

Hello, my name is KT Trenbeath (they/them). I live in Portland, Maine and I have spent the better part of the last decade working in the restaurant industry.

My personal experiences with wage theft happened recently: I was asked every payroll for nearly three months to defer my paycheck -sometimes by a few days, sometimes by over a week- because there wasn't enough money in the bank to pay the entire staff on the day payroll was to be processed. I was asked for my "explicit consent" each time but it was well understood that if I said no, the owners would just ask other staff. At the time, I was in a pretty stable financial situation, so I always said yes to protect my coworkers. It was also not totally out of left field to have been asked to defer my paychecks specifically, given that there were multiple times leading up to this time period that this restaurant deferred payroll for the entire staff due to a lack of funds -again, sometimes pushing it back by a few days, sometimes by a week.

As a labor organizer, I've also heard innumerable stories about workplace violations in the restaurant industry: harassment, grossly unsafe working conditions, a comfortability with wage theft so pervasive that folks have reported their bosses openly admitting to them that they steal tips from employees they don't like because they know they'll face no repercussions. Nearly all of these violations go unreported, primarily due to fear of retaliation. We all know people, both personally and from stories told, who started getting harassed, had their shifts cut, or were fired altogether because they spoke out against the management or owner of the place they were working. It's also understood that even if one of us were to reach out to the Department of Labor or Better Business Bureau, the likelihood of any actionable change being accomplished is very low.

I lay all of this out as a person's experience in one of the most exploitative industries in the nation. Any and all ways that the Maine Labor Department can prevent the illegal and unjust actions of employers, particularly by increasing funding for staffing in the Labor Department and enacting more preemptive measures so that the burden of making these big changes no longer falls almost exclusively on the employees experiencing the violations, would make a dramatic difference in the everyday experience of thousands of laborers across the state. I implore you to support this bill and help the army of employees who get food to your table, from the folks breaking meat down in factories to your local barista, because we all deserve fair, just, and sustainable workplaces.