand safe and fair workplaces.

Through organizing and collective action, workers have helped fight for protections that many people benefit from today, including:

- The eight-hour workday
- Child labor protections
- Workplace safety laws
- Overtime protections
- Better wages and working conditions

YOUNG WORKERS HAVE POWER, TOO

Young workers have always been part of movements for change. Your voice, your experiences, and your ideas matter. You do not have to wait until you are older to speak up, organize, or take action.

For me, it's being expected to do work outside my job description....and doing prep work I wasn't trained for.

- 19 year old airport food service worker

DID YOU KNOW?

Many workplace protections exist today because workers organized and demanded change. The rights you have at work were not always guaranteed, they were fought for.

Reflection Question: Does your state have labor laws that are stronger than the federal laws?

WE CAN BUILD SAFER WORKPLACES TOGETHER

You can help create change by:

1. Sharing Your Experiences

Talk with trusted co-workers about workplace conditions and safety concerns.

2. Learning Your Rights

Know what protections apply to you and where to find reliable information. Check your state's laws. Rules may differ depending on your age and where you work.

3. Documenting What Happens

Keep track of schedules, hours, injuries, safety concerns, and other important information when appropriate and safe to do so.

4. Building Connections

Connect with co-workers, worker organizations, labor centers, and community groups.

5. Taking Action Together

Work with co-workers to raise concerns and advocate for safe and fair workplaces.

RESOURCES

LEARN ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS

Labor South



AFL-CIO



National Labor
Relations Board
Employee Rights



US Department of
Labor Resources
on Young Workers'
Rights



RESOURCES

LEARN ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS

US Department of Labor
Restaurants and Fast Food
Establishments Under the
Fair Labor Standards Act
(FLSA)



US Department of
Labor Tipped
Employees Under the
Fair Labor Standards
Act (FLSA)



US Department of
Labor Young Worker
Safety in Restaurants
eTool



US Department of
Labor How to File
a Complaint



If companies invested more in education or career development, people would get more out of working there.

- 19 year old restaurant chain worker

YOU DESERVE

- A safe workplace
- Fair pay
- Respect
- To know your rights
- To have your voice heard

