



Striking Chipotle Workers, some of them CUNY students, rally in Midtown for better schedules and fair pay in May 2022. (Photo credit: Maya Howard/32BJ SEIU)

Making CUNY A Place to Educate and Organize New York City Food Workers: A Call to Action



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than 750,000 New Yorkers work in the food industry, making it one of the largest sectors in the city. Included in this workforce are fast food workers, grocery store cashiers, food deliverers, chefs, waiters, school cooks, workers in food manufacturing plants, and more. The food sector contributes significantly to New York's economy, offering entry-level jobs with few formal entry requirements. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these jobs were deemed essential to the city's well-being, ensuring our food supply. But despite being critical to New York City's economy, the jobs in this sector pay below-average wages, offer limited benefits, inadequately protect workers against health and safety threats, and generally offer few pathways to career advancement or higher wages. This is likely a key reason workers in the food sector were among those most likely to die or become ill because of workplace exposure to COVID. Because people of color, women, and immigrants are overrepresented in New York City's food workforce, the poor quality of

employment in the sector contributes to the city's most serious problems—growing inequalities in income, health, and living conditions by race/ethnicity, gender, and immigration status.

Recently, workers, the media, some public officials, and the public have begun to mobilize to improve the working conditions of food labor. In 2015, fast-food workers pressured New York State to increase the minimum wage for workers in their sector, and later, for workers statewide. Activism by food delivery workers led New York City to pass a package of bills aimed at improving the working conditions of food couriers. Recent efforts to unionize food workers at Starbucks, Chipotle, and Trader Joe's locally and across the country illustrate the opportunity for improving the status of food workers.

City University of New York (CUNY), the nation's largest urban public university, enrolls more than 240,000 degree students



Workers and students testified to the CUNY Board of Trustees about poor working conditions and low pay at CUNY cafeterias on November 29, 2017. (Photo Credit: Dave Sanders, PSC-CUNY)

and another 240,000 non-degree students. Through its academic programs, research, and workforce development activities, CUNY touches every community and every sector of the city's economy. CUNY offers 28 food-related academic programs across 12 campuses, including certificates in catering and sustainable urban agriculture; Associates degrees in culinary arts, hospitality management, and food studies; and undergraduate and graduate degrees in hospitality, nutrition, dietetics, and food studies. No educational institution in the city prepares more people for the food sector than CUNY. Moreover, a recent survey of CUNY students found that an estimated 40,000 current CUNY students, about 16% of its degree students, work in the food sector, making it the largest single employment sector for our working students. Moreover, as Big Tech and finance cut jobs in New York and nationally, CUNY's strategy of partnering mainly with these sectors to create high-end and STEM jobs for our students is called into question. Another strategy would be to improve jobs in sectors such as food and health care that will always be essential to New York City's future.



Restaurant worker washing dishes (Photo Credit: bgton, iStock).

This report makes the case for CUNY to take on the role of training students to help strengthen New York City's food workforce by ensuring that they know their rights, know how to exercise them in the workplace, and gain the skills needed to advance in this sector. Based on in-depth interviews with 20 CUNY students who are food workers, eight individuals who teach or lead CUNY food-related programs or who work for labor unions, and a review of recent academic and journalistic reports on the food industry in New York City, we identify several actions that CUNY could take to build a stronger food workforce for New York City. These include:

1. Make CUNY a place where students who are food workers learn how to protect their health and safety on the job, understand the benefits of unions, and can find opportunities inside and outside CUNY to advance their careers in the food sector.
2. Assist CUNY students in balancing academic, family, and work demands in ways that support academic, economic, and life success.
3. Create opportunities for unions and labor organizations to educate CUNY students about their services and the labor rights of working students.
4. Engage food employers in assisting their workers who are college students to achieve their academic goals and support other workers seeking to continue their education.
5. Establish a Food Workforce Development Task Force at CUNY to identify ways that the university, NYC government, employers, and labor unions can create a food sector that contributes to a thriving, equitable, and healthy New York.

AUTHORS

This report was prepared by the CUNY Food Workers Project, a collaboration of students and faculty from the CUNY School of Public Health (SPH), the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies (SLU), and the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute.

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METHODS

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 CUNY students who are food workers, and eight key informants who teach in food-related programs, work for labor unions, or work as CUNY administrators. We also reviewed academic, media and advocacy reports on student food workers. This report summarizes our findings from these sources.

Interviews with 20 students from 15 campuses working in fast food, restaurants, catering, coffee shops, and app-based food delivery were conducted via Zoom video or audio conference and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Participants were recruited through social media, university listservs, and snowball sampling. Interviewed students were entered into a drawing for three \$50 cash cards to thank them for participating. The student interview guide consisted of open-ended questions related to participants' experiences as a student and a food worker, ways they have overcome challenges, and support and resources that would be useful to them.

Interviews with the eight key informants also took place by Zoom video or audio conference and sought the perspectives of CUNY faculty, CUNY administrators, and CUNY and food worker union organizers on the challenges student food workers face and opportunities for addressing them. This study was approved by CUNY SPH's Institutional Review Board.

Know Your Workplace Rights: CUNY Food Worker Edition

New York City has several resources to help food workers navigate issues in the workplace, from seeking back pay to establishing a regular schedule with an employer. We compiled the following list to connect CUNY student food workers with existing resources and organizations that can help address these on-the-job challenges—and to illustrate the kind of information CUNY should provide to its students.

Help! My fast-food employer changed my schedule, reduced my hours, or fired me without giving a clear reason.

If you are a fast-food worker in New York City, you might have protections under the city's Fair Workweek Law. This law increases protections for fast-food workers by requiring employers to provide regular scheduling, limit their ability to cut a worker's hours, and provide a reason for firing a worker (known as "just cause" job protections). Follow [this link](#) for more information about how the NYC Fair Workweek Law protects fast-food workers, and follow [this link](#) to file a workplace complaint with the city's Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (NYC DCWP).

Help! My boss is not paying me what I am owed, withheld my tips, or is paying me below the minimum wage.

If your employer is not paying you what they owe you, you can file a complaint with the New York State Department of Labor (NYS DOL) wage theft hotline. Call 833-910-4378 to speak confidentially with a representative about filing a complaint. Interpretation services are available if you would prefer to speak in a language other than English. You can learn more on the NYS DOL website: <https://dol.ny.gov/unpaidwithheld-wages-and-wage-supplements>.

Help! My coworkers and I are interested in working together to make our workplace safer, but do not know how to begin.

If you and your coworkers are interested in forming a union, or otherwise working together to make the workplace safer and more fair, you can reach out to the city's existing unions for help. Some examples of local labor unions and worker organizations that work with food-sector workers include [32BJ](#), [Los Deliversitas Unidos](#), the [Restaurant Workers Union](#), the [Restaurant Organizing Project](#), and [UNITE HERE Local 100](#). You can also reach out to the [Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee \(EWOC\)](#). EWOC is a volunteer-run organization that connects workers with guidance and advice on dealing with problems in their workplaces, and how to organize with coworkers for better working conditions. Workers can fill out this [online form](#) to be connected to a volunteer, or email a description of their issue to info@workerorganizing.org.

Help! My coworkers and I formed a union, but we are struggling to win a fair contract with our employer.

If you have formed a union but are now struggling to negotiate a contract with your boss, check out [Labor Notes](#). Labor Notes is a non-profit organization that provides in-person and virtual trainings, workshops, and conferences, plus articles about organizing with your coworkers and strategies for successful union campaigns. Sign up for their [email list](#) to receive updates on upcoming workshops and new articles.

Help! I am struggling to find resources that help address mental health, economic, and school-related problems I'm facing.

If you're looking for free or low-cost resources to help with health, financial, and educational challenges you might face while in college, check out [A Guide to Surviving and Thriving at CUNY](#). CUNY students created this online guide for CUNY students; it provides links, phone numbers, and other contact information for services across New York City.

Making CUNY A Place to Educate and Organize New York City Food Workers: A Call to Action

PROBLEM AND VISION

Food workers have long been an essential part of New York City's workforce, ensuring that New Yorkers have access to a variety of food in grocery stores, bodegas, restaurants, fast food outlets, and food carts. More than 750,000 New Yorkers work across the food industry, making it one of the largest sectors in the city.¹ The food sector has provided employment opportunities to those often excluded from other parts of the workforce. It has enabled many low-income, immigrant, women, and Black and Latino/a New Yorkers to gain footholds in our city.

In general, however, food workers are poorly paid and have few employment benefits, little protection of health and safety, and limited opportunities for unionization, job stability, or career advancement.² Workers with precarious immigration status or those with limited work experiences and education outside the food sector are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the workforce, including wage theft and threats of deportation for speaking up about unfair treatment on the job.³ The growth of the food sector has contributed to income inequality in New York City, one of the nation's most unequal cities.⁴ Food workers in major food companies struggle to make ends meet, while large employers generate big profits, and wealthier New Yorkers enjoy access to food from around the world. In New York City, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the perils of food work, and its essential role in creating a thriving city.⁵

The City University of New York (CUNY), created in 1847 to provide access to higher education for all New Yorkers, plays a mostly hidden role in the city's food system. First, many CUNY students work in the food sector to support their education, themselves, and their families. A 2021 Healthy CUNY survey estimates that more than 40,000 CUNY students work in the food sector, making it the largest single employment sector for

our working students. CUNY also trains more people to work in various parts of the food sector than any other university in the country. It offers 28 degrees and certificates in culinary management, hospitality, nutrition, dietetics, food studies and other related food fields, listed in Appendix B at the end of this report. However, despite educating tens of thousands of current and future food workers, CUNY has not considered playing a coordinated role in supporting the rights of workers in one of the most important sectors in New York City. Educating and training students to tackle inequities in the food workforce could profoundly benefit CUNY's students and graduates. It could make it easier for prospective and current students to stay in school, while improving the career and economic success of alumni working in the food sector, and it could support more equitable economic development and a more just food economy for New York City.

In this report, we describe a vision of a food system that provides good jobs making healthy food, pays its workers a decent wage, and offers paths to career advancement. We imagine a CUNY that plays an active role in ensuring its food-worker students understand and defend their rights in the workplace, learn the skills that will help them to advance their careers, and contribute to creating a healthier, more affordable, and sustainable food system for the city. We envision a CUNY whose students, faculty, staff, and administration become agents of change in New York's food system, continuing the university's tradition of promoting a fairer, healthier, and thriving city and state. More broadly, we imagine a university that gives its students the knowledge and skills to become forceful advocates for better pay, safer working conditions, and the right to organize for more just workplaces. While many colleges and universities recognize their civic responsibility by encouraging voting and electoral participation (for instance, hosting campus-based voter registration drives, embedding

voter registration forms in online student service portals, and establishing poll sites on campus), relatively few institutions leverage their resources to promote democracy in the workplace and inform students of the city, state, and federal laws that protect them on the job. Recent scholarship highlights the vital role that worker organizations can play in promoting a more equitable society and a thriving, more sustainable economy.⁶ At a moment when democratic norms and institutions are under threat, it is mission-critical that colleges and universities make sure their students understand their legal protections and rights in the workplace.

Our primary audience for this report includes students, faculty, staff, and administration officials at CUNY. But the work of building a fair workforce for food makers will require collaboration with groups outside of CUNY, including:

- policymakers committed to reducing inequality and supporting working-class pathways to secure jobs;
- workers, unions, and employers in food businesses across New York City; and
- advocates for healthier communities, safer workplaces, and a fairer city.

Our goal is to spark a conversation among these actors who have the power to help plan and implement both incremental and transformative changes in our food system.

While this report focuses on food sector workers within CUNY, we hope it can help inform similar projects for CUNY students working in other low-wage, precarious sectors. Furthermore, as U.S. higher education grapples with growing inequality and its devastating impact on the trajectory of the working class, we hope our framework, findings, and recommendations can spur action at other colleges and universities. Such action will help students learn about their rights as workers and the powerful health, economic, and social benefits that worker organizations bring to our city and nation.

Our vision of a transformed food system and university is described in Box 1.



A barista makes a beverage at a coffee shop. (Photo credit: Marcos Paulo Prado on Unsplash)

Box 1. A vision for a fair food workforce for New York City

Imagine a **city** where all food workers:

- Earn a decent wage that can support themselves and their families
- Work in safe workplaces
- Receive benefits including health insurance, paid sick leave, and fair scheduling
- Know their rights as workers and have access to fair means for redressing violations of these rights
- Understand how to join or form unions and workers' organizations within their workplace
- Access opportunities for career advancement, workforce development, and acquiring new skills
- Receive fair and equal treatment, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, or immigration status

Imagine a **City University** that:

- Educates its students about unions and assists those who want more information to find such resources
- Ensures that all students know their rights as workers and where to find help if these rights are violated
- Assists employers, unions, and city and state governments in transforming the food sector from a generator of inequality into an incubator of equity
- Helps every student with interest in food work to find the academic programs, internships, mentors, and peer support to realize their academic and professional aspirations
- Treats its own cafeteria food workers (and employees of companies it contracts with) with respect, pays them decent wages, provides the opportunity to join unions, and makes it easier for them to earn a college degree

Imagine a **New York City food industry** where:

- Every employer recognizes and respects the legal rights of their workers
- Food employers who choose the high road for their workers win recognition, public support, and subsidies, while those who choose the low road face penalties and public disapproval

While we acknowledge that today's reality differs significantly from our vision, every one of us can today begin to make the small and bigger changes that start on this path of transformation.

In this report, we examine how CUNY can contribute to this transformation. Already, thousands of CUNY students, faculty, and staff are working to change our food system, and we hope this document can help to bring these agents of change together to plan next steps. We invite you to build out this vision and translate it into reality. Send your ideas or join us at: <https://cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/resources/report/cunyfoodworkers>.

Why should CUNY pay attention to its students working in the food sector?

Why should CUNY care about its students who are food workers? First, many students work in the food sector. A 2021 Healthy CUNY survey of a sample of 520 CUNY students found that of the students who worked (65%), 26% worked in food retail or food services, the largest single category. These data suggest that of the 240,000 students enrolled in CUNY certificate or degree programs, more than 40,000 work in the food sector. Second, our interviews for this report showed that CUNY students who are food workers face distinct challenges that can undermine academic success, precipitate dropout, delay graduation, and contribute to stress and anxiety. Understanding the specific issues and opportunities that shape the well-being and academic success of this large cohort of students should surely be a priority for CUNY. Furthermore, we know the problems of low pay, irregular hours and schedules, limited benefits, and violation of rights that characterize the food sectors are also features of other low-wage sectors that CUNY students rely on to pay for their schooling and support themselves and their families. Paying attention to the conditions faced by CUNY's student food workers can yield insights that can help other working CUNY students.

Taking on the circumstances facing its students who work in the food sector can help CUNY rethink its mission, its pedagogy, and its role in the city's economy. While a CUNY education prepares students for jobs beyond the entry level, CUNY cannot ignore the working conditions its students face while they are in college. Furthermore, while food service jobs might be a temporary part of some students' working lives, others stay in the food sector for many years after graduation or make the sector their career. We propose a vision where CUNY is not just preparing students for

jobs, but changing workplaces and workers to have better, healthier work experiences. In this vision, public universities are changing the economy, rather than just responding to it. CUNY has long been in the forefront of U.S. universities that move their students from poverty into the middle class. But changing economic circumstances will require revisiting the assumptions that shape how CUNY currently defines its economic and workforce roles.

Among the problematic assumptions that need to be questioned are:

- The idea that universities should prepare students to move from lower paying sectors (like food, personal services, and childcare) into higher paying sectors like information technology, finance, law, and the health professions.
- The idea that universities should adapt their curricula to respond to the changing demands of employers, rather than also challenge industries to rethink their business models and workplace structures to enable businesses to better contribute to society and improve the lives of their workers.
- The idea that young people in low-wage jobs like those in the food sector should avoid college since these jobs are so precarious and stressful.
- The ideas that the life experiences of low-income, immigrant, Black and Latino/a students only hold them back from achieving their goals, rather than also serve as an asset for success, and that universities should provide students with experiences that widen their horizons rather than also help them extract lessons from their own lives.

As the political economy of New York City changes, each of these assumptions warrants deeper scrutiny. For instance, while recent reports urge CUNY to orient itself as a “springboard” for careers in technology, with the hopes of connecting CUNY students to highly-paid, steady employment, news of major layoffs at tech companies like Twitter, Meta, Google and Amazon suggests instability in the sector.⁷ Meanwhile, a December 2022 report from New York City comptroller Brad Lander highlighted impending layoffs in New York City’s financial sector, including from Wall Street companies that relocated to other states during the pandemic.⁸ While employment in the city’s food sector is still below pre-pandemic levels, food businesses, like some other place-based and essential sectors, will continue to employ hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers.

Improving the circumstances of its students who are food workers provides CUNY with another opportunity to reduce the stark income, health, and wealth inequalities that now characterize New York City and the nation. Shrinking these gaps will prepare New York City to meet the urgent social, political, and economic challenges of the coming decades.

Status of CUNY students working in the food sector

The students we interviewed described both benefits and challenges in their roles as students, food workers, and low-wage workers. It is the intersection of these three roles that we focus on here.

Benefits from working in the food sector

While CUNY students differ in their motivations for working in the food sector, the majority of those we interviewed reported that economic security was a driving one. Most students experienced economic pressures exacerbated by the lack of financial support both at school and at home. Food work provides an economic lifeline to these students, helping them pay tuition, support themselves, and sometimes support their families. Working in food allows younger students with less work experience to enter the workforce and build transferable skills. Working in food also comes with the promise of relatively flexible work hours compared with a nine-to-five job, allowing some students to accommodate their class schedules and personal responsibilities.



A grocery store worker helps a customer. (Photo credit: stock image, Microsoft Word 2016)

For many of the students we interviewed, mixing school and work activities, feeling competent and effective, and developing relationships with co-workers—a nearly universal theme in the interviews—were positive attributes of working in the food sector. As one participant explained, food work can make students feel productive:

“Even though food work can be so stressful mentally, it’s also just so great. I wake up and I go to work, and I go to school, and I’m feeling successful, like that I could do it all. I feel so high and mighty doing everything.”

One student saw restaurant work as an important part of the city’s social fabric, particularly during COVID-19:

“I love food. I love the community. I love what restaurants do for neighborhoods. They bring them alive. What is a neighborhood without restaurants? And I think the pandemic really showed that... It’s where people can go and experience things and come together.”

The positive aspects of working in food can be transformed into experiences that empower workers, build skills, and support students’ academic and professional success. But to achieve that transformation will require coordinated efforts from CUNY, policymakers, labor organizations, and employers.

Challenges from combining food work and school

Despite the relative flexibility and accessibility provided by food industry jobs, students experience significant challenges in navigating their role as food workers, including unsafe work conditions, harassment and other problematic interactions with managers and customers, work schedules that conflict with school schedules, and limited access to benefits such as health insurance.

Students universally cited the physical demands of food work as a core challenge, with many explaining that their jobs required carrying and lifting heavy things, or standing for long periods of time during shifts that were often fast paced with few or no breaks. Several students described that their jobs entailed repeti-



A food delivery worker bikes through city traffic. (Photo credit: Brett Jordan on Unsplash)

tive motions that had led to injuries, or that they experienced constant exposure to hot cooking utensils and high temperatures in their workplaces. The physical demands of food work left students with little energy after their shifts, sometimes interfering with their ability to keep up with schoolwork. One student explained:

“The challenge is the shifts are long and you’re on your feet. So physically, I’m challenged. Physically my body is tired. And when my body is tired, it is difficult to focus on [school] work.”

While the flexible hours of food industry jobs were an initial draw for many of the students, they pointed out that, in fact they had little control over their work schedules, especially as food businesses were understaffed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some felt compelled to take on extra shifts as they needed the extra income. Others agreed to work longer hours because of understaffing, and occasionally missed class because of this. One student explained that they set their work schedule around their classes, but that sometimes they would still be called to work because, as they put it, “I was the only available manager, and I’m the closest one to the store that can close.”

Disruptions in work scheduling were a significant stressor for many students. Having to respond to text messages from managers while in class was frustrating, even for those students who felt comfortable turning down requests from managers to cover extra shifts.

Managing both work and class schedules also left students with little time to do other things such as socialize and participate in extracurricular activities or events at school, particularly if they also were caring for children. Most critically, work also led to time management difficulties, with many students struggling to find time to stay on top of their course assignments. One student explained that they changed their enrollment status from full to part time to avoid the anxiety of falling behind in school because of work:

“I switched my schedule to part time because I didn’t want to have to juggle and then have that anxious ‘I’m failing my classes; I can’t balance it’ [feeling]. So I didn’t even try it. If I’m working this much, I’m gonna do part time.”

Unfortunately, evidence suggests that students who attend school part time are less likely to graduate than full-time students.⁹



A restaurant worker prepares meals near the cash register. (Photo credit: Patrick Tomasso on Unsplash)

Many students also reported stressful interpersonal relationships and interactions on the job. Some of these social stressors are common to many types of work, such as navigating relationships with managers. Students we interviewed expressed difficulty meeting managers' high expectations, such as taking on multiple tasks and responsibilities beyond the scope of their job. Some students noted that they had little power in their relationships with managers and had experienced emotional and psychological abuse. One student described an unpleasant interpersonal interaction with their boss:

“There was a time where I was very upset with my boss. I felt like she was picking on me. But I don't think she was picking on me. I think it was the way management on top of her was telling her what she had to do, so she was just being harsh.”

Other stressors that students identified are more unique to the food sector. For instance, as public-facing food workers, students also described a lack of power and control in their interactions with aggressive and unruly customers as a frequent challenge, a problem exacerbated by COVID-19. As tipped workers whose income depends on customer service interactions, students reported that they were at times unable to defend themselves from unfair or unreasonable customer behavior. One student noted:

“As a food worker, you always have to have your guard up. Because as a worker in general, you have to have your guard up. But especially when you're making someone's food, I feel like they can easily flip things on you.”

Inability to defend themselves was especially challenging and harmful when students experienced sexual harassment on the job. Most female students interviewed for this project stated that sexual harassment in the food sector is normalized in their experience and is considered by their managers to be part of the job. Students observed few workplace protections against sexual harassment from customers

and no clear mechanism for reporting it. Additionally, some students feared reporting sexual harassment from customers, co-workers, and managers because of the threat of retaliation. Speaking up can result in reduced shifts or losing a job entirely. When asked whether she had experienced sexual harassment on the job, a student responded matter-of-factly:

“Definitely harassment. That's just something that happens. Every restaurant for the most part.”

Finally, a common challenge experienced by students was the overall poor quality of their employment arrangements. Many students we spoke with had trouble accessing basic workplace benefits long enjoyed by workers in other sectors, such as paid sick leave, health insurance, and paid time off. Most of the students were not informed by their employers about paid sick leave policies, which most companies are required to have under New York City law. When employers did mention these policies, students were unsure whether they were eligible or did not know how to use the benefit. For other students, accessing paid sick leave depended on poorly explained accrual mechanisms (i.e., accruing a certain amount of paid sick time for every hour worked). Only a few participants were offered paid time off and benefits such as tuition reimbursement. Even those who had access to tuition reimbursement found bureaucratic barriers prevented them from maximizing these benefits.

For students experiencing financial instability, lack of paid sick leave was challenging as they had no choice but to work while sick or risk retaliation. One student explained:

“It's between losing your income or taking care of yourself... I worked sick [in my restaurant job] all the time. I had a stomach flu, and I was there throwing up in the bathroom downstairs. I was there because [the restaurant owner] had to go on a date that night. A few months before that, I got a chemical burn on my eye hours before going to work. I couldn't see, I was in excruciating pain. I had to put an eyepatch

on. And I went to work because they could just let us go for no reason. And they did. They let people go all the time, they would just stop putting them on the schedule. And there would be no warning, no meeting, no one strike. You just got the schedule, and you're not on it anymore. And it was all legal.”

Student strategies for overcoming obstacles

Students' ability to manage the challenges they faced reflects their resilience, agency, and power, but it also points to the need for more support, especially when it comes to understanding and exercising their rights as workers. Most of the strategies described in the interviews involved students figuring things out themselves, “powering through,” or tolerating things with the support of co-workers. For example, one participant explained how they learned from their family how to juggle multiple responsibilities:

“Every single moment was [taken up] with something because I was doing school, I was doing my internship, I was doing club, which took up a lot of time, and then I was doing this job.

I saw my mom growing up working in fast food. And she would bring stuff with her to read on the way, or I saw her manage things all at once while working in person and doing other things. My parents were always doing multiple things at once, so I just learned how to do that from my parents also. My entire family was just very efficient. Because they have to be.”

Occasionally, students described seeking help from managers to deal with issues on the job, though they reported that these conversations often did not result in changes in the workplace. A few students knew of their legal worker protections and leveraged them, such

as a participant who had threatened to file a complaint with the Department of Labor when they were not getting paid, successfully resolving the issue. Most, however, did not. Overall, students reported receiving little guidance on their rights as workers while at CUNY, or other resources that could make it easier to juggle work and school.

Very few students reported interactions with unions during their time in college and in the workforce. Students' comments about unions reflected a range of attitudes: from limited awareness of the role of unions, to a belief that unions are essential for ensuring that workers are protected against abuses of power in the workplace, to an interest in becoming involved in one if it could help them and others in the workplace. Some students were aware of explicit union resistance from their employer. When asked whether it would be useful to have more information about workers' rights, one student replied:

“A lot of food workers don't have unions. So it [would be] really helpful to have an info session about workers' rights. Especially, there are some managers and there are some bosses [who are terrible]. Even though they're informed about workers' rights, they don't respect it. And they know that their workers are desperate for a job. They know they don't really have a choice, or they don't have the power to negotiate, they don't have leverage. So the boss keeps on doing what he does.

I think unions are essential. A lot of CUNY students work in the food sector. If you go to McDonald's or to Burger King, you can see the crew members are young, they look like college students. It makes sense for them to make a union, because it's not just the work that they're troubling themselves with but also the schoolwork. If there's a union, it could possibly give them more time, more resources to better manage between working, school, and their personal lives.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from our interviews and prior research from the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute and our partners^{10,11,12} suggest steps that four key constituencies can take to work towards the vision of a fair New York City food system:

- CUNY, including central administrators, administrators housed at CUNY's 25 campuses, faculty, and students;
- City and state policy makers;
- Labor unions and worker organizations; and
- Food employers.

For each constituency, we identify short-term and longer-term goals, recognizing that the work of transforming CUNY's commitment to its working students requires both modest changes within existing CUNY programs, initiatives, and curricula, as well as system-wide changes. Together, these suggestions for the next two years (short term) and the next three to five years (longer term) can build towards the vision of a stronger, healthier, more prosperous food workforce for New York City.

CUNY

CUNY has long recognized that helping its students find financial aid, food assistance, health insurance, and childcare enables them to complete their education. By expanding this assistance to include information on workplace rights and protections, it can provide another foundation for academic success. At CUNY, central and campus-level administrators, faculty, staff, and students all have roles to play in making the university a place for educating and supporting its working students.

CUNY Administration

The CUNY administration can play a central role in transforming New York City's economy by preparing its students to create and demand better, healthier workplaces in all sectors. We offer recommendations to key CUNY offices and initiatives related to food workforce development and labor education.

Workforce Development Recommendations

The following recommendations can be implemented by Campus Career Centers, CUNY Career Success Initiatives, the Office of Research, Evaluation & Program Support, and other workforce-related offices, such as the Office of Continuing Education and Workforce Development.

Short-term:

- Provide student services that acknowledge students' experience as workers and assist them to balance work and school. This could include offering academic, career advising, and financial aid services at hours beyond the 9am-5pm window and recognizing the role work plays in shaping students' academic experience. As one student food worker noted, "I think it'd be great to have somebody that's just specifically for student job relations. Maybe they can help me plan my schedule. As we go into next semester, we have to pick out new classes and a new work schedule. It'd be great to have somebody to help balance that."
- Support students currently working in the food sector by helping them to market skills learned from food work when pursuing other work and creating ways for students to share reviews of work experiences with specific food employers. Develop a process for recognizing food work as college-level learning and award appropriate credits. Expose students to alternatives to employer-controlled workplaces, such as [worker-owned restaurants or food businesses](#).
- Create opportunities for working students to connect with each other. This might look like creating WhatsApp threads for working students and using social media to leverage student connections and learning, facilitating peer referrals to campus career services, and hosting events like labor organizing discussion groups, workshops on working in particular industries like food, and community forums for students who work while in college.

- Collect and report publicly available systematic data on student employment status and experiences, such as where students work, working hours, wages, and awareness and use of rights, and assess the impact of various work arrangements on academic progress.

Long-term:

- Increase funding and staffing for Campus Career Centers and build partnerships between CUNY, food employers, and unions to create employment opportunities for students.
- Develop relationships with employers who recognize the “real needs” of students and actively support those needs at work; have a list of employers in the food sector that are a good fit for and understand academic needs of students seeking paid work.
- Review contracting and procurement agreements to ensure CUNY is working with companies that comply with labor law.
- Offer more flexible learning schedules to facilitate work-school-life balance (for instance, long class sessions once weekly rather than short class sessions twice weekly).
- Develop new workforce development strategies to strengthen key low-wage sectors in New York City, such as food and health care, to improve these jobs and prepare students with the skills they will need to advance in these sectors.

Labor Education Recommendations

To make CUNY a resource for educating workers about their rights—as CUNY already does for voting rights and immigrant rights—the university can create multiple settings for labor education. The CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies (SLU), career-related offices on each campus, and other hubs for student resources, such as CUNY’s Resource Centers could provide information and referrals. Our recommendations are:

Short-term:

- Advertise programs like CUNY SLU’s [Union Semester](#) across CUNY campuses and consider replicating the program on other CUNY campuses so students can receive academic credit while gaining experience working in unions and worker-rights organizations.
- Encourage CUNY School of Law to create free on-campus services to help students file workplace complaints, modeled after CUNY’s Citizenship Now! program and other pro bono services currently provided by the CUNY School of Law.
- Create Workplace Know Your Rights trainings on topics including protections against harassment and wage theft, and legal rights to organize for better working conditions.
- Disseminate outreach materials on workers’ rights from labor and worker protection agencies on CUNY campuses. Outreach material can be widely distributed to CUNY’s resource centers, offices of student affairs and on learning platforms.
- As part of new student orientation, offer a seminar on working while in college, covering topics such as workers’ rights, tips on balancing school and work, and information on unions and how to build them. For those interested in deeper learning on the topic, connect them to credit-bearing courses on workers’ rights.

Long-term:

- Reimagine CUNY SLU as a hub and resource for labor and worker education across the CUNY system.
- Establish partnerships between CUNY SLU and the CUNY School of Public Health (SPH) to build the connection between occupational health and safety in the workplace, and the well-being of students working in the food sector and beyond.

- Build strategic relationships between CUNY and New York’s labor unions and worker centers through workshops, union job fairs for students, and expanding opportunities for paid student work in labor organizations.
- Create paid, peer-to-peer student labor liaison roles, where students are trained on workplace protections and are paid to help other students navigate their legal rights in the workplace. This could be modeled off similar initiatives, such as Healthy CUNY’s Student Health Advocates program, which trains and then pays CUNY students to assist their peers to apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- Allow for flexibility in deadlines and course schedule if possible and provide alternative opportunities for earning course credit, to facilitate greater participation of working students.
- Connect with existing CUNY centers, schools, and institutions that support organizing, including CUNY SLU, [this course](#) on labor and community organizing at LaGuardia Community College, the PSC-CUNY, and the Center for Worker Education.

Long-term:

- Use existing resources at CUNY SLU, culinary and hospitality programs, and elsewhere to organize an online training on health and safety in the food industry, history of worker organizing, and discussions with unionized restaurant workers who are CUNY students about their experience.
- Provide opportunities for student involvement in organizing campaigns or student-led research focused on neighborhoods where CUNY campuses are located, for students to gain research skills but also to learn about advocacy and organizing related to food and other industries.
- Encourage PSC-CUNY and other faculty and staff organizations to advocate for making CUNY a national model for educating students about labor and labor rights and connecting them to worker organizations.

CUNY Faculty

Faculty can bring the experiences of students as workers into the classroom to make learning more personal and to meet their specific needs to balance student, food worker, and other roles. Faculty in nutrition, hospitality, culinary arts, and those with an interest in labor from law, social science, labor, and urban studies can teach—and learn from—students about food workers and food worker organizing.

Short-term:

- Include information and links to existing school resources such as mental health services, financial aid, career services, and food assistance on syllabus and course websites to increase students’ awareness of these services and to encourage them to view the faculty member themselves as a resource.
- Embrace labor rights and the role of unions as part of education, since many students have limited experience with unions and may fear reporting labor law violations.
- Encourage working students to connect with each other to share strategies for juggling school and work.

“It would be great to have a curriculum that’s more inflected around workers’ rights and what the history is, and how that intersects with immigration law and voting rights and all these other things. I feel like a lot of professors are doing it.”

— CUNY administrator

CUNY Students

CUNY students have long been at the forefront of social justice movements. In 1969, a student strike at City College forced CUNY to enact a policy of open admissions. In 2002, CUNY students and immigrants' rights organizations persuaded the New York State legislature to make undocumented students in New York eligible for in-state tuition rates. In the coming years, CUNY students can again mobilize to expand the rights and the access to higher education of another group of students in major need of support: the many CUNY students who work in food and other low-wage jobs without adequate protections. A few principles can define roles for CUNY students:

- Students, including those who are food workers, should lead organizing efforts.
- Sharing and critically analyzing their experiences as students who are food workers can facilitate and inform effective organizing and advocacy.
- Networking, socializing, and advocacy activities should tap into and support students' articulated desires to build community with other students as a means of creating networks and a culture of support and caring.
- Students are eager to initiate and drive discussions on worker and labor rights, sexual harassment, and mental health in and outside the classroom.
- Students who are union members can educate their peers working in food.



Starbucks workers and their supporters rally against union-busting tactics used by their employer. (Photo credit: Elliot Stoler)

Unions and labor organizations

Our interviews with students indicated a strong desire for information on their rights as workers. National polls and surveys also show that support for unions is at its highest level in more than half a century, particularly among young people.¹³ Unions looking to expand membership and organize more workers should recognize the clear opportunities presented by reaching current students. New York’s labor organizations can help strengthen labor education within CUNY, the nation’s largest urban public university system.

Short-term:

- Bring union staff and organizers to CUNY campuses for tabling, workshops, and information sessions on organizing within workplaces.
- Make unions seem more relevant or personal to working students and foster a sense of ownership in student organizing.
- Emphasize the various reasons that workers might organize with their colleagues, including around issues of racial equity and being treated with respect in the workplace.
- Along with CUNY, help students think of themselves as food service workers, for instance through videos of other students explaining their experiences.

Long-term:

- Nurture “academic organizing” by emphasizing students’ role in labor education and labor rights research, and the value of their experience as workers.
- Recognize the strong interest in unions among college students and younger students and build strategic partnerships across CUNY campuses.

“If unions were to make these issues more personal, people will definitely listen more. When I got automated messages about wage theft, I never got my wages stolen, so I don’t know how to really respond to this. I feel sorry for whoever got their wages stolen, and I know that’s a very big problem with corporations stealing wages. But a lot of people that work just don’t see themselves in the things that could be helping them. So I think like more personal efforts—more student and worker-led—would help.”

— Student food worker



Food worker delivering a bag to the front door.
(Photo credit: Maria Castellanos on iStock)

Employers

Food industry employers clearly share responsibility for addressing the challenges facing working students. Supportive employers and managers allow students to gain valuable and transferable work experience and to explore career interests in food and service, while benefiting from students' labor. Employers can act to further support working students to develop their work skills and juggle their roles as students and workers.

Short-term:

- Communicate all labor laws clearly to workers, and respect the legally-protected right for workers to advocate for themselves.
- When creating work schedules, take into consideration the specific needs of working students, related to semester changes, major assignments, and final exams.
- For businesses that make benefits available to students, make sure students are aware of those and make them easier to access and use.
- Explore partnerships with CUNY that will enable workers who are CUNY students to achieve their academic goals and assist other workers to enroll in relevant CUNY degree programs.

Long-term:

- For all employers, but especially large food chains and restaurant companies, provide food workers a living wage, based on the [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#), and competitive benefits including to those working part time.
- Join other [“high road” employers](#) by providing above-industry wages, better benefits, job security, stable hours, and opportunities for employee training. These practices can reduce employee turnover, improve the quality of service, promote a loyal customer base, and contribute to needed industry-wide change.

- CUNY and other partners develop long-term strategies for strengthening the food workforce in New York City, creating new pathways to career advancement, and reducing the sector's contributions to income and health inequities.

City and state policymakers

New York State has the highest rate of income inequality in the United States—with serious implications for public health, public safety, and the strength of democratic institutions. New York's city and state lawmakers should expand and strengthen policies that close the gap between the state's wealthiest and poorest residents. For working-class students at CUNY, this includes increasing public investment in CUNY, expanding laws that protect workers, and working to make sure all CUNY students understand their legal rights to organize with their colleagues for safer, more equal workplaces.

Short-term:

- Work with New York State Department of Labor (NYS DOL) and New York City Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (NYC DCWP) to host workshops with CUNY staff on supporting students with filing workplace violations that are common in the food industry, such as wage theft, and hold regular meetings with CUNY's food-worker students to identify common workplace challenges and concerns.
- Launch coordinated campaigns between city and state lawmakers' offices, NYS DOL, NYC DCWP, and CUNY aimed at educating student-workers on their rights in the workplace. These efforts should be modeled after NYC DCWP's multilingual, citywide campaign to educate workers about their workplace rights and filing complaints.

Long-term:

- Encourage state elected officials to pass legislation to restore free tuition at CUNY to offset students' need to work while in school, such as the state-level [“New Deal for CUNY”](#) legislation.

- Increase funding for NYS DOL and NYC DCWP to ensure adequate staffing for field and outreach operations and increase the capacity for agency staff to work with CUNY. This additional funding should also support the monitoring of city and state labor laws, with the awareness that younger workers, including those in school, are less likely to know about or exercise their rights as workers.
- End the subminimum wage for tipped workers in New York. Research shows that tipped workers in the food sector are vulnerable to wage theft, and experience rates of sexual harassment that are much higher than non-tipped workers.¹⁴
- Extend the city's Fair Workweek law to include food workers beyond fast-food companies and launch campaigns making sure workers, particularly immigrant workers, know their rights.
- Develop a long-term comprehensive food workforce development strategy for the city to set long-term goals for improved pay, benefits, health and safety protections, and working conditions, and to provide education and training for food workers to advance their skills and job prospects.
- Ensure all food workers, including undocumented workers, are protected by law in exercising their labor rights.
- Encourage state elected officials to pass legislation that expands truly affordable housing, noting the role that exorbitant housing costs play in pushing students to working while in college.

Have feedback to these ideas, or additional recommendations? Send us your comments and suggestions:

<https://cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/resources/report/cunyfoodworkers>



Chef in a bakery kitchen.
(Photo credit: anon-tae on iStock)

Appendix A: Resources for Teaching and Learning about Workers' Rights, Health, and Safety at CUNY

We provide a list of resources that CUNY faculty, staff, and others can provide their students to help them learn about workers' rights and health and safety.

Workplace Safety and Rights

- Guerin R, Okun A, Stephenson C, et al. *Youth@Work – Talking Safety: A Safety and Health Curriculum for Young Workers, New York Edition*. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Department of Health and Human Services; 2018. https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/talkingsafety/states/ny/2015-138/pdfs/Talking_Safety_NY.pdf
- Kreshpaj B, Orellana C, Burström B, et al. What is precarious employment? A systematic review of definitions and operationalizations from quantitative and qualitative studies. *Scand J Work Environ Health*. 2020;46(3):235-247. doi:[10.5271/sjweh.3875](https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.3875)
- Rankin N, Lew I. *Expanding Workers' Rights - What It Means for New York City's Low-Income Workers*. Community Service Society; 2018. <https://www.cssny.org/publications/entry/expanding-workers-rights>
- *Workers' Bill of Rights*. New York City Department of Consumer and Worker Protection <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/dca/downloads/pdf/workers/Workers-Bill-of-Rights.pdf>

COVID-19 and Food Workers

- Chong VP, James CJ, Fraser KT, et al. *Protecting Those Who Feed Us: How Employers, Government, and Workers' Organizations Can Protect the Health, Safety, and Economic Security of Food Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond*. CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute; 2022. <https://cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/resources/report/protecting-those-who-feed-us/>
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Importance of Labor Unions

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Appendix B: An Overview of Food-Related Degree and Certificate Programs at CUNY

CUNY offers 28 degree or certificate programs in food-related fields at 12 campuses in four broad areas: food studies, nutrition sciences and dietetics, hospitality management, and culinary arts. We list those programs below:

Campus	Degree Programs				Credit-bearing Certificate Programs			Non-credit Certificates
	Food Studies & Food Management	Nutrition Sciences & Dietetics	Hospitality, Hospitality Management, & Tourism	Culinary Arts	Nutrition and Dietetic Internship	Culinary Arts	Food Services Operations	Other
Brooklyn College		BS, MS			Adv Cert			
Hunter College		BS, MS			Adv Cert			
Lehman College		BS, MS			Adv Cert			
NYC College of Technology			AAS, B Tech					
Queens College	BA	BS, MS			Adv Cert			
York College	BA(Minor)							
BMCC								Hospitality
Bronx CC		AS						
Hostos CC	AS			AAS		Cert		
Kingsborough CC			AAS			Cert	Cert	Certified Dietary Manager
LaGuardia CC		AAS	AAS					
School of Public Health & Health Policy					Adv Cert			

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