ESSENTIAL WORKERS
SURVIVING COVID 19
IN SAN FRANCISCO

2020
To all the undocumented people who have been without income for six months as San Francisco shut down, to the fast food workers who live in homeless shelters, to the undocumented restaurant workers who contracted COVID-19 at work and demanded their rightful access to the FFCRA from their boss, and to all the workers who form committees with their compas to organize for justice and dignity at work. We see you.

Thank you to Young Workers United’s Sanctuary Campaign Organizing Committee who showed us how community can come together during times of crisis and organize for change. And of course to all the workers who picked up the phone for this survey and shared a brief part of their lives in the midst of a devastating pandemic.

This report is produced by Trabajadores Unidos Workers United. It was written by Estefania Ramirez and all surveys were completed by Miriam Medellín Myers, Carina Gavino, and Jenny Gordiano. The survey project was managed by Lucia Lin and support staff included: Jennifer Alejo, Marcela Oñate-Trules, and Iris Barrera-Hurtado.
Low-wage workers have always been undervalued in our capitalistic society and even cities that have more liberal labor laws have many labor violations. Trabajadores Unidos Workers United (TUWU) is a multi-racial membership organization dedicated to improving the quality of jobs for immigrant workers and raising standards in the low-wage service sector in San Francisco.

Trabajadores Unidos Workers United conducted a survey from July to August 2020 to assess current conditions and working experiences for the working class Latinx community in San Francisco during the COVID-19 pandemic and through the reopening of businesses.

By conducting this survey, we identified where labor exploitation or labor violations were happening and determined organizing potentials. We were able to survey 295 immigrant workers who worked or live in San Francisco, the majority of whom were restaurant and domestic workers. At the beginning of the San Francisco shelter in place, TUWU member leaders started a petition to demand economic relief from Mayor London Breed, and as result many Latinx low-wage workers shared their contact information with us. Our process consisted of having TUWU organizers and summer interns use this contact information to make calls and ask if workers were interested in participating in the survey that took 10-15 minutes to complete. Our report focuses more on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected workers’ jobs and working conditions whereas reports done by other organizations focus on the correlation between low-wage workers and COVID-19.

Studies have shown that low-wage workers are more susceptible to COVID-19 and are therefore more disproportionately affected by the impacts. A report by the University of California Merced Community and Labor Center titled “Hidden Threat: California COVID-19 Surges and Worker Distress” found that the relationship between low-wage work (and household size) and COVID-19 positivity was constant across rural, suburban, and urban regions. The brief summarizes its findings by stating: “While electeds and public health officials focus efforts on mitigating COVID-19 through stay-at-home orders and prohibiting large gatherings, such efforts fall short of addressing a potent factor driving COVID-19 rates: low-wage work.” Additionally, a community-based screening initiative conducted in San Francisco’s Mission District in late April also found evidence of the correlation between low-wage work and positive COVID-19 rates. One of the principal investigators and senior author Diane Havlir, MD, chief of the UCSF Division of HIV, Infectious Diseases and Global Medicine at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center (ZSFG) said, “We find that recent infections in late April were concentrated almost exclusively among low-income Latinx people working frontline jobs, whereas infections earlier in the pandemic affected people more equally across the ethnic and economic spectrum.” Since it has already been established that low-wage workers are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 we will now look at worker concerns and labor exploitations that have intensified throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
One of the primary concerns found among survey participants was the inability to pay rent and the possibility of becoming homeless. 65.8% of participants indicated they were not currently working and therefore did not have a source of income. Many low-wage workers in San Francisco are undocumented, making them ineligible for any federal government assistance such as unemployment or stimulus checks. As a result, the majority of immigrant workers have not been able to pay rent and bills. One immigrant worker who lost her job as a janitor at a well known Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco, making $15.59 an hour, shared she was evicted from her home with her kids despite the Eviction Moratorium being in place and is now staying with her sister outside of San Francisco. Unfortunately, she is not the only mother who has been forced to relocate her family. Another mother who lost her job working at a school cafeteria making $20 an hour is currently staying in Oakland with a friend since she also became homeless during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her and her children have been staying in her friend’s living room while she struggles to find a job. Another immigrant worker who normally works as an independent contractor painter shared he has been living in his car and feels he is especially vulnerable to COVID-19 since he has limited access to running water. Some immigrant workers stated they were 5-6 months behind on rent and are praying for some sort of rent forgiveness as we have seen that eviction moratoriums are loosely enforced. In the meantime, some workers mentioned they are looking into available homeless shelters to relocate their families. Other workers shared they had used up all their savings to cover their rent for a couple of months. However, since all their savings were used to pay rent during the first months of the shelter-in-place, they are now struggling to buy basic necessities like hygienic and household items.

Another concern among workers is food insecurity. Many families shared they rely on food banks, food stamps, or a combination of both to feed their families. However, a drawback with relying on food banks is that the need is much greater than the supply. Some participants shared they were told to only go once a month so that other families could also receive food as the food banks often run out. Another drawback with relying on food banks is that people can’t follow certain diets since they can’t choose what food they eat. For example, one immigrant worker from Guatemala, who worked in construction and was paid $10 an hour, shared he is diabetic and is supposed to be on a strict diet due to his condition, but he can only eat what he is given at food banks because he doesn’t have a source of income to buy his own groceries.
Labor exploitation is common among low-wage workers and the pandemic has intensified this issue. Some workers reported their responsibilities have changed and they now have to do the work that normally two employees would do. Chefs and cooks have now become dishwashers as well due to the limited staff hired by businesses. Because business is slow, restaurants can't afford to hire their usual number of employees and they are also trying to maintain social distancing guidelines at work. As a result, employees bear the burden of the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. A restaurant cook stated, “I am a bit stressed out because I am doing a lot of work and they cut back my pay to minimum wage.” Of the workers surveyed that reported their current hourly wage, 22.5% reported earning less than the San Francisco minimum wage which is $16.07 per hour.
Low-wage workers who are working through this pandemic are constantly told they are “essential workers” but the workers surveyed stated they are not treated as if they are essential. When asked what are three things participants would change about their current jobs, some mentioned receiving more pay, which would be considered hazard pay during this pandemic. Despite the fact that restaurant, grocery, and other service work during this time is deemed “essential work,” workers surveyed consistently express how they have not received hazard pay or other due compensation for the risk they are taking during this pandemic and instead have had their hours and pay consistently cut.

San Francisco was the first city in the United States to pass a Paid Sick Leave Ordinance in 2006 after successful organizing efforts from Trabajadores Unidos (formerly known as Young Workers United). However, the survey results indicate that about 50% of workers have never taken a paid sick day. Among participants that are currently working, 27.7% reported not having paid sick days at their workplace. When asked what it would take for workers to ask their employer for a paid sick day, some workers replied that they would not feel comfortable asking due to their undocumented immigration status. The problem is not that workers do not know their rights, the problem is that employers have taken advantage of their employees’ vulnerable immigration status before and have violated their rights. One immigrant worker shared, “I only started asking for sick pay when I got my work permit but before when I did not have Social Security, I was afraid to ask.” Another fear workers had was the possibility of being fired if they asked for a paid sick day because in their experience, previous employers would get mad and would refuse to grant workers this right. Other workers reported that they have been granted days off when sick but they never received any pay.
LATINX WORKERS’ HOPES DURING AND BEYOND COVID-19

When asked what their hope was for Latinx workers, many participants responded that they hoped the government would provide some type of economic aid as the little aid provided by nonprofit organizations is not enough to supplement months of unemployment. Participants stated it was unfair that undocumented workers were not receiving government assistance because they pay taxes just like U.S citizens do, and their labor helps make the United States economy run. One immigrant worker who works at a restaurant as a cook making $15 an hour said, “I hope everything calms down and I wish that we be treated well at work. Regardless of race, we should have an equal opportunity. Sometimes, for being an immigrant, we accept a lot of things or we let them minimize us. We forget our value. We forget we have rights, but everyone should be equal. I have been here for 22 years. One day, I would love to be a legal citizen. There are people who came for a better life, for work. I came at 14 years old, and I had to work. For 22 years, I have made it okay. I want to be okay. I do not want to be worried. Housing is really hard when you are undocumented. I want an equal living standard for all.”

The majority of participants shared their only hope was for the pandemic to be over so that businesses could reopen, and workers could return to work. However, some participants also shared they hope working conditions improve upon returning to work. A former restaurant employee stated, “I hope that we can access work. It should not be like how we were working before, but it should be work that will pay us enough to live.” Another common hope among participants was the desire for employers to respect labor laws – such as paid sick leave and breaks – and for there to be more labor justice for all Latinx workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left low-wage Latinx workers even more susceptible to exploitation. Workers are even more hesitant to speak up about labor law violations for fear of being fired during such precarious times. One worker who makes $15.85 an hour working at a cafe at a San Francisco university and has two kids said, “I am not going to be that demanding if I have work because I need to work.” The lack of work available gives workers no choice but to accept pay reductions and increased workloads to continue feeding their families. Some workers have even accepted working under dangerous conditions. One immigrant worker who is employed part-time at a cafe making minimum wage shared that her manager doesn’t always wear a mask because he does not believe in wearing a mask. This mother is concerned for her son’s safety since he is immunocompromised, but she cannot quit her job as it is their only source of income. Instead, she has had to provide her own Personal Protection Equipment in an effort to protect her health and her son’s because her employer does not provide any PPE. She is not the only worker who is not provided with PPE by their employer as 12.2% of workers surveyed do not receive Personal Protection Equipment, as is required by law.

Do you have PPE provided to you by your employer, including masks and other supplies?

- Yes 87.9%
- No 12.2%
CONCLUSION

Low-wage workers are being overworked and are treated as if they are disposable. A restaurant worker stated, “My family and I tested positive for COVID-19 in early August. We have been quarantining because the entire family tested positive. I had a job lined up and had started working for two days, but then I lost the job after being in quarantine for two weeks.” Workers deserve to be treated with respect and dignity and the needs of employees should be prioritized over the needs of businesses. Employers should not take advantage of their employees, especially as we are amid a pandemic and low-wage workers are in a vulnerable position. It is not enough to pass labor laws to ensure workers’ rights are protected. These laws also need to be enforced to put an end to the exploitation of low-wage immigrant workers.

MORE STATISTICAL FINDINGS

When asked how the work of participants was affected by the pandemic beginning in March, 82.5% of respondents answered that they lost their jobs because their place of work had to close. 13.9% of people surveyed stated their work hours were cut because business was slow and there was low clientele.

Only 31.8% of workers surveyed have been asked to return to work.

How was your job affected by the pandemic?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everything stayed the same</th>
<th>Hours Cut</th>
<th>I lost my job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
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</table>

Have you been offered to return to your place of employment?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>68.2%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
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Hours worked per week

About 63% of workers that are currently employed are working less than 30 hours per week, which is a part time job.

What kind of work have you had in the past?

These are the industries in which survey respondents have worked. The majority of workers have worked in restaurants (54.4%) followed by domestic workers (13.1%) followed by janitors (9.6%). Many workers have worked in various industries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restaurant</th>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>Hotel</th>
<th>Janitor</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashier</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
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When asked if they were considering moving to another city, state, or country due to the lack of work in San Francisco, 72.5% of participants said they were not. Their reasoning was that they do not have enough funds to make a move right now—nor would they want to start from zero in a place that is also experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. 27.5% of participants said they were considering moving and the main reason was due to high rent prices in San Francisco.

Only 50.8% of people surveyed have had access to emergency relief funds, the majority of which are provided by nonprofit organizations.

93.8% of respondents said they were interested in learning more about worker rights!

The top three difficulties in finding a job right now are:
1. Lack of work opportunities
2. Lack of childcare available (especially since children are doing online classes)
3. Fear of exposure to COVID-19

“Before, I was not that well informed about my rights. Then, when I informed myself, I used my sick time when I needed to. Now, I use them whenever I feel sick. It’s simple logic, stay home if you are sick but before I would go to work sick. If I had an appointment with the doctor or dentist, and they told me to rest, that was the only reason I would stay home."

“Our source of income has been cut. When we don’t have that source, we are stuck. We have no exit. Such little money is coming in and it’s hard to cover everything."

“Es injusto no tener ayuda económica como el desempleo porque yo he pagado mis impuestos por 13 años, siempre he pagado.”
Q: What is the biggest hardship you have at work right now?

“Transportation. I usually take a bus to the Mission so that I can take the bart to get to my job in Berkeley. But since the bus is not running I have to take an uber and that is more expensive.”

Q: What would you do if you were not given PPE at work?

“I would learn more. I would talk to the bosses. It is easier for them to get all of those things than it is for the workers. The workers are going to work for them so they need to give us the PPE. Currently they are giving us the PPE because it is the responsibility of the owner to take care of the employees.”

“I don’t know what I can do. I have talked to my coworkers about it. At my brother’s work, they are providing masks but the boss at my job is not providing anything. The hand sanitizer is brought in by a worker.”

Q: What is your hope for Latinx workers right now?

“That we all get help, regardless of citizenship. My brother is an example, he does not have papers and his daughter is 1 year old. Rent is adding up and funds are not accessible because he lives in Daly City. He has anxiety and mental health issues. He is a strong worker, and it is a shame that he cannot qualify. It is a shame that the laws are so unjust. People in need are not getting help. I know people who don’t have papers and it is getting really hard.”

“To get jobs because immigrants have less resources. My hope is that we have more help and support and to keep our jobs if there are no resources. Immigrants need the help, especially undocumented immigrants. The only opportunity for immigrants is to at least keep our jobs because we receive no help.”

“That they support those who do not have work right now. It is really hard for us. We have kids in other countries depending on us to send money to eat. They are waiting for us to send money we don’t have.

SURVEYOR REFLECTIONS

Miriam:

Conducting the surveys was both enjoyable and informative. Most people who answered were willing to participate, some were skeptical, so they did not share the name of their workplaces. Almost everyone I spoke to would be open to staying in touch with us and want to learn more about their rights! I look forward to staying in touch with the survey respondents moving forward! From my experience, I believe this was a helpful recruitment tool, as there were numerous conversations where I got the impression that they were really interested in learning more/ participating in TUWU.

Estefania:

Conducting this survey was very informative but sometimes emotionally tolling. It was frustrating hearing the desperation of unemployed workers without being able to offer any resources or economic aid. As someone who lives outside of San Francisco in the Central Valley, I am more familiar with the labor laws surrounding agricultural work, so it was nice to learn about labor laws pertaining to other industries. It was exciting to see many workers surveyed were familiar with some basic labor laws and the majority of workers were interested in learning more about their rights to prevent being exploited!