

It's Not Just Wages. Retailers Are Mistreating Workers in a More Insidious Way.

Feb. 19, 2024

By Adelle Waldman

Ms. Waldman's forthcoming novel, "Help Wanted," takes place in a big-box store.

Back in 2018, with an eye to writing a novel about low-wage work in America, I got a job at a big-box store near the Catskills in New York, where I live. I was on the team that unloaded the truck of new merchandise each day at 4 a.m.

We were supposed to empty the truck in under an hour. Given how little we made— I was paid \$12.25 an hour, which I was told was the standard starting pay — I was surprised how much my co-workers cared about making the unload time. They took a kind of bitter pride in their efficiency, and it rubbed off on me. I dreaded making a mistake that would slow us down as we worked together to get 1,500 to 2,500 boxes off the truck and sorted onto pallets each morning. When the last box rolled out of the truck, we would spread out in groups of two or three for the rest of our four-hour shift and shelve the items from the boxes we just unloaded.

Most of my co-workers had been at the store for years, but almost all of them were, like me, part time. This meant that the store had no obligation to give us a stable number of hours or to adhere to a weekly minimum. Some weeks we'd be scheduled for as little as a single four-hour shift; other weeks we'd be asked to do overnights and work as many as 39 hours (never 40, presumably because the company didn't want to come anywhere close to having to pay overtime).

The unpredictability of the hours made life difficult for my co-workers — as much as if not more than the low pay did. On receiving a paycheck for a good week's work, when they'd worked 39 hours, should they use the money to pay down debt? Or should they hold on to it in case the following week they were scheduled for only four hours and didn't have enough for food?

Many of my co-workers didn't have cars; with such unstable pay, they couldn't secure auto loans. Nor could they count on holding on to the health insurance that part-time workers could receive if they met a minimum threshold of hours per week. While I was at the store, one co-worker lost his health insurance because he didn't meet the threshold — but not because the store didn't have the work. Even as his requests for more hours were denied, the store continued to hire additional part-time and seasonal workers.

Most frustrating of all, my co-workers struggled to supplement their income elsewhere, because the unstable hours made it hard to work a second job. If we wanted more hours, we were advised to increase our availability. Problem is, it's difficult to work a second job when you're trying to keep yourself as free as possible for your first job.

No wonder my co-workers cared so much about the unload time: For those 60 minutes, they could set aside such worries and focus on a single goal, one that may have been arbitrary but was largely within our shared control and made life feel, briefly, like a game that was winnable.

Many people choose to work part time for better work-life balance or to attend school or to care for children or other family members. But many don't. In recent years, part-time work has become the default at many large chain employers, an involuntary status imposed on large numbers of their lowest-level employees. As of December, almost four and a half million American workers reported working parttime but said they would prefer full-time jobs.

When I started working at the store, I assumed that the reason part-time work was less desirable than full-time work was that by definition, it meant less money and fewer or no benefits. What I didn't understand was that part-time work today also has a particular predatory logic, shifting economic risk from employers to employees. And because part-time work has become ubiquitous in certain predominantly low-wage sectors of the economy, many workers are unable to find full-time alternatives. They end up trapped in jobs that don't pay enough to live on and aren't predictable enough to plan a life around.

There are several reasons employers have come to prefer part-time workers. For one thing, they're cheaper: By employing two or more employees to work shorter hours, an employer can avoid paying for the benefits it would owe if it assigned all the hours to a single employee.

But another, newer advantage for employers is flexibility. Technology now enables businesses to track customer flow to the minute and schedule just enough employees to handle the anticipated workload. Because part-time workers aren't guaranteed a minimum number of hours, employers can cut their hours if they don't anticipate having enough business to keep them busy. If business picks up unexpectedly, employers have a large reserve of part-time workers desperate for more hours who can be called in on short notice.

Part-time work can also be a means of control. Because employers have total discretion over hours, they can use reduced schedules to punish employees who complain or seem likely to unionize — even though workers can't legally be fired for union-related activity — while more pliant workers are rewarded with better schedules.

In 2005 a revealing memo written by M. Susan Chambers, then Walmart's executive vice president for benefits, who was working with the consulting firm McKinsey, was obtained by The New York Times. In it she articulated plans to hire more part-time workers as a way of cutting costs. At the time, only around 20 percent of Walmart's employees were part time. The following year, The Times reported that Walmart executives had told Wall Street analysts that

they had a specific target: to double the company's share of part-time workers, to 40 percent. Walmart denied that it had set such a goal, but in the years since, it has exceeded that mark. It's not just Walmart. Target, TJX Companies, Kohl's and Starbucks all describe their median employee, based primarily on salary and role, as a part-time worker. Many jobs that were once decent — they didn't make workers rich, but they were adequate — have quietly morphed into something unsustainable.

One of the most surprising aspects of this movement toward part-time work is how few white-collar people, including economists and policy analysts, have seemed to notice or appreciate it. So entrenched is the assumption that full-time work is on offer for most people who want it that even some Bureau of Labor Statistics data calculate annual earnings in various sectors by taking the hourly wage reported by participating employers and multiplying it by 2,080, the number of hours you'd work if you worked 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year. Never mind that in the real world few workers in certain sectors are given the option of working full time.

The shift to part-time workers means that focusing exclusively on hourly pay can be misleading. Walmart, for example, paid frontline hourly employees an average of \$17.50 as of last month and recently announced plans to raise that to more than \$18 an hour. Given that just a few years ago, progressives were animated by the Fight for \$15 movement, these numbers can seem encouraging. The Bloomberg columnist Conor Sen wrote on social media last year that "Walmart's probably a better employer at this point than most child care providers and a lot of the jobs in higher ed."

The problem is that most Walmart employees don't make \$36,400, the annualized equivalent of \$17.50 an hour at 40 hours a week. Last year, the median Walmart worker made 25 percent less than that, \$27,326 — equivalent to an average of 30 hours a week. And that's the median; many Walmart workers worked less than that.

Likewise, at Target, where pay starts at \$15 an hour, the median employee makes not \$31,200, the annualized full-time equivalent, but \$25,993. The median employee of TJX (owner of such stores as TJ Maxx, Marshalls and HomeGoods) makes \$13,884 a year; the median Kohl's employee makes \$12,819.

Those numbers, though low, are nevertheless higher than median pay at Starbucks, a company known for its generous benefits. To be eligible for those benefits, however, an employee must work at least 20 hours a week. At \$15 an hour— the rate Starbucks said it was raising barista pay to in 2022 — 20 hours a week would amount to \$15,600 a year. But in 2022 the median Starbucks worker made \$12,254 a year, which is lower than the federal poverty level for a single person.

And this is after the post-Covid labor shortage, when pay for low-wage workers rose faster than it did for people in higher income brackets.

Since my stint at the big-box store, where I ended up working for six months, I've come to think that every time we talk about hourly wages without talking about hours, we're giving employers a pass for the subtler and more insidious way they're mistreating their employees.

From the perspective of employers, flexible scheduling remains extremely efficient. But that efficiency means renegeing on the bargain on which modern capitalism long rested. Since the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act during the New Deal era, employers have had to pay most of their workers for 40 hours of work even when business was slow. That was just the cost of doing business, a risk capitalists bore in exchange for the upside potential of profit. Now, however, employers foist that risk onto their lowest-paid workers: Part-time employees, not shareholders, have to pay the price when sale volumes fluctuate.

To the extent that the shift to part-time work has been noticed by the larger world, it has often undermined rather than increased sympathy for workers. For decades, middle- and upper-class Americans have been encouraged to believe that American workers are hopelessly unskilled or lazy. (Remember when Elon Musk praised Chinese workers and said American workers try to "avoid going to work at all"?) The rise in part-time work seems on its face to support this belief, as white-collar workers, unfamiliar with the realities of the low-wage work environment, assume that workers are part time by choice.

It's a bit rich. Policies undertaken to increase corporate profits at the expense of workers' well-being are then held up as evidence of the workers' poor character. There is poor character at play here. It's just not that of workers.

Adelle Waldman (@adellewaldman) is the author of two novels, "The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P." and the forthcoming "Help Wanted."

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X and Threads.