

Financial insecurity left hospitality workers more vulnerable to customer and management abuse during COVID

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Hospitality workers felt less able to challenge and negotiate bad practice or unsafe working conditions during the coronavirus pandemic, a new study shows.

Workers feeling less financially secure, particularly those on zero-hour contracts, said they couldn't raise concerns about health and safety with their bosses.

These findings have been released today, on International Workers' Memorial Day, as the international trade union movement calls for stronger health and safety protections for workers.

Workers who took part in the research also described how they were expected to enforce a range of frequently changing COVID-19 regulations, whilst protecting and distancing themselves. This sometimes led to aggressive confrontations from customers who disagreed with rules or refused to comply. This was a particular challenge when venues were especially busy and maintaining a safe distance from customers or other staff was described as impossible.

Some [hospitality workers](#) said their managers interpreted COVID-19 guidelines to maximize profit. For example, during the busy Eat Out to Help Out scheme, some were instructed to prioritize waiting customers over maintaining COVID-19 cleaning protocols.

The study shows the pandemic put a strain on work relationships, particularly between workers and management. Workers built better mutual support networks during this period, with some realizing the importance of trade unions and workplace organizing for the first time.

Project lead, Dr. Charlotte Jones, University of Exeter, said:

"Participants experienced significant mental health consequences due to the pandemic and higher workloads: anxiety about transmission; stress from work precarity and intensification, and from public health responsibility.

"Some participants no longer found work fulfilling or manageable. Their

[physical health](#) was often affected, and many reported extra unpaid labor at home due to COVID-19 precautions. They missed casual interactions with the public, which had been a major source of job satisfaction for some people in hospitality, pre-pandemic.

Safely preparing and maintaining hospitality venues has required a lot of extra work for staff, especially due to preventive health measures, such as the intensive cleaning processes enforced in some businesses. Closure of other essential facilities, such as public toilets, has made these venues particularly indispensable, and put greater pressure on hospitality staff."

Bob Jeffery, Vice-Chair of Yorkshire and Humber Regional TUC, added: "This research highlights the challenges for workers in hospitality, doing tough jobs, often on the lowest rates of pay and most insecure contracts. It is shocking to hear some of the behavior workers had to put up during the pandemic, from non-compliant customers, to some workplaces interpreting guidelines in a way that exposed their staff to greater risk. But given these workers' lack of bargaining power, can we really be surprised? This report simply underlines the necessity of building unions in a sector where workers rights are all too frequently violated."

The research for the project Beers, Burgers + Bleach took place between December 2020 and April 2021 with 21 hospitality staff who were working during the COVID-19 pandemic (including in restaurants, cafés, pubs, bars, and fast-food outlets). Participants kept a diary, where they wrote reflections on their experiences of hospitality work and cleaning duties. After submitting their diaries, they attended an in-depth interview.

The research team was led by Charlotte Jones, University of Exeter, alongside Lauren White, University of Sheffield, and Jen Slater and Jill Pluquailec, Sheffield Hallam University. The advisory group included

Ioana Cerasella (University of Birmingham), Martha Foulds, Bob Jeffery (Sheffield TUC) and Rohan Kon (Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise) and others who have chosen not to be named.

The report recommends:

- Employers should be required to provide protective equipment and undertake risk assessments in consultation with union reps.
- Effective trade unions are needed in all hospitality workplaces. Where possible, this should include health and safety reps.
- Employers should support hospitality workers who are experiencing abuse or harassment from customers and create formal protocols and a zero-tolerance policy to protect staff.
- For the safety of delivery drivers, customers, and staff, employers should facilitate delivery drivers' access to takeaway orders. Collection points and routes to facilities should be clear and easily accessed.
- Employers and governments should invite hospitality workers to give input on their safety, environment, and work tasks. Where possible, they should be granted democratic power and an active and involved role in decision-making.
- The health and safety of staff and customers need to be prioritized, even when this comes at a cost to the business.
- Hospitality workers should be given better pay and working conditions. They should be provided statutory sick pay protection with no lower earnings limit, at least at the value of the real living wage. Zero-hours contracts should be banned.
- In times of crisis, government furlough should be 100% of workers' income, at real living wage, and available flexibly for all hospitality workers for as long as circumstances are unsafe.
- Workers who have a high concern about transmission/health and safety should not be penalized if they refuse to attend their workplace.

- Commercial landlords should be prevented from seeking full rent whilst venues are forced to be closed.
- More [public toilets](#) are urgently needed in all areas of the UK, particularly facilities which are well-maintained, free of charge, gender-neutral, and accessible.

More information: For more information, see aroundthetoilet.com/beersburgersbleach

Provided by University of Exeter

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