

PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS



THE NEED FOR ACCESSIBLE, APPROPRIATE TRAININGS FOR RETAIL WORKERS

A REPORT BY THE CENTER FOR FRONTLINE RETAIL AND
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AT THE URBAN JUSTICE CENTER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are over 16 million retail workers in the United States, with “retail salesperson” being the most common occupation in the nation. New York City, an international center of business and commerce, has almost 350,000 retail workers across large chains and smaller stores. A previous study by the Retail Action Project has shown marked occupational segregation and inequities across race and gender lines in the retail sector. The lowest paying jobs are occupied disproportionately by women and people of color, with White men in the higher paying and managerial roles. Career advancement is also inequitable: the same report found that Black and Latino workers were less likely than White workers to be offered a promotion.

The Center for Frontline Retail (CFR) provides workers with the tools and knowledge necessary for industry advancement to higher paying retail positions with full-time schedules, while developing workers’ labor consciousness and leadership skills through political and popular education. CFR’s career development services broaden workers’ knowledge of retail career pathways and advance workers toward economic self-sufficiency. CFR’s trainings offer retail workers and job seekers a sector-specific curriculum with certifications that they can add to their resume and aid them in applying to new positions.

Over the past two years, CFR identified training and career advancement as an unmet need for retail workers in New York City. CFR staff and members talked to hundreds of New York City retail workers through one-on-one conversations, trainings and events. These workers repeatedly reported that they needed but did not have access to quality training or other professional development opportunities. This prompted CFR to partner with the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center (CDP) on a participatory research project, collecting 292 surveys, holding three focus groups, and conducting a literature review in order to explore the training and advancement barriers and opportunities for workers.

Our research shows that while career ladders exist in retail, workers have trouble climbing those ladders and are expected to take on additional responsibilities without a change in title, pay or additional training. Expanding access to quality training is a key mechanism to increase longevity, de-segregate the workforce, and build a career ladder for retail workers. The following are select findings from our survey and focus groups.

MANY WORKERS WHO HAVE THEIR JOB DUTIES CHANGED, DO NOT RECEIVE ACCOMPANYING TITLE CHANGES, TRAINING OR PAY INCREASES

37% had their job responsibilities change since they began working for their employer

...OF THOSE WHOSE JOB RESPONSIBILITIES CHANGED:



54% had **NOT** received a title change



43% had **NOT** received training to match the change in duties



42% had **NOT** received pay increases from their employer to reflect these changes

SELECT RESEARCH FINDINGS

Many retail workers remain in entry-level positions, even after years of employment.

- The vast majority of survey respondents (91%) were in entry-level jobs.
- Over half (55%) of respondents who worked in entry-level positions had been working for the same employer for a year or more.

Retail workers experience discrimination as a barrier to advancement in the retail industry.

“Even if you get training, the training is limited to certain people: certain race, certain sex. Sometimes they give males more chances to advance up, or sometimes also when it comes to race, you find that majority of the White people working in the company tend to advance higher and quicker, as compared to people of color.” – Focus Group Participant

Many workers who need training to do their current jobs cannot access it through their employer.

- Almost one-third of respondents (28%) said that they need training to do their current job.
- Of the respondents who said they need training to do their current job, almost half (49%) reported that their employer does not offer the training needed to do their current job function.

Most workers report that they need training to advance in their career, but are not receiving this training through their employer.

- About 60% of respondents felt that they needed training to advance in their career, and this was consistent across race and gender.
- Of those respondents who reported that they needed training to advance, 40% said they were NOT receiving such training.

Few workers report recent retail training opportunities.

- Less than one-fifth (18%) of survey respondents had gone to retail training in the past 6 months.

More than a third of respondents never received a workplace evaluation, including long-term workers.

- 36% of respondents had never received an evaluation.
- Of the respondents who had never been evaluated by a supervisor, over three-quarters (76%) had worked in retail for more than a year.

When evaluations do take place, they are used in a punitive way.

“Most of the time, when they decide to evaluate you, it’s to give write-ups. So if you have done something wrong, that’s where they will pull a file. Usually it’s a record of negative stuff that they may have had or just things that they won’t tell you on what you need to work on, what are your good, your strong points, stuff like that.” – Focus Group Participant

Workers report that the Center for Frontline Retail’s education and training program fills the void in employer-based training by preparing them to work in the retail industry, and making them feel empowered.

“My training, what I received outside of work, was somewhat different from the training I received at my job cause the ones at work, it’s just to brush through on the company policies and stuff like that. We are not trained on labor rules or if this happens at work, who we should speak to and who to address... But when I came to Center for Frontline... it’s kind of like outside of work but it still deals with work so it helps you have knowledge both outside of work and inside. Like if a boss does this, this is who you need to contact, or customers, know your rights, people just can’t speak to you in a certain manner... You have rights as a human.” – Focus Group Participant

Workers are forced to take on managerial duties without a title change, training or pay increase.

The managers and the district manager started telling us... because we didn’t always have a manager or an assistant manager... on shift and they started telling my coworkers, “When there isn’t a manager here, [Focus Group Participant is] in charge,” and I wasn’t really sure what that meant. Nobody explained that to me... How am I in charge?... What do I have the authority to do?

– Focus Group Participant

THE SOLUTION: New York City Should Invest Real Resources in Expanding the Center for Frontline Retail Training Model

The findings in this report point to a sector that is severely lacking in training and advancement opportunities for workers. Despite the City's stated commitment to invest in the development of retail workforce, little has been done to turn these words into concrete outcomes for workers. To ensure that retail workers are getting the resources, training and guidance they need to truly advance in the retail sector, the Mayor and the City Council should invest resources and develop a specific training fund for retail workers, based on the Center for Frontline Retail model. This could be done through a City Council budget initiative or a new program in the Mayor's budget that could be put out to bid through a competitive RFP process. The trainings should include the following based on CFR's model:



Communication and Leadership Development: Such as CFR's Customer Service Training where workers learn how to better communicate with customers and develop their leadership skills to improve qualifications and dominate the sales floor.



Pathways to Higher Paying Positions: Such as CFR's Visual Merchandising Training which provides training in the retail visual career path for higher-paying positions with opportunities for advancement.



Worker's Rights and Empowerment: Such as CFR's monthly sector-skill classes, where workers learn about their rights in the workplace.



Job Search Skills: Such as CFR's Job Search Workshop that prepares students to find new job opportunities with their newly developed skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



The Center for Frontline Retail (CFR) promotes awareness, leadership and action to achieve quality employment in the retail sector. They conduct industry analysis and worker empowerment to expand public knowledge about the latest trends impacting the quality of retail employment.

Frontline is a leader in the movement to create family-sustaining jobs in one of America's fastest growing industries, working to simultaneously elevate workers' voices and raise standards in the retail sector.

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center (CDP) partnered with the Center for Frontline Retail (CFR) to conduct this research. CDP provides

legal, participatory research and policy support to strengthen the work of grassroots and community-based groups in New York City to dismantle racial, economic and social oppression. CDP's Research and Policy Initiative partners with and provides strategic support to grassroots community organizations to build the power of their organizing and advocacy work. We utilize a "participatory action research" model in which low-income and excluded communities are central to the design and development of research and policy.

For more information about this report, please contact the Center for Frontline Retail at info@frontlinetail.org or 646-918-6907.