

Waking up abruptly at 6:13 AM, I get dressed in my McDonald's manager uniform. I rush to work, luckily a few blocks away. I apologize to my boss for being late, wash my hands, take my temperature, write it down, and clock in. Once I leave the office to get ready to work, one lady comes in. She does not have a mask on.

"I'm sorry ma'am, I cannot take your order unless you have a mask" the cashier declares.

"Why do I have to wear a mask? I'm getting one drink, take my order now", she replies.

Realizing I have to step in, I respond, "Miss, our policy is no mask, no order. This has been decided by the owner of the store as well as the NY governor. We have masks and can give you one if you do not have one".

The lady proceeds to curse me out, bang on the counter, ridicule me, telling me I'll never amount to anything; nothing I hadn't heard before. I worked in fast food after all.

If you're wondering if she got her drink, she didn't. She couldn't get under my skin enough to make me give up, but she definitely reminded me that even though minimum wage workers are essential workers, working through the pandemic to provide food and supplies, we will never be seen or treated as essential. Our importance is constantly looked over, even when we're the last ones around providing necessities.

That woman was not the first or last person to not follow our policy and blame us for it. Every day I wondered why I was even at work at the peak of a pandemic; how could working at a fast food restaurant be "essential"? Why was I putting my family and myself at risk to hand out a combo meal?

For the 5 months I worked at McDonalds during the pandemic, I was scared of catching COVID and spreading it to my family. When my father got COVID-19, I was terrified that I was the reason. I was the one continuing to work, coming in contact with random customers who barely wore masks. Some of my coworkers were catching COVID, and even though they were placed on sick leave, I couldn't stop myself from thinking about the times I worked with them, if I would work with them again, and if I had caught it too. My coworkers were coming to me, asking why their hours were being cut. I had to explain to them that we could only have 6- 8 people working each shift to follow social distancing policies. They told me we were all better off receiving unemployment benefits because it paid more a week than our actual job did. I couldn't help but think all this was not worth \$15 an hr?

A lot of the people I know work minimum wage, and we all realize that just because we're "essential workers", no one appreciates us any more. Frontline workers deserve all the

appreciation in the world; they are attempting to save lives everyday, and I am proud to say my sister is one of them. But even she sees how low wage workers have been ignored during the pandemic. COVID- 19 drew attention to the working conditions, pay, and feelings towards low wage workers, who are often young adults, women of all races and people of color. According to the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), nationwide, 35% of minimum wage workers are young adults (ages 19-25), 58% females, 23% Hispanic, and 16% Non- Hispanic Black. These same groups get the average pay of \$11.80 per hour. 80% of minimum wage workers are paid hourly, which means if their hours are getting cut, their pay is directly affected. In addition to this, those in the fast food sector, like I was, get an average pay of \$8.69 an hour. While all minimum wage workers get paid a low amount, fast food workers get paid even less by \$3.11 since it's not difficult to find anyone who can fill positions. Skills are easily taught, and no degree or education is required. Despite all the data that was revealed because of the pandemic, no solutions were presented, just hollow words. The first step could have been passing a federal minimum wage of \$15, which is still low. [The Living Wage Calculator](#) reports that an adult in NYC with 0 children needs a wage of at least \$20.42 to survive and afford their necessary expenses. This actively demonstrates the groups that are mostly affected by the horrors that occur working fast food; youth, women, and people of color. These are the same groups being disproportionately affected by the pandemic in other ways, such as mental illness, domestic violence, unemployment, and police brutality.

Many low- wage workers experience greater financial insecurity because of reduced hours like my coworkers, as well as a lack of access to paid sick leave before and during COVID. In order to see if my peers were experiencing these insecurities, I conducted a questionnaire/ survey of 21 random New York City students working minimum wage jobs in different departments, such as retail, fast food/ food service, and warehouse work. All respondents were students of color. To reach respondents, I sent the survey link to Brooklyn College club chats and posted the link on my personal social media. I was met with little roadblocks, such as inadequate response options; some answers to the short answer questions were repetitive or didn't answer the question. 83.3% of respondents reported no access to hazard pay, sick leave/pay, bonus check, or any benefits while working during the pandemic. This is compared to a study conducted by [The Pew Research Center](#) that found only 51% of workers earning \$13.80 and 31% of those who earn \$10.80 an hour have less paid sick leave. Before COVID, at my job, if an employee was sick and did not find someone to cover their shift, they had to take a tylenol and come in. In my experience at McDonalds, during COVID, if you weren't feeling well, you were encouraged not to come in, and equally encouraged not to come back if you do not have a doctor's note. My franchise did not offer sick pay, like many McDonalds across the nation. Only corporations, who are [fewer than 10% of McDonald's franchises](#), are expected to offer two weeks of paid sick leave to staff who are tested positive for COVID-19 in compliance with the most current policy adjustments introduced by McDonald's. Along with this, 50.2% of respondents reported not having access to healthcare, and only 5.6% claimed they had healthcare from their job. With the absence of both sick pay and healthcare,

minimum wage workers are set up for failure, having no support when it comes to their health. Lastly, my survey revealed that 61.1% of respondents interacted with customers without a mask, and 61.1% also noted their coworkers caught COVID, which goes to show how surrounded minimum wage workers are by the virus.

Additionally, specifically 1/7 of African Americans who are low wage workers (Garfield) and an even higher number of immigrants, also experience a fear of speaking out against unsafe/ exploitative working conditions, like myself who was hesitant to speak out against another manager who was sexually harassing my coworkers and I. Additionally, a new [NELP survey](#) results showed that Black employees are more than twice as likely as white workers to have seen potential workplace backlash against themselves or another employee for speaking out about pandemic-related issues. The particular reason for this circumstance is the absence of policymakers at all levels of government trying to [do more](#) to protect the interests of workers who are complaining over safety issues or refusing to work in dangerous conditions. I didn't want to get my hours cut or get fired, and neither did the rest of the women I worked with. We're replaceable and we are reminded of that every single day. But with effort, essential workers could finally have the ability to lift up or voices, power, and bargaining rights.

Enforcing masks and social distancing policies were the most troublesome experiences as a minimum wage worker. It was hard for anyone to take me seriously in the first place; I was 18 years old at the time, and a woman, whether I was a manager or not. At my McDonalds, we put up signs saying "Masks required" at the door, the window, the cashier booths and the pick up stations. There were people who noticed the signs and would go back to their car to get a mask, but there were way too many who ignored the sign and came in anyway. My cashiers were scared to refuse people away, so they would take their order anyway and apologize to me for it later.

"We HAVE to enforce the policy, for the sake of our jobs and ourselves. I don't know about you, but I am more scared of contracting COVID than I am telling someone to get a mask", I remember telling them.

However, I understood why they were scared. At our location, a man attempted to throw a "Caution: Wet" sign at our workers and broke our TV menu instead. At our Coney Island location, a person pushed and broke our glass display. On social media, we saw employees getting punched in the face, spit on, and jumped for telling people to get a mask. [People](#) were smashing store windows and store property all because they did not want to wear a mask (Porterfield). That could happen to any one of us, and I wasn't sure if I could protect myself or my coworkers. We all were on edge wondering when it would be one of us who would be assaulted for telling someone they need a mask to be serviced.

About a month into the pandemic, my father was diagnosed with the virus. He works at jobs he can't do from home; school bus driving and a self-employed accounting firm in

Flatbush, Brooklyn. He was working 6 AM to 6 PM every single day, until he caught the virus. I can't even remember if I noticed any symptoms before he was diagnosed; I was so caught up in working at least 8-9 hours five days a week, taking five classes, and boosting my mental health. I was so tired and sad all the time, I didn't even think of what was going on with the rest of my family. Once my sister told me my father contracted COVID, everything fell apart. I was beating myself up for being so selfish, not looking after my parents, and for probably being the reason he caught the virus. Was I not sanitizing and washing my hands enough? Did I leave my mask or work clothes somewhere? How could I be so irresponsible? My father is the sole provider for my family, and without him I wouldn't even know what to do. My sister, being the oldest sibling, stepped up and took the lead. She told me to get a doctor's note, proving that I needed to quarantine for two weeks for everyone's safety. My job seemed understanding and nice at first, allowing me to call out last minute and sending me that paid time off form. I filled out the form and sent it back; it was so simple. However, soon after, my boss sent out my shifts for others to take, which meant it would not show up as my hours, meaning I wouldn't get paid for whatever shift he gave away. I felt cheated. They were taking away the money I would have been earning! Between being worried about my sick father and my depressed mother, I didn't even have enough fight in me to demand my money back no matter how desperately I needed it. I knew my boss would say it was a business situation, nothing personal. Everything as an essential worker however, is personal. At the end of the day, you realize you're risking yourself and your family, to make a living/ survive. When people take away from that, your work becomes unappreciated and feels like it is in vain. You're risking yourself so the corporation you work for could keep making money and remind you you are expendable.

When I returned from quarantine, I was greeted by a gloomy atmosphere, but my coworkers stayed positive nonetheless. That was until I heard many of the girls I worked with discussing a manager at our store. The manager, about 40 years old and male, was taking their phones, requesting access to it to take a survey for the store (yes we fake our surveys) but instead going through their messages and getting jealous if they were talking to boys. This same manager, before COVID, would put his hand around my waist, show up on my street, whisper in my ear, and randomly text and call me. Since I was gone from quarantine and expressed to him that I was uncomfortable with his advances, he backed off, but it is clear he moved on to the other women. I instructed them to go to our general manager, and if they went as a group it would be even better, but they were scared. They felt nothing would change, they would embarrass themselves and be targets to retaliation. Once again, I understood how they felt. Female minimum wage workers (especially those in food service) across the nation are being [sexually harassed](#), despite all the harassment training being enforced. The worst part is not many report such harassment, especially women and immigrants whether they are documented or not. Nothing ever changes, and those groups will be vilified if they talk. With the job market being so hard during the pandemic, low wage workers feel lucky to be employed at all, and to complain is to risk everything they have.

There is no happy ending for this story. I left McDonalds, but my coworkers are still working for low wages, getting their hours cut, living paycheck to paycheck, exposing themselves to customers, getting cursed out by those customers, and withholding their concerns about the job. In fact, millions of minimum wage workers working during the pandemic are experiencing all these afflictions as we speak. They are the ones waking up at 6 AM or going after their classes, and greeting customers who don't care about them or what they do. Minimum wage workers are being kept invisible; rarely being covered in the news/ media and never receiving any attention to their issues, just little token agreement. Until we're seen, we'll have to accept customers for better or worse, for \$15/hr or less.