

FAST FOOD WORKERS ON THE BRINK

**Precarious Work and the Path to Stability
in California's Fast Food Industry**



CALIFORNIA FAST FOOD WORKERS UNION

June 2025





California Fast Food Workers Union, SEIU

The California Fast Food Workers Union unites fast food workers across brands and locations and is the first of its kind in the country. Part of the Service Employees International Union, this historic union grew out of over a decade of fast food workers organizing across California, beginning with the Fight for \$15 and a Union. Our Union is fighting to achieve racial and economic justice and transform fast food jobs in the Golden State by fighting for fair pay, safe and healthy workplaces and a voice for all workers in the fast food industry.

<https://californiafastfoodworkersunion.org/>

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FOREWORD

While record levels of homelessness have brought California's housing crisis into focus, there has been less attention on factors related to employment that drive California's working poor into crisis. Not only do these workers face pay too low for California's high cost of living, but they also face the cruel and unworkable reality of ever-shifting hours and work schedules, and unstable incomes. Many of these workers are either homeless or are living on the brink of homelessness, despite having jobs.

As I know, both through my work as a physician and from my research, many people who experience homelessness despite working – work in fast food. And all too often, cuts in hours, sudden schedule changes and arbitrary firings – frequently in retaliation for taking a sick day or speaking up about workplace problems – precipitated their loss of housing.

In this groundbreaking report, we hear from California's fast-food workers – describing the toll that low wages and a lack of stable work hours and incomes have on their lives. We hear that 86% of workers surveyed worry about being unable to pay next month's rent, and three-quarters had to choose between paying rent or paying for their family's food or medical bills. Eighty-seven percent said that they needed more work hours to pay for their living expenses and 79% said that they wanted more hours than they could get scheduled.

Fast food workers – like many low-wage workers – scramble to do whatever they can to make the impossible math of low wages work. They struggle to find childcare and transportation that work with their unpredictable schedules. They take on second and third jobs, trading sleep and time with family for the ability to keep their kids fed and roofs over their heads. As Matthew Desmond described in his landmark book, *Evicted*, the “rent eats first.” California's fast food workers struggle to cover rent, utilities, food, medicine, and car payments – in the face of low wages, ever-changing schedules, insufficient hours and no job security.

What happens when workers don't have steady hours? When hours change, workers' patchwork childcare falls through, and their carefully planned public transit trips collapse. Without reliable work hours, it is impossible to hold on to their second job. As bills pile up, these workers skip meals and split pills, hoping to make both food and medicine last longer. Their stress often increases and their health frequently declines. They take out pay-day loans at exorbitant interest rates that further diminish their resources. Their phones are turned off. Juggling electric bills, phone bills, grocery bills, and rent only gets you so far – eventually, the bottom falls out.

Fast food workers value their work; this study shows that they are just calling for the ability to consistently work enough hours to make ends meet. And while we live in a society that claims to value work deeply, one has to ask – do we?

This report makes clear the hidden underbelly of precarity at work that underlies the crisis facing California's low-wage workers, and the devastation wrought by unreliable work hours and unstable incomes. To lift low-wage workers out of grinding poverty, and its consequences, these workers need livable wages that keep pace with the cost of living, as well as stable work hours, safeguards against abrupt and unfair firings, and protection from retaliation.

Margot Kushel, MD

Professor of Medicine, UCSF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After several violent attacks at work, including one in which she had to use a pizza cutter to fight off a man who chased her through the kitchen and threatened to kill her and her coworkers, Alejandra and her coworkers reported the violence to Cal/OSHA and went on strike to improve safety at the Taco Bell where she worked. In apparent retaliation, Taco Bell cut her hours and transferred her to another store much farther from her home and daughter's school, leaving her broke, homeless, and separated from her young daughter.

"Because of the retaliation, my income went from around \$2800 per month down to \$500. I couldn't pay rent; I lost my housing, and since then I have been sleeping wherever I can, with friends and family. I had to leave my daughter, Rosaly, in my mother's care, because I don't have a stable place to live and I don't earn enough to care for her," says Alejandra.

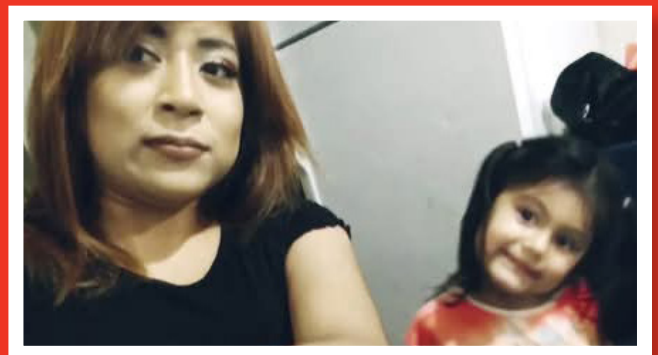
Across California, fast food workers like Alejandra face the uncertainty and insecurity that come with working in this low-wage, high-violation industry. Fast food jobs are characterized by inadequate income, unstable work, and barriers that prevent workers from exercising rights put in place to protect them. These realities affect all aspects of workers' lives—from access to housing and food, to physical and mental health, to overall social and family wellbeing.

The multi-billion dollar fast food industry employs over half a million workers in California. Despite working hard every day to support their families, California fast food workers consistently report being unable to afford basic living expenses, as well as persistent struggles with unpredictable and erratic schedules, involuntary part time work, and unfair, arbitrary firings. In January and February 2025, the California Fast Food Workers Union conducted a statewide survey of more than 400 fast food workers at over 200 work locations representing 35 fast food brands in 66 cities across California. The survey included a series of in-depth questions about fast food workers' experiences regarding income, scheduling, hours and job stability, and how these factors impact their economic security and wellbeing.

Before getting transferred, I worked at a Taco Bell near Rosaly's school, so I could be there for her, and attend events at school after work. Now I can't do that anymore. Rosaly loved her old school, so after Taco Bell management transferred me, I tried as hard as I could to keep her there. We had to take several buses and the metro, and I was spending 4 hours a day on transit, so it just wasn't feasible. I had to tell Rosaly, with tears in my eyes, that she had to transfer to a new school.

"I'm a good worker. I was promoted to shift leader. I had a steady income, working full time, five days a week, and my daughter was at a good school. Management should be encouraging us to speak up about problems at work and taking action to protect us, not punishing us and destroying our lives."

-ALEJANDRA, TACO BELL WORKER, LOS ANGELES



KEY FINDINGS

ECONOMIC INSECURITY

86%

of fast food workers surveyed say they are worried about being able to pay next month's rent.

76%

say that during the past year they have had to choose between paying their rent or paying for basic needs such as food, medicine and bills.

87%

say that they need to work more hours to be able to pay basic expenses, such as rent, food, bills and gas.

UNPREDICTABLE SCHEDULES

98%

of fast food workers surveyed say that if they had a sudden schedule change or cut in hours that it would cause them problems paying for rent, healthcare or other basic needs.

90%

say they worry that their schedule could change for no good reason or without warning.

82%

say that they worry every week about whether they'll be scheduled for enough hours, because their schedule constantly changes.

64%

say that a sudden schedule change would cause them problems with childcare or with their second job.

79%

say they want to work more hours at their fast food jobs but can't get scheduled for them.

JOB INSTABILITY

71%

of fast food workers surveyed say that their employers have hired new workers without offering the hours to workers who already work at the store and want more hours.

92%

of fast food workers surveyed say they worry they could lose their job for no good reason or without warning.

Results of the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey show that experiences with precarious work are widespread among fast food workers across brands statewide.¹ Respondents to the survey reported persistent struggles with poverty and housing insecurity, trouble paying for basic necessities, and having to make impossible decisions, such as choosing between paying rent and buying food or medicine for their families. The findings of the survey also show that an overwhelming majority of California fast food workers deal with unstable schedules and insufficient work hours, and worry about schedule changes, cuts to their work hours, and the possibility of losing their jobs without warning or for no good reason.

These new survey results are consistent with findings of prior studies examining the problems fast food workers experience, including low wages, volatile and unmanageable schedules, and widespread violations of workplace rights. These studies also highlight how employer retaliation punishes workers who exercise their rights or speak up about problems, while deterring other workers from doing so.² A growing body of research also describes the social, economic, and health impacts of precarious work for California fast food workers and their families, who face high rates of poverty and homelessness.³

For millions of Californians, the primary threat to financial stability is not a lack of employment—it is that their jobs don't pay adequately, don't provide sufficient hours, and don't offer enough security to ensure they can meet their basic needs.⁴ California's poverty rate has climbed in recent years, reaching nearly 19 percent in 2023, up from 16.4 percent the previous year, according to the US Census Bureau's Supplementary Poverty Measure.⁵ A 2025 United Way study shows that a significantly higher share of California households—more than one in three—do not earn sufficient income to meet basic needs. The vast majority (roughly 97 percent) of households facing financial struggles are already working, the study found.⁶

While poverty has risen across all racial and ethnic groups, the percentage of Californians of color has disproportionately increased, with poverty rates of 25 percent and 22.3 percent for Latino/a and Black Californians, respectively, in 2023.⁷ In California, households led by people of color, women and immigrants are especially likely to face financial hardships and struggle to afford a decent standard of living.⁸

California's fast food workforce exemplifies these realities. The vast majority of the state's fast food workers are people of color, approximately two-thirds are women, and over a quarter are immigrants.⁹

In California, households led by people of color, women and immigrants are especially likely to face financial hardships and struggle to afford a decent standard of living.¹⁰ And fast food workers make up the second-largest group of low-wage workers in the state.¹¹







Low wages are a key driver of economic insecurity among fast food workers. However, the effects of low wages are compounded by other characteristics of fast food work.¹² Unpredictable schedules, sudden hours cuts, arbitrary and unfair firings, dangerous working conditions, and the threat of employer retaliation for exercising rights such as taking sick leave when sick and speaking up about workplace problems, all create and perpetuate the conditions that keep fast food workers in poverty and on the brink of homelessness.¹³

After more than a decade of organizing to address these problems, including strikes by workers at over 450 fast food locations across California, fast food workers won a landmark victory with the passage of AB 1228 in 2023.¹⁴ This historic law established the \$20 per hour state fast food minimum wage and the California Fast Food Council, which provides workers a seat at the table with employers and government to improve working conditions and standards in the industry.¹⁵

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The path to stability for California's fast food workers requires a multifaceted policy approach that addresses the interlocking problems of economic insecurity, job and schedule unpredictability, and barriers to exercising workplace rights and protections.

Recommendations include:

-  **Cost-of-living adjustments to the fast food minimum wage in line with state, city and county laws in California.** The California Fast Food Council must implement cost-of-living adjustments to the fast food minimum wage that keep pace with inflation. The state minimum wage goes up automatically with inflation every year, as do the minimum wages in 40+ California cities and counties.
-  **Fair scheduling policies.** Policymakers should support solutions that offer fast food workers protection from constantly changing schedules, such as the proposal currently under consideration by the Los Angeles City Council to include fast food workers in the city's existing Fair Work Week law.
-  **Just Cause rules to prevent workers from being fired without warning or good reason.** Just Cause policies promote stability for workers and their families and safeguard workers from arbitrary punishment and retaliatory firings for speaking up about workplace problems such as wage theft or health and safety violations.
-  **Opportunity to Work policies supporting workers who want full-time work.** California should follow the lead of cities like San Jose and enact a measure to ensure that employers offer open shifts to existing, qualified, part-time workers before hiring new employees.
-  **Know Your Rights training.** Know Your Rights training provides fast food workers with the knowledge and know-how needed to exercise their rights at work. To be effective, Know Your Rights trainings must be presented by independent organizations experienced in providing training to low-income and immigrant communities. These programs must be presented in-person, in an environment of trust, where workers feel safe asking questions. Elected leaders and others should support Know Your Rights training pilot programs for fast food workers, such as those presently being considered in the City of Los Angeles and Santa Clara County.
-  **Protection from retaliation.** Mechanisms to protect workers from retaliation and discrimination by employers for exercising their rights should be strengthened at the State and local levels.

The \$20 per hour fast food minimum wage has improved the lives of over half a million California fast food workers, but cost-of-living adjustments are necessary to protect these gains. As the cost of basic necessities rises, low-income families are impacted the most.¹⁶

Minimum wage standards that keep pace with the cost of living help working families afford basic necessities.¹⁷ For this reason, California's minimum wage adjusts for inflation every year,¹⁸ as do the minimum wages in over 40 cities and counties across the state.¹⁹ Without automatic cost-of-living adjustments, the fast food minimum wage is an outlier among comparable wage policies across California, and out of line with widely accepted best practices for responsible economic policy.

In addition to wage adjustments that keep up with the cost of living, fast food workers need policy solutions that promote stable, secure jobs and safeguard their rights at work. The current proposal to add fast food workers to the existing Fair Work Week law in the City of Los Angeles; Just Cause provisions that protect workers from arbitrary, abrupt and unfair firings; and Opportunity to Work laws that require employers to offer available hours to existing qualified workers before hiring new employees are examples of such policies. Know Your Rights training programs that offer quality, in-person training provided by independent and trusted organizations are a policy solution to ensure fast food workers are informed about their rights at work and how to uphold them. Protections against retaliation must also be strengthened to better-support workers to exercise their rights and speak up about workplace problems and abuses.

The raise to \$20 per hour made a big difference, but we are not keeping up with the cost of living. In Lancaster the rents have gone up dramatically. I used to pay around \$1095 per month, but now I pay around \$3000, and that doesn't include lights, gas, and water, and all of that is going up too. How are we supposed to live?

Almost all my coworkers have 2 jobs. I work the night shift in fast food on Saturdays and Sundays, and I work weekdays for the school district. On Sunday I work the night shift from 11pm to 7am, and then I start work at the school at 8:45 am on Monday. I am tired as hell, and it seems like I am making no money. I have a whole list of places to get free food, and I share it with my coworkers, but sometimes I am too worn out to go get it. Is this what God created me for, to be this tired?

ANGELA, FAST FOOD WORKER, LANCASTER



ABOUT THE SURVEY

The 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey was conducted by bilingual outreach to workers between January 30, 2025 and February 24, 2025. It included a total of 405 fast-food workers at over 200 fast-food locations in 66 cities across California. Respondents represent 35 different brands, including McDonald's, Jack in the Box, Carl's Jr., Burger King, Subway, KFC and Taco Bell. The survey included a series of in-depth questions about fast food workers' experiences regarding income, scheduling, hours and job stability, and how these factors impact their economic security and wellbeing.

About California Fast Food Workers

Over 630,000 workers are employed in California's fast food industry as of 2025.²⁰ Approximately eighty percent of these workers are people of color, sixty percent are Latino/a, and over a quarter are immigrants.²¹ California's fast food industry employs the second largest group of low-wage workers in the state.²²

California fast food workers experience frequent violations of their workplace rights and often face dangerous, unsanitary, and hostile working conditions. In just the past five years, with the support of the California Fast Food Workers Union, workers have filed more than 500 complaints with state and local agencies documenting wage theft, health and safety hazards, and civil rights and child labor violations in California's fast food workplaces.²³

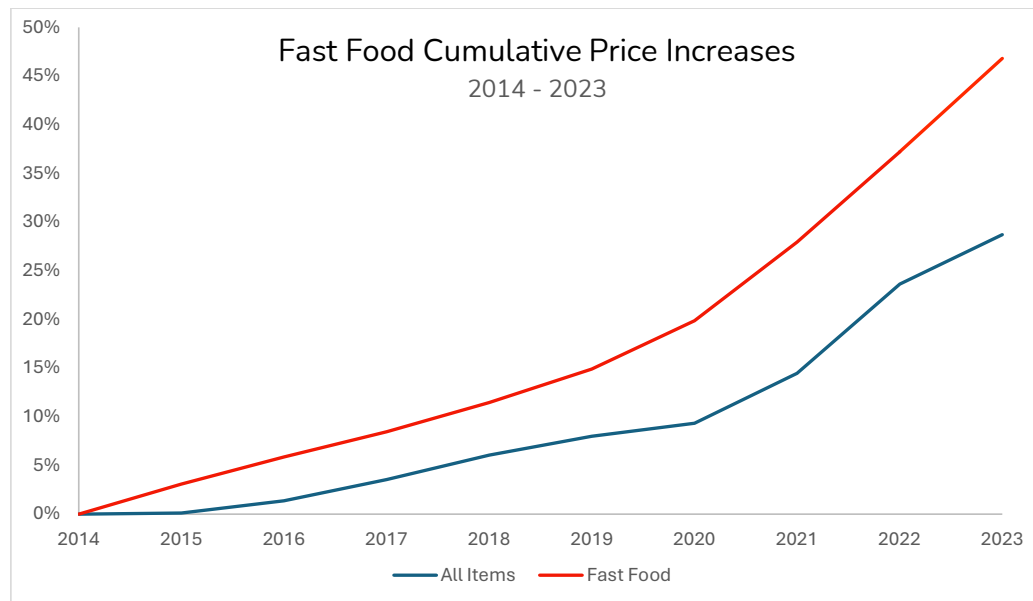
Numerous studies confirm that these hazards and violations are pervasive.²⁴ Furthermore, workers who exercise their rights or complain about workplace violations often face firings, cuts to hours, and other disciplinary actions – despite legal prohibitions on retaliation.²⁵

Fast food workers won a historic victory in 2023 with the passage of AB 1228, which established the California Fast Food Council, a first-of-its-kind statewide body composed of fast food workers, government appointees, and industry leaders, which has the ability to set standards and improve conditions across the industry.²⁶ AB 1228 also established a new minimum wage of \$20 per hour in California's fast food industry, effective April 1, 2024.²⁷

Still, California fast food workers struggle with unpredictable scheduling, insufficient hours, abrupt and unfair firings, and a lack of knowledge about their rights at work and how to uphold them. Wage theft, harassment and discrimination, and violations of health and safety laws remain widespread, as does the problem of employer retaliation. While the increase to \$20 per hour marks a critical step toward a livable wage, low-wage workers like those in fast food are heavily impacted by California's rapidly rising cost of living and still struggle to afford basic necessities and keep their families out of poverty.²⁸

About the Fast Food Industry

California is home to approximately 47,000 fast food locations – about one out of every six of the industry’s 300,000 establishments nationwide.²⁹ California’s fast food industry has grown significantly over the past decade, in terms of both employment and number of establishments.³⁰ Over the same period, many of the fast food industry’s largest corporations have increased prices at rates that outpace inflation.³¹ Fast food prices have increased nationwide by 47 percent between 2014 and 2023, compared to 29 percent for all consumer items.³² A 2024 study by the Roosevelt Institute found that the ten largest publicly traded fast food companies had nearly \$21 billion in total operating profits in 2023.³³



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index Data.

Under the industry’s franchise business model, global corporations control nearly every aspect of the fast food business, requiring franchisees to adhere to strict rules around operation, quality of services, sourcing of supplies and more. This arrangement leaves few opportunities for franchisees to reap financial gain.³⁴ Since labor is one cost franchisees can most easily control; this is where they often seek to make their profits. Under this system, franchise operators are pressured to squeeze workers from all sides—keeping pay low, benefits minimal, schedules unpredictable and employment unstable. This system can essentially reward employers who violate the law by cutting corners on health and safety protections or using wage theft and retaliation as tools to control costs, as these employers are rarely held responsible for their bad actions as workers are either unaware of their rights or too afraid to speak up.³⁵

Industry-wide policy solutions are needed to safeguard against the precarious conditions of fast food work—low pay, unpredictable schedules, unfair hours cuts and firings, and retaliation against workers who exercise the rights put in place to protect them. The multi-billion dollar profits of leading fast food corporations and continued growth of California’s industry demonstrate that fast food employers can afford these urgently needed improvements.

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

POVERTY AND HOUSING INSECURITY

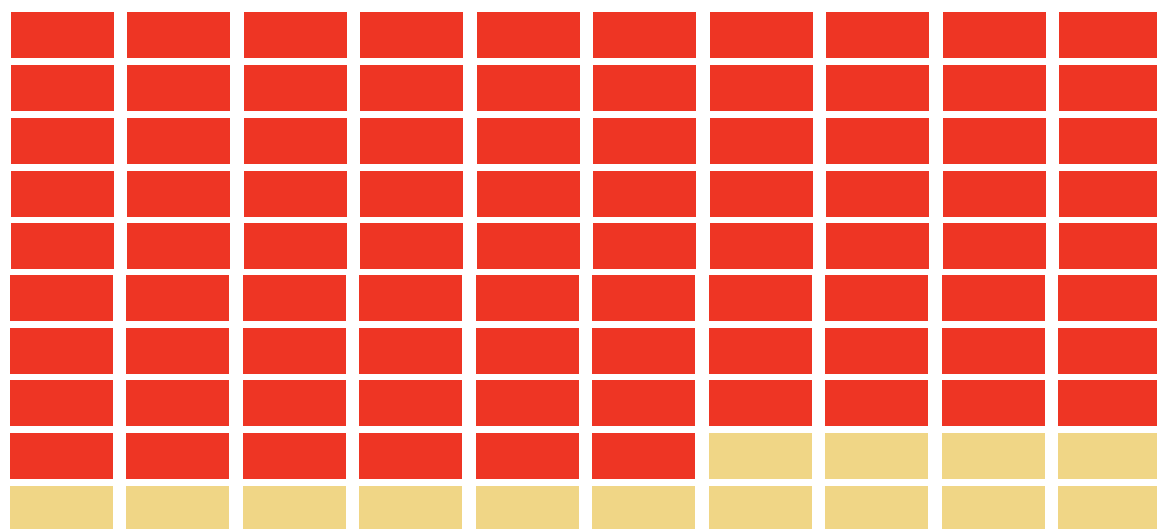
As previously noted, this study analyzes the results of surveys of over 400 workers throughout California taken in the 2025 California Fast Food Worker survey. The survey's results further demonstrate that low wages, part-time hours, unpredictable scheduling and a lack of job security in fast food all significantly contribute to poverty and the inability to pay for housing, putting many fast food workers at risk of homelessness, and all too often pushing them over the brink.

Recent research has highlighted that fast food workers are overrepresented among California's homeless and housing insecure populations. A 2023 study found that 11 percent of the state's homeless workers were employed in fast food.³⁶ The same report found that 43 percent of frontline fast food workers in Los Angeles lived in overcrowded housing, more than twice the rate for all other workers in the labor force.³⁷

Housing insecurity is a major concern among California fast food workers. A large majority of the workers surveyed in the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey report that they worry about whether they will be able to pay the rent

86%

of fast food workers surveyed say they're worried about being able to pay next month's rent.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

After management retaliated against me, cutting my schedule and my income in half, I couldn't pay my rent and bills, or eat regular meals.

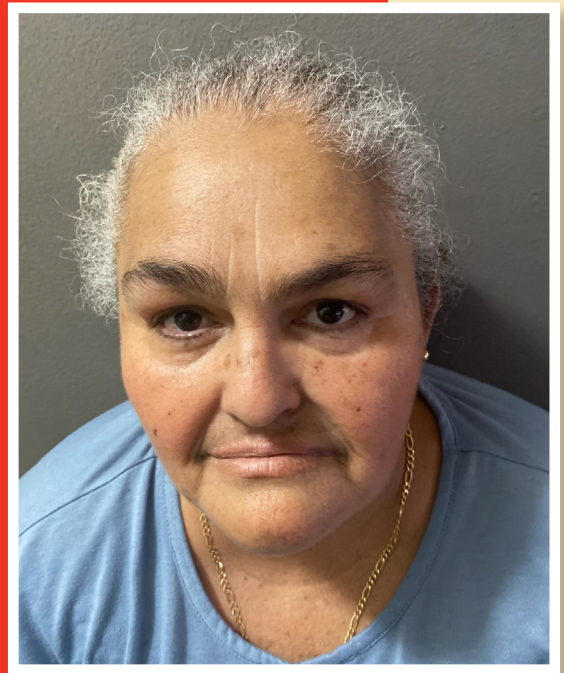
The retaliation started last year when my coworkers and I decided we had to do something about the problems at work. A manager was sexually harassing my coworker, and humiliating me and other workers. We were also upset that management refused to pay sick pay, and denied us meal breaks and rest breaks. So we filed complaints about these problems and went on strike in protest on June 27, 2024.

Carl's Jr management transferred the manager to some other location, but they also cut our schedules in retaliation. My schedule was cut by a whole day each week after the strike. Then in December, they cut my schedule again for missing 2 days of work when I traveled to Las Vegas to see my brother in the hospital, the day before he died.

For a while I had only two days of work a week, which is not enough to live on. I did everything I could to pay the rent. I had to stop paying the electricity and gas. I stopped buying clothes. Sometimes I just ate one real meal a day. My adult children helped with the rent. My coworkers and I took action again, demanding an end to the retaliation against us. In April, a new manager restored my schedule. Now I can afford to eat regular meals again.

I have worked hard at this Carl's Jr for 20 years. Keeping my job shouldn't depend on how much humiliation I can withstand, or giving up on what is most important to me,

-TERESA, CARL'S JR WORKER, SAN FERNANDO



FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

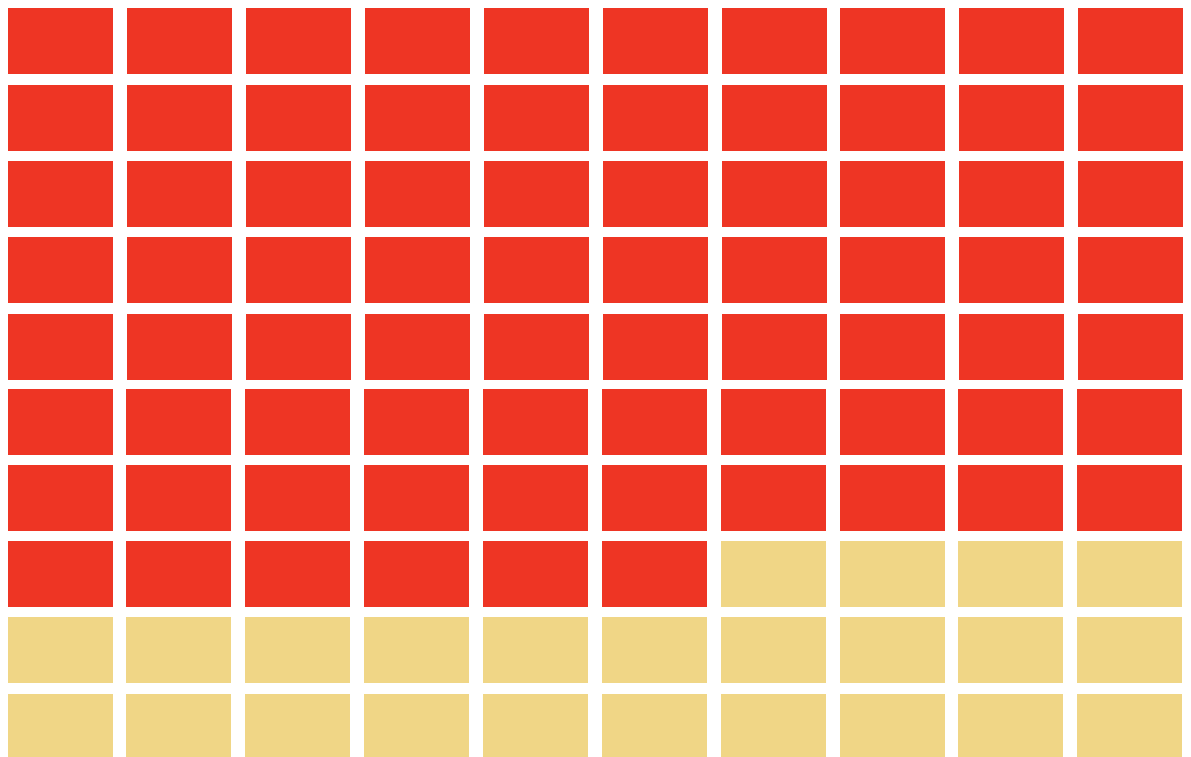
INADEQUATE INCOME, IMPOSSIBLE CHOICES

Fast food workers struggle to afford basic necessities like housing, food, medicine and utilities amid California's high and rapidly-rising cost of living.³⁸ Research shows that severely cost-burdened families are among those at greatest risk of homelessness.³⁹ Statewide, fast food workers are roughly twice as likely as other workers to be severely cost burdened, spending more than half of their income on housing.⁴⁰ An unexpected loss of income due to a schedule cut or sudden job loss can be devastating, in many cases resulting in missed rent payments and loss of housing.⁴¹

The 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey shows fast food workers regularly experience difficulty paying for rent and other basic needs.

76%

said that during the past year they had to choose between paying their rent or paying for basic needs such as food, medicine and bills.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

My husband Remedios suffered a head injury when he was hit by a broken metal door when he was coming down from the roof at McDonald's – the injury was life-changing for my husband, and has left us struggling to pay our rent.

McDonald's management didn't take Remedios to the hospital or call me to let me know about the accident, they left him to drive himself home, which was very dangerous. When I saw him I could tell right away that my husband was not ok, so I took him to the ER, and I brought him to the hospital again 5 days later because he wasn't healing right.

Remedios couldn't work for 7 weeks after the injury, and during that time we had no regular income. We had to borrow money from family and friends to pay rent. He can't work full time anymore, so we get free food from the Church, and after he gets off work he helps me sell candy in the street.



-EDULIA,
WIFE OF REMEDIOS,
MCDONALD'S WORKER, SANTA CLARA

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

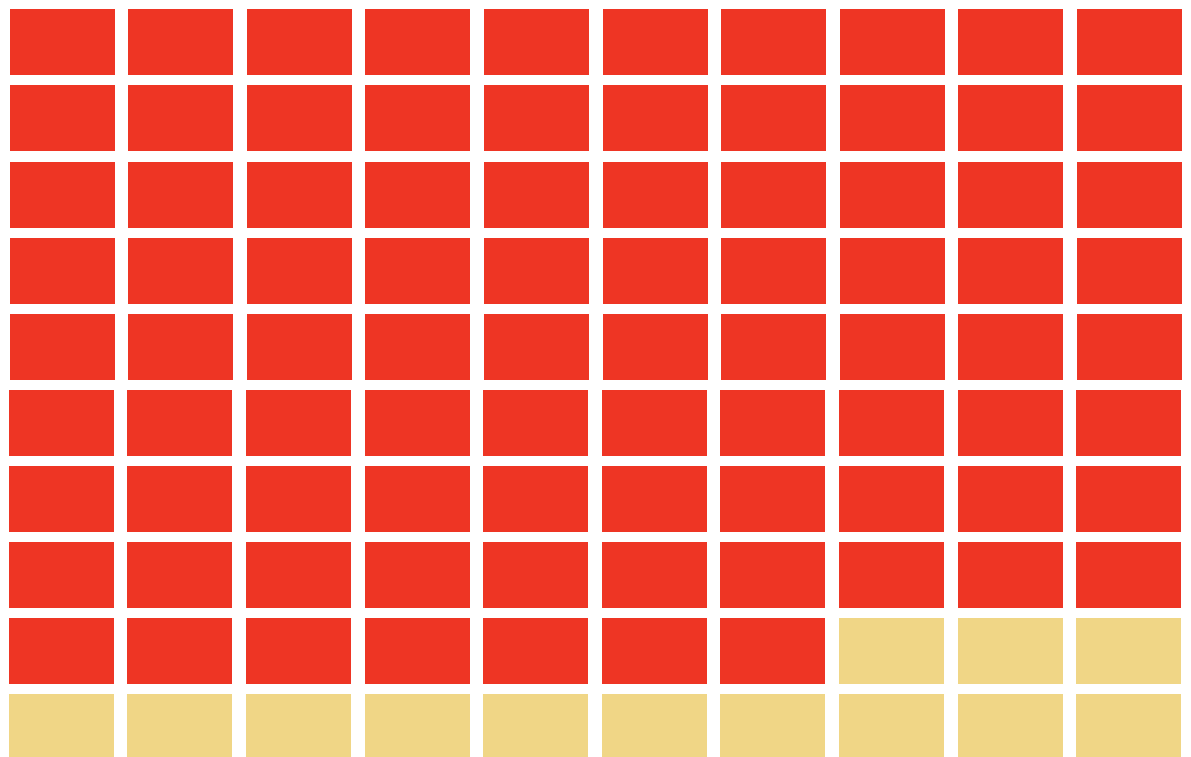
INSUFFICIENT HOURS, ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

To achieve economic stability, workers need wages that keep pace with the cost of living and work schedules that provide sufficient hours to earn a living. Living wage standards are typically calculated based on full-time work, 40 hours of work per week and 52 weeks of work per year.⁴² However, many fast food workers can't count on full time hours at their fast food jobs, and unpredictable schedules or schedule changes can make it hard to hold down second jobs.

In the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey, nearly nine in ten respondents report that they are unable to pay for basic necessities due to insufficient hours.

87%

say that they **need to work more hours** to be able to pay basic expenses, such as rent, food, bills and gas.



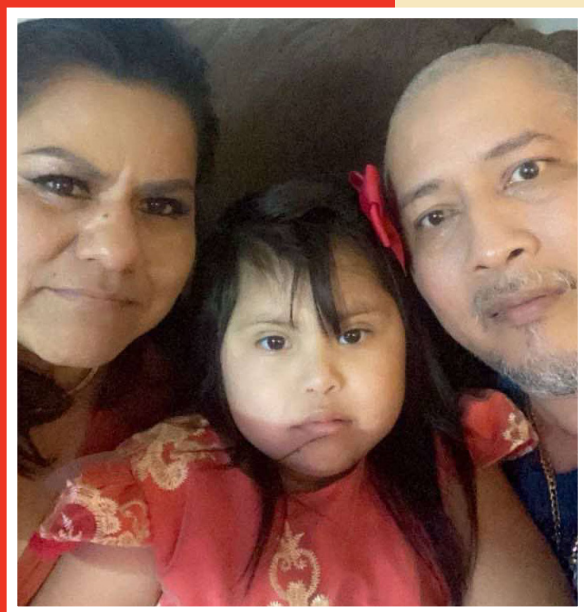
Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

Our lives get turned upside-down every time there is a new store manager. Fast food companies change managers a lot, and we always worry the new managers will cut our hours, bring in new people, and give them our hours. We need policies to protect our work schedules.

My wife takes care of our daughter, who has special needs. When only one person in the family works, you really have to earn. I pay the rent, electricity, internet, gas, car repairs, food, everything. When the new manager at El Pollo Loco told me and my coworkers that our schedules weren't going to change, I was relieved, but then he started cutting my schedule a half-hour here and an hour there, and soon instead of working full time, and even overtime, I was down to 32-34 hours per week, a pay cut of \$300-\$400 per month. I had to look for a second job, but the hours there aren't stable either. It is not fair. I have been a cook at El Pollo Loco for over 10 years, and I am very good at grilling chicken.

Because of the schedule cuts, I had to take out two payday loans to get by. Paying them off with interest makes our finances tighter. We are human beings, we need to work. Fast food companies should respect our schedules and offer us additional hours before they bring in new people, so we can support our families.

**-BOSCO, EL POLLO LOCO WORKER,
SAN JOSÉ**



FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

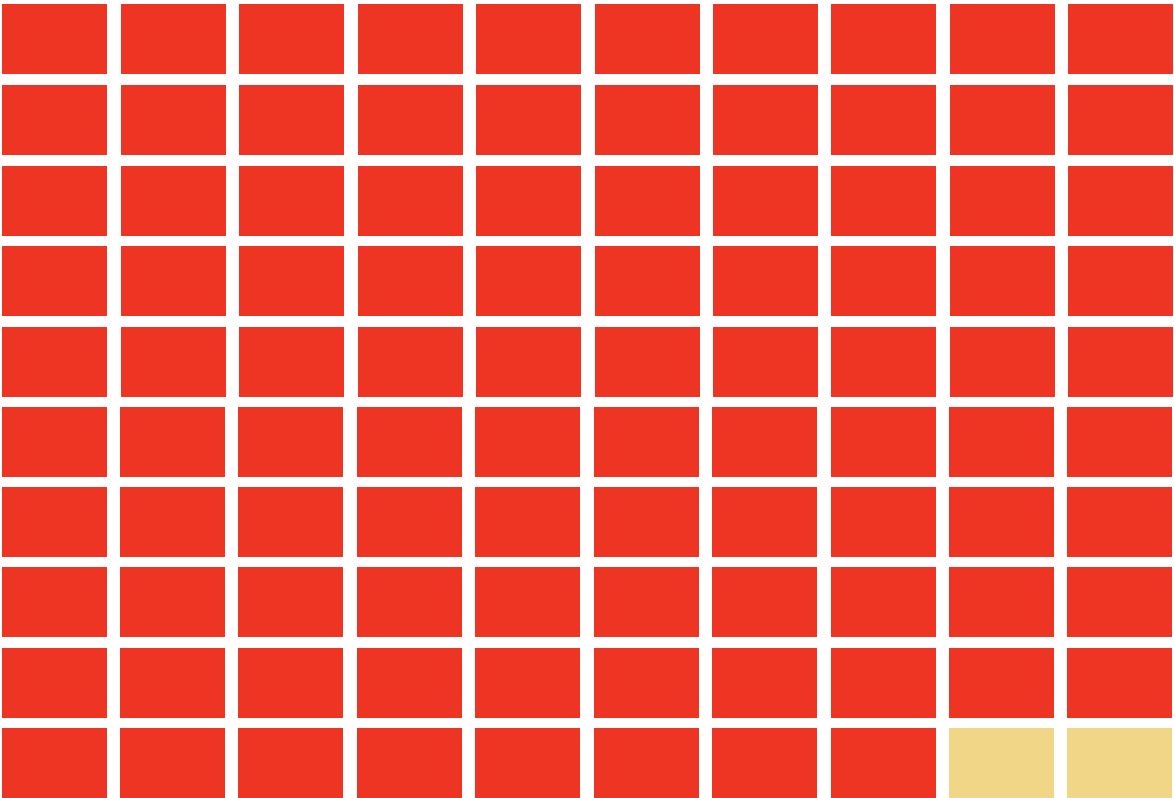
UNPREDICTABLE WORK SCHEDULES, FINANCIAL STRUGGLES

Many fast food workers have schedules that change on a weekly basis with just a few days' notice, and work schedules are often subject to last-minute changes, such as being sent home early or kept late at work without any notice.⁴³ When schedules are unstable and unpredictable, workers can't count on a steady income.

In the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey, fast food workers report that fluctuations in income make it hard to pay for regular bills like rent and utilities on a typical monthly schedule, or cover expenses like unexpected medical bills or car repairs when they arise.

98%

say that if they had a sudden schedule change or cut in hours it would cause them problems paying for rent, healthcare or other basic needs.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

McDonald's slashed my schedule by over 20 hours per month last fall, and gave my hours to new people. It's not right, it is arbitrary, and it has wrecked my finances. I cannot afford to support my husband, who is 77 years old, help my daughters with their expenses at college, and pay rent and bills. We have already cut our food expenses down to just \$50 per week.

I have dedicated my life to supporting my family, and now I don't know what to do. I cry a lot. I feel depressed. I started to feel heart attack symptoms so I went to the doctor, and she said it was from stress. I told the McDonald's store manager and HR about all the pressure I am feeling because I can't pay my bills, and I practically begged for my hours back, but they said no.

I have worked at McDonald's for over 20 years, and with full time work, I couldn't save, but I was able to plan our expenses around my steady income, and we were getting by. It is humiliating to have them take away my hours for no good reason. McDonald's is making money while we are hungry.

-GUILLERMINA,
MCDONALD'S WORKER,
SAN JOSE



FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

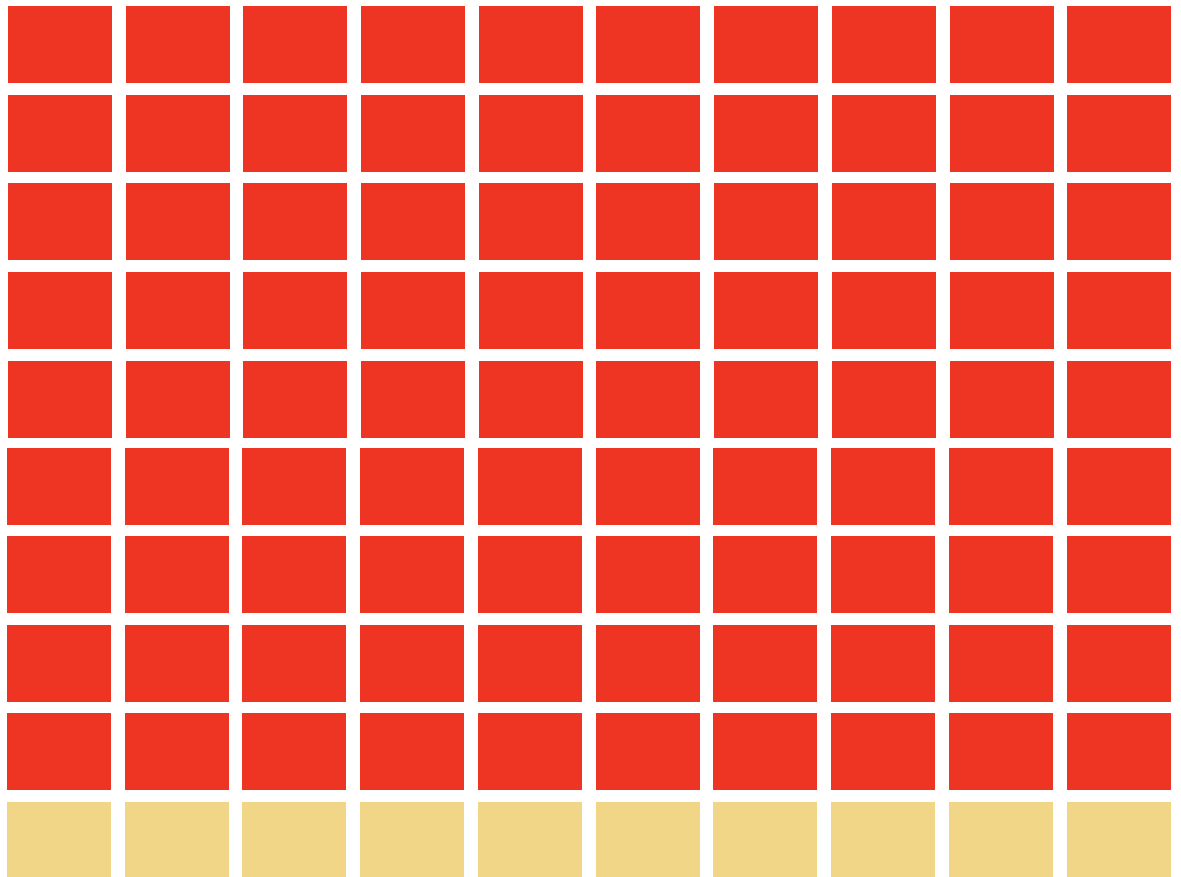
SUDDEN AND ARBITRARY SCHEDULE CHANGES

The 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey results show that schedule changes are a major source of worry for California fast food workers.

Schedules that change arbitrarily and without warning make it difficult for workers to provide for their families, increase their risk of falling into—or deeper into—poverty, and contribute to poor physical and mental health outcomes.⁴⁴

90%

say they worry that their schedule could change for no good reason or without warning.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

Going to school full time, working in a bookstore and working at Wingstop meant that I got exposed to a lot of people, and a lot of viruses. Getting sick sometimes is inevitable, people get sick.

After I missed work because I was sick with COVID, management cut my schedule for 6 weeks. They cut my hours when I got another respiratory infection.

Management shouldn't put us in the impossible situation of either working sick, or risking our livelihood if we call off work sick.

- ERIKA, FORMER WINGTOP WORKER, LOS ANGELES



FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

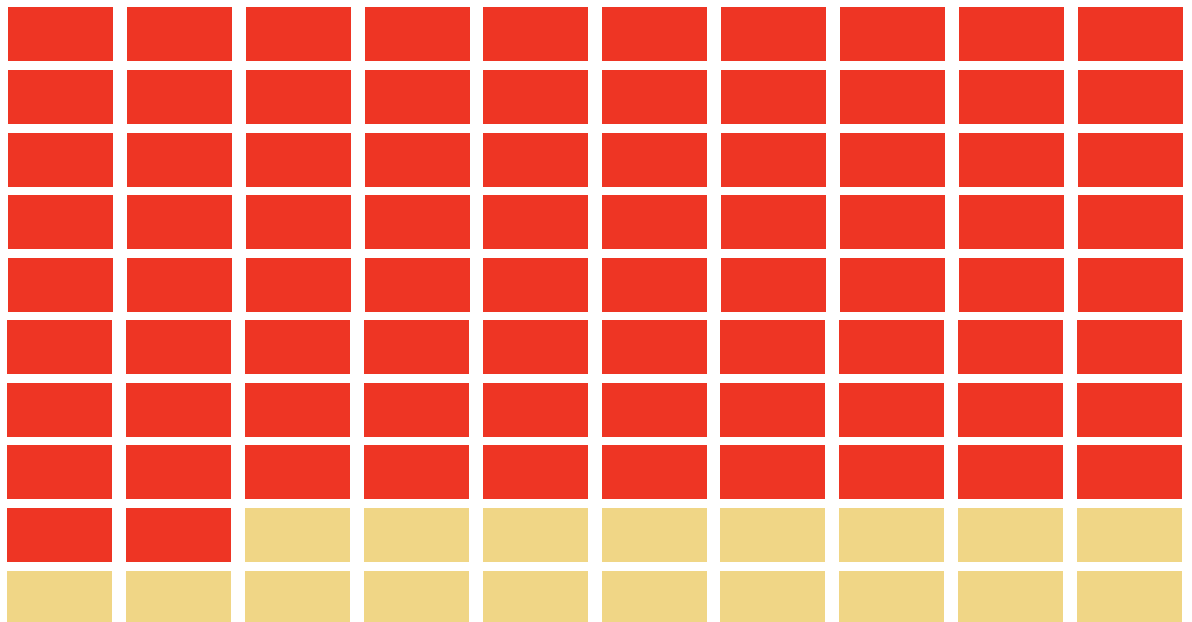
WORRY ABOUT SCHEDULE INSTABILITY

California fast food workers reported experiencing relentless instability in their work schedules. This finding is consistent with recent research. A 2022 UCSF/Harvard study found that, across all aspects of work scheduling, fast food workers experience far less predictability than other service workers.⁴⁵ Of those surveyed for that study, 75 percent of fast food workers reported that they receive less than two weeks' advance notice of their work schedules, compared with 51 percent for all other service workers. Similarly, far greater numbers of fast food workers reported having shifts canceled by their employers, being required to work "on call", and experiencing last-minute changes in the timing or duration of their shifts, compared with other service sector workers.⁴⁶

The 2025 California Fast Food Workers Survey finds that most fast food workers cope with constant schedule changes and worry about this problem persistently.

82%

say that they worry every week about whether they'll be scheduled for enough hours, because their schedules constantly change.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

McDonald's management is putting me in an impossible situation, because I need more work hours so I can make enough money to live, but I can't work a schedule that changes at the last minute.

I had a regular full-time schedule at McDonald's until I got a promotion to become a trainer, with a fifty cent per hour increase. But since the promotion, they just schedule me for 4 or 5 hours, and they say I can work later if the store is busy. I can't do that, because I need to care for my husband. I need to coordinate in advance with my son to be with him while I am at work, because my husband has health issues and can't be home alone.



- REFUGIO, MCDONALD'S WORKER, SAN JOSE

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

SCHEDULE CONFLICTS

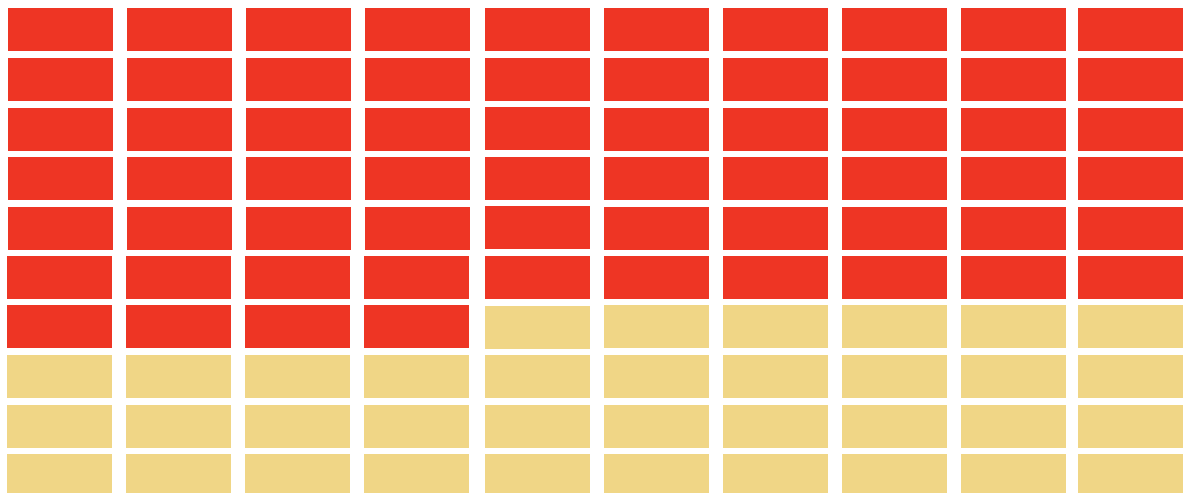
Unpredictable work schedules make it difficult for fast food workers to plan all other aspects of their lives, from family commitments to medical appointments to second—and third—jobs. This can be especially problematic for parents who have to coordinate childcare without knowing their work schedules in advance.

Research shows the harm caused to children and families by unpredictable schedules. One study found that young children of low-wage workers subject to last-minute scheduling go an average of 15 days per year without childcare or supervision, compared to 9 days for those who are not subject to last-minute scheduling.⁴⁷ Research also shows that unpredictable work schedules are associated with negative health and behavioral outcomes for children.⁴⁸

The 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey finds that most fast food workers have arrangements such as childcare and second jobs that are vulnerable to sudden schedule changes.

64%

say that a sudden schedule change would cause them problems with childcare or with their second job.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

My kids and I were getting by ok until McDonald's retaliated against me, reducing my schedule and changing my shifts.

I have worked at McDonald's for over 17 years. I used to have a regular 8-hour schedule, and I worked mornings, getting off work in time to pick up my sons from school. Then in 2023, we experienced repeated, life-threatening violence, including a gun robbery, and a situation where an angry customer threatened us with a machete. Management wasn't providing adequate security or giving us the training we needed, so my coworkers and I reported the problem to Cal/OSHA, and we went on strike to demand safety.

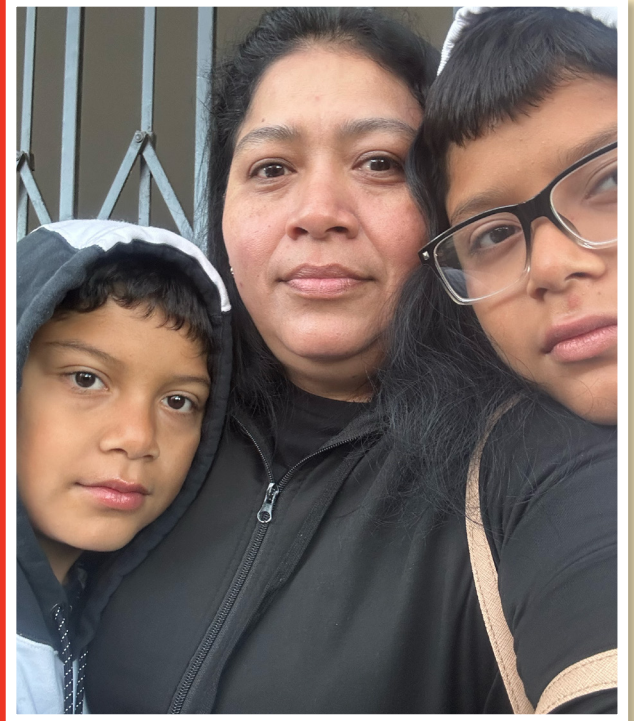
Since then, McDonald's management has been retaliating against us, cutting my work hours and changing my schedule to afternoons, when they know I need to pick up my kids from school. When I asked the store manager to give me my hours back, she said she couldn't because "Harri", the computer system, decides the schedule, but the fact is after we filed the Cal/OSHA complaint and went on strike, they took away my steady morning schedule, hired new workers and gave them my hours.

With the pay cut and the extra expense of paying someone to pick up my kids from school, I fell behind on my bills. The electricity got shut off, and I had to borrow money from a payday lender to get it turned back on. We rely on free food from the kid's school, and CalFresh. I don't buy clothes for myself, it is more important for my kids to have clothes.

Imagine, I am a single mom, I have to support my kids, and pick them up from school on time. I cannot leave them at school, it is dangerous.

We need some kind of real protection so that management can't just change our schedules from one day to the next, and leave us broke, and unable to care for ourselves and our kids.

- ANA, MCDONALD'S WORKER, OAKLAND



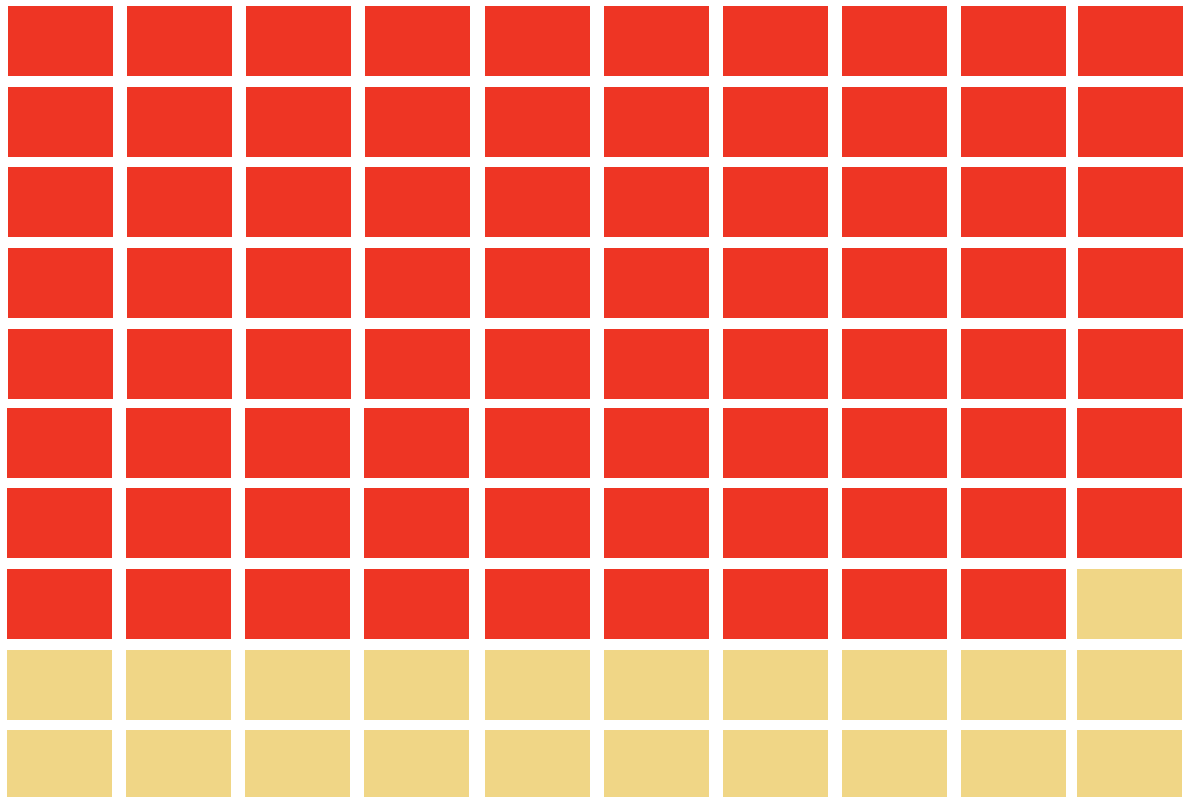
FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

INVOLUNTARY PART-TIME WORK

Recent research has found that California fast food workers cope with high rates of involuntary part time work. In the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey, nearly eight in ten respondents said they would like to work more hours than their fast food jobs provide them. A UCSF/Harvard study in 2022 found that two thirds of fast food workers who worked less than 35 hours per week wanted more hours than they were able to get.⁴⁹

79%

say they want to work more hours at their fast food jobs but can't get scheduled for them.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

I am a freelance journalist and I write for baseball and hockey news sites, but I rely on my job at Pizza Hut for regular income. For nearly 3 years I worked at Pizza Hut with no problems, with a regular schedule of 20-25 hours per week that I could count on. But last fall, management cut my hours in half.

When I asked why my schedule was cut, the manager said it was because I am “slow,” but this is not true. I have compared my work, side-by-side, with my coworkers, and I make pizzas just as fast. I am 59 and in good health, and I have never thought of myself as old. I think management at this Pizza Hut is discriminating against me because of my age. Management hires young workers and gives them more hours than they give me, and the most recent hire was just promoted to shift lead and given additional hours, and I was not offered this opportunity. I have been at the store for over 3 years and have not been promoted, although I have many years of successful experience as a manager in high-pressure fast-paced environments, including running a 14-person news desk that produced deadline-driven pages six days a week for a big-city daily newspaper. I also was the closing manager of a cafe that served food and drinks.

This schedule cut of 10 hours a week has reduced my income by around \$800 a month and has made it very difficult to make ends meet. I have had to reduce my spending and I am barely able to pay my rent.

In fast food, losing just 5 or 10 hours a week can completely destabilize you and leave you unable to pay your rent or bills.

-STEVE, PIZZA HUT WORKER, TEMECULA



FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

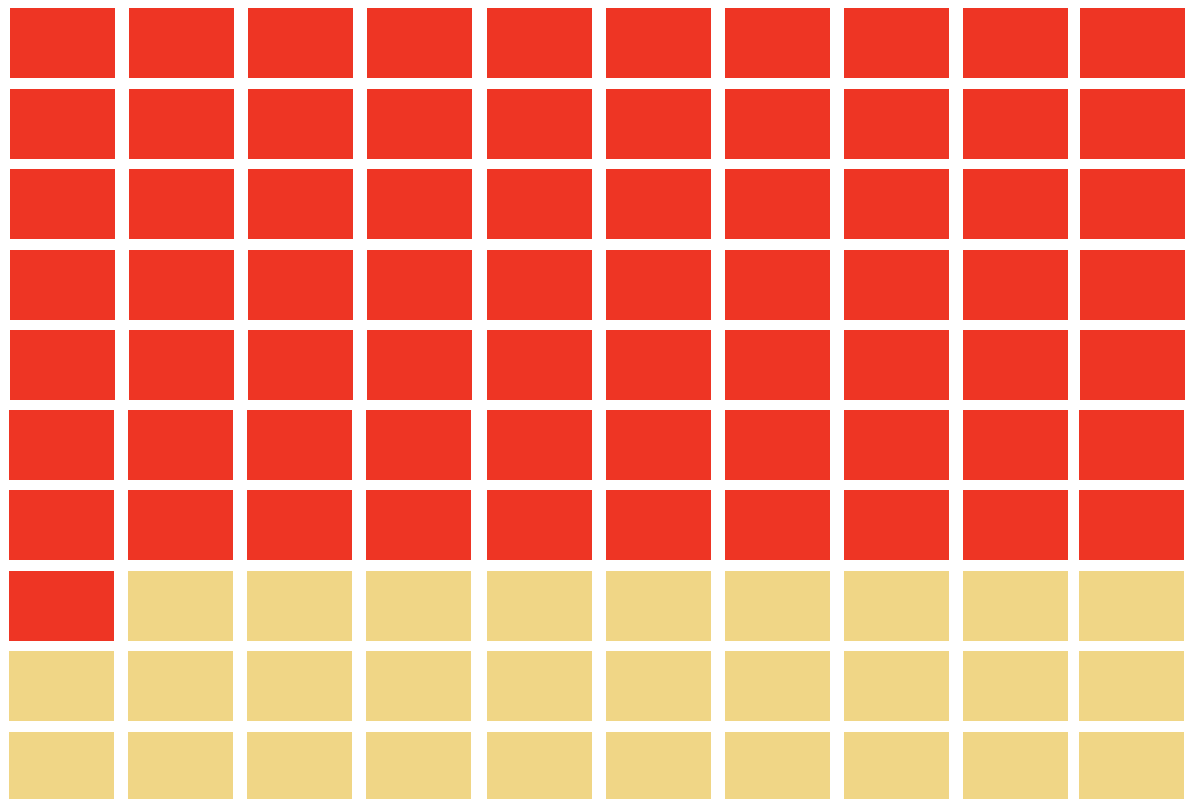
OPPORTUNITY TO WORK

The rise of involuntary part-time work among low-wage hourly workers in recent years has prompted policymakers in cities like San Jose to enact Opportunity to Work laws, to ensure that employers offer hours to existing, qualified part-time workers before hiring new workers.⁵⁰

Responses to the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey show that many California fast food workers struggle with underemployment because their employers hire new part-time workers instead of first giving available hours to current employees.

71%

say that their employers have hired new workers without offering the hours to workers who already work at the store.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

Popeyes fired me when I got the flu and I couldn't find someone to cover my shift. I couldn't find another job right away, so I lost my apartment and had to move in with a friend and share a room, and I had to cut down the money I send to support my mother, who relies on me since my father died. I still had my second job, but I couldn't find another job to replace the 25 hours a week I had at Popeyes. I got depressed, the stress made my blood pressure go up, and I had to go on medication.

I actually did find a coworker to cover my shift at Popeye's for the first 3 days when I had the flu, but management said he had to work under my name – he worked full-time, and I think management didn't want to pay him overtime to cover my shift. On the 4th day when I was still sick, the guy refused to keep working under my name, and I couldn't find someone else to do it, so management fired me.

**-GERARDO, FORMER POPEYE'S
WORKER, SAN JOSE**



FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

ARBITRARY AND UNFAIR FIRINGS

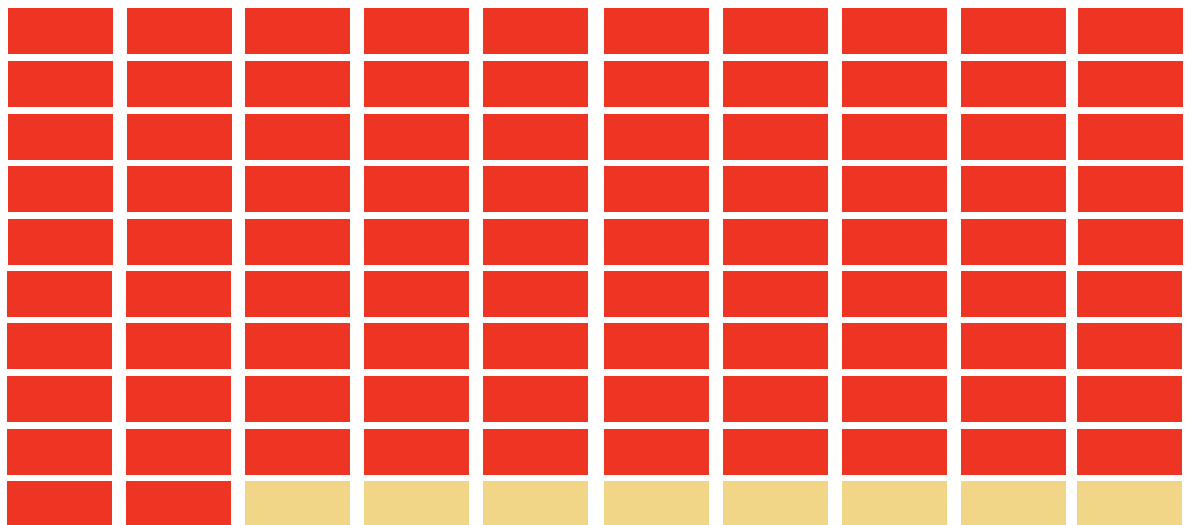
California fast food workers often report being fired abruptly and unfairly, with some reporting experiencing retaliation for exercising basic rights such as taking sick days when they are sick or speaking up about workplace violations. Sudden and arbitrary firings can have devastating impacts for workers who already cope with low wages, unpredictable schedules and insufficient hours and may have little savings to fall back on.

Just Cause policies would protect fast food workers from unfair firings and ensure employers give workers fair warning and adequate reasons for terminations. Just Cause policies help provide workers with the predictability they need to plan their financial lives and pay their bills. These protections also help workers feel safe to speak up about health and safety hazards and other workplace violations without fear of being fired in retaliation.⁵¹

In the 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey, fast food workers overwhelmingly report being vulnerable to arbitrary job loss.

92%

of fast food workers surveyed say they worry they could lose their job for no good reason or without warning.



Source: 2025 California Fast Food Worker Survey

IMPACTS OF PRECARIOUS WORK

A growing body of research shows that California fast food workers are especially vulnerable to precarious work and its impacts, including negative outcomes related to economic security, mental and physical health, and social and family wellbeing.⁵²

Economic Security

Low wages are a key driver of economic insecurity among fast food workers, but the impacts of low wages are amplified by other precarious aspects of fast food work.⁵³ Unpredictable work schedules, insufficient hours, abrupt and unfair firings, widespread workplace violations, and the threat of employer retaliation for speaking up about problems at work all create and exacerbate the conditions that drive fast food workers and their families into poverty.⁵⁴

Prior research has found that fast food workers are overrepresented among California's homeless and housing insecure populations. These workers are disproportionately likely to live in overcrowded housing and to be severely cost burdened with respect to housing, putting them at grave risk of homelessness as California's high cost of housing continues to rise.⁵⁵

Physical and Mental Health

On the job, fast food workers are vulnerable to health and safety hazards including workplace violence, excessive heat and heat-related illnesses, workplace injuries, and exposure to communicable diseases.⁵⁶ Research also suggests that elements of precarious work such as unstable schedules increase the risks of work-related injury and illness beyond what is explained by physical working conditions alone.⁵⁷

Despite California's paid sick leave provisions, studies show that a majority of fast food workers lack information about their rights regarding sick leave. In a 2023 survey of California fast food workers, over half of respondents said they had not heard about paid sick leave or did not know how to access it.⁵⁸ Furthermore, fast food workers are often unable to access the paid sick leave they are entitled to because employers refuse to pay them for it.⁵⁹

Without access to paid sick leave, workers are less likely to seek preventative health care, which can negatively impact their general health and put them at increased risk for serious health problems later in life.⁶⁰ Access to paid sick leave is also important for preventing the spread of communicable illnesses among workers and the general public.⁶¹ One study found that those without access to paid sick leave are one and a half times more likely to go to work while sick with a contagious illness and nearly twice as likely to send a sick child to school or daycare.⁶²

Precarious work is also associated with poor mental health outcomes and health-related behaviors. A 2019 Shift Project study found that workers with the least stable schedules were more than twice as likely as those with the most stable schedules to report psychological distress.⁶³ These findings are in line with prior research showing that uncertain and irregular work schedules are associated with stress, depression, and anxiety.⁶⁴ Associations between precarious work and smoking, lack of exercise, obesity and sleep problems are well-documented.⁶⁵ Food service workers who cope with precarious schedules are especially likely to report poor sleep quality, one study found.⁶⁶

Social and Family Wellbeing

The uncertainty and instability of fast food work impacts workers' ability to plan for their personal lives and care for their families.⁶⁷ Volatile work hours and unpredictable income lead to work-life conflicts and make it difficult for workers to arrange childcare, schedule medical appointments, maintain social connections or hold down second jobs. These problems have ripple effects that impact workers' children. Parents with unstable work schedules are often forced to rely on a patchwork of childcare providers, which can undermine children's relationships to caregivers and increase stress, especially for very young children.⁶⁸ Studies have found that unpredictable work schedules are associated with negative health, developmental, social and behavioral outcomes for children.⁶⁹

Systemic Inequality

In California, households led by people of color, women and immigrants are especially likely to face financial hardships and struggle to afford a decent standard of living.⁷⁰ Across the state, Latinas make only 44 cents and Black women 58 cents on the dollar compared to white men's earnings.⁷¹ The same demographic groups are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of precarious work.⁷² California's fast food workforce exemplifies these realities. The vast majority of the state's fast food workers are people of color, approximately two thirds are women, and over a quarter are immigrants.⁷³

These demographic disparities are reflected across all facets of precarious work. Workers of color are more likely than white workers to experience schedule instability, and the disparity is greatest for women of color and Latino/a workers.⁷⁴ Black and Latino/a workers are disproportionately likely to face extended periods of unemployment after job separation and have less household savings to fall back on, making the impacts of job loss more severe.⁷⁵ Workers of color, women, and immigrants are especially likely to experience wage theft and other workplace violations,⁷⁶ and more likely than white workers to experience retaliation for speaking up about problems at work.⁷⁷ The prevalence of these problems in California's fast food industry deepens the systemic inequality that exacerbates the impacts of economic insecurity, poverty and homelessness for all Californians.

Industry-wide policy solutions are needed to safeguard against the precarious conditions of fast food work that harm the economic security, health and wellbeing of all California fast food workers – low pay, unpredictable schedules, unfair hours cuts and firings, and retaliation against those who exercise the rights put in place to protect them. The multi-billion dollar profits of leading fast food corporations and continued growth of California's fast food industry demonstrate that fast food employers can afford to do their part for these urgently needed improvements.

In December of 2022 I suddenly felt extreme pain in my right arm and elbow while I was putting away dishes. Taco Bell management sent me to a Workers Comp clinic where I was diagnosed with a repetitive motion injury. The doctor told me to rest, but the doctor's note said I could push/pull/lift 10 pounds constantly. I was put in a Return-to-Work program at a drug treatment halfway house where I had to sweep, mop and cook full time, causing more pain. I got an MRI, which showed the tendon in my elbow was partially torn, and I was sent to work 40 hours per week plus overtime writing letters to U.S. troops by hand, with my injured right arm, and my pain continued to worsen.

I haven't had a chance to heal. My husband has 2 jobs, but we have fallen behind on our bills.

I feel depressed. My arm aches at night and sometimes I cannot sleep from the pain. I continue struggling to get the treatment I need. I am still working instead of healing, I have no choice.

-EULALIA, TACO BELL WORKER, CULVER CITY



RECOMMENDATIONS

The path to stability for California's fast food workers requires a multifaceted policy approach that addresses the interlocking problems of economic insecurity, job and schedule unpredictability, and barriers to exercising workplace rights and protections. Recommendations include:

- ➔ **Cost-of-living adjustments to the fast food minimum wage in line with state, city and county laws in California.** The California Fast Food Council must implement cost-of-living adjustments to the fast food minimum wage that keep pace with inflation. The state minimum wage goes up automatically with inflation every year, as do the minimum wages in 40+ California cities and counties.
- ➔ **Fair scheduling policies.** Policymakers should support solutions that offer fast food workers protection from constantly changing schedules, such as the proposal currently under consideration by the Los Angeles City Council to include fast food workers in the city's existing fair workweek law.
- ➔ **Just Cause rules to prevent workers from being fired without warning or good reason.** Just Cause policies promote stability for workers and their families and safeguard workers from arbitrary punishment and retaliatory firings for speaking up about workplace problems like wage theft or health and safety violations.
- ➔ **Opportunity to Work policies supporting workers who want full-time work.** California should follow the lead of cities like San Jose and enact a measure to ensure that employers offer open shifts to existing, qualified, part-time workers before hiring new employees.
- ➔ **Know Your Rights training.** Know Your Rights training provides fast food workers with the knowledge and know-how needed to exercise their rights at work. To be effective, Know Your Rights trainings must be presented by independent organizations experienced in providing training to low-income and immigrant workers. These programs must be presented in-person, in an environment of trust, where workers feel safe asking questions. Elected leaders and others should support Know Your Rights training pilot programs for fast food workers, such as those presently being considered in the City of Los Angeles and Santa Clara County
- ➔ **Protection from retaliation.** Mechanisms to protect workers from retaliation and discrimination by employers for exercising their rights should be strengthened at the State and local levels.

First, I believe in God, because without God we can't do anything. But after that, being in the Union is also very important, because that is how my coworkers and I got our voice.

I got involved in the California Fast Food Workers Union because I needed a stable income. Pizza Hut management wasn't respecting our schedules, and they were cheating us out of our pay. I wasn't getting enough hours because they sent me home from work early and didn't let me work all the hours they put on my schedule. They gave me split shifts, with a gap in the middle of the day, which made it hard to hold a second job, but they didn't pay extra for that like the law requires. They skimmed hours that I worked off my check and incorrectly told me I didn't qualify for paid sick leave when I got injured and went to the ER. They also made me work through my meal breaks and rest breaks without paying for that, either.

My coworkers and I learned about our rights from the Union, filed Complaints and went on strike 3 times to win the respect we deserve. After the first strike, management retaliated against us and cut my schedule, and then after the second strike they retaliated against us again, and after the 3rd strike the retaliation was so bad Pizza Hut was only scheduling me for 1 hour per week! But I didn't give up, my coworkers and I kept fighting, and with the help of the Union, we won our case and now we are treated with respect, and I am able to work a regular schedule.

With my regular schedule I started getting enough hours at Pizza Hut to quit my second job, and with the \$20 per hour fast food minimum wage, we can pay our rent and bills and there is a little money left for family life. We can do things on the weekends, like take our 5-year-old son, Guillermo Julian, to of-living increases, because prices keep going up. And we need fair work policies and know-your-rights trainings, so that all fast food workers can have stable schedules without going on strike 3 times, like we did.

-JULIETA, PIZZA HUT WORKER, LOS ANGELES



ENDNOTES

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Gabi Guerra is an interdisciplinary and archival artist from the Midwest. Using the traditions handed down in her maternal line, her visual work explores memory, mythology and magic. Connecting her art practice to her family tree, Gabi highlights the energy of the past with a unique drawing style and a vibrant, nostalgic color palette. Find out more at www.malahoraart.com.