Expendable yet essential; restaurant labor, class, and the ongoing need to cope

Gabriella Vetter
Advisor: Salvador Rangel

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Abstract

This study documents and analyzes the shifting labor conditions in the restaurant industry to understand how the industry has changed in the context of the pandemic. In combining theoretical frameworks with autoethnographic research and comprehensive qualitative interviews, this thesis illuminates what restaurant workers experience daily, in and out of the pandemic, and how they survive these conditions. In utilizing a class analysis supported by Marxist theoretical perspectives, this thesis begins to unpack the restaurant industry’s context within the larger economy. This thesis centralizes the voices of current and previous restaurant workers as a primary source of knowledge and expertise on the subject because far too often, the working class is overlooked as a source of knowledge; the interviewees are the basis for this thesis. The restaurant industry is an understudied and overlooked industry that should have more traction. This thesis serves as a foundation to study the industry more deeply – there is so much to learn.
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I would also like to thank my mom, Patricia. I am incredibly grateful for your kind heart and unconditional love! The last four years have been difficult to say the least, but all I had to do was give you a call while I walk to get my food and things got better.

To my brother and sister, Riley and Natalia, you rats! Riley, you inspire me every day to unapologetically be myself. Natalia, my bestie, thank you for being my rock. I am so proud of both of you. Know that you both keep me going, always.

My friends <3. Swarthmore has given me a lot, but I am most thankful for all of you. This thesis would not have gotten done if it weren’t for you all forcing me to take breaks (to play cards of course) and your edits, feedback, and motivational speeches (even if I hated it in the moment). I appreciate you all endlessly. #LongLiveFLICouncil #236

Coatesville… Home… I am forever grateful to the community that raised me – here I am writing a thesis guys – who would have thought.

Dedications

This thesis is dedicated to all the amazing souls I have had the pleasure of working with and meeting throughout my years in the restaurant industry. Each one of you have impacted my life in ways you will never begin to understand. My motivation to write this comes from you, our late-night conversations, and every experience where I know you deserved better. You are not expendable.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents who both deserve better than what this industry, this society, & this world gave them. Thank you for everything.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to me because you deserved better too.
Picture this, you, and your family of four are feeling restless with the current state of the pandemic and are desperate for a night out of the house. Despite your avoidance of restaurants in the pandemic generally you have been hearing about how difficult it is for restaurant workers to make an income when customer levels are low. With all, you decide to go eat at your local Chilis. You arrive, all wearing masks of course, and are seated by a host at a table in the bar area. Your server takes your order, the bartender makes the drinks, and the four cooks in the back begin preparing your food. As you wait for your food you socialize with your two kids about their days at school, masks off. Your food is brought out by three different servers being that you ordered quite a bit and you begin enjoying your meal. About four bites in the manager comes over to check on how your evening is going in which you respond with nothing but positive feedback. Your server checks on you a few more times and the very speedy busser drops by to remove any unwanted dishes. You finish eating and stack all your dirty dishes and napkins on top of each other for an easier carry to the dishwasher in the kitchen. You gather up your two kids and leave the restaurant running into the second host who tells you to have a great night and drive carefully - since you were so close to the door though, you didn’t put your mask back on before leaving. All in all, this family outing took about an hour and a half, what great service!

The next morning you wake up to your child running a low fever with a slight cough. When you finally get a chance to check your email you realize that their teacher at school tested positive last night for COVID-19 on a routine test. You and your partner are vaccinated but unfortunately neither one of your kids are. Four days later your older child develops a slight fever and soon enough your entire house tests positive. Now, you’ve been careful and have kept your distance from others as much as possible, but you remember that impulse trip to Chili’s that you took just four days earlier where you spent an hour and a half unmasked interacting directly with 14 different restaurant employees. But it was just an innocent trip out to a restaurant, and you did after all tip 30% for all their hard work. Were you responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak at Chili’s? No. This is simply the harsh reality of working in a restaurant during this time. How is it right to put these employees in danger while simultaneously leaving their income in the hands of customers? This is what it is like to be a frontline worker in an industry deemed essential that is nowhere near essential. Essential yet expendable.1

Introduction

In March of 2020, the unthinkable happened as I was finally adjusting to college and balancing my schoolwork, actual work, and the little social life that I had time for. We were sent

1 Gianna 21-year-old woman, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
home from school, and I was laid off from work at *The Pantry* due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, I was like, “hmm, a break, how appealing,” and then reality hit - I had to submit unemployment applications, keep up with my schoolwork and figure out how in the world my family, restaurant workers who supported themselves on a shift-by-shift basis, would pay for our necessities. We waited eagerly for the government to provide relief. Balancing a full-time course load while navigating how to apply for government assistance in such an unprecedented time was quite an experience. Despite having little to no guidance from my employer, I acquired unemployment for myself and my mom. On the other hand, my dad, who was houseless at the initial shutdown, went through a 2.5 month back and forth with the PA state government trying to receive the benefits that he should have been able to access right away. He turned to Instacart as a source of income, spending eight hours a day in grocery stores at the height of the pandemic.

I was called back to work in my employer’s first round of employees. While completing a full-time internship over the summer, I still needed to work to make enough money to help my family, so I had no choice but to return. The very first shift I worked; I recall having a total of three tables throughout a six-hour shift because people had no clue that we were even open. I made $16, which was just under three dollars an hour. I went from making unemployment wages (about $700 a week) - which was way more than what I made working - to not even making enough money to fill up my gas tank in one shift. Under normal circumstances, the restaurant business sees a slight decrease in sales during warmer weather. People seek opportunities to be outside rather than dining in restaurants (It was June when I was called back). Coupled with an increase in outdoor dining - which my employer did not offer - the first 1-1.5 months of work

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2 Pseudonym for my place of employment as well as the place of employment for several interviewees
was quite rough concerning business. I was grateful for the sympathy tips that some customers provided me with, but it was nothing like making unemployment wages – how is that even possible? How can I make more money by not working? Making more money on unemployment benefits was especially shocking given that during the pandemic, my family experienced the closest to financial stability we have ever been because of unemployment.

Given these experiences, I choose to analyze this industry more deeply. To contextualize this a bit more, I will talk more about my background and experience in the industry. I have worked in and around the restaurant industry since I was 14 years old at a total of 3 different restaurants. The legal age to work in a restaurant as a server is 16, but since I started my restaurant experience at a small, family-owned diner, I was allowed to work at a younger age. I have worked in both franchise and family-owned restaurants, which provides me with valuable knowledge when trying to make sense of the industry, the value of my labor, what restaurant employees struggle with, and the necessary actions it takes to work in these circumstances.

Working at a family-owned restaurant for my first job laid the foundation for my expectations for a workplace. I was used to close-knit, personal relationships in the workplace, which I saw as a form of care. Managers always emphasized that we were a family and needed to rely on each other even though this relationship was not reciprocal. I began my employment journey under the impression that employers prioritized workers and they saw value in my presence. When I started college, I began to hear about all the experiences my peers had in high school; I felt like I missed out on so much and could not relate because all I did was work. My social life was work. When I started reflecting on my work experiences, I started to ask more questions because these experiences were not typical amongst non-working-class populations. Work was my entire life in high school, and if you asked me then whether I loved my job, I
probably would’ve said yes because I genuinely believed I did. Over time, I realized that despite
the homey feeling I was tasked with providing my customers with, work was not a home for me,
and it did not, in the words of Sarah Jaffe, love me back (Sarah Jaffé, 14, 2021).

Family-owned restaurants are assumed to provide more support compared to franchise
restaurants. Still, I can recall experiences where my employer did not take my well-being and life
outside of my job into consideration. With a smaller ‘restaurant family’ and less of a corporate
presence, family-owned restaurants are on a different level than franchisee-owned restaurants.
Because of this, they are expected to be more caring and empathetic to employees, but this is not
the case. For example, in my senior year of high school, I was preparing to take my SATs for the
second time to apply for college. The first time I took them, I had scored well below my goal. I
was very stressed out about the fact that I was falling short of the standards I was setting for
myself, in addition to the idea that I was failing myself in achieving what at the time felt like my
only way out of my current circumstances. I requested off work on the Friday night before my
SATs, which I never did, so that I was adequately rested. The only testing location still open was
an hour and a half away, so I knew I needed to be up early to make the drive. My manager
begged me to work just the dinner shift on Friday, 5 pm - 9 pm if he promised to let me leave
early. I, of course, agreed because I thought my manager had done so many favors for me; it was
the least I could do. I showed up for the shift, which was short two servers, and quickly realized
there was no way I was going to leave at nine pm. I ended up working until almost 2 am. I felt
obligated to the restaurant and my coworkers, so I had no choice but to stay and work. I couldn’t
risk losing my job and not being compliant. I went home almost in tears because I knew I would
not be at my best when I went to take my SATs. Since the testing location was so far away, I had
to wake up at 5:30 am to leave and take the 90-minute drive by myself. I did worse on the SAT’s
this time than I did the first time. It was clear my employers only cared about their needs, not mine. Family-owned or not, that diner was not home for me, and it never would be. Both franchise and family-owned restaurants operate under capitalism, meaning they profit off my labor and take advantage of what I bring to each restaurant.

The idea that work would not love me back was only validated more when I transitioned to work in a franchise restaurant with very disconnected corporate offices. I was very clearly there to do a job for them, and my well-being was not a priority. I distinctly remember an interaction with our area director, who came for a quality check of the restaurant during the early months of COVID. She found boxes underneath a shelf in the wrong location and was very upset with our decision to place them there. As we were standing in a group - the area director, my two managers, and myself, she said to my managers, “tell that Carside\(^3\) girl to do her job and move these boxes to the correct spot.” - completely disregarding my presence. I complied despite being utterly shocked that she refused to acknowledge my presence or humanity. I made a joke later that day that she only speaks to salaried employees because hourly employees are beneath her, but really, I wasn’t joking. Restaurant workers are a commodity. It did not matter which restaurant I was at; the homey feeling may have masked the exploitation and harm in some cases, but we were all still struggling. Labor under capitalism inherently relies on exploitation which by no means includes love or care. I believe this directly contributes to the mass exodus of restaurant employees. (Business Insider, 2022)

On a different note, both of my parents worked in restaurants for a combined 40+ years. They even met in a restaurant where they both worked. I remember take your child to work day

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\(^3\) Carside refers to the drive-up pick-up service offered by restaurants where to-go orders are placed, and the orders are brought out to the parking lot by restaurant workers. I worked Carside during the pandemic since to-go sales increased immensely.
in 2nd grade with my dad. I have worked with both of my parents on separate occasions in two different restaurants. This brought an abundance of jokes from my peers and coworkers about “how funny is it that you work with you mom/dad” as if there wasn’t something morally off about a sixteen-year-old working the same hours and shifts as her parents to keep the bills paid. These jokes would come from friends and parents of kids who did not have to work to ensure their household would survive. They saw this as a funny coincidence instead of a deep flaw in how our world is structured. It was not my fault that I had to work those hours, and it was not my parent’s fault that I had to work those hours. There is no one/thing to blame except the structures in which we live and the fact that this setup, this work dynamic is a characteristic of capitalism, not a flaw. Capitalism is structured so that people are on the bottom to have a few on the top.

I have always had a weird relationship with the restaurant industry. As unpredictable as it was, it was also a consistent flow of cash that I knew I could somewhat rely on. In a system where the diminishment of the welfare state forces the working class to undergo harsh and unbearable experiences to survive, it becomes easy to glorify the source of your exploitation. Through my waitressing, I made more money than most of my friends, who were making $7.25 an hour. The most convenient aspect of working in a restaurant was that I could leave with the cash in hand. Had a bill to pay? Needed fast cash? I would pick up an additional shift and take as many tables as possible because, like I always said, “If I am at work, I will never say no to a table.” Even though I was often working until midnight on the weekdays and 3 am on the weekends while dealing with harassment from the late-night diner crowd and hectic working conditions, I thought everything was great. I knew I went home with my feet throbbing so bad I could hardly sleep. I knew that I was often so tired from working that I would arrive late to
school the following day. Going into a shift, I knew I would be stiffed two-three times, so I had to make up for it with other tables. I knew that the emotional labor\textsuperscript{4} it takes to work one shift in a restaurant would often take all the energy I had to interact with people for the day. Yet, \textit{I thought everything was great} because at least I could make money. At least I could work to help my family \textbf{to survive}. I accepted my reality willingly, and now, given my reflection and exposure to what could be, I continue to ask myself why I did that and what allowed me to continue to see the world through that distorted perspective.

I am famously known in and around my hometown as the server who did her homework at an empty booth while still providing excellent customer service. I suppose you could be known locally for worse things, but imagine being \textbf{boiled down to your labor and productivity}? I hated it. Working to this extent wasn’t exactly the experience one would hope for moving through high school, but it was necessary in a world where everything costs money. I have always been left with reflections regarding the restaurant industry and what I have lived through with essentially no outlet to interrogate them. This research is providing me with the opportunity to analyze what I experienced and think critically about what the pandemic illuminates for us and where we go from here.

\textsuperscript{4} Managing the feelings and emotions of oneself to meet the requirements or to perform well in a job (Hochschild, 1983) More on page 29.
As society is collectively experiencing this traumatic and life-altering pandemic, it is essential to take a step back and assess how the pandemic is affecting groups of people in different ways. As the world shut down, leaving only so-called essential services open, marginalized groups of people were put at risk to ensure that everyone had access to necessities to continue living as well as providing a sense of normalcy. Left on the front lines, were primarily low-waged workers who were thrown under this essential narrative to ensure that capitalism did not ground to a halt. Higher wage jobs that were able to shift completely virtual continued, and employees did not see a change in their salary. On the other hand, lower-wage employees were forced to either maneuver through the unemployment process or put themselves in harm’s way to ensure the continuance of society with little to no information about what the virus could do. With a return to work eventually mandated, increased work responsibilities, and a greater risk for contracting COVID-19, restaurant workers quickly went from being taken for granted to essential and expendable. To stimulate the economy, keep restaurant corporations
afloat, and provide **customers** with some sense of normalcy, restaurants opened, and the industry that flourishes off the exploitation of servers became popular once again. Restaurant workers saw a shift in what their responsibilities entailed and how they were being treated and what their role in society was. My motivation for this research is that I have met hundreds, if not thousands, of people who rely on the industry to live and support themselves. All these people, including myself and my family, deserve better. Given this context, the overarching goal of this thesis is to paint a picture of the restaurant industry in the context of the pandemic to understand workers’ experiences. I aim to explore; What conditions exist for this exploitative industry to be upheld, and how has the pandemic shed light on, called attention to, and shifted the dynamics of the industry? What parts of the story are we not hearing? Why do workers continue to accept this treatment, and relatedly, do they have a choice?

**Methodology**

My research is primarily qualitative interviews with current and previous restaurant employees. The purpose of interviewing this population is to better understand how work dynamics have shifted over the course of the pandemic and how this may have affected workers’ perspectives. Viewpoints from former employees help contextualize what is leading to the mass exodus of restaurant workers concerning the pandemic and otherwise. I created an interview guide that helped me understand the employees' opinions and experiences in the restaurant industry before and during the pandemic and the employees’ opinions on the larger economy, including where they fit within the system of capitalism.

My seven+ years of working in the restaurant industry made finding a population that fit these criteria accessible because I relied on my networks. I contacted interviewees via email or
text message to ask for participation in this study. Most interviews took place via Zoom due to unreliable work schedules and accessibility. Given the nature of the interviews and the proximity that I have to the restaurant industry I established a strong level of trust with the workers interviewed prior to the interview process. This trust allowed for transparent, straightforward, and intentional interactions throughout the interview process. My sample reflects the experiences of those working both in a franchise restaurant (where 3rd party operators are granted the ability to use the company name) and in family-owned restaurants. I interviewed seven women, five men, and one non-binary restaurant worker, all between 18 and 52 years old. I knew most of them well before the interviews were held because I worked with them over the years throughout three restaurants. Nine of the thirteen interviewees identified as white, while four of the interviewees identified as Latinx. Additionally, the sample represents both front-of-house workers (servers, bartenders, and sanitation positions) and managers providing a holistic view of the experiences in the industry during this time. The experiences of back-of-house employees are significant; however, I chose to focus on front-of-house workers due to their customer-facing role in the pandemic and my interest in the ways that the white working-class moves to differentiate themselves from the rest of the working class.

Existing research on the restaurant industry tends to rely on observations of the workplace and how employees, particularly those of different backgrounds, interact with each other. In conversation with these observations are personal experiences from writers themselves and their time working in the restaurant industry. In addition to observations and my

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5 Front of House, Back of House: Race & Inequality in the Restaurant Industry by Eli Revelle Yano Wilson; Kitchens the Culture of Restaurant Work by Gary Fine; The Restaurant Book: ethnographies of where we eat by Barbara G. Shortridge; A ‘Professional Back Place’: An ethnography of restaurant workers by Amanda Michiko Shigihara
own experiences, the use of interviews will allow employee voices to be the main mode of investigation throughout my research. Given the events since March 2020 and the pandemic’s impact on the restaurant industry, it is urgent to expand upon this type of analysis to gauge the effects of the pandemic and changing work environment on the restaurant industry’s workforce. To this end, the existing research and the methodology used to complete my research is an essential foundation that showcases the profound shifts in the industry in the context of the pandemic.

While analyzing my findings from interviews with the existing literature and my own experiences, I will be looking at a few key themes. First, I will explore the how expectations and work responsibilities have shifted in the context of the pandemic. In conjunction with this, I will explore work relations, specifically between workers and their employers, and how these relations impact the worker’s experiences in the pandemic. Then, I will shift my focus to coping mechanisms in the workplace and how restaurant workers continue to work under these conditions. Lastly, I will analyze the big picture opinions and ideas of employees of the economy and labor in the United States - if we can identify these exploitative and harmful characteristics, why do we continue to live under them? Do we have a choice? By understanding the experiences of everyone with their opinions, ideas, identities, and understanding of the work, I shed light on an industry that should and needs to be studied more with labor. My interviews and the common themes throughout them heavily influenced this thesis’s direction, and I appreciate the willingness and vulnerability each interviewee expressed while speaking with me.
Thesis Overview

This thesis will begin by laying the foundation for the theoretical framework in which I situate my analysis. Then I will set the scene for the restaurant industry by describing the working conditions before the pandemic. One goal of this thesis is to document how labor conditions shifted, but I do not want to lose sight of the fact that this industry has ALWAYS been harmful to restaurant employees, and it is only getting worse. The subsequent section will document the exact changes that did occur through my own experiences, the experiences of 13 interviewees, news articles, and podcasts. The second section provides many points of view that serve as a representative summary of the shifts in labor conditions that were and are being experienced by restaurant workers. I observe that scholarship related to the restaurant industry during the pandemic focuses on its financial aspects while leaving the people, who should be the center of study, to the side.

With the first half of the thesis focusing on the concrete shifts, the second half will focus more on analyzing how and why workers continue to work under these harmful and exploitative structures. The negative experiences that workers face every day are accompanied by a constant need to cope, and this was very evident in my interviews. Everything from substance abuse to scapegoating is used to get through each day - to survive. Given these coping mechanisms, I am interested in exploring why workers continue to work under these conditions and precisely what role the restaurant facade plays in taking away their choice. It is important to note that this research only serves as a foundation for a deeper analysis of the restaurant industry and the experiences of essential yet expendable workers.

Lastly, I want to emphasize that given my own experiences and my deep understanding of the restaurant industry pre-pandemic and during - my ability to analyze interviews and
interweave my own experiences provides an in-depth and powerful account of what has happened to restaurant workers. Centering my own experiences as I analyze those of other employees as an ethnographic method will provide an immense amount of influence on my findings. Without the experiences I have had, my understanding of the dynamics present in the restaurant industry today would be different.
**Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

To understand how labor conditions in restaurants have shifted in the context of the pandemic, I completed an analysis of capitalism, labor, the economy, and restaurant work. The restaurant industry is an ideal site to analyze the intricacies of labor shifts and the ideologies of workers in the context of the pandemic. Analyzing how and why the working-class life under these conditions is no easy feat, but with a comprehensive theoretical framework, the context in which my research exists is much easier to parse through. What is lacking in scholarship surrounding labor conditions in the restaurant industry is a comprehensive study on the industry within the context of the pandemic. I utilize this theoretical framework to contextualize my qualitative research.

A class analysis framework supported by Marxist theoretical perspectives allows my research to refuse to accept the economy and its current form at face value. Scholarship on the experiences of restaurant workers provides a means to extend and compare the experiences of those who lived, worked, and survived through the pandemic as restaurant workers. Sarah Jaffe's contemporary labor under capitalism in *Work Won't Love You Back* serves as an essential reference in my understanding of the relationship between workers and work. The shift from expendable restaurant workers to expendable & essential restaurant workers seems subtle but has changed workers' perceptions across the United States. Utilizing this theoretical framework, I seek to contextualize the substantial changes within the restaurant industry. I also seek to understand how and why (it is not by choice) restaurant workers continue to work under these unfair and exploitative conditions.
Capitalism, Neoliberalism, & Labor

Understanding how our current economic system, capitalism, creates and upholds class inequality is vital to analyzing the restaurant industry. The reproduction of inequality relies on the notion that it is every man for themselves. Michael Schwalbe analyzes capitalism through the concept of the Rigged Game which helps contextualize how inequality is created and reproduced by institutionalizing imbalanced flows of socially valued resources (Schwalbe, 2008). Capitalism sets the rules, and it is enforced by those who directly profit from these rules. In applying the rigged game to restaurant workers in the pandemic, we see the production of inequality with some struggling to survive. In contrast, others hold excess and, in some cases, accumulate even more resources in the Capitalist Crisis. In the pandemic, those in the lower class suffered while the ruling class became stronger.

The idea that restaurant workers became essential as if dining in restaurants facilitated some other necessary function that was not filling the corporate pockets of owners is a way that institutions enforce inequality. Schwalbe's analysis of why the public tolerates the rules that produce inequality helps explain how that is potentially shifting in the context of the pandemic. Schwalbe helps us identify how inequality is a choice made by those in power instead of an individualized experience. This identification is an essential realization that the working class must come to.

When everything is boiled down to individual actions under the assumption that everyone is free social solidarity disappears. We are then left with the inability to see past the systems we live in. In the restaurant industry, this inhibits any collective organizing from being widely accepted, and it also places the blame for circumstances on individuals as opposed to systems. In relation to this, Rebecca de Souza coined the term neoliberal stigma in her studies of food aid
which I argue can be widely applied to the service industry. Neoliberal Stigma identifies the cause of poverty and inequality to be the individual, meaning we are all responsible for our circumstances (De Souza, 2021). Neoliberal Stigma aids in the glorification of the restaurant industry given its individualized structure while simultaneously socializing us to associate hard work with being worthy of basic human needs and fair treatment.

Marx and Engel's critiques of capitalism are as relevant today as they were in the mid-19th century when they first began writing. Like Schwalbe, they acknowledge that crisis and exploitation are inherent features of a capitalist society. Marx states,

within the capitalist system, all methods for raising the social productivity of labor are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labor by turning it into a torment; … [T]hey deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labor process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness." (Capital, Marx, 23-25).

This passage assists us in understanding the prioritization of profit over the value of human life. The prioritization of profit over the value of human life is evident in the pandemic based on who was deemed an essential worker and why they are essential. When restaurants opened in June of 2020, 58% of respondents in a ROC United survey distributed to restaurant workers noted they were severely fearful of contracting covid, their well-being, and their loved ones. Yet, they have no choice but to work (ROC United, 2021).

The general upholding of a capitalist economy and success of the wealthy is upheld by what Engels refers to as 'social murder.' This concept resonates closely with the treatment of restaurant workers during the pandemic. He states,

I have now to prove that society in England daily and hourly commits what the working-men’s organs, with perfect correctness, characterize as social murder, that it has placed the workers under conditions in which they can neither
retain health nor live long; that it undermines the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurries them to the grave before their time. I have further to prove that society knows how injurious such conditions are to the health and the life of the workers, and yet does nothing to improve these conditions” (Engels, 96, 1892).

This valuable perspective proves that the maltreatment of workers is consistent, and the circumstances created by the pandemic have only exacerbated these working conditions making it more salient than ever. When applied to the restaurant industry, we are, in a similar vein, questioning how the harm is not identified and what keeps us from demanding better. A ROC United report based on their survey data of restaurant workers states, "A California-based study on COVID-19 mortalities found that cooks, among all essential workers, are at the greatest risk of death working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bartenders, chefs, and cooks were also listed among professions with the highest risk ratio for mortality" (ROC United, 2021). These labor conditions are deliberate and unavoidable in a capitalist society—simply another mechanism to prioritize profit over people.

Given these unavoidable circumstances, when boxed into this Capitalist framework, why do people continue to accept it? Mark Fisher identifies this paradox as Capitalist Realism which refers to the idea that there is no viable alternative to a Capitalist society (Fisher, 2009). It is not possible to imagine otherwise. This inability to reimagine alternatives provides insight into why the current circumstances are accepted, and a critique of the systems we live in is so difficult. Despite the restaurant industry's harm and terrible working conditions, this sense of having no alternatives causes people to be dedicated to the economy, therefore seeing no alternative or option for something better. To 'save' the economy, the United States risked the lives of those most vulnerable, and most people avoided questioning that together. Jaffe extends this notion into what she calls "work realism" by asserting that we cannot imagine a world without
capitalism, nor can we imagine a world where we have what we need to survive without jobs (Jaffe, 2021, 15). With bank bailouts in 2008 to ensure they would recover compared to the inability to keep restaurants closed for the safety of the working class during the pandemic, this comparison truly puts this analysis into perspective. It provides evidence as to why capitalism is so ingrained within working-class minds. If capitalist realism is seamless, and current forms of resistance are hopeless and impotent, where does effective change come from?

Political economists such as Mark Fisher, Marx, and Engels recommend a moral critique of capitalism. Poverty, famine, and war are presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that we can eliminate these forms of suffering is painted as naive utopianism. Capitalist realism is threatened when it is shown to be inconsistent or untenable; if capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort" (Fisher, 2009, 3). Despite this, we are in a moment when the inequities present in our Capitalist society are visible across the board. The potential for a moral critique of capitalism is feasible. Part of the reason this moral critique of capitalism is difficult to accept is neoliberalism's influence on the notion of individualism. David Harvey analyzes neoliberalism and its inception, which relied heavily on the type of politics espoused by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. As Harvey explains,

This entailed confronting trade union power, attacking all forms of social solidarity that hindered competitive flexibility (such as those expressed through municipal governance and including the power of many professionals and their associations), dismantling or rolling back the commitments of the welfare state, the privatization of public enterprises (including social housing), reducing taxes, encouraging entrepreneurial initiative, and creating a favorable business climate to induce a substantial inflow of foreign investment (mainly from Japan). There was, she famously declared, 'no such thing as society, only individual men, and women - and, she subsequently added, their families. All forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favor of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values. The ideological assault along these lines that flowed from Thatcher's rhetoric was relentless. 'Economics are the method', she said, 'but the object is to change the soul.' And change it she did,
though in ways that were by no means comprehensive and complete, let alone free of political costs (Harvey, 2007, 23).

This passage demonstrates the dismantling or rolling back of the commitments of the welfare state. With this coinciding with the push to individualize society and the way we interact as people, many working-class folks only had work and labor to rely on. It is understandable how this diminishment of the welfare state forced workers to buy into capitalism to survive with the hopes of one day working hard enough to achieve more. The only reliable and consistent source of resources was work - working to survive.

Precarious work in the United States is quite common. When it comes to restaurant work, it is particularly precarious due to the unpredictable nature of the business. Precarious work refers to work that is uncertain, unstable, and insecure. Employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections (Kalleberg 1, 2019). In the context of the pandemic, precarious work became more prominent and even riskier. Restaurant workers significantly heightened this precarity due to the increased precarity associated with tips, federal and state guidelines, and health risks. When restaurant workers were called back to work and Pandemic Unemployment ended, servers relied on tips, and restaurants were filled with customers to make money. The fuller the restaurants became; the more at-risk workers were to contract COVID-19. Grappling with this paradox exacerbates the precarity of money in the restaurant industry. With this classification, we can better understand the position of restaurant workers in the context of the economy and gain a more holistic view of the role employers/labor plays in the value of workers within society. In an unprecedented time for us all, restaurant workers were particularly vulnerable - the precarity of this work was only exacerbated.
The manifestation of social constructs in the restaurant

With this larger framework for understanding Capitalism, the economy, and why workers tolerate their treatment, a deeper understanding of the restaurant industry is explicitly necessary. For years scholars such as Eli Revelle Yano Wilson have analyzed the racial dynamics of the restaurant industry by comparing the experiences of White (Front-of-House) and Latino (Back-of-House) workers (Wilson, 2020). The differences between front and back of house workers are discussed and analyzed consistently, given the stark differences in demographics for each position. Front-of-house positions within the restaurant industry include servers, bartenders, managers, and hostesses, while back-of-house positions include cooks, dishwashers, and bussers. The differences between the two positions revolve around who is seen by customers and who is hidden and how compensation is given. Front-of-house workers typically work on salary (managers) or tips (servers), while back-of-house workers are paid hourly. The social division of labor in the restaurant industry is evident in the placement of primarily white men and women in 'Front of House' positions and the placement of Black and Brown in 'Back of House' positions. To complicate this a bit further, Wilson explains that,

This social division of labor results from management decisions and the worker inter-relations that bosses help structure. Through discriminatory hiring and supervisory strategies, management sets the stage for this dynamic in restaurants. Workers then play out the scenes each day, understanding their colleagues as members of distinctly unequal "teams" tinged with race, class, and gender differences" (Wilson, 2020).

He provides context to the relationship between primarily white, college-educated front-of-house staff and Primarily Black and Brown back of house staff. He also identifies how this is simply a microcosm that reinforces the separateness of race and class identities in the larger world. This
common theme of scapegoating and a lack of cohesiveness within the restaurant itself plays a huge role in the ability of the industry to continue being structured the way it's structured. With the shift in labor conditions caused by the pandemic, my research questions whether the working class is coming to terms with its oppression? What can be learned about the industry when studied as one entity within the larger economy?

In addition to racial dynamics within the restaurant industry, gender dynamics also provide another reinforcement agent for the social division of labor. Over the last 50 years, most of the scholarship has focused on gender dynamics in the restaurant industry and the commodification of womanhood within the service industry. Paules, for example, advocates for more credit to be given to women in the restaurant industry who take autonomy of their circumstances and control their wages to their benefit (Paules, 2011). I argue this reinforces the glorification of the restaurant industry. I believe that servers can maximize their emotional labor and management when trying to earn money. However, merely citing this as a form of resistance without critiquing the structures under which workers are forced to work does a disservice to those living through these experiences. Yes, there are ways in which servers make the best of their circumstances, but from my research, observations, and experiences, this causes harm to the individual and further allows for the exploitative structures of the industry to profit.

The Value of Restaurant Labor

With a concrete understanding of the interpersonal dynamics of restaurants, we would be remiss to talk about labor without compensation. In an industry that capitalizes off its individualized nature, compensation in the restaurant industry is the primary source of precarity – of course, we shouldn't overlook things like a pandemic – but the pay structure is precarious in
and of itself. The minimum wage for servers in the restaurant industry is $2.83 an hour, not including taxes (WGAL, 2022). When taxes are applied to this wage, it is non-existent, forcing tipped workers to rely solely on what they bring home each shift in cash. Tipping is a form of payment that removes the responsibility from the employer to pay workers and shifts it to an unreliable and ever-changing clientele. The earliest notions of tipping can be traced back to the late Middle Ages when wealthy estate owners would tip their servants.

In the United States, the history of tipping is inseparable from racism and labor force manipulation. Tipped jobs were designed by the Pullman company, which employed newly freed slaves to work low-wage jobs on the trains, which forced them to work for gratuity from those traveling (Tipping is a Legacy of Slavery, 2021). In a similar vein, tipped wages continued in female-dominated service industry positions under the assumption that women were not the primary source of income in the household. Over time, the tipped wage remained the same. Restaurant employees are consistently left out of conversations surrounding minimum wage, adjusting wages for inflation, and whether the employer should reclaim responsibility for paying their workers.

It is unclear whether servers are aware of the racialized and oppressive nature of the tipped wage. However, servers prefer that payment method because it is framed as if they have complete control over their wages. Michael Buroway's conceptualization of production activities through the concept of 'making out' helps evaluate how social relations manifest out of the organization of work (Buroway, 1979, 51). In my experience working in restaurants, one of the most common phrases used at the end of the night as each server counts their money is "How'd you make out?" This phrase refers to how much money in tips you could secure after a shift. Buroway's understanding of making out in the context of the manufacturing sector is analyzed as
a game metaphor. In this game, workers attempt to achieve levels of production that earn incentive pay, in other words, anything over 100% of their daily salary. Applying this analysis to tipping is very similar in that servers work harder, turn over more tables, and provide better service based on the amount of money they desire to make. A server looking to make the bare minimum in a shift will only take the necessary tables and complete a minimal amount of work. But in an industry where you rely only on your tips to earn money, participating in this game is more of a necessity - especially during the pandemic.

Servers go above and beyond to make additional tips and “make out” better than they would typically, leading to the overwork of restaurant workers while simultaneously overshadowing, masking, and even inverting the conditions in which it emerges (Buroway, 1979, 90). For example, Buroway mentioned that "When one is trying to make out, time passes more quickly – in fact, too quickly – and one is less aware of being tired" (Buroway, 1979, 91). Due to the glorification of restaurant work, it is often seen as a job that provides quick and easy money. Applying Buroway's theory of the game reaffirms the idea that this industry does indeed take advantage of, exploit, and capitalize off the commodification of restaurant workers themselves, just as Marx and Engels described in their early theories. Within Buroway's framework, it is essential to shift the understanding from 'what do workers choose to do' to 'what do the labor conditions of the job make necessary for workers to do to survive. He discusses how consenting to these 'game' rules also acts as consent to the conditions imposed by capitalist structures. He states, "…we do not collectively decide what the rules of making out will be; rather, we are compelled to play the game, and we then proceed to defend the rules" (Buroway, 1979, 93). In combining the previous two points, not only are workers subjected to the rules of the game, but
by participating, they uphold the very structures that impose their oppression. Can this cycle break?

In applying these technical frameworks and theories to restaurant workers, humanizing workers' experiences alongside them is essential. Additionally, recognizing alternative modes of knowledge production provides my research with an added layer of context to further support my arguments. The podcast *This American Life* recently completed an episode focused on a restaurant employee named Shelly, who narrates one of the many experiences working in restaurants where her humanity was questioned. Shelly has been employed in the restaurant industry for more than ten years, and it was not until she put on what she referred to as her 'COVID Goggles' that she realized how terrible the treatment she was experiencing was. When describing an interaction with a customer, she mentioned, "... she rolled her eyes and continued to talk to the other woman at the table. And it was just a reminder that, like, I am not a human to her. I have never been a person to her. I am just someone out of her world that doesn't deserve to be treated like a human being" (*This American Life*, 2021). She described how she copes with these increasingly common situations, referencing her disassociating from the experience and acting as if it did not happen. The pandemic only exacerbated this feeling, and the dehumanizing feelings translated into feeling disposable. I tie this closely to compensation within my theoretical framework because within capitalism, the value of one's labor is measured through compensation. Regarding the restaurant industry, the value of labor is very much decided by the customers due to their hands-on role in the industry's structure and the restaurant, which still profits off the servers. These circumstances lay the foundation for what I am looking to answer in my research. Are people fed up? What mechanisms are servers turning to cope with their
circumstances? Like Shelly in the podcast, are all restaurant workers putting on their COVID Goggles?

**Service with a smile**

One of the reasons I argue workers in this industry should be paid more is the overlooked concept of emotion labor. The restaurant industry relies heavily on employees' emotional labor to continue to make profits. In addition to this increase intangible work, aesthetic and emotional labor, the backbone of the restaurant industry, was still expected and became much more challenging to perform. When discussing aesthetic and emotional labor, generally, we fail to focus on the connection between this form of labor and the restaurant industry because of the immediate association between food and restaurants. Aesthetic labor is the screening, managing, and controlling of workers based on their physical appearances based on the idea that women's skills are just as commercially valuable as their technical skills (Barber, 2016, 627). Emotional labor follows the same idea as screening, managing, and controlling workers based on their feelings and emotional abilities. Emotions have been commercialized for the corporation's benefit so that workers manage their "authentic" feelings of exhaustion, frustration, and anger to smile at, defer to, and ultimately produce happy customers (Barber, 2016, 628). For example, the following conversation was recounted by a 21-year-old female-identifying server in an interview.

Server: Hello Sir, what can I get you?
Customer: I'll have a beer, and for my main entree, I'll have you. *Winks*
Server: Hahaha, unfortunately, I am not on the menu today.6

Rather than addressing the uncomfortable interaction that had taken place, the server brushed off the comment and continued to put the customer's comfort and experience above her own. This

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6 Gianna 21-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
provides a clear-cut example of the emotional labor expected to come from servers to improve the overall experiences of guests under normal circumstances. As you can see from this example, emotional labor was very much present and a prime method for profit in the restaurant industry before the pandemic. Additionally, emotional labor falls more heavily on women in this industry, as alluded to in the ethnographic work completed by Paules. However, this should not take away those men who also participate and utilize emotional labor within this industry.

The pandemic provided quite a twist on emotional labor, given the mask. The adjustments that were made by servers to uphold the "service with a smile" mantra in restaurants were astonishing. To combat the lack of a smile, servers noted using increased hand motions, such as a thumbs-up, a higher-pitched voice ironically to "sound more sincere," and in some cases, physical touch despite the social distancing guidelines. The "service with a smile" mantra relies heavily on the emotional labor of servers; through my observations and experiences, servers began seeing a decrease in tips with an increase in emotional labor required for the job. 80% of servers have reported a decrease in tips with an increase in sanitation responsibility and the requirement of a more intentional aesthetic and emotional labor process (UC Berkeley, 2020). Many servers, including myself, found the mask to act as a barrier to their participation in the aesthetic and emotional labor needed to receive tips. Interactions with customers became quite weird. I had to learn different methods of communication with my customers given that my personable, smiley, and familial way of interacting with people was now seen as dangerous and impossible. Between trying to make customers feel comfortable, providing good service, and enforcing rules and regulations in the restaurant, work became much more exhausting than I had remembered prior to the pandemic. Restaurant employees are tasked with providing a welcoming and warm atmosphere as they are being put in harm's way. Controlling oneself and
compartmentalizing the experiences you are going through to adequately foster this environment is no easy task.

Erving Goffman's theory of the presentation of the self in everyday life is crucial to understanding the mental and emotional toll service work, and restaurant work takes on a person. He breaks down the presentation of the self into two distinct phases, "front stage" and "backstage." "Frontstage" refers to a performance put on when you are in the public eye or expected to act a certain way. The presentation of the self on the "front stage" is heavily influenced by what society and those around you expect and demand you to be. "Backstage" refers to who you are when you are not in the public eye, a more relaxed and authentic version of yourself (Goffman, 1967, 4). Restaurant work employees are forced to be on the "front stage" for emotional labor at a much larger rate than the average person. The exhaustion associated with this takes an enormous mental and emotional toll on the person. Throughout my research, I will refer to this idea of the true self versus what is expressed to understand how this industry profoundly affects workers.

When people pay to dine in a restaurant, they also pay for the experience. The success of their experience is contingent on the server catering too much more than their food needs. It is naïve to claim that workers can be themselves and dictate their personalities 100% of the time while working in a customer-facing position such as restaurant work without drastically affecting their standing with their employer or their money. Emotional labor in the pandemic requires much more from restaurant workers. The usual expectations apply, but there is also an element of creating comfort and compensating for the inability to complete the standard "service with a smile" mantra under pandemic conditions. This research serves as an extension of emotional
labor in the sense that it analyzes how it has shifted and what servers do to work under these conditions.

**Division of the Working Class**

To understand how capitalism is ingrained into every facet of our lives is to understand the role that the white working-class plays in upholding these structures. The political influence implored to support Capitalist structures explains why the working class, specifically the white working class, tolerates exploitation with the notion that this is how life is supposed to be. White men, to who the American Dream was promised, are increasingly desperate to achieve something that is simply out of reach (Kimmel, 2013). In Angry White Men, Kimmel asserts that we must consider the rage of this 'forgotten' group (white working-class men) and create solutions that address the concerns of ALL Americans - erasing this differentiation between the white working-class and the rest of the working class. This idea is directly applicable to the primarily white workforce of front-of-house restaurant workers. Although about 70% of the front-of-house workers are women, these insights apply to both male and female-identifying servers. Similarly, 60% of front-of-house workers are white (Zippia, 2022). We are now often seeing a version of "Feminism being white supremacy in heels" thus, Kimmel's theories are beginning to encapsulate the viewpoints of many white women (*When Feminism is White Supremacy in Heels*, 2018). Exploitation and crisis are undeniable in capitalism but are widely accepted by many working-class, specifically White Working-class people, who expect to receive more with hard work.

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7 This refers to the idea that Feminism, and specifically white women center themselves as opposed to those most vulnerable. Feminism in this state ignores conversations of race and class (Intersectional Feminism).
On the topic of work ethic, Kimmel expresses, "When it is revealed that no matter what you do, no matter how hard you work, those dreams are for Disneyland, they morph into a tragic American Everyman, defeated by circumstances instead of rising above them(Kimmel, 2013)."

Kimmel investigates what he refers to as 'aggrieved entitlement and deciphers why white men specifically believe they have had benefits snatched away from them that they rightfully deserved. Servers turn to blame customers of color, low-income customers, and cooks for the tips they earn instead of the structure of the industry they work in. Using Kimmel's analysis, we gain an inside understanding of labor conditions in restaurants that explain everything from interpersonal relations, tolerance of the work, and the draw to restaurant work in general. Given this information, the denial of exploitation and the acceptance of these conditions is still quite difficult to understand. Sarah Jaffe explains that "Exploitation is not merely extra-bad work or a job you particularly dislike. These are the delusions foisted on us by the labor-of-love myth. Exploitation is wage labor under capitalism, where the work you put in produces more value than the wages you are paid are worth. Exploitation is the process by which someone else profits from your labor" (Jaffe, 2021, 17). Given their social position, what do restaurant employees believe regarding the economy? Who do they blame for their hardships if anyone/thing? How has the pandemic shed light on the inevitable flaws of living in a capitalist society? Sarah Jaffe's understanding of exploitation can broadly shift viewpoints and perceptions of labor.

All these false promises and notions of entitlement feed into what Arlie Hochschild defines as the "Great Paradox." This concept helps interrogate just how confusing it can be to understand why workers accept their circumstances. How can those who are suffering in conditions that are almost unlivable support systems, governments, and politics that directly contribute to their demise? Through her ethnographic research and her idea of an empathy wall,
she understood why, for lack of a better description, poor white Americans are conservative. The sense of competition within the economy and the reliance on scapegoats is prominent (How the ‘Great Paradox’ of American politics holds the secret to Trump’s success, 2016). This competition mimics the structure of the restaurant industry. In this perceived competition, it is assumed that those who are ahead must have "cut in line" or cheated their way up the chain. This dynamic facilitated the idea that since these opportunities were "taken," the blame should be on those who took them. This concept of how to live an honorable life that is defined by hard work helps contextualize the opinions and ideologies present in the primarily white, working-class restaurant industry. The unhappiness present in the lives of restaurant workers yet the sheer focus on defending it is a "Great Paradox" in and of itself. With increasingly terrible working conditions and a more prominent acknowledgment of the unfairness present, in what ways has this "Great Paradox" shifted?

Understanding cannon scholarship on these topics framed my ways of thinking through this project. I structured my interviews, completed my analysis, and integrated my own experiences based on the theoretical framework established above. As readers move through each chapter, connections to the theoretical framework will become apparent through narratives, quotes, and analysis. Overall, my goal is to put this work forward as a critic of capitalism and the restaurant industry, as well as to classify the everyday decisions made by the working class as products of the systems, we live in. Additionally, given the framework on restaurants themselves, I argue there should be more. Let this framework serve as a foundation while the interviews and narratives speak for themselves.
CHAPTER 1: Façade of care and the onset of the pandemic

The restaurant industry has continuously operated on this basis—now, it is only worse.

The exploitative structures within the restaurant industry existed before the pandemic, and the hardships of restaurant employees before the pandemic have only been exacerbated. Before the pandemic, servers were making a tipped wage and experiencing the inconsistency of money across the board. Workers received harsh and dehumanizing treatment from coworkers, managers, and customers. The industry is historically known for its low quality of life while simultaneously upholding a I of ease, flexibility, and care. This low quality of life is evident in the anecdotes shared in the introduction that emphasizes just how juxtaposed my thoughts and experiences regarding the industry were. I argue that this I is detrimental to the well-being of employees. Despite the individualized and autonomous work experience portrayed in such high regard, the restaurant industry is in dire need of reform and a reprioritization of people over profit.

If this façade of care exists to uphold the industry’s glorification, what exactly does it look like? When I was looking for my first job, I was drawn to applying to restaurants, given my parents’ experience. I sought after the false notion that I would have control over my pay, and I typically enjoyed talking with people, so I thought, why not? When I started at a small 24-hour diner, I worked three days a week: Sunday, Monday, and Wednesday night, otherwise known as the slowest nights of the week. I realized my three $30 shifts a week were not cutting it, and I needed to start working busier shifts. As I made myself more available to the restaurant in terms of scheduling, they began to take more and more. I was grateful for the opportunity to quickly move into busier shifts that were “only given to the good servers.” I quickly worked late-night shifts and upwards of 40 hours a week while still in school. I was exhausted but took pride in that
I did so much for my place of work. I was reliable and hardworking, which made my bosses happy – I took pride in my work ethic. Taking pride in my work ethic in this way is now one of my biggest regrets, but even though it is a regret, I am still trying to work through how much control I had over these circumstances, if any. I had to work hard and be reliable to make the amount of money I had which was ultimately just enough to get by. This façade of care only furthered my exploitation; it was almost impossible to see while entrenched in it.

The following story shows just a slight glance into working as a server and the conditions I worked in. I once worked a Daylight savings time weekend – the clocks jumped backward an hour at 2 am, giving bar hoppers an extra hour to drink and party. That Friday, I finished school at 2:15 pm and immediately went to softball practice. I finished softball around 5:15, and even though I was late for my 5 pm shift when I had practice, my manager allowed me to work the shift still. Then, I saw it as a favor; he looked out for me because he knew I needed the money. I was an asset to the restaurant, and my being late was worth the fact that I would then stay until 3 am. This experience is one example of my workplace’s many tactics to uphold this I of care. The reality is that restaurants will put up with anything if you remain beneficial to their profits.

I arrived at work around 5:45 pm and was immediately thrown into a dinner rush. As one of the overnight workers, I oversaw making sure the dinner shift workers finished their side work and cleaned up the restaurant. I received no additional compensation for taking on those responsibilities. I knew once it hit 10 pm and I still had five tables that it would be a long night. I continued to take tables until about 3:30 am that night since late-night rushes are so unpredictable. By the time I got home, showered, and fell asleep, it was almost 6 am – I had been up for 24 hours. My brother and sister needed a ride to a school function, so I was up around 11 am the following day. I went back to work at 5 pm for my next 5-3 am shift. The dinner rush was
steady, an average shift until about midnight when we got slammed with only three servers on
the floor. I continued to take tables nonstop until about 4:45 am despite my shift technically
being over at 3 am. On an 11-hour shift, my sales were $1600. I sold $1600 worth of food in a
small, family-owned diner where the average cost per person is probably about $10. The
expected tip on each table is 20%, so if I break down my sales with a 20% tip, I should have
expected to walk out with $320. Unfortunately, I walked out with $150 and a headache so bad I
could barely keep my eyes open to drive home. I made about $15 an hour, which seems like an
excellent wage for a senior in high school, but how backward does that story sound? Not only
did I have an increase in responsibility to ensure that the restaurant was kept clean and prepped,
but I worked far past my scheduled time as a minor. Additionally, I was catering to drunk adults
who ran me around like a chicken with its head cut off. All for a measly $5 tip and often an
inappropriate comment about my smile. I blamed the customers who didn’t tip enough, not even
thinking that my job put me in this position. It is my job’s responsibility to ensure that I am
adequately compensated. All that at the age of 17. All of that for me to sleep Sunday away and
come back to work for my shift at 5 pm the next day. When did I do my homework? When did I
rest for the upcoming school week? I didn’t.

In addition to my experience working in the industry, I am also the daughter of restaurant
workers. This positionality gives me a unique perspective on the effects of the industry on my
family and my mom. As I mentioned, I worked at a local 24-hour diner, and when my mom was
looking for a job, she came to that same diner to work. She started with night and day shifts but
was quickly forced to work overnight shifts because they were the only hours offered to her. At
first, she was okay with the shifts because it allowed her to be home with my siblings and me
during the day. Those overnight shifts were detrimental to her physical, mental, AND emotional
well-being. It was not easy to watch. She despised going to work and was miserable during every hour of every shift while barely making enough money to support our needs. When asked the manager to decrease her overnight shifts, he would continue to schedule her despite her pleas. She eventually left the job to pursue other opportunities, but for the time that she worked at Purple Years, I barely saw my mom outside of our shifts together. I saw the distinct changes in her personality and ability to function as a human while also going through the emotional turmoil of working in restaurants myself. Since this experience, she has vowed not to return to the industry despite liking the interactive aspects. The negatives severely outweigh the positives. I am glad she could see through this cost of care to prioritize herself.

I tell these stories to provide a foundation to understand my questioning of what is fair and just under capitalism. As a senior in high school who did not have the ability and TIME to question her circumstances, I reflect now, and I am mad. I am mad that this was an everyday experience for me growing up, and I am mad that this is an everyday experience for working-class people across the United States. I went from an exhausted waitress who thought work was doing me a favor by being lenient with me to someone who recognizes the harm this industry indeed caused me. It is bigger than the industry, though. Despite coming to some of these realizations as I went through college and began to think about my place in society, I still had no choice but to continue working to support myself through college. The restaurant industry’s hold on me puts how controlling and demanding work is. I use these experiences to help question why workers continue to accept the conditions in which they are forced to work and how they survive. Are workers in the industry coming to the same realizations that I did? How has the industry shifted in the context of the pandemic? What role did the pandemic play in these realizations, if any?
Before continuing, I want to explain a bit more about what I mean when I use the phrase ‘I of care’. As I mentioned, growing up, I saw the restaurant industry as something reliable and supportive, which drew me to the industry in the first place. Even while working, I felt like I owed the restaurant something as they gave me so much. My employer could not have cared any less about my well-being. If I was there making him a profit and drawing customers back into the restaurant every week, it did not matter. This intentional classification of a reciprocal relationship made the industry and work seem two-sided. We are not family, and there is an obvious delineation between the exploiter and the exploited. There is a lack of care from our employers and reciprocated care from the customers, which is evident in customer employee interactions. 7 out of the 13 interviews that I completed spoke to the idea that one of the worst things about working in the industry is the dehumanizing and terrible treatment that servers get from customers. This reinforces this individualized idea that it is up to employees to care for themselves. Caring for themselves in these conditions means doing what they can to survive.

**The Journey to Being Essential**

On March 14th, 2020, the Pennsylvania State Government ordered all restaurants to close for in-restaurant purchases and only allowed Carside/to-go options(Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, 2020). Like many restaurants across the United States, restaurants in Pennsylvania laid off all workers except managers because they wanted employees to qualify for unemployment. Although this initial move by employers seemed well-intentioned, the reality is that the restaurant industry's profit was facing a record low - employers did not want the responsibility of compensating their workers. More than 2 million U.S. restaurant workers were laid off at the start of the pandemic in 2020('There’s nothing I wouldn’t do at this point',...
2020). Let's take a moment to think about this - 2 million workers who typically work shift to shift - are applying for unemployment benefits simultaneously, along with millions of other workers from different industries, with an average approval time of 4-6 weeks UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES. We cannot undercut the sheer uncertainty and distress that workers and restaurant workers felt. It is important to note that 40% of restaurant workers live in poverty — only emphasizing that they rely on a day-to-day payment with their tips to support themselves. There was no prioritization of lower-wage employees who did not have the same access to savings and emergency funds.

Notice the stark difference in unemployment rates when comparing the restaurant industry and the private sector. All these restaurant employees were applying for unemployment at the same time.

Initially, the order was stated to continue through March 27th, 2020, but we quickly recognized that this pandemic would disrupt our lives for more than two short weeks. With mixed messages and unclear estimations for when the restaurant industry would open and when the rest of society would return to normal, restaurant workers were left in a void with little to no answers. From March 17th, 2020, until the end of April, the only contact that my employer made with employees was in an email from our Vice President of Human Resources. In this email, he stated, "In the meantime, during this time of REDUCED HOURS, we want to help you claim
any benefits that your state allows, including unemployment compensation. Most state
unemployment agencies provide compensation benefits for reduced hours. "We want to help you
claim any benefits that your state allows" - with public libraries closed and some employees
having no access to computers. My employer made no effort to assist employees in submitting
unemployment claims. Most state unemployment agencies provide compensation benefits for
reduced hours. Thankfully, Pennsylvania did, but what about those who did not? The
subsequent communication from my employer came three days later, informing employees that
they would be placed on "laid off status" effective immediately to avoid issues with the state
unemployment regulations. This decision followed three days of confusion and, in many cases,
pure distress and panic. A month later, they sent an additional email stating, "As some of you are
aware, as we prepare for reopening, we are starting to recall team members on an as-needed
basis." My employer prioritized "Reliable" and "productive" workers during the phased opening
rather than those who needed to get back to work.

Can anyone give me insight on some help on grants or
anything since I don't qualify for unemployment this is
ridiculous.. I bust my ass to be told im part time so I ain’t
worth the funds to help

Facebook Post from a server support group from April 2020

In Pennsylvania, Governor Wolf implemented a phased reopening per county that allowed
counties with lower positive testing rates to begin opening. For my case study, dining inside
restaurants remained closed until June 6th, 2020 (only opening to 25% capacity) in the county of
study (Governor.pa.gov, 2020). As workers were brought back to work on a more permanent basis, there was a mix of emotions present. It was difficult as some were eager to make money again, while others were genuinely afraid to expose themselves to COVID-19. 40-hour workweeks in the restaurant industry meant 40 hours a week spent at the highest possible risk of contracting the Corona Virus. For $2.83 an hour plus tips, hospitality workers across the country are putting themselves at a much higher risk to support themselves and their families financially. Despite an increase in preventive measures required, employers put workers in danger and vulnerability to keep the corporations afloat. Eight-hour shifts in restaurants surrounded by people who sometimes forget or disregard the government-imposed social distancing and mask regulations created an increased exposure to COVID-19. One out of every two servers personally know someone who tested positive for COVID-19, while more than 40% of restaurant employees tested positive themselves (UC Berkeley, 2020). This ultimately led to increased exposure for their families at home. Since fear of exposure was not a valid excuse to continue collecting unemployment, it became a choice between decreased exposure and paying the bills.

When workers were brought back to work, business was slow, and people remained rightfully afraid to come out to eat. The Pennsylvania state government continued to caution people from dining in restaurants while simultaneously recognizing that the livelihoods of restaurant workers were reliant on business. While doing so, it actively took money away from those who earned a tipped wage. As a society, we needed to practice social distancing and abide by CDC guidelines to mitigate the spread, including paying workers to stay home, which was not practiced for restaurant workers. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, it was noted that "the best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is to limit both staff and customers in a restaurant. But the most viable way to meet razor-thin margins and keep a restaurant afloat is to fill a dining
room with hungry diners as soon as local mandates allow." (When it Comes to Indoor Dining, Restaurant Workers Face the Greatest Risk, 2021) Similarly, the most viable way to keep the bills paid and stomachs full at home is to continue to work and encourage customers to visit restaurants. The balance between the safety and well-being of restaurant workers while considering the stress that capitalism and the way our economy functions ultimately put on employees was unequal.
CHAPTER 2: Who would have thought it could get any worse?

Reflecting on my experiences as a restaurant worker during the pandemic has left me tired, confused, and emotionally drained. Using academia as an outlet to interrogate my experiences gives me a reclaimed sense of self-worth which I use to criticize and refuse to accept my previous experiences as usual. As I reflected on my experiences, it is easy to identify how working in a restaurant before the pandemic was difficult and unfair. Often, I found myself overworked, underpaid, taken advantage of, and frequently harassed by both coworkers and customers. Despite feeling the weight of these terrible conditions before the pandemic, the identification and acknowledgment of my struggles were not so concrete while I was going through them. The working class is inherently at a disadvantage when it comes to having the ability to identify and fight against these terrible conditions because we are often left with no choice but to undertake them. For some before the pandemic, the circumstances were unbearable, but for many, they were just tolerable enough to be worthy of acceptance.

The abuse and exploitation that faced restaurant workers were only exacerbated despite society having every opportunity to address it. Work responsibilities increased, safety decreased, money and compensation were unreliable, and the emotional toll on employees was more than ever before. With different experiences and industries taking the stage to discuss employee treatment, identifying, and documenting how labor conditions have shifted in the restaurant industry is vital. Through this chapter and the above categories, I will begin to parse out the experiences of 13 restaurant employees and my own experiences to paint a picture of yet another group of people who deserve more than they receive, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will contextualize the shifts in the industry first, followed by a discussion of the implications of these shifts and the direct effects on employees.
Time and time again…

When returning to work in June of 2020, restaurant employees didn't exactly expect their jobs to be the same as when they left in March of 2020. Still, they never expected the changes in physical responsibility to be as drastic as they were. All aspects of the job became much more complex and time-consuming. Capacity and schedules are among the many shifts that impact the ability of workers to return to any sort of ordinary circumstances. When restaurants in Pennsylvania opened back up after they were required to close for three months, they were only open to 25% capacity (governor.pa.gov, 2020). Opening to 25% capacity significantly decreased the number of tables servers had in their respective sections from five to seven to about three. With a three-table section, servers who were used to waiting on five to seven tables in an hour and a half period were limited to only three tables. Servers were expected to make the same amount of money they made before the pandemic with access to fewer tables. In a similar vein, restaurants typically make cuts (reduce the number of servers on the floor/send people home in a staggered manner) during shifts and allow some servers to work five to nine. In contrast, others work five to close because the late-night rush is not as busy as the dinner rush. Due to the decreased staff and the smaller sections, servers had no option but to work 7-8 hour closing shifts, which ultimately led to them making equivalent wages to a 5–6-hour shift. Gianna noted, "I worked a shift at the beginning of the pandemic where I worked 4 pm -12 am, and I made like $75. I used to make that on a 4 pm-9 pm shift, but I had to stay because we were so short-staffed, and to be honest, I needed the money." Servers who already worked strenuous hours before the pandemic were expected to work even longer hours to have a shot at making similar wages as before the pandemic.

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8 Gianna 21-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
More to do, more, more, more

Hectic schedules did not even include the immense amount of physical responsibility that was taken on by employees. The COVID guidelines specifically put an added strain on servers. Each table had to be a certain distance away from the others and was sanitized with a 3-step process after each guest left. The increased process between tables made the "table flipping" process much slower, resulting in fewer tables per server.

During the early summer, it was a lot harder. We had a lot more duties. We had to rack the silverware up differently, we had to separate the silverware in plastic bags, rather than putting it in a bin. We had to make sure the tables were extra clean. Not only did we have hosts seat the tables, but we had to wait for the sanitization on every table. So, it kind of took longer for the tables to be ready. So, it made servers less money.9

Gloves and masks had to be always worn, which did not consider the worker's comfort. In the ROC United Survey results, 41% of respondents noted that they were never given safety training or provided with the PPE they were required to wear, causing another additional expense (ROCUnited, 2021). One server even noted his struggle with incessant sweating due to the wearing of a mask and the refusal of management to turn up the air conditioning. After clearing a plate from a table, servers were required to wash their hands immediately, resulting in handwashing upwards of 50 times a shift. Servers could only carry two plates at a time instead of three, or four, leading to more trips from the kitchen to the table. For Carside Pickup food must be brought out on a tray or put into the back of the car requiring workers to physically touch and, in some cases, enter customers' vehicles. Franchise restaurants such as my employer hired sanitation specialists for the sole purpose of cleaning the restaurant. At the same time, servers, bussers, and hostesses were still required to sanitize and keep the restaurant cleaned.

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9 Alan, 26-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25th, 2021
In addition to cleaning/COVID responsibilities, the small number of staff present in the restaurant also increased physical responsibilities. Closing procedures typically left up to 15 people were now left to seven people. Running food and drinks was originally for eight servers and shifted quickly to three servers. The shared responsibilities of working in a restaurant increased immensely individually. When asked about whether responsibilities increased in the pandemic, one manager notes, "Yes, increase, increase, increase. A lot of PPE protection. Like booth dividers had to be put up, the bar dividers too. Just so a lot of safety stuff that had to get implemented which now is a waste of time because it's all gone. So, a lot of stuff that wasted my time." Relatedly, when speaking with the manager of The Pantry, he noted that since the restaurant had been established in the 1980s, this was a record year for profit. One can only imagine the increase in physical responsibilities that come with an increase and profit with a simultaneous decrease in staff.

Employers gave workers a good responsibility to ensure the restaurants could function with no additional pay. In Pennsylvania, many people praised the COVID-19 Hazard Pay Grant that would allow frontline workers to earn an additional $3/hour if they worked in qualifying industries. The qualifications are as follows,

Businesses, healthcare non-profits, public transportation agencies, and certified economic development organizations may apply for funding for employers located and operating in Pennsylvania within one of the following eligible industries:

- Healthcare and Social Assistance
- Food Manufacturing
- Food Retail Facilities
- Transit and Ground Passenger Transportation
- Security Services for eligible industries listed above and commercial industries that were not closed as a result of the Governor’s Business Closure Order

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10 Gabriel, 27-year-old, Hispanic, man identifying, manager, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
Janitorial Services to Buildings and Dwellings” (Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, 2020)

While restaurants were permitted to stay open under this "essential" narrative, they were not included in the Pennsylvania state government's definition of essential. Therefore, restaurant workers were never allowed to receive hazard pay or additional pay for the increased responsibilities they were forced to deal with.

Inevitability of COVID

Restaurant COVID-19 guidelines to "keep workers safe" – most either adding additional work or not possible in the work environment of a restaurant.

As we continue to live through this pandemic, we learn more and more every day about what we do not know about COVID. Everything from how it spreads to who is most vulnerable has continued to change over the last two years. Despite this continuity of learning and relearning, society continues to put vulnerable populations at risk for the sole purpose of profit and normalcy. During the height of the pandemic and to this day, the narrative regarding
restaurants opening claims to stimulate the economy and facilitate a return to normalcy. Masked behind the intent of helping small businesses by opening restaurants rather than providing financial assistance to those who needed it to keep their businesses open, the government decided who and what they prioritized more. Given this, servers are beginning to recognize their mistreatment and are naming their frustration. Workers were brought back to work in restaurants, but the government and restaurant's corporate offices did not care about the increased exposure they were putting their employees under. Despite mask mandates requiring customers to wear masks when walking to and from their table, masks obviously could not be worn while seated and eating. This led to an increase in exposure simply by coming to work. As aforementioned, hazard pay for workers was never enacted despite active conversations and advocacy to apply to this industry. Most regulations put into place in restaurants were centered around the customer's safety. As of late 2020, one out of every two servers personally knew someone who tested positive for COVID-19, while more than 40% of restaurant employees tested positive themselves (UC Berkeley, 2020).

In December of 2020, when vaccination distribution was in discussion, restaurant workers were denied access to the vaccines in the first two phases of distribution despite being seen as essential. Despite including many other essential workers in the first two phases of distribution, restaurant workers were an afterthought, further reaffirming that restaurant workers were essential yet expendable. In the CDC recommended vaccine plan, restaurant employees were classified as "other essential," meaning they would be placed in phase 1c for vaccine distribution (CDC, 2020). While other frontline workers were placed in phase 1a, restaurant workers waited two months to be eligible. Despite the CDC recommended timeline, the federal government gave jurisdiction to each state over how to distribute vaccines. Pennsylvania placed
restaurant workers in Phase 2 (Governor.pa.gov, 2021). This distribution plan ultimately required them to continue working while being exposed when they could have had access to the vaccine. The health and safety of restaurant workers were put on the back burner as the government poorly handled the complexities of vaccine distribution.

One interviewee recounted the time that he contracted COVID from work and was out of work for a month. He could not get unemployment because he got denied and had to rely on his savings to care for himself. His employer helped reimburse some food occasionally, but everything else was his responsibility, even though working in those conditions caused him to contract COVID. When explaining where he believes he contracted COVID from, one specific night when he first started working at a new restaurant came to mind. He waited on a group of men, probably about 10 of them, who were all unmasked and refused to put on masks when asked. He reluctantly waited on them and tested positive with severe symptoms about a week later.

The Tipped Wage

Given all this increase in responsibility with a decrease in safety, compensation was inevitably affected. The server minimum wage in Pennsylvania is $2.83 an hour requiring servers to rely solely on tips as their income. The general minimum wage in Pennsylvania is $7.25 an hour, allowing for some restaurants to pay their bussers, hosts, and other hourly positions as low as $7.25 (WGAL, 2022). Returning to work brought many regulars who came to visit their favorite workers leading to sympathy tips being very high during the first few weeks back to work. Many interviewees noted how special and validated it made them feel to have people go out of their way to acknowledge their hard work. Similarly, the essential narrative
came with an influx of support that quickly died down after the first two to three weeks that restaurants were open. Business was at an all-time low for dine-in sales, and servers often found themselves short tables. Media outlets were questioning whether restaurants would survive the low turnout phases but rarely was the idea that the employees may not survive discussed. (It quickly became difficult for employees to rationalize coming back to work when they were making more money on unemployment. Despite no way to rationalize this, it is essential to note that they weren't given a choice. One of the qualifications to remain on unemployment is that you are actively searching for job opportunities; thus, when employees were called back, they no longer qualified for unemployment. Many interviewees noted that they didn't have a choice but to return to work due to the potential threats to call unemployment, specifically to report that they were refusing the opportunity to work. The vilification of those who did not return right to work or those who took issue with being forced to go back to work is exactly where this laziness narrative came from.

Two interviewees who worked at the same restaurant noted that their managers strategically scheduled them with the greatest number of hours possible so that they could continue to receive unemployment benefits (the additional $600 a week). The managers knew that they were struggling to make ends meet by only working at their job and wanted them to have access to the additional money. Unfortunately, these instances occurred due to previous personal relationships being built and tenure in the industry. When reflecting on restaurants opening in June, one server stated, "Quite a few people didn't want to come back full time because they wanted to keep getting their government money. So, they would come back, and they would only work 20 hours a week for employment. Did I do that? Certainly." ¹¹ With the

¹¹ Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
ability to have a bit of control over their schedule, these two servers could work while remaining on unemployment - but this was not the case for most of the rest of the employees.

Eventually, as cases decreased, business began to pick up, but restaurants were so short-staffed that being stiffed and low tips due to unsatisfied customers were common. To no fault of the workers themselves, they were being punished due to circumstances completely out of their control, and the lack of understanding coming from customers was almost intolerable. Often being put in positions where, despite doing their best, it was not enough for the employer or the customer. They were left with nothing. In reflecting on my own experiences, I am reminded of a customer interaction that I recorded since I quickly became worried for my safety. It was a hectic night in the restaurant and to-go orders - I was working Carside. A customer returned upset with the quality of his food. He yelled and berated me about his ribs and my inability to effectively do my "simple and easy job." He mentioned how I do not deserve the very little money I make. Eventually, my manager came out and handled the customer seeing as I was visibly upset and was being very quickly pushed out of character. After the dispute was settled and my manager provided the customer with a refund, the customer proceeded to push a drink carrier filled with drinks in my direction - very forcefully - which caused them to splash all over the wall, floor, and my legs. I lost the tip that I made on that order, the customers I was waiting on witnessed it (and my reaction) and proceeded to not tip, and he threw my entire night off. I felt dehumanized. When your wage depends on the generosity of customers, it contributes to the overall precarity and unreliability of the industry. Restaurant work in and of itself is precarious, but given the pandemic, the precarity only increased.

This prime example can see this precarity and the simple lack of care associated with the restaurant industry. Before Christmas in 2020, before vaccines were widely distributed, we saw a
sharp increase in COVID cases. Governor Wolf in Pennsylvania decided two weeks before Christmas that restaurants would be closed for indoor dining for three whole weeks (governor.pa.gov, 2020). With little to no warning, an industry where most workers live shift to shift due to tips faced a nightmare experience. This left many families with little to no money for Christmas and immediate necessities. This action mandated by the state government, with claims of it being in good faith, sheds light on the extent to which those in positions of power have no true understanding of how the restaurant industry is structured and what a sudden decision such as that could do to a family. Decisions like this reaffirm the idea that all along, restaurants could have remained closed in June of 2020 for the safety of all people, but they opened, nonetheless.

Management as a tool of the system

Despite taking the brunt of it, servers were not the only ones seeing a change in responsibility. I interviewed two managers of a franchise restaurant to understand how the pandemic was perceived by management. From dealing with short-staff issues to implementing COVID-19 protocols, managers saw an increase in their overall responsibilities with no increase in their compensation. This provided a unique viewpoint where those in positions of power became exploited to another degree and forced to complete tasks on a level they were not used to. In feeling the effects of the pandemic on a very personal level, discussing topics such as the reasons workers were leaving the industry and how labor conditions have shifted in the context of the pandemic was quite illuminating. Despite this new experience of increased exploitation, the supposed higher status that managers hold continued to create a lack of understanding. Managers were still tools of the system despite being viewed as
In speaking with a general manager of a franchise restaurant who mentioned that in the year 2021, the restaurant made more money than ever before, he reflected on the reasons the economy is currently suffering and why the restaurant industry is experiencing a labor shortage. He reflects, "The economy is okay I guess, but you know it's gonna take a while to get back to where it was before the pandemic and until people get off their ass and get back to work. I think a lot of the reason the economy will stay stagnant, and we will continue to struggle is because people don't want to work." On the contrary, the restaurant advocacy campaign *One Fair Wage* reports that over half (53%) of all workers report that they are considering leaving their restaurant job with the pandemic. More than three quarters (76%) say they are leaving due to low wages and tips (*One Fair Wage*, 2020). Additionally, in research completed to see what could shift in the restaurant industry to make workers return or avoid leaving, 78% of respondents say a higher and fair wage (*One Fair Wage*, 2020). Additionally, with the decreased safety and increased harassment reported in the industry, the work is asking for far more than worth the tips and a $2.83 hourly rate.

Blaming the state of the economy on the fact that people simply do not want to work takes away any acknowledgment of the legitimate danger associated with working in the restaurant industry during this time. It also ignores that people are now gaining a better understanding of their worth and what they were sacrificing by working in the restaurant industry. Despite this being much more complex than a simple work ethic debate, many restaurant managers made statements like, "These are hardworking people, but they just saw an opportunity to— and they knew that they would get an offer when it all started again, so it's just— which to me is just disgusting. I'm sorry, but I mean, I'm old school, and I'm a dinosaur"

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12 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
(Stories from the Great American Labor Shortage, 2021). Just as this restaurant manager acknowledges, this point of view is an old-school but commonly held idea that we are obligated as workers to make sacrifices to save the industry and uphold capitalist structures.

With the separation between managers and other restaurant employees, when The Pantry closed in March of 2020, only managers were the ones to be kept on staff and receive pay because they were salaried. As the Carside business picked up, the four managers at this restaurant worked all the jobs. They got a taste of cooking, cleaning, customer interactions, and everything there is to be working on the frontlines of a restaurant. The average restaurant manager salary in Pennsylvania is about $56,000, higher than the average pay of all other restaurant positions. Since managers continued to make their salaries (more than workers would make on tips), the corporate offices of restaurants saw an opportunity to maximize profit by forcing managers to complete all the duties to keep the Carside business running. By not paying hourly employees, they would be taking on no additional costs. Masked behind the idea that corporations wanted to keep workers safe, they laid off all workers besides managers to absolve themselves from paying them.

While working, the general manager of The Pantry noted that they received no increase in pay despite working during the peak days of the pandemic in March and April 2020. When asked about receiving tips, he mentioned that all earned tips were supposed to be compiled into the Food Fund13, an emergency fund available to employees. As mentioned by the manager, "Corporate saw this as a way to pour more money into the Food Fund without it becoming an expense, but we took care of ourselves because we were working hard, if you know what I mean."14 From this, I gathered that despite the directions given by corporate, the managers felt

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13 A fund available for employees of The Banker to apply for emergency funds. Explored more on page 55
14 Kirk, 51-year-old, white, man identifying, Manager, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25th, 2021
they deserved more than what they were being paid for and took it upon themselves to keep the
tips that they rightfully earned – I agree. As salaried employees making more than the people
who typically complete those duties, they STILL did not feel they were adequately paid for the
work they were required to put into the job. This certainly puts into perspective just how
underpaid restaurant workers are, especially working under pandemic circumstances with no
hazard pay - not even restaurant managers on their salaries want to do the work. Both the
managers and workers deserve better.

We are family

An often-overlooked responsibility of managers is company culture. They create an
environment where people want to work – to the benefit of the corporation of course. Family
dynamics as a strategic mechanism for exploitation is quite common in restaurants. This
contributes to upholding the façade of care to attract and retain workers. Managers in many
restaurants have a way of creating what seems like a family when there is still an exploitative
relationship between those with power and those without. This was evident when interviewees
were asked questions about their relationship with their managers. Some were very upfront that
they disliked their management and wanted nothing to do with them, whereas others saw them
more so on their level. Based on my assessment, I acknowledge that managers in restaurants are
much closer to the servers and employees than they are to those in corporate offices. However,
they still hold the ability to differentiate themselves from the rest of the employees by separating
themselves and declaring the fact that they deserve more/are above the rest. Samantha, a server
who worked at her restaurant for over seven years, stated, "I associate them more with us. I don't
associate them with corporate. They're more personal with us, and we have relationships. We can
joke with them and stuff.”15 Although this may not be in bad intent on the managers themselves as all work under capitalism is exploitation, the restaurant industry does benefit from this family dynamic created in the industry, and positive relationships can be built.

On the other hand, these family dynamics can be seen as a threat to exploitation itself. As Penelope put it, “too much family dynamics it becomes easier and easier to say no to terrible working conditions.”16 As I was finishing up writing this thesis it was brought to my attention that the general manager of The Pantry had been fired. Subsequently, one of the other managers was moved to another location. The Corporate office of The Pantry sited insubordination and needing to break up the group at the restaurant. Managers at The Pantry looked out for their people, and I can’t help but guess this had something to do with the decisions made by corporate. Those managers that Samantha saw as “one of them” are no longer there.

**Tentative harm reduction restaurant style**

As aforementioned, The Banker, the company that owns The Pantry’s franchise I am employed by, has the Food Fund initiative. The Daisy Fund is a pot of money to which The Pantry’s employees can apply if they face hardship or have trouble paying their bills. Grants average around $200, and employees can only receive them once a year. At face value, one would listen to this initiative and admire the care that the company shows. When I think about the Food Fund, my first question is why employees are in positions where they do not have enough money to support themselves if they are working. These tentative harm-reductive solutions that held up the facade that restaurant workers were being cared for are not enough.

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15 Samantha, 46-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25th, 2021
16 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
This fund is advertised and often discussed when employers discuss what initiatives "great companies to work for" have implemented. Still, if we think about it - no great company to work for would have their employees struggling. Just as an example, at the start of the pandemic, Mason applied for a grant through the Food Fund out of desperation. When he submitted his application, despite noting he had no place to live and less than $60 to his name, they granted him $200, which took over three weeks to reach him. If this company truly cared about Mason, more effort would have been made to assist with his circumstances.

In a similar vein, initiatives like the Restaurant Employee Relief Fund provided grants to over 43,000 during the height of the pandemic, each estimated to be a couple of hundred dollars (RERF, 2020). With the rise of neoliberalism and the diminishment of the welfare state, charity took to the front of solutions for working-class people and people living in poverty. With poverty and hardships seen as an individual problem - the responsibility of everyone - charity and employee relief grants are more than enough in the eyes of the ruling class. This fund being one of the only forms of aid accessible to employees as restaurant workers, felt like a slap in the face. In addition to all these shifting conditions, the only form of aid felt like it was out of pure obligation, and most of us did not even have access to it.

**Restaurant Workers get sick too**

Decreased safety made COVID in the workplace unavoidable. While home for winter break in December 2021, I was able to return to work to make some extra money in between semesters. I walked into work for my first shift on December 18th, just as Omicron cases had started to increase in Pennsylvania. I was the only employee wearing a mask. Just that week

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17 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
alone, we had four servers test positive, and finally, two days before Christmas, the company I work for mandated masks. While I was working, one of my managers (a key holder, otherwise known as an assistant manager who was paid hourly) was sick with a cold. He tested negative on a rapid and a PCR test and continued to come to work while sick. This was not atypical for restaurant workers, who are often forced to come to work when sick, but it was even worse in a pandemic with the possibility of false negatives. I was distraught that he continued to come to work, being that I did not want to contract COVID and put my family at risk. In a conversation with him about why he was continuing to come to work, he mentioned that even if he did test positive for COVID, if the symptoms were bearable, he would still come to work. In probing this statement, a bit more, two themes caught my attention. First, he mentioned that he had no choice because he needed to make money, which was a genuine concern for those working in the restaurant industry given that sick leave is not available. He quickly followed up with that sentiment by questioning why he should care about getting other people sick when the government has no safety net for him if he becomes sick – he still must work. He said, “they don't care about me, so why should I care?” Grappling with these two very different attitudes left me a bit perplexed. On the one hand, the spoke of a lack of agency in his position – being forced to come to work in dangerous conditions and relying on his hourly job to live. On the other hand, he spoke as if he didn't care – if the government and society were not doing something to protect him, why should he make the conscious decision to protect others. It felt as if he acknowledged that he had no agency in his position while simultaneously acting as if he genuinely had a decision to make.

Attending a work shift while sick is a characteristic of the industry that existed before the pandemic, but it is more problematic with the spread of COVID continuing. In 2013 Saru
Jayaraman, a well-known organizer in the restaurant industry, began analyzing the experiences of restaurant workers and the unsuccessful fight for sick days, healthier safety conditions, and healthcare in her book *Behind the Kitchen Door* (Jayaraman, 2013). It is essential to understand the dynamics of being sick and disease spread before the pandemic to analyze the impact that the pandemic had on workers and how their practices shifted (if at all). Jayaraman exclaims, "When workers feel compelled to serve food while sick, they are at higher risk of suffering prolonged illness on the job, and customers are at higher risk of contracting foodborne illnesses" (Jayaraman 60, 2013). She then mentions that the CDC has cited restaurants as the third most frequent setting for outbreaks of foodborne illnesses (Jayaraman, 61, 2013). Already workers were expected to come into work if they weren't VISIBLY sick, so not much changed during a life-threatening pandemic except for the mental and emotional toll these conditions took on employees.

**The politicization of the Mask and COVID protocols**

Restaurant workers were put in a challenging position where in many cases, they were responsible for enforcing COVID protocols in their respective restaurants to ensure their safety - the way I see it and felt while enforcing these rules is that I had to beg for people to care about
my safety. Nonetheless, when trying to enforce these COVID protocols, many employees noted feeling uncomfortable, often avoiding the enforcement altogether and allowing people to disregard them. Bianca Noted,

With the restrictions with COVID, it's our job to implement them and be like, 'Hey, I'm sorry you must put a mask on while you're doing this. And unfortunately, when alcohol mixes with that, people tend not to take it too kindly. I have seen that more customers feel as though they are entitled to certain things and get angrier much faster. Since the pandemic, I feel like people were more understanding that this is your job, whereas now they're like, 'Oh, it doesn't matter, these rules should not apply to me. I barely ever get to go out. It affects our money.'

Bianca brings up three key points that I think are important in understanding this politicization of the mask. Enforcing these protocols requires a very thoughtful and calm approach, especially since Bianca is a woman. Even with this kind and calm approach, she is still met with aggression around compliance—secondly, this entitlement and how it has grown since the pandemic. As I mentioned in the introduction of this, part of the reason restaurants opened was to give customers a sense of normalcy at the expense of the well-being of restaurant employees, and this only reaffirms the idea that customers should feel entitled to this experience under THEIR terms. Third, the implementation and enforcement of COVID protocols often lead to employees choosing between prioritizing their safety and their own money. One server noted, "Sometimes they let that affect their tip. Like if someone must be reminded to put their mask on a couple times, they are shown to like tip less. And it's not something that is a representation of what type of service or experience we provided them. It's just because they don't politically agree with

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18 Bianca, 23-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
the procedures that we have to implement.”¹⁹ The server then discussed how she sometimes avoids enforcing these protocols not to anger the customer and risk losing out on money. No worker should be put in a position where their beliefs and safety are compromised to make a wage.

Lastly, on a more serious and dangerous note, in some cases, the politicization of the mask has explicitly put service workers in danger. An 18-year-old female server stated,

>This might be like a personal fear of mine, but when I have a customer that's clearly on the right side of the political scale, like, you know, they're wearing a Make America Great Again hat or something, and I'm sitting there wearing a mask. I've literally been asked, like, does your boss make you wear that mask? Or do you do it because you want to? And like I don't know what to say to that. Because one, it's nobody's business but two, I'm scared that it's gonna affect how much money I go home with that day or even my physical safety. People will treat you like shit for stuff like that.²⁰

This response struck me because I completely resonated with the fact that not only am I worried about my money and my physical health due to COVID, but the political climate in the United States, especially around the utilization of PPE and masks, puts many service workers across other industries in danger. Frontline service workers throughout the pandemic HAVE BEEN KILLED over disputes around enforcing masking protocols. As a 21-year-old female (myself) and an 18-year-old female (Nova), we were tasked with enforcing these protocols on top of our already worsened responsibilities. Thankfully, the worst we experienced was a snarky comment here and there or an upset customer who eventually left. Still, we do not talk enough about the

¹⁹ Beatrice, 21-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
²⁰ Nova, 18-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
service workers that lost their lives simply asking for their safety to be taken into consideration - the toll this can take on the mental and emotional well-being is detrimental. Still, I do not believe we will not know how this affects people for quite a few years.

**The mental and emotional toll of forced expendability**

During the first few months of the pandemic, as restaurants remained closed, whether businesses – restaurants specifically – would make it through the pandemic was front and center. When looking at a world that quickly shifted to only essential services, with most of the world still not back to normal, it was quite a difficult concept to understand. Why was it so important that restaurants get back in business when it puts servers and other staff in close contact with 10s and 10s of people each day? Why were profit and a sense of normalcy for customers more critical than servers' physical, mental, and emotional health? Many servers, especially those who have left the industry since the pandemic, have experienced an increased feeling of being expendable. To contextualize what I mean by expendable, on the one hand, I define it as the feeling of being of little significance when compared to an overall purpose and, therefore, able to be abandoned (Oxford Dictionary, 2022). When opening restaurants in this way, with society knowing that the chance of contracting Covid-19 and dying was a genuine possibility, it is hard to think anything other than you are expendable.

Expendable labor is a concept that existed before the pandemic. Most low-wage jobs are considered expendable labor because it does not matter how many workers an industry loses; they will always be able to replace them, given the need to make money
and have a job. This is how essential jobs get away with paying workers such low wages.

An article published about the expendable, essential workers describe, "The hardest-working, lowest-paid people who indeed do the essential and thankless work of society are more accurately described as "expendable workers," easily replaced by others equally desperate to get by and thus not worth paying a living wage, let alone protecting from infection." Despite the notion of expendable labor existing, I argue that the essential narrative played a massive role in the realizations held by essential workers that they were, in fact, expendable. By this, I mean that we can all agree that restaurants are not in any way a necessity for society to continue functioning, so by classifying restaurant workers as essential, this expendable aspect became front and center because their well-being was not prioritized.

In many cases, this feeling of being expendable comes from the treatment at work, the inability to find other opportunities, AND the idea that you can be easily replaced (whether you leave or, in severe but realistic scenarios, pass away). Penelope affirms, "So yes, it can be soul-draining to work in an environment this toxic. You're stuck in a situation where you need that money. It's not like you can quickly job hop to another industry. Especially for me because there comes a time when people just don't want to hire you anymore because you're older. It's a combination of feeling bad about myself and the industry just telling me that I can be replaced."21 This feeling of being expendable is complex but felt by restaurant employees in every facet. As mentioned previously, we will not know the mental and emotional effects of the pandemic until the years to come. Even though we can confidently make that claim, it would be

21 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
naive to say this notion of being expendable is not actively harming employees on an intense level.

**Help wanted**

Given all the increased responsibilities and shifting labor conditions, one can critically think about why the industry would be so short staff… yet there is still quite some confusion. Since restaurants opened in June of 2020, they remained short-staffed, given the heightened risk and negative aspects of returning to work. Many people feared putting themselves in danger as well as exposing their families. With unemployment paying more than people were making while working, many people, like me, saw this as a much-needed break. In August of 2021, 4.3 million Americans quit their jobs which was the highest number since December 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). This mass exodus of workers is not original to the restaurant industry. Yet, the media has successfully painted the picture that we can blame only the lazy worker for the 'fall of the restaurant industry. In addition to an increase in quitting, slowed hiring is crippling industries such as restaurants due to the surge of the Delta variant, the danger associated with working during heightened cases, and the demand for more pay. One server in
Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, noted, "We're short-staffed, and that's everywhere, but we're managing," she said. "A lot of people don't want to come back, and some people don't want to come back into this profession again because, after the pandemic, they figure the restaurants, hotels, were the first to have to close down because they're in direct contact with people" (Restaurant owner struggles to find candidates as worker shortage continues, 2021). In October of 2021, the Department of Labor reported that the restaurant industry had 1 million fewer workers than it did in February 2020 but was seeing similar, if not increased, sales (Restaurant owner struggles to find candidates as worker shortage continues, 2021).

The restaurant industry worker shortage over the last year has made headlines in all major news outlets. The number one reason reported for the shortage is that workers refuse to return to work due to their unemployment benefits and simply not wanting to work. When restaurant workers were laid off and left with no choice but to apply for unemployment, most found themselves making more money than they worked 50-60 hours a week, including weekends. Even current restaurant employees argue that the industry is so short because of unemployment and laziness. My analysis of the conditions in the industry aligns far more with the following quote. "The question misses the point entirely. As a longtime restaurant worker, until the pandemic struck, I know plenty of former colleagues who've already returned to the industry. For those who haven't, including me, it's not unemployment benefits that are giving us pause: it's the feeling of being, well, over it" (The real reason there is a restaurant worker shortage, 2021). With the news and media blaming laziness and unemployment and frustrated employees who are being overworked due to staffing shortages – the negative stigma associated with refusing to work is very prominent. Unfortunately, it takes away the critical coverage that should focus on the legitimate reasons workers leave the industry, through my interviews and observations, as
well as the noted reasoning above, frustration with work, underpayment, low quality of life, increased exposure to the coronavirus, and dissatisfaction with the work. This hypothetical unemployment benefits and laziness excuse continues to prop up a system that prioritizes hard work and work ethic over well-being.
CHAPTER 3: The ongoing need to cope

In my original research plan, I intended to document the shifting labor conditions very generally to highlight the increased responsibility and stress associated with restaurant jobs which ultimately leads to a decrease in perceived value for restaurant workers. Upon completing my first two interviews, both interviewees mentioned drinking to tolerate the job, in addition to numerous other ~unhealthy~ methods of coping. This form of coping (the use of mind-altering substances) was disheartening. I was also familiar with its normalization within the restaurant industry before the pandemic. In February 2020, just before the pandemic, 11.8% of food services workers reported binge drinking during the last month, 19.1% of food services workers reported using illicit drugs during the previous month, and 17% of food services workers were diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder (Spate of overdoses hits service industry workers in Philadelphia who thought they were doing cocaine, 2021). The restaurant industry is known for the prevalence of substance abuse, especially in the context of the pandemic. In November 2020, Philadelphia restaurants saw a string of overdoses in bartenders who were under the impression they were doing cocaine. Three confirmed overdoses on shift were tied back to the same batch of laced cocaine (Spate of overdoses hits service industry workers in Philadelphia who thought they were doing cocaine, 2021). Utilizing mind-altering substances to make a shift more bearable is not as uncommon as one might think. In an interview with Penelope, she discussed coping mechanisms that she witnessed her coworkers use, and she stated, “Getting drunk and getting high. I mean, there were servers at Olive Garden that would go to the bathroom to snort a line of
cocaine just to deal with the shift, and I have heard them say that out of their mouth so it's not like we are making this up."\textsuperscript{22}

After completing my second interview with a woman who has worked for the same restaurant for over seven years, I received a text message stating, "\textit{Hey! I was glad that I got the chance to do that interview with you. I think it may have been important to note that I have been drinking more lately and that I really rely on it to get me through a shift. Before the pandemic, I never used to drink at work.}"\textsuperscript{23} This text message was unprompted, as, in my original interview guide, I did not ask questions regarding methods of coping and substance abuse specifically. After seeing this theme within my first two interviews, I continued probing that question. I asked subsequent interviewees what the most common coping mechanisms were for them and their coworkers (asked as separate questions) to see what else this industry demanded of employees just to make the work bearable. This shifted my research trajectory as I realized that it is crucial to understand why workers continue to work under these circumstances (and whether there is even a choice). It is also essential to understand how. I identified a common theme of mind-altering substances, absenteeism, escapism, refusal, pushback, and even quitting - leading to this short-staff restaurant phenomenon. Additionally, I recognized forms of resistance as vital coping mechanisms for many in the industry. In this next section, I will analyze the increase in the need for these types of coping mechanisms and how some manifest as forms of resistance.

In the best of times, working in the restaurant industry means working 5-7 shifts a week in a high-stress environment. Each shift comes with overwhelming responsibility and requires a sharp memory and continuous physical movement that frequently makes your feet ache. In

\textsuperscript{22} Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2021

\textsuperscript{23} Samantha, 46-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25\textsuperscript{th}, 2021
addition to the physical toll this job takes on you, the mental and emotional toll is just as, if not even more significant. In this consistently high-stress environment coping is always necessary and finding ways to continue not just working but living under these conditions is essential. In the context of the pandemic, employees have noted just how much more they need to cope has become a part of their lives. Over the last decade, self-care and coping have become a commercialized AND individualized concept. If you are not participating in the ways of coping or self-care that the mainstream 'social media influencers' oversee, you are not taking care of yourself or preserving yourself in an acceptable way. I argue that this is a critical social construct to dispel for the working class and, more specifically, restaurant workers. If restaurant workers must work to survive, essential self-care and 'healthy ways of coping' do not even begin to address the harmful structures they are working under. With that being said, I have identified methods of coping within the restaurant industry that make work bearable and some mechanisms acting as a form of resistance. In documenting the shifting labor conditions in the industry, it is also vital to analyze how employees use to move through these experiences.

Coping

Happy hour and ‘puff puff breaks’

Every restaurant employee interviewed mentioned using mood-altering substances (mainly alcohol and marijuana) to cope with the high stress associated with working. Eight of my thirteen interviewees mentioned that they participate in the use of mood-altering substances however showed hesitancy to reveal such information. For example, Astor, a server who worked at their family restaurant during the pandemic, mentioned a need to cope with the high-stress environment for 10 hours straight. They state, "I know this is bad to do, but at the end of the day,
especially the long days, I sort of started getting used to ending the night with a drink. I worked at the bar, so I knew how to make all the drinks, and it was just easy to take home a pina colada. I'm just like, I deserve this. I need this.”24 The emphasis on them being aware that it is wrong came from a similar place as the text message that I received from Samantha: a specific tone that alluded to the idea that it was wrong, but an acknowledgment of being deserving and the necessity to make it bearable. I am not arguing that the use of mind-altering substances is wrong; however, the reliance on them to cope with the stresses of the work environment is wrong. No job should put so much stress and pressure on a person that they feel obligated to escape.

A few interviewees also mentioned the sort of communal experience around the utilization of mind-altering substances. For example, Jacob, a 24-year-old ex-server who quit the industry just a few months ago, described his and his coworkers’ experience with coping as almost nonexistent. He said, "We don't really have time for many coping mechanisms, other than just like fuming on the ride home. But once I get home, I'm usually fine and just tired. In the industry, I noticed drinking and some drugs are very common as the only coping mechanism. Like after your shift is done, we all go meet at a bar, get trashed, and then do it all over again."25 Jacob mentioned that this happened at all 4 of the restaurants he had worked at. It is so normalized that no one takes stock of the reliance on mind-altering substances to deal with the stress. This is a before work, during work, and after work coping mechanism that is very much ingrained in the industry. When everyone is doing it, normalization makes it attractive - it is just part of the job.

24 Astor, 21-year-old, Hispanic, non-binary identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
25 Jacob, 24-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
Similarly, peer pressure within the restaurant industry also relates heavily to mind-altering substances and the social conditioning of substance abuse. Korczynski extends Hochschild's idea of emotional labor to analyze how employees lean on each other to cope. The experiences of many in the restaurant industry, including my own, include the socialization associated with drinking alcohol and smoking weed. There is an incredibly overwhelming need to fit into this coping mechanism due to the age differences present in the staff. This observation was then validated in an interview with a 23-year-old female server, Bianca. She mentioned that the worst part about working in the restaurant industry was the high stress that ultimately leads to peer pressure surrounding substance abuse. She was often encouraged to drink alcohol and smoke weed or cigarettes because that was the "normal thing to do". She discussed how impactful this was on her, being that she began working in the industry at 14 and grew up surrounded by it. Similarly, an 18-year-old server, Nova, who has worked in the industry for about two years mentioned that "the dependence on weed in the restaurant is bad." When asked if weed was smoked before, during, or after shifts, she said all the above, mentioning that she is unsure if people could get through a shift without it. She described them as "puff-puff breaks" which were taken frequently throughout the shift to collectively smoke and cool off between tables. This was such a standard method of coping in the community that it manifests as peer pressure in many instances.

**Absenteeism, Escapism, & Refusal**

One of the most frustrating things about working during the pandemic was that I never knew what additional responsibilities I would have to take on due to generally being short-

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26 Nova, 18-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
staffed or the absenteeism, escapism, and refusal that my coworkers participated in. I would often find myself working later than scheduled, working a shift with two staff members that should have had four, and even running food and helping servers who were completely in over their heads. During the pandemic, working in the industry meant doing extra work that may not be in your job description to keep the restaurant running. The industry's structure calls for a collaborative environment where one part of the job is not being done, and it profoundly affects others who may or may not even be responsible for that role. With that being said, the purpose of this section is to explore how these tactics were used as a coping mechanism for workers to survive and make the work bearable simply. Unfortunately, it is impossible to ignore how these coping mechanisms often only hurt coworkers instead of the restaurant itself.

I distinctly remember one shift where I was working Carside on a Friday night, and we were 18 pages back on our computer screen.

![Screen Showing Order Status]

The screen above shows what servers and Carside workers utilize to grab orders from the kitchen. The Red indicates it is taking too long, the blue indicates the cooks have begun cooking the food, and the green indicates that it is ready for packaging.
To give you an idea of what this means, multiply the screen above by 18 and imagine how long it takes for each of those orders to be cooked, separated, packed, and run out to cars. Each order should be cooked, separated, and packed in under 14 minutes, or our restaurant will receive bad reviews from corporate, leading to Carside workers getting in trouble. I worked this shift with two people, one running food and processing payments while I remained in the backpacking food orders with the help of one of my managers, who quite frankly kept handing me food that only made me more confused. Our service times were low, leading to a decrease in tips, and by the end of the shift, I was practically ready to cry. To make matters worse, when I thought I would leave at the end of the dinner rush, I had to stay until closing for Carside because the other employee working with me had come in earlier than me. This was entirely unfair to me, but I was practically given no choice on whether I could stay - I was expected to go above and beyond for others.

I didn't blame any of my coworkers for taking a break, not showing up to work, or looking for ways to cut corners to make the job easier for them. We CAN'T blame the workers. Everyone is trying to survive, and the reasoning behind the participation in or utilization of absenteeism, escapism, and refusal as methods for coping is because there is no other option. I think this is where the most blame on coworkers and the rest of the working class comes from through my analysis. In these situations, it is so much easier to identify one or two people as the source of the frustration because they did not show up for a shift they were scheduled for or do not work as hard as others. The real blame should be on the industry's structure and the factors that push workers to get to the point where they need to participate in absenteeism, escapism, and refusal. For this section, I will begin with a breakdown of definitions for what I mean by absenteeism, escapism, and refusal.
**Absenteeism:** The practice of staying away from work (no call/no show) or showing up late consistently

**Escapism:** The necessity to find a distraction or engage in entertainment to make the work bearable.

**Refusal:** To indicate or show that one is unwilling to complete a task.27

Absenteeism is equivalent to what we in the restaurant industry would call no call/no-showing. This happens way more often than you would think. Unfortunately, with the way work is structured in the restaurant industry, as you can tell from my narrative above, the workers who are most harmed by this coping mechanism are themselves. We must classify these no-call/no-show acts as coping mechanisms. Given the worsening conditions in the industry that were documented in the previous chapter, it is not surprising that people need coping mechanisms.

One server explained,

> I was one of the first people that was brought back/hired after the pandemic, and everything started opening. I kind of witnessed everybody coming back, I've seen a lot of people come and go for a lot of different reasons. We were short staffed, so they were getting scheduled way too many hours and couldn't deal with it, or they just weren't making money - people would not call/no show almost every day but we couldn't get rid of them because we had no one else. It always came back on us.28

The most challenging thing about absenteeism as a coping mechanism is the inability to direct the impact. We continue to see headlines about 'unreliable employees' and 'short, staffed restaurants,' but we fail to critique the conditions in which these workers are working, forcing them to utilize absenteeism.

Escapism in the restaurant industry can lead to uneven loads of work even with an entire staff of workers. Through my observations, escapism is a more common coping mechanism for younger restaurant employees. Escapism reinforces the very individualized nature of the

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27 All three definitions adopted from Oxford Dictionary definitions to apply to the restaurant industry specifically
28 Nova, 18-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
restaurant industry and encourages employees to look out for themselves. Within my interviews, I noticed a very intentional reliance on things like music, Netflix, and phone games to get through the shift. Some younger employees mentioned utilizing these outlets during shifts rather than 'picking up some extra slack.' This is quite interesting to put into conversation with the criticism from older employees of the work ethic of younger employees. For example, a 24-year-old Carside worker, Tammy, noted that she wears her hair as a sure way to keep air pods in during her shift to watch Netflix. When she is low on orders, rather than helping run food or assisting with other aspects of the restaurant, she watches a comfort show. This is frustrating to other employees, but it helps her work through the shift while still technically addressing all her responsibilities.

Escapism is also associated with customer interactions. Due to the reliance on emotional labor in the industry, many servers refer to customer interactions as a game. You cater your personality to the people and see how you can make the most money on each table. I was particularly struck by the reference to customer interactions as an acting class. One server noted, "I'm an aspiring actor. I want to be an actor, so I like being a server sometimes because I can be someone else. Every time I walk up to a table. I can be gay. I can be straight. I can be racist. I can be prejudiced. I am not actually you know but I could be anything I want to be, and I use that to my advantage. It's like an acting class with every table." 29 At face value, one would take this comment to be very ignorant and, more likely than not, judge the individual's character. Alan made a point to emphasize that these characters mentioned are not a genuine part of his personality - he is pretending based on the character. I argue that there is something to be said about how escapism as a mechanism for coping and getting through a shift at work facilitates the

29 Alan, 26-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25th, 2021
removal of and inability of a person to be themselves. My assessment of this method is that it is a direct response to the emotional labor demanded by the industry and the importance of customer service. If you must cater to the needs of people at a table, servers may as well make it exciting, and that is what Alan chooses to do.

What I describe as refusal is a more deliberate action against a specific power and in the context of the restaurant industry. Refusal within my observations and interviews came up in two specific forms - one in which employees are refusing to do specific tasks that the job requires and another where employees specifically refuse to do things that they did in the past. In the first, across my interviews, I noticed a trend of references to covid protocols and specific aspects of the job that were completed pre covid that are simply not followed because employees refuse. For example, a Carside worker described a covid protocol that required workers to bring food out to customers and physically open the cars of each person to place the food in the vehicle. This required more work, but it also required employees to spend a minute in a stranger's car to ensure the food was in a proper place not to fall. This seems like a small example, but the employee described it as something they refused to do despite their job requirement. Numerous other interviewees alluded to their refusal to take specific tables if they were aware of the regular customers not tipping. Jacob was particularly adamant about not taking tables he knew did not tip at his last job before leaving the industry. He noted that it was much easier to deal with the fact that occasionally tables don't tip before the pandemic. Still, since it was harder for him to make money more generally and his responsibilities increased, it was easier for him to refuse to wait on a table.30

30 Jacob, 24-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
In the second, employees refused to do things that they previously did. Mason, an employee in the restaurant industry for almost 30 years, discussed that much of what he did before the pandemic to make his work experience worth it, he now refuses to do. He spoke of going the extra mile for his employer and helping the restaurant itself to ensure his shifts went more smoothly. He stated, “I don't do the things I did before the pandemic, not only because they're not healthy for me, but they're also like, emotionally, professionally, and personally in pretty much every facet not good, it just wears on you…I refuse.” In a similar vein, restaurant industry employees who have been there for quite some time made many comparisons to the standard they held for themselves and the restaurant before the pandemic. It was often on the 'veterans' of the restaurant to teach the new employees the ropes and hold them accountable. The three oldest employees I interviewed mentioned that they refuse to take that responsibility anymore and focus specifically on making their money and taking care of themselves. For example, Samantha contended, "After we opened from the shutdown, I had to come back with an open mind because I was so strict before, but I just didn't have the energy. I am not more laid back, and I refuse to treat work so seriously. It's made the job a lot more bearable." She has decreased her workload by refusing to take on the additional responsibilities that she did before the pandemic while making the job more bearable. In this case, she feels some of the repercussions but has an easier time dealing with the pressure.

What I find most interesting about refusal is that the concept itself is very much identified by the employees themselves, not necessarily as a coping mechanism but as something that they need to do to make the work itself bearable. Classifying these actions as coping mechanisms is

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31 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
32 Samantha, 46-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25th, 2021
important because it shows how harmful the working conditions are that these tactics are so ingrained into the everyday lives of these employees. They don't think twice about their participation in absenteeism, escapism, and refusal because it is the only way to get through a shift; they do not have any other options. Working conditions should not leave employees with no other option but to rely on these mechanisms to survive. Work should not be this hard.

Scapegoats

Scapegoating as a coping mechanism/response to the conditions in which workers are placed is relatively standard. Through my interviews and observations in the industry, I noticed a constant need to blame those around us for our circumstances. My interviews revealed two types of scapegoating within the industry; one directed towards customers, and one directed towards coworkers. Employees utilize both methods of scapegoating to understand and make sense of their circumstances. There must be someone responsible for their hardships and lack of money, and it makes the most sense for it to be the people you are surrounded by daily.

Due to the collaborative nature of the industry, employees rely on each other for a good amount of work during a shift. From relying on bartenders and cooks to prepare food and drinks to other servers for assistance in running food, you always must wait on someone else to ensure you can complete your job to the best of your capabilities. Almost every interviewee had something negative to say about how their coworkers affect their ability to make money.

The worst part would be coworkers because they are not always up to par on my level. I need a bartender to make a drink, and then my tip relies on that bartender making that drink. However long the bartender takes relies on that bartender making that drink. However long the bartender takes to make the drink changes how much I get paid because it falls on me if it takes longer or is terrible—the same thing with the cooks. If the cooks take forever to make an entree, it will fall on me regardless. It gets a little irritating when they're not on their game, and they're just out for themselves. My living is based on tips. It's like they don't care
sometimes, and the food might take longer, or the drink might not be made, but ultimately it messes me over when it comes to my money.33

Two employees, the oldest employees that I interviewed with the most experience, saw each generation as a scapegoat, blaming the work ethic of the younger generation.

The worst thing is the coworkers. I just feel like the older I get and the younger the people that we hire, I see a huge gap in work morals and work ethic. A lot of the younger people that we work with don't have work ethic and are lazy, unfortunately. So that can be a pain because it then affects me and my money.34

You don't have a lot of support to help you do stuff because everybody's doing their own thing. And then some people are just lazy, but I don't let that stop me from taking advantage of the opportunity. The younger generation does not have the same work ethic.35

Alan, Samantha, and Mason critique their coworkers on their work ethic and what can be classified as a level of individualism, but the two older employees add this generational layer. Scapegoating, in this case, is successful in shifting the blame from the systems to the people, further dividing the working class when it comes to age as well.

The second most common scapegoat group is the customers. Due to the tipped wage, restaurant customers dictate the money that servers leave each shift. This causes a somewhat unreliable form of payment because no matter how great your service is, it is still never a guarantee that you will receive a tip. As mentioned before, the tipped wage comes from an inherently racist and gendered way of thinking. The consistent usage of the tipped wage is to keep the responsibility of wages away from the employers and only on the individual.

In the restaurant industry, I know that every right server I've talked to has a vendetta against Indians in the restaurant industry. And I have never had any

33 Alan, 26-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25th, 2021
34 Samantha, 46-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25th, 2021
35 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
prejudice in my body. But I do understand why because of their cultural difference, and they do like the same thing about white people, I am sure. Do you know what I mean? I do relate and see what you're saying. I think it is crazy because white people always think that they're better than everybody, and that's wrong, but I see why there is blame there.  

I don't always get tipped the way I am supposed to, but that's honestly because of where I am at. The Pantry and Pantstown. What do you expect from these people?

The worst thing about this industry is the people. They can be very difficult to deal with and entitled. Especially in this area. They don't tip or come in here demanding everything.

The worst thing about the industry is that customers decide your pay. Some people don't know that 20% is the standard, and other people literally don't care so it sucks that you could give great service and people still lowball you. They should know better since I just did all that work for them.

In reflecting on my interviews and coping methods, scapegoating was the most alarming. It showcases how frustrated employees are with their circumstances with no natural outlet to direct this anger. The reliance on scapegoating as a form of coping pins the working class against each other as opposed to placing blame on the systems and structures in which we live. To no fault of the employees and their chosen methods of coping, it is a mere symptom of Capitalism. Sociologists argue that scapegoating occurs between groups when long-term economic problems plague a society or when resources are scarce (Thoughtco, 2019). In this instance, the working-class restaurant employees are plagued by long-term economic problems that are only exacerbated by the pandemic.

36 Beatrice, 21-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
37 Pseudonym for town the restaurant is located in.
38 Alan, 26-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25th, 2021
39 Gabriel, 27-year-old, Hispanic, man identifying, manager, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
40 Bianca, 23-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
When resources and money are scarce, there is frequently blame on each other and those you are being put in competition with instead of blaming the structures. This phenomenon is used to the advantage of the ruling class because they are exempt from any harm being done. If the working class does not identify the problem as those in power, class divisions will hinder collective action and resistance.

We’ve had enough

In many instances, forms of coping with the circumstances created in the restaurant industry do manifest themselves as forms of resistance. Resistance in the industry can be split into two separate categories, individual resistance, and collective/organized resistance. Due to the segmented nature of the industry, resistance is difficult. With restaurants being run under different companies, minimal communication between restaurants, and state laws differing regarding labor laws and wages, it is nearly impossible for workers to get on the same page. In 2019 only 1.3% of restaurant workers were a part of a union, making them one of the two industries with the lowest unionization rate (Why don’t restaurant workers unionize?, 2019).

Workers, especially in the context of the pandemic, are finding ways to push back and resist the treatment they are facing. Two of the most common individual methods of resistance in the industry now are quitting and what I classify as pushback.

As referenced throughout the thesis thus far, the restaurant industry is facing record numbers in terms of job openings, and restaurants around the country are incredibly short-staffed. This short-staff phenomenon can be attributed to both pushback and quitting. Pushback as a coping mechanism is very similar to what I would classify as refusal. However, this also includes written and formal complaints to management and even corporate offices. In the context
of the pandemic, a few interviewees noted that workers are more willing to air their grievances with management and higher-ups to improve their working circumstances. When speaking with Penelope, a server who left the industry before the pandemic, she noted a stark difference between generations when utilizing pushback as a mechanism for coping. She stated,

They kind of brainwash you there into thinking that you must do what they say when they say and how they say to do it even though it may not have anything to do with you. Or you're gonna get fired. It's like that scare tactic. It comes to a point where I mean, especially if you're on the younger side like in your 20s, you don't know anything, and you're thinking you're going to lose your job, and so they use that against you all too often.  

Penelope was correct in referencing the scare tactics used in restaurants that often keep employees from asking for better. Based on findings in my interviews and my observations, I do believe this is something that is very quickly changing. Restaurants are finding themselves in positions where this pushback requires them to change some of their protocols. Otherwise, they will risk losing more and more employees. Jacob described a great example of this. He recalled a time when he ended up going above his managers in the restaurant to corporate because the shifts he was working were not adequately staffed, not because they were necessarily short staffed but because they wanted to save money on labor. This put him and his employees in a terrible position because they were very overworked and stressed during shifts. By going above management to the corporate office, they could get an additional server added to the busy shift. This is a prime example of employees joining forces and demanding something from the corporate office to improve their working conditions. Although small, Jacob noted it was beneficial.

41 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
42 Jacob, 24-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
Given the popular headlines questioning the ability of restaurants to survive, we would be remiss if we did not discuss quitting and leaving the industry as a form of resistance. The sheer number of employees leaving and refusing to continue working in the industry is alarming, and I hypothesize that with a continuance of people refusing to work in the industry, conversations around increased pay and better working conditions will be more legitimate. When I completed my interviews, one server, Jacob, quit the industry during the pandemic due to the problematic nature of the job and his inability to tolerate the treatment. He stated,

> It was a long time coming. I was good at my job, and some days were better than others. I don't know, I just found it harder and harder to go to work each day. Especially after the pandemic, when I returned to work, it was definitely harder. I didn't feel appreciated, and I was definitely undervalued. Not only by customers but also my job itself. It just really wasn't the same after that some leaving was kind of meant to be. Their loss.43

Under normal circumstances, pre-pandemic workers were much more replaceable than they are right now because the harmful environment fostered by the industry is a lot more known. Jacob was in a particularly privileged position as he was completing school while also working in the industry, allowing for other opportunities to come up for him to explore. For most, quitting requires having a backup plan or another opportunity at one's disposal, so this form of resistance is not open to everyone. Despite this, conditions in the industry have worsened to the extent that people are leaving anyway. This is only validated when put in the context of job openings in the industry. This puts restaurants in a position where they need to reflect on the conditions they are creating and explore alternative payment methods. For the next year or so, scholars of work and labor must

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43 Jacob, 24-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, December 18th, 2021
pay close attention to how quitting as a form of resistance transforms the industry. In such a segmented industry, could this possibly be a legitimate and effective way to resist?

**The fight for more**

As mentioned, organized resistance in the restaurant industry is quite difficult since the restaurant industry is so segmented. Unions are almost nonexistent within the industry, and there is no representative body organizing around labor rights within the industry. A few non-profit organizations and politicians have made it a goal to address working conditions in the restaurant industry. Still, none have been successful to the degree necessary for workers to see AND feel improvement. For example, lobbyists and advocates called for an increase in the server minimum wage, which is currently $2.83 in the state of Pennsylvania. In conjunction with advocating for a $15 statewide minimum wage, advocates have also called for this to apply to tipped wage workers (WGAL, 2022). If a server makes less than $30 a month in tips, they must be paid at least the minimum wage ($7.25) to make up for that money. This figure of $30 a month had never been adjusted for inflation since 1977 (WGAL, 2022). To adjust for inflation, the Wolf administration raised that figure to $135 a month (WGAL, 2022). Of course, a server working full time makes more than $135 a month in tips but in what world is that equivalent to a livable wage? Resistance and organizing around restaurant work demand more than they've ever given, and this is a prime example of just that. A government organization receiving praise for the VERY bare minimum. Nonetheless, therefore collective, organized resistance is more critical, especially in the context of the pandemic.
A Flyer for a virtual rally supporting restaurant workers in May 2020. No concrete policy was implemented because of this, but it was one of the first of its kind.

On a positive note, organizing in the restaurant industry is actively growing, especially in the context of the pandemic. With more and more employees naming their exploitation and feeling comfortable enough to share their experiences, organized resistance is becoming more of a possibility. The primary restaurant advocacy group is called Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROCUnited). Their mission states, "We work to improve restaurant workers' lives by building worker power and uniting workers of various backgrounds around shared goals and values" (ROCUnited, 2022). ROCUnited has been responsible for much of the documented experiences of workers in the industry and facilitating opportunities for workers and people in positions of power to exist in the same room to discuss what is needed in the industry. For example, they hosted a virtual rally in May of 2020 to support legislation put forth by senators to prioritize restaurant workers and provide a platform for workers to discuss their experiences.

In addition, ROC United One Fair Wage & Berkeley Food Labor Research Institute are also two very well-known advocacy groups that prioritize fair wages for restaurant workers and research to document the experiences of those working in the industry. Saru Jayaraman, an instrumental advocate for One Fair Wage & the Berkeley Food Labor Research Institute, is just
one prime example of someone who constantly participates in advocacy for this industry. One Fair Wage runs campaigns in 7 states to end subminimum wage pay (One Fair Wage, 2022). This refers to the idea that jobs can pay below the federal minimum wage if supplemented by tips. This removes the responsibility of the employer to pay employees - basically, the structure of the restaurant industry.

As mentioned above, organizations such as ROCUnited often partner with politicians like Elizabeth Warren and Rho Khanna to enact policy changes to benefit restaurant workers. During the height of the pandemic, Elizabeth Warren was known as the essential worker champion, first fighting for restaurant workers to be labeled as essential in official descriptions to have access to the benefits that entails, as well as for her work in creating and proposing the Essential Worker Bill of Rights (Warren.senator.gov, 2020). Senator Warren participated in virtual rallies and championed this bill in the Senate alongside Repetitive Khanna in the House of Representatives. This bill included worker protection measures, including but not limited to robust compensation, secure health care, and increased safety and preventive measures. The media attention around this bill did not last long, and there was virtually no chance of this bill passing and being enacted. I argue that the Essential Workers Bill of Rights was the BARE MINIMUM that the government could have done to provide workers with what they needed. Ultimately, besides raising some awareness, it was unsuccessful. Although unsuccessful, what I do find to be somewhat hopeful is that conversations around the restaurant industry are happening on a national level as opposed to a state-by-state basis. The biggest takeaway we can identify here is that advocacy around the restaurant industry is not often taken seriously.

Now, why is it not taken seriously? The National Restaurant Association is a national corporate restaurant trade lobby that funnels money to elected officials to stop common-sense
policies and legislation that would provide workers with living wages and benefits (ROC United, 2022). ROC United is very adamant about the fact that the NRA’s agenda is "to keep wages, especially tipped workers' wages, as low as possible, prevent paid sick leave, paid family leave, and health care reform, and stop a wide variety of other laws designed to protect people, the environment, and animals" (ROC United, 2022). The NRA's website states, "Both small and large, chain and independent restaurants across the country face several challenges in Congress, regulatory agencies, and the courts. As the voice of the restaurant and foodservice industry, the National Restaurant Association advocates for federal policies that help restaurants, and their employees thrive in a safe and prosperous customer-driven business environment" (NRA, 2022). The NRA’s agenda focuses on the economic well-being of small and large restaurant corporations. Their agenda is centered around profit, with people and employees taking a back seat. By identifying themselves as the voice of the restaurant industry and donating to campaigns of politicians who support their work, they are looked to by decision-makers to gain a better understanding of the experiences of those in the industry. Whether or not they receive an accurate representation of those in the industry is up for debate. ROC United's advocacy work directly attacks and criticizes the work of the NRA and fights to be taken just as seriously by politicians and those who are making the decisions.

In tandem with this organized advocacy, many restaurant employees are taking it upon themselves to look towards advocacy and organization within employees themselves. Despite the examples mentioned above of resistance existing closely within the systems that perpetuate these inequities, the possibility of resistance and workers' movements exists outside of organizations such as ROC United or potentially in partnership with. At the pandemic's start, workers were looking for comfort and hope to grapple with the collective tragedy they were experiencing. On
Facebook, the workers of *The Pantry*, a National Franchise restaurant, created a worker support group. In this group, employees were asked questions about everything from how to apply for unemployment, restaurant worker relief funds that were supplying grants, and return to work plans for different companies within the franchise. One particularly wholesome thing, but also disheartening, was the ability of all restaurant workers to relate to each other, find commonalities, and discuss ways to move forward. In June 2020, someone posted, "Now I'm getting between 25 -30 [hours] and don't qualify for unemployment or the extra 600....the extra money helped a lot, so now that I'm not getting it, I'm not making what I used to make so how am I supposed to live off this. What should we do about this?" (*The Pantry* employee support Facebook group, 2020). In a similar vein, in May of 2020, one employee posted, "Starting back on Monday. Hearing about COVID cases back on the rise while customers leaving shitty tips. Are we ready for a sick out yet?" (*The Pantry* employee support Facebook group, 2020). Each post led to 10s and 10s of comments agreeing in solidarity and expressing the need to push these concerns up to corporate employees. People were willing to band together to support these exploitative and unfair structures, but no one employee had the resources or capacity to push this any further than a conversation. Even within the same franchise, the segmented nature of the restaurants ultimately led to difficulty in organizing. Additionally, employees from this company were faced with punitive repercussions, including but not limited to being fired, due to posts in this Facebook group that exposed what was genuinely occurring within the company. Since early 2021, the Facebook group name has been changed to "The Board of Trustees at *The Pantry* Restaurant" and is almost nonexistent. Yet again, the ability to organize was deemed impossible due to the suppression of voices.
Where I think the pandemic provides us with a unique possibility is the uplifting and protection of workers' voices in advocacy frameworks. For example, ROCUnited, One Fair Wage, and Berkeley Food Labor Research Institute have all done an amazing job gathering survey data to map the shifts in working conditions in the context of the pandemic. I argue that fostering more collaboration and centralizing the voices, anecdotal evidence, and experiences of restaurant workers makes a more compelling argument against harmful policies supported by the NRA possible. Resistance and organizing in the industry are a tricky feat in and of themselves. Still, with a mass exodus of the industry, we have a unique opportunity to capitalize on this and draw attention to what is happening in the industry. Sometimes resistance is a form of coping and channeling your energy towards improvement allows for substantive change and healing.

**What does the ongoing need to cope mean?**

Each coping mechanism listed above has become more utilized and more necessary in the context of the pandemic. Chapter two documented how the industry's labor conditions have shifted; therefore, chapter 3 focuses extensively on what employees are doing to continue working through these conditions and to allow themselves to survive. Given the extent to which employees are trying to work through these conditions, there are grounds for calling for change - there was before, but even more so now. The pandemic's added stress and dangerous conditions are pushing people to a breaking point. Some utilize healthier coping habits, while others turn to harm themselves and their well-being just to make it through. Some manifest as forms of resistance, while others make the shift more bearable. From this analysis, we understand just how harmful the industry is and the dire need for change.
CHAPTER 4: A Tale of Two Servers

Part of what I am looking to argue and showcase in my research is that academia has so much to learn from the experiences, decisions, and opinions of those living through the things we study. Untapped knowledge goes unnoticed because we intellectualize everything and fail to see the critical analyses and ideas right in front of us. In conversations with my coworkers at work, we were able to collectively think about how our circumstances are harming us and the lack of autonomy over changing them. Therefore, we turn to methods of coping with keeping ourselves afloat. Throughout this thesis, I have documented the shifting labor conditions and identified how restaurant employees cope with these shifts. I now look to analyze why workers continue to work under these conditions. Two of the most fruitful interviews I conducted were with Penelope and Mason. Penelope and Mason were two of the oldest people I interviewed, 49 and 52 respectively, who had the most experience in the industry. Both provided amazing insight into the everyday experiences of restaurant workers in multiple different settings. They both recounted difficult times when they found it almost impossible to keep themselves on their feet despite working hard. After many years, Penelope has left the industry and vowed never to return, while Mason has remained dedicated to the industry for almost 30 years. I use these two interviews as case studies to understand what pushed Penelope to leave and encouraged Mason to stay. I will compare the ways they understand their relationship to the industry to understand the perceptions of different workers. Why do workers continue to work under these conditions, and what alternative do they have? I did not expect to conclude based on the limited research I was able to complete within the time frame of this thesis, but I do believe there is much to learn from studies like this.
Mason - dedicated to the industry

Mason is a 52-year-old male who currently works at The Pantry. He has been employed as a bartender for over four years. With just under 30 years of restaurant experience total, Mason is a dedicated restaurant employee who sees the industry as a place where thriving is dictated by your work ethic. He classifies the industry as a very individualized experience that can be dealt with through hard work and dedication. Despite naming instances of frustration, acknowledging the low quality of life associated with the industry, AND the increase in responsibilities associated with the pandemic, he believes there is an opportunity for everyone in this economy and sees work as a rational duty that everyone should be able to complete. This is such a common way of thinking in this industry because there is no alternative in sight(similar to Jaffe’s idea of work realism). My interview with Mason stuck out for three primary reasons, 1) his pain and dissatisfaction with the quality of his life, 2) his simultaneous upholding and praise of the industry(façade of care), and 3) his criticism of other employees as lazy with a lack of work ethic. I chose his interview as a case study to explore because of his extensive experience and dedication to this industry. I question: How does he identify terrible circumstances while providing praise? How does he acknowledge how hard his job is while calling his coworkers lazy? Why does he feel he has to put himself through this to survive? What is the difference between living and surviving?

As someone who has worked in the industry for about 30 years, I was not surprised when Mason noted that he was very satisfied with the structure and his experience working in the restaurant industry. He purposely went out of his way to defend the industry when asked about his satisfaction with his time in the industry. This says a lot about what he sees as his relationship with his job.
I don't think it's as bad as the perception that people are given through the media and people that aren't in the business. Being in the business just really isn't nearly as dire or abusive or taken advantage of people think. I make my money off my guests, I make my money off the extra things I do and my performance in the restaurant, which certainly holds you to a certain level, but I hold myself to a higher level. And I've always done well because that restaurant business, and I continue to do well with it during the pandemic and take advantage of the opportunities that are there to make more money.\textsuperscript{44}

This quote reveals a few key things as we unpack Mason's relationship with the industry and his work. He begins by directing his criticism toward the media and the negative perception that the industry has in terms of being unfair to workers. Instead of acknowledging that there could be different experiences across different employees and employers, his statement debunks the idea that there is unfair treatment to the extent that people claim(something that is prominent in other interviews as well as news articles). There is a certain level of blame and disassociation in his statement and the subsequent ways he talks about HIMSELF making the situation work, whereas his coworkers were not. He holds himself to a higher level; therefore, he is different. I am intrigued by how by differentiating himself from the rest of the employees, he is tricking himself or allowing himself to believe that his circumstances are not as dire as they are. Sociological imagination plays a key role in understanding the context that shapes individual decision making, Mason denies the circumstances in many ways.

It is essential to understand Mason's position when the pandemic first hit. He mentioned that he was housing insecure at the beginning of the pandemic and struggling to make ends meet. Even with working 60-70 hours a week, he struggled to take care of himself and provide himself with necessities. He emphasized that this was not the first time in his life that he found himself in this position while working in the industry. When he applied for unemployment, it took months

\textsuperscript{44} Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12\textsuperscript{th}, 2021
of back and forth with the Unemployment office to approve the application, ultimately requiring him to turn to Instacart as a source of income. He recounted stories of waking up at 6:30 am so that he would call right at 7 am when the offices opened to sit on hold for a few hours because everyone was trying to talk to someone. If he were lucky, he would talk to a real person about his application status. He experienced the diminishment and unpredictability of the welfare state firsthand. Mason did have time off like many employees did when restaurants shut down because of his lack of savings and could not rely on unemployment. He was very quick to mention that although the quality of life was rising to the top of the list in terms of priorities, it would never surpass financial incentives - because this is what he needed to survive. There was no question of quality of life if he could not provide himself with the basic needs. Despite identifying the many struggles, he is facing, he believes it is normal and acceptable treatment. He acknowledges that to make money he should be making; he must complete extra things and go above and beyond workplace expectations to please customers and work for tips. He strategically utilizes the emotional labor aspect of the work to get himself to make enough money. Meeting the minimum requirements to work in the industry and make enough money is thus not possible. As a somewhat clever entrepreneur, he capitalized on business opportunities and commodified his personality.

There is no mention of how his employer benefits from this attitude. Mason's attitude and desire to go above and beyond ultimately provide his employer with a server that draws customers back for more, increasing their profits and bringing in additional customers. Since servers are customer-facing, their service is a commodity like food. Due to the individualized nature that Mason uses to describe the industry, he is making himself unaware of how his employer is benefiting at the expense of his well-being, all for him to make adequate money.
In addition to his defensive comments regarding the industry, he named many frustrations related to the pandemic. He mentioned his realizations that came with the pandemic's extra weight allowed him to reflect and prioritize his quality of life a bit more than he previously did. He shared,

I think when you're in other industries, and other positions, quality of life is a lot more of a focus, just because it allows you to focus on it. It's not eating up your holidays and weekends and all sorts of different things. You don't really focus on that very much in the restaurant business. I think since the pandemic, that quality of life issue has become more important to me personally, but it's not as important as the financial rewards. But it certainly has come close. I found myself being a little bit more aware and in tune with that.45

Given his comments upon returning to work in June, he prioritized his mental and emotional health by cutting back a bit and allowing himself to prioritize his quality of life. He utilized refusal as a method of coping and began to refuse shifts, extra work, and going above and beyond. Listening to him speak, I question how much his inability to make the quality of life his top priority over financial rewards is a decision, given his need for money to survive. If any person feasibly could prioritize the quality of life, they would. I thought this was incredibly insightful, especially since Mason referenced his short sabbatical from the industry where he worked in the corporate world many years ago. He stated, "I came across an opportunity to go work for a property management company and sit in an office and work nine to five, have weekends, and holidays off, and all that good stuff. And it was actually very interesting, very educational, and eventually, it led to some financial stability as well."46 Despite this financial stability, he was laid off for personal reasons and found himself back in the restaurant industry,

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45 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
46 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
which felt familiar to him. Mason never used financial stability to describe his time in the restaurant industry.

Mason was also very willing to discuss the hardships that came along with the pandemic regarding increased work.

When people come into a restaurant, we also owe them a performance. Obviously, they want to eat, but they also want to relax and enjoy themselves. We are trying to get to that same level in a totally different environment where there's less staff. We are trying to do all these crazy insane sanitary things to prevent spread, so the performance of the job just became tenfold more. There are just too many damn things to do. 47

Despite a previous question acknowledging his ability to go above and beyond expectations to make the money he deserves, Mason then discusses his newfound inability to tolerate the demanding aspects of the industry, especially in the context of the pandemic. He mentions his active participation in refusal as a form of coping with the stress but does not criticize the work itself. I am left exploring why Mason is defensive when it comes to the industry and the criticism associated with it while simultaneously acknowledging the harm that has been done to him, especially in the realm of what is demanded from him. Much of this goes back to the diminishment of the welfare state and the feeling that there is no other option but to continue to move through these terrible circumstances. In all of Mason's hardships, because of this diminishment of the welfare state and the self-reliance that he had to cope with, the only things that remained consistent were his hard work and this industry - no wonder this facade of care upheld by the restaurant industry is so strong. From an outside point of view, we can identify how work does not and will not love us back, but for someone who had no choice, it can feel like love.

47 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
Regarding the economy and the impact of our economic system, he had glowing things to say.

I must use the word fair because I mean when you're talking about being fair; you're talking about opportunity. Is the opportunity there for people to adjust and do what they need to do to support themselves and make money? Yeah, the opportunity is always there, maybe doing something different or adjusting. They talk about all these things about retraining people in, you know, labor-oriented industries and things because of the way our culture and society has evolved and everything with computers and automated things. The opportunity is always there to change. So, it's there. I guess not technically for everybody, but there's enough people, you know, the opportunity is there for most people, you know, certainly there'll always be marginalized aspects of it, but it doesn't really mean it's not fair because there were other marginalized people in different circumstances. That smaller portion of people just shift where it [opportunity] is just like everything else, and it's just a huge shifting. So, it's fair that everybody basically has the same opportunity to do things.48

When reflecting on Mason's circumstances and the lifetime of experiences he holds in navigating the industry, public assistance, what works for him, and the quality of life he deserves – there is still an aspect of him that believes the opportunity is for everyone. The circumstances under which we live are normal. He then moves to this idea that it is not technically available for ~everybody~ as if this is normal and this is how it should be. This brings into question how ingrained capitalism is within our way of thinking and our inability to see past it. Opportunity must be always lacking for some people for this system to work. We could take what he stated in his last quote at face value and simply say that this man does not understand our current economic system and the impact that it can have on marginalized folks, but that would be naïve. Through Mason's experiences, he has been directly impacted by the unfair and exploitative structures that exist, as another interviewee stated, “...to keep the rich, rich and the poor, poor.”49

Through his hesitation and processing, we can see how he begins to question himself, moving

48 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
49 Alan, 26-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 25th, 2021
from an opportunity for everyone to an opportunity for most. What is it that Mason holds onto under these capitalist structures that do not allow for an imaginative process to envision something more past capitalism and the exploitative restaurant industry? How ingrained is this idea of working hard and individualism in his ways of being, and can we deconstruct that?

It's no different than it was two years ago. The economy was there for me. The opportunity to know, make money, and do whatever you need to do on you as well. It's just the circumstances, and the way people approach it and focus now has changed. It's there for everybody.50

A large part of it falls back on this idea of a neoliberal stigma. Neoliberal stigma encourages the working class to divide and refrain from any collective organizing. By emphasizing that poverty and unfair working conditions are individual issues, we self-blame and blame those who are struggling. Utilizing social categories to divide the working class is a strategic and intentional mechanism the ruling class uses to uphold social hierarchies. When the world is constantly telling you that you are the one in control of your circumstances and it is up to you to take advantage of the opportunities presented to you to change your circumstances, it feels like you have no choice but to believe it. The individualized aspect of existing and living is only reinforced by suppressing class consciousness. Therefore, we don't talk about our collective struggles or how the industry is harming all of us.

Mason has continued to work in the industry while actively looking for other employment. His current place of work, The Pantry, is “not like it used to be”51 He is struggling to find employment in another industry but is currently not making enough money nor is he happy. Mason’s frustration is very real, and like I have been saying – he deserves better. Studies

50 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
51 Mason, 52-year-old, white, man identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, October 12th, 2021
such as this should continue to understand where people like Mason end up as the pandemic continues to unfold. Mason has such important knowledge and so does the rest of the working class.

**Penelope – Will never return**

Penelope, a single mother of 3 kids, worked in restaurants during high school and continued working in restaurants after high school because it was "quick, easy money." She has spent about 12 years in the industry throughout her entire professional career. She left the industry because it was not conducive to raising kids but returned 15 years later when her kids were older. She stated, "I needed to be able to make quick money like I needed to have cash in hand to be able to pay bills and keep a roof over my kid's head. I was barely making it. But at least I had cash in hand, which meant I wasn't waiting two weeks to get a paycheck that was already spent before I got it."\(^{52}\) She worked in the restaurant industry for another three years and finally quit by walking out of a shift and never returning. Although this research aims to document and analyze the shifting labor conditions in the industry in the context of the pandemic, Penelope's interview provides essential insight into the process it took for her to be fed up, and her only option for coping and resistance was quitting. This process is something that more and more employees across the industry are coming to. I chose her interview as a case study to compare to Mason because 1) her ability to deconstruct capitalism, 2) her outward criticism of the industry and gratefulness to be out and, 3) her acknowledgement that she still does not have complete control, but she knows she deserves better. What happened to Penelope that shifted her relationship with the industry? How are Penelope’s circumstances better now?

\(^{52}\) Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
Penelope left the industry before the pandemic and expressed her gratitude for the decision.

When everything shut down, I was glad that I was not in the restaurant business because how are you going to prove that you were making the money you were making to file for unemployment. I'm so glad, literally it was four months before the pandemic that I left the restaurant business. **I don't know how my family would have made it without if I had stayed in the restaurant business.**

As someone who went back to the industry out of necessity citing the consistent money as an appealing factor, she also acknowledged that the inconsistent nature of the money and industry would have caused her family to struggle deeply during the pandemic. It was challenging to listen to her discuss her simultaneous gratitude for not being in the industry but her empathy and disappointment for those stuck in it. Penelope was very willing to discuss her unhappiness and sheer disappointment with how she was treated by managers and customers while not being paid an adequate amount for what the job required of her. "It's absolutely insane that you have to act a certain way with people who treat you like crap most of the time just to get a few dollars from them that doesn't even cover anything. It's just like you have to do this over and over and over (Penelope)."

As aforementioned, she became quickly fed up with the stress and hardships that restaurant work caused and eventually hit a breaking point, causing her to resist and quit. "I mean, I walked out, and I quit. I just never went back. But I saw many people quit while I was there as well, and I know people are doing that at a much higher rate during the

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53 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
54 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
pandemic, too. Penelope could no longer tolerate the industry, and this was her way to cope – quitting.

I found Penelope's interview to be particularly moving due to her mentioning what she refers to as an “awakening” that she had about 3-5 years ago when she finally snapped out of the illusion that the economy we live in is fair in providing equal opportunity to everyone. I think this awakening prompted her breaking point in the restaurant industry. Since Penelope was able to see through this facade of care upheld in the glorification of the restaurant industry, she refused to tolerate a good amount of the mistreatment she was receiving. I was curious about her utilization of coping mechanisms during her time in the industry. She continued to work in the industry after having what she referred to as her "awakening."

When asked her opinion about the larger state of the economy, she did not hesitate to criticize it and name what she saw as unfair.

It sucks. It doesn't work. It doesn't work. I mean, the upper-class people want to sit there and say, well, poor people need to get jobs, and they need to, you know, do this, and do that. But yet, people are out there doing those things. And they're still stuck being poor. So, what gives? I mean, minimum wage sucks—employers suck. Everybody's out to make big bucks no matter what. And they don't care who they hurt. I mean, I'm a little bit bitter, but I've been there. I know."

She directly identifies the upper-class as being in a position where they constantly criticize, yet they make it impossible for upward mobility and improving your conditions to happen. She was the only interviewee to acknowledge that the working class works hard and tries but is stuck in the working class. Other interviewees acknowledged the unfair aspects of the economy. Penelope named the feeling of being stuck while

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55 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
56 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
debunking the idea that a strong work ethic and hard work can fix your circumstances. Additionally, she refers to hurting others in trying to better their positions. In my analysis, this realization that she has had is monumental because it allows us to see how the working class is slowly but surely recognizing the importance of others. I hypothesize that as people begin to have awakenings like Penelope, collective organizing and pushback will be more feasible.

She continued,

There are so many things that could be different here. That would make things so much easier for everybody who is going without. It is 2021, and we still have people in the US who go to bed hungry every day. Like what is the reasoning behind that? Like, it makes no sense to me. So how is that fair? Like, it makes no sense. You gotta fight for basic human rights. Like, why? It makes no sense to me.57

Penelope went through life as a single mother with three kids blaming herself for the fact that her circumstances were simply not working out no matter how hard she was working. It was not until this awakening that she was able to take that blame away from herself and blame the systems we live in. Due to this realization, she began to refuse. She refused some of the treatment she was receiving in the industry and eventually found herself unable to tolerate it. She still finds herself living under capitalism and working a job that profits off her exploitation, but she is aware and able to push back. More generally, her experiences.

When asked about how the pandemic affected her views on the industry and the economy more generally, she responded,

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57 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
The pandemic just made things a lot more obvious to me, blatantly obvious. I think a lot of other people, too, because they had the time to stop and take stock of what was going really going on. I think I, along with a lot of people, realize that a lot of stuff doesn't work. Unfortunately, with change, it is one by one. It seems to be a minority. It's not, though; we just don't have the voice or the resources to be heard yet. But I think that people are starting to realize that things don't really work. The information that's coming to me tells me that there are a lot more people out there who are starting to realize that things are not really working and need to change. As opposed to me, I realized it maybe three years ago but had very little control over my circumstances – I still don't really have control, but I gladly see that people are realizing that there's a lot more to life than just working. We are living to work instead of working to live when we should not be working at all.58

This quote from Penelope embodies exactly what I want to communicate through my research. The pandemic has exacerbated social inequities in all aspects, and this is not something we are debating now. Specifically for the restaurant industry, we have seen worsening conditions in all respects. Penelope references the idea that a small number of people are fed up and starting to voice their dissatisfaction, but there are more people fed up, and it is not simply a minority. I thought her point about the lack of voice and resources to be heard was crucial. Towards the beginning of this section, I referenced conversations that I have had with my coworkers about the harmful conditions in which we were working. We knew they were terrible; however, none of us could do anything about changing them because we were focused on making enough money to survive. We didn't feel it was worth the trouble we would cause or the risk of losing a "decent job." We remain silent while those profiting from our exploitation remain in control.

However, in the context of the pandemic, along with Penelope, I believe more people are beginning to recognize their power and that these conditions need to change. She acknowledges that she still does not have control over her circumstances, given that she

58 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
is still living under capitalism, BUT she is aware. As more people become aware, the power of the collective will be enough. As Penelope notes, there is more to life than just working.

I prompted Penelope with questions regarding the recent narrative of restaurant workers being lazy and what led to the reasoning behind why the industry is so short-staffed now. Her response embodies her own experiences while continuing to criticize the structures that perpetuate harm against restaurant workers.

For those who say that you know, the restaurant workers are lazy. I'd like to see them work a double and see how they come out of that one in a restaurant setting. Why are restaurants so short-staffed? Because people don't want to put up with crap anymore. Like I said, when everything shut down, I think everybody realized that life's too short to give it all up to a job that doesn't care for you. Serving can be exhausting. Emotionally, mentally, not necessarily just physically, but like everything else. It can be very hard on you in so many ways. I would tell anybody who thinks that restaurant workers are lazy and to get paid what servers get paid and do the job for a day or two and see how they feel about it then.59

I find Penelope’s “awakening” to be a powerful representation of what is happening to many restaurant workers who are currently leaving the industry. She noted that the worst possible thing that could happen during this pandemic is that life goes on, and these circumstances don't change. Voices like Penelope's are so powerful and insightful in understanding the dynamics at play within the working class and how the strategic division of the working class removes any aspect of collective power and organizing. Right now, methods for coping and resistance are very individualized, but with insight like this, hope exists for a much larger movement.

59 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
They’re not so different

Coupling these interviews together provide insight into the very different interpretations and forms of coping necessary to exist within the working class and more specifically in the restaurant industry. Employees like Mason see no other option but exploitation and work - this is not unique to Mason. We prioritize a work ethic and provide necessities based on earnings, which is wrong in Penelope's eyes. As Penelope was elaborating on a response to a question regarding this idea of upward mobility and holding onto the idea that if you work hard enough, you can achieve what the ruling class has, she notes there is no other choice. If you do not believe in system change and cannot see past capitalism (capitalist realism), she says, "you have to think that way. Otherwise, what's the point of living? It's just too depressing."60 They both continue to live within capitalism, because there is no other choice, Penelope simply denies the exploitation she experienced within the industry.

Similarly, the views held by Mason and Penelope regarding the larger economy illuminate so much for us. Much like Hochschild’s great paradox, Mason believes the economy is fair despite naming his low quality of life and general frustrations. Penelope on the other hand, immediately refers to people going without, blaming capitalism. Both ways of thinking allow Mason and Penelope to move through their days and process their experiences. In thinking about these two interviews together, you get two very different opinions from people who hold valuable experiences. With this information, how do we improve their conditions?

60 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

“It is only when the routine daily struggle of the class explodes into violent activity against the bourgeoisie (the throwing of a foreman out of the window, the conflict with the police on the mass picket line, etc.), activities which require an overt exercise of their creative energies, that the workers feel themselves as human. As a result, the return from the picket line to the covert class struggle is even more frustrating than if the strike had never taken place. The molecular development of these offensives and retreats can only explode in the revolution which will enable the working class to employ its creative energies not only in smashing the old relations of production but also in establishing new social ties of a positive and creative character.”

- Ria Stone (Abolish Restaurants: A Workers Critique of the Food Service Industry)

What does the pandemic reveal?

We will not truly understand the magnitude of the pandemic's impact on our society anytime soon. However, through studies like this, we can see how conditions are changing and worsening. Workers identify and describe how their labor conditions have shifted in the context of the pandemic. A lot of this is directly attributed to the pandemic itself. The pandemic reveals that we need to pay more attention to the working class and the restaurant industry to learn from what we are doing. As Penelope imparted, "This pandemic will be especially sad looking back if we don't change anything because of it.”

The events since the onset of the pandemic reaffirm the idea that we live in an individualistic society that does not allow us to care about the well-being of others. I intentionally use the word allow because, as seen in the coping mechanisms identified by restaurant workers, we are forced to act in specific ways to survive. From my analysis, the pandemic illuminated how we need to reimagine what studying labor looks like. Questions like "Will the restaurant industry survive?" and "Why are restaurants so short-staffed?" are not difficult to answer. Of course, the industry will survive because they need to work will never go

61 Penelope, 49-year-old, white, woman identifying, server, interviewed by Ella Vetter, Coatesville, November 24th, 2021
away. The desire for profit will not disappear. Restaurants are short-staffed because the only viable coping mechanism they found was to leave the industry altogether. Restaurants are short-staffed because they do not pay enough. My research showcases coping mechanisms from substance abuse to scapegoating, and many like Penelope and Jacob simply cannot do it anymore, so they quit. Since completing my thirteen interviews, three interviewees have quit the industry and reached out to inform me of this, Penelope, and Jacob. Eight of the thirteen interviewees remain in the industry and rely heavily on alternative coping methods. With working conditions changing for the worse, this need will not disappear.

**My Take-Aways**

Compiling all the research presented in this thesis into a concise and straightforward conclusion is no easy task. Rather than coming to a concrete conclusion or assessment, I see my research as a call to action to study more. I have split my conclusion into three themes; the tipped wage, the massive need to cope, and the foundational aspects of this study encouraging more attention to this industry.

**Pay more**

The federal government must immediately raise the minimum wage for restaurant workers across the country. Humans should profit off the exploitation of others, but we need an immediate response to the lack of money being earned by restaurant employees. In every interview I facilitated, the employees mentioned that the tipped wage and the minimum wage for service workers need to be raised. Jacob even mentioned that if the pay were better and he made a higher hourly wage in addition to tips, then the work would be worth it, and he would have
stayed in the industry. Even employees who felt they could work in ways that would lead them to be adequately compensated still felt they were not adequately compensated overall.

Advocacy around the tipped wage is quite common, especially before the Pandemic. The $15 minimum wage has been a fight in the United States since 2012 (National Employment Law Project, 2021). A year later, organizations like ROCUnited and the amazing work done by Saru Jayaraman and her team at One Fair Wage led the movement to include subminimum wage workers in this advocacy. With people organizing daily to push law makers to enact change, this research serves as an irrefutable source for the necessity of raising the server minimum wage. Through the stories and direct references to wages in these interviews, to the increase in work responsibilities in an already stressful work environment, workers need more money immediately. Work won’t love us back, but at the very least, we need more pay.

**Endless coping**

There is an undeniable need to cope with working in the restaurant industry, and coping mechanisms are not the same for everyone. There needs to be a serious reprioritization of quality of life in this industry. Studies have shown the prevalence of substance abuse in the restaurant industry. Still, a more in-depth acknowledgment and analysis are needed of why workers act the way they do and the industry's implications on this. I argue that restaurant workers are just trying to survive their circumstances. Does this excuse racism? Does this excuse scapegoating? Does this excuse the explicit attempt of white working-class individuals to differentiate themselves from the rest of the working class? No. But it begs the question of what coping methods, blame-shifting, displacement of anger, and a distrust of the other are products of circumstances and yet another mechanism of capitalism that further entrenches us in the system.
I see value in looking at the deeper reasoning behind the decisions made by workers in these positions. It is incredibly disheartening to see workers every day fighting to get themselves through a shift to make ends meet. Simply classifying these actions as coping mechanisms is not enough. I hope that shedding light on how these decisions are made because of the need to cope will push us towards a reality where we are addressing the root of the problem. If this is happening for workers to cope – what needs to change, and how do we change it? Let's figure this out by centering the voices of the people experiencing this.

**Study more**

This research should serve as a foundation for open conversations about labor studies in such a segmented industry. Most of the research on the restaurant industry focuses on internal dynamics within the workplace. Still, few studies look at the industry to the rest of the economy and working class. I argue that the study of service jobs in the context of the pandemic and a deeper exploration of this essential narrative is vital to understanding labor conditions more generally and what

The scholarship coming out now regarding the industry focuses on the industry's financial security (primarily articles and economic assessments of the standing of the industry). I argue that there is a abundance of knowledge present in the people's minds this industry exploits. There is a certain level of responsibility academics must research in a way that gives them autonomy. By completing interviews and ethnographic research, the people most deeply affected by the pandemic and the working conditions in the industry are the focus as opposed to the industry's profitability. Academia in this current moment should call attention to this and utilize this research to advocate for a tipped minimum wage along with safer and more supportive working conditions.
My Thoughts

In reflecting on the research completed for this senior thesis, I found the data collected and the analysis of pandemic events to be rather disheartening. I knew moving into this research project that it would be a challenge emotionally to reflect on workers' experiences in this industry, given my own experiences and those of my parents. Despite this challenge, I saw it as a responsibility to call attention to this industry as an important area of study. Like all social inequities, the harsh and unfair treatment of workers in the industry was exacerbated by the pandemic, which is evident in the vulnerable stories shared in my interviews. During my analysis, this constant need to cope and find a way to live under these conditions became particularly salient. Due to this shift, I focused on documenting just how workers make it through their daily lives.

Studying a population and experiences that are close to you is difficult. I believe the most potent scholarship is produced by experts in the field who relate to the work they are studying because they understand the meaning of living through those experiences. Despite this, I didn't expect intellectualizing my experiences to be this taxing. As I reflect on where I see this research going in the future, it will always be a part of me, therefore at the forefront of my mind. I hope these stories shed light on the importance of completing additional research on the industry, especially as the pandemic progresses. My fellow restaurant workers deeply inspire me, especially the interviewees, through this research. It is not easy, but I hold onto their positivity, desire for something better, and willingness to tell their stories.

No concise conclusion just yet. This is ongoing and ever evolving. Stay tuned.
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