

# 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

## 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.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are over 16 million retail workers in the United States, with “retail salesperson” being the most common occupation in the nation.<sup>1</sup> New York City, an international center of business and commerce, has almost 350,000 retail workers across large chains and smaller stores.<sup>2</sup> A previous study by the Retail Action Project has shown marked occupational segregation and inequities across race and gender lines in the retail sector.<sup>3</sup> The lowest paying jobs are occupied disproportionately by women and people of color, with White men in the higher paying and managerial roles.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.

## SELECT RESEARCH FINDINGS

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### 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.

### When job duties change, many workers do not receive accompanying title changes, training or pay increases.

- 37% of respondents had their job responsibilities change since they began working for their employer.
- Of the respondents who had their responsibilities change at work, 54% did not receive a title change.
- Of the respondents who had their responsibilities change at work, 43% had not received training to match the change in their duties.
- Of the respondents who had their responsibilities change at work, 42% had not have received pay increases from their employer to reflect these changes.

### 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

### 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 they need 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.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**More than a third of respondents had 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 being."*

– Focus Group Participant

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

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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.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Our work has shown that training opportunities for retail workers—crucial to career advancement, longevity, and higher wages—have diminished, as have opportunities for high quality and secure jobs with possibilities of career mobility in the retail industry. In the void left by employers, who have curtailed in-house training opportunities, The Center for Frontline Retail (CFR) has been providing trainings to retail workers free of charge. In conversations with these workers, CFR heard that retail training opportunities can be difficult to find, expensive, and not tailored to workers’ needs. Workers also reported unequal access to training and career advancement based on gender and race as well as favoritism based on these characteristics. Seeking to delve further into these issues, CFR partnered with the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center (CDP) to conduct a participatory action research project to explore issues of access to training and career advancement for retail workers.

This report is based on 292 surveys, three focus groups, and a literature review of recent research on the retail sector. Overall, our research shows that there is not a clear path to advancement in the retail industry in New York City. We find that:

- Workers do not have meaningful education and training opportunities to meet their current job duties or to climb a career ladder.
- Often, workers are given additional responsibilities in the workplace that are not accompanied by a title change, pay increase, or additional training.
- Supervision is inadequate and does not promote advancement. Workers do not receive professional development opportunities such as performance reviews, and they report that their supervisors are not adequately trained.
- Racism, sexism and favoritism are reported as additional barriers to advancement.
- Workers must look outside of the workplace to supplement the inadequate education and training from their employers. Workers turn to the Center for Frontline Retail for training.

Given the major gaps in employer-based training, the success of the CFR model, and the City’s commitment to invest in retail as an emerging sector, we argue that the City should invest in expanding the Center for Frontline Retail training program.

## **A. BACKGROUND ON THE RETAIL SECTOR**

There are over 16 million retail workers in the United States, with “retail salesperson” being the most common occupation in the nation.<sup>6</sup> New York City, an international center of business and commerce, has almost 350,000 retail workers across large chains and smaller stores.<sup>7</sup> Previous studies have



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demonstrated that the industry experiences marked occupational segregation and inequities across race and gender lines. The lowest paying jobs are occupied disproportionately by women and people of color, with White men in the higher paying and managerial roles.<sup>8</sup> First-line supervisors (a high wage-earning position, compared to other retail job titles) are disproportionately White; conversely, cashiers—the lowest paid position—are disproportionately Black or Latino.<sup>9</sup> A 2012 report focused on the retail industry in New York City found that average and median hourly wages for men in retail were significantly higher than those for women, and that White workers reported higher wages than workers of color.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

### ***WAGES ARE NOT EQUAL BASED ON RACE, GENDER AND RETAIL SUBSECTORS***

Wages and opportunity for advancement vary by retail subsectors: while there are over 4 million jobs in retail (almost a quarter of all retail jobs nationally) that pay over \$15 per hour, these jobs are mostly concentrated in certain subsectors of retail, such as home and garden stores (like Lowes and Home Depot), home furnishing stores, and car dealerships.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, lower pay jobs, which comprise the majority of retail jobs, are concentrated in retail subsectors such as clothing, shoes, and accessories stores, and general merchandise stores (such as Target and Walmart).<sup>13</sup> The higher paying subsectors also tend to employ lower percentages of people of color and women, who make up much more of the clothing and general merchandise workforces.<sup>14</sup> For example, men make up 80% of the relatively higher paying auto sales subsector, while women make up 73% of the workforce in clothing, shoes and accessories stores.<sup>15</sup> There is a similar breakdown of workers when it comes to race: people of color, who make up 35% of the overall retail workforce, are overrepresented in the lower-paying clothing, shoes, and accessories subsector (making up 45% of workers), and underrepresented in the higher paying home and garden sector (making up only 24%).<sup>16</sup> Most of the workers surveyed in this report work in stores that are part of the clothing, shoes and accessories and general merchandise subsectors.

Retail workers in New York City, already facing the challenge of low wages in the industry, are also constrained by the city's high cost of living. While the average annual wage in New York City for the title "retail salesperson" in 2016 was \$27,420, the self-sufficiency standard for a family of four in the Bronx (the borough with the highest income inadequacy) was \$52,776 in 2014.<sup>17, 18</sup> There tends to be a misconception that retail workers are teenagers working part time jobs; however, previous studies on the retail wage gap by the Fiscal Policy Institute show that the majority of retail workers in New York State were aged 20 and over.<sup>19</sup> Consistently, the majority of workers surveyed in this report were low-income adults aged 20 and over, and had worked in the retail industry for more than a year. CFR's membership is also mostly composed of people who have been working in the retail industry long-term.

Most of the workers surveyed in this report also work for big-box and fast fashion retailers. Worker concerns have been documented for both of these categories of retailers. Big-box retailers (such as K-Mart, Walmart and Target) have been criticized for low-road standards for employment.<sup>20</sup> Big-box retailers, which account for 60% of all retail employment in New York State, pay significantly less on average than smaller retail employers.<sup>21</sup> In 2014, the average pay for workers in establishments with more than 500 employees was \$23,500: 25% less than retail employers with less than 500 employees.<sup>22</sup> Fast fashion companies (such as Zara, Forever 21, and H&M) are retailers who are able to produce and market new trends in fashion quickly to consumers.



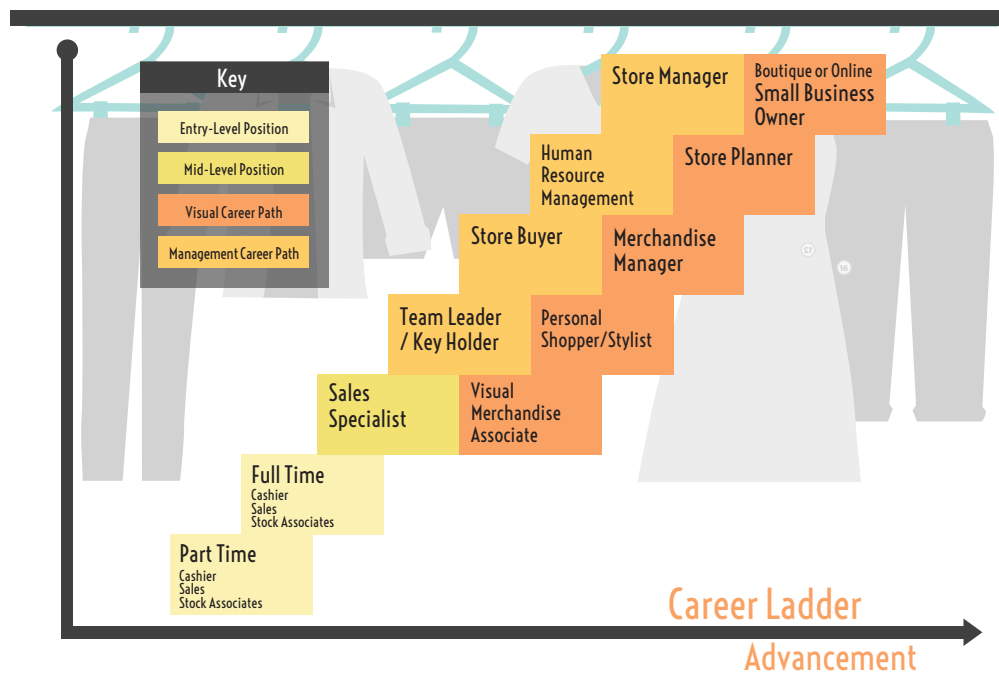
## 1. INTRODUCTION

Certain fast fashion retailers have been criticized for paying employees low wages and slashing hours for workers; in 2015, Zara workers in New York City unionized, won increased wages, and got the company to agree to offer more full-time positions to workers.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, in 2009, nine H&M stores in New York City were able to unionize after working for two years with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union to organize workers to fight for wage increases and other benefits.<sup>24</sup>

### ***THE FUTURE OF RETAIL: THE IMPORTANCE OF CAREER LADDER TRAINING***

The retail industry is changing, and many companies are shifting to online sales and e-commerce as consumer patterns change.<sup>25</sup> As brick-and-mortar stores shut down throughout the country, retail sales positions are declining. However, despite the looming “retail apocalypse” often referenced in the news, brick-and-mortar stores in New York City, a center of fashion and commerce, will not be closing anytime soon.<sup>26</sup> Whether customers continue to frequent brick-and-mortar locations will depend on their experiences at those stores, making the quality of training retail workers receive in customer service critical to keeping retail stores profitable. While multiple and interrelated strategies to address the stratified retail workforce must be implemented, a key factor to address is that of access to job training and other career advancement opportunities such as mentorship and performance evaluation. These opportunities are integral to career advancement, job stability and longevity, and access to higher wages. Our research shows that while career ladders exist in retail, workers have trouble climbing those ladders and are often expected to take on additional responsibilities without a change in title, pay or additional training. Expanding access to training is a key mechanism to increase longevity, de-segregate the workforce, and build a career ladder for retail workers.

### **CAREER PATHWAYS IN THE RETAIL INDUSTRY**



*There is a career ladder in the retail industry with clear steps and titles for advancement. However, workers trying to climb this ladder face barriers such as racism, sexism and favoritism, along with a lack of adequate employer-provided training opportunities or meaningful supervision to move up.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### **B. POLITICAL CONTEXT: An Opportune Moment to Promote Retail Worker Training in New York City**

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The de Blasio administration has elevated retail as a sector worthy of particular attention in the city. A 2014 report from the Mayor's Jobs for New Yorkers Taskforce, *Career Pathways: One City Working Together*, recognizes the severe economic inequity in the city, with nearly one in four people in the workforce earning under \$20,000 per year.<sup>27</sup> The report highlights retail as one of six key economic sectors in the city, and acknowledges that retail, along with the food service sector, has “enjoyed robust job growth, but in mostly low-wage positions that provide few benefits and limited stability.”<sup>28</sup> The City commits to launching a retail “industry partnership” that, in addition to conducting employer education and working with employers to adopt better practices, pledges to “maximize access to training and jobs in sectors with better income and job quality prospects.”<sup>29</sup> One year later, in a 2015 progress report, the City describes the anticipated formation of initial partnerships in the retail sector and increased investments for anticipated trainings.<sup>30</sup> Another progress update in 2016 says that the City's Department of Small Business Services (SBS) will launch the retail industry partnership, which aims to “work with employers, organized labor, non-profits, training providers, private philanthropy, and workforce organizations to build a sustainable and robust pipeline of local talent to fill New York City's jobs,” and says that “key activities will be identifying, highlighting, supporting and helping to scale employer practices that offer benefit to both workers and businesses.”<sup>31</sup> At the time of publication of this report, it is unclear whether the partnership has been launched yet.

While the City's recognition of retail as a crucial sector in New York City— and one in which far too many jobs are low-wage and insecure, with little room for mobility—is important, it has not taken sufficient steps to remedy the problems, particularly in the realm of training. Much of the City's plan focuses on connecting workers to jobs. While crucial, these connections are insufficient to address the inequities and lack of upward mobility in sectors such as retail. To do this, appropriate and accessible training and more professional development opportunities are needed.

### **C. THE NEED FOR ACCESSIBLE, APPROPRIATE TRAININGS FOR RETAIL WORKERS: Select Training Programs**

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Training is crucial for retail workers seeking career longevity and advancement, but current opportunities are lacking. On-the-job training has become increasingly scarce for retail workers. This section describes several notable training courses available outside of the workplace; however, with the exception of CFR's training model, most of these fall short of being accessible, inclusive, tailored, and effective. We describe CFR's model in more detail on page 19.

#### ***THE WORKFORCE 1 MODEL:***

Much of what the City offers related to job readiness falls under their Workforce 1 programming, administered by the New York City Department of Small Business Services. Focused primarily on matching job seekers to employers, the program's website states that it “prepares and connects qualified candidates to job opportunities in New York City.”<sup>32</sup> CFR partners with Workforce 1 on hiring events that connect CFR members to retail employers. While many retail workers benefit from seeking jobs through the Workforce 1 online posting system, or by attending hiring events, ultimately, CFR's model and the Workforce 1 model have different goals. The scope of Workforce 1's work is broader and the retail-specific training opportunities it provides

are limited. CFR's more tailored approach seeks to prepare workers to ultimately take on leadership and long-term career oriented roles in the retail industry. Workforce 1 does provide opportunities for accessing trainings such as Individual Training Grants (ITGs) to "help qualified job seekers get specialized job training to find a new job or advance in their careers," but retail was not, at the time of this report writing, an occupation type eligible for an ITG.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the Workforce 1 training website has a searchable database of training, but retail was not listed among the industry categories to select from.<sup>34</sup>

### ***THE NATIONAL RETAIL FEDERATION (NRF) MODEL:***

Another prominent training model is administered by the National Retail Federation (NRF), the largest retail trade association in the world. The NRF has a training component, called "RISE Up," framed as a "powerful new program offering training and credentials that help entry-level job seekers develop meaningful careers."<sup>35</sup> This program offers training manuals as well as several online courses that result in a certificate, all of which are available at a fee to participants ranging from a course for \$35 geared toward preparation for the Retail Management Certification exam, to \$90 for a customer service sales certification (accompanied by a recommended e-learning course for an additional \$80). NRF's trainings are geared towards upper management, and are not sufficiently accessible or tailored to the needs of retail workers that CFR has worked with. Fee-based courses that depend on computer access are limited in their ability to promote equitable career advancement opportunities. Recently, NRF partnered with Walmart's employee training program Walmart Academy to develop standards for a certificate that Walmart employees can earn based on skills developed on the job.<sup>36</sup> However, as the Walmart Academy is geared towards advancing the skills of more experienced supervisors and department managers, it does not provide the tailored and comprehensive training that entry-level workers require, nor does it adequately address workers' low wages.<sup>37</sup>

### ***ALTERNATIVELY, THE CENTER FOR FRONTLINE RETAIL (CFR) MODEL:***

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. Our career development services broaden workers' knowledge of the retail career pathways and advance workers toward economic self-sufficiency. Our two monthly 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. The 16-hour courses are taught by industry professionals with years of retail experience and facilitation skills. We describe CFR's model in more detail on page 19.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Over the past two years, The Center for Frontline Retail (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, at trainings and at hiring and other 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) to conduct a participatory research project and develop a comprehensive methodology that includes:

### ***SURVEYS:***

CFR collected 292 surveys from retail workers working for 89 different employers (ranging from smaller retailers to large chains) concerning their access to education and training in the workplace. Surveys were designed by CFR organizers and members. CFR members were trained to administer the surveys, which were collected anonymously in front of retail stores when workers were on breaks. Surveying took place from July to October of 2016 throughout the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens.

### ***FOCUS GROUPS:***

CFR conducted three focus groups in March of 2017 with a total of 14 participants from various retail stores in New York City. To ensure anonymity, participants' names are not used in the report. The focus group guide was designed by CFR organizers and members and the groups were facilitated by CFR organizers and members. Focus group facilitators received training on conducting the focus groups. Participants in the focus groups were CFR members who were outreached at CFR events.

### ***LITERATURE REVIEW:***

CDP researchers conducted a literature review in order to assess the state of the retail industry both nationally and locally, the landscape of retail trainings available to workers in New York City, and the scope of previous research on the needs of retail workers.

## **DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESEARCH SAMPLE**

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The majority of survey respondents (90%) identified as people of color, and almost two-thirds (64%) were women. More than half of respondents reported being very low-income, with a yearly income of \$10,000 to \$24,000, and the median hourly wage of surveyed workers was \$11 per hour. Most survey respondents were over 24 years old (85%) and most (54%) had been working in retail for more than a year, with one-third (34%) working in retail for more than four years. This dispels the myth that most retail workers are teenagers just looking for a temporary job. Longevity at a specific employer was shorter for respondents: 43% had been working for their specific employer for less than a year, almost half (48%) had been working for their employer for a year to four years, and only 9% of respondents had been working for their employer for more than four years. 59% of respondents reported being classified as part-time workers, while 38% reported being classified as full-time workers. Most survey respondents (89%) worked year-round.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The majority of focus group participants identified as people of color (67%) and most (85%) were older than 24 years old. 70% of participants reported incomes below \$25,000, and nearly all (90%) were receiving some sort of safety net benefit. Over half of focus group participants (54%) had been working in the retail industry for more than four years, but none had worked for their current employer for more than four years: more than half of respondents (54%) had been working for their employer for less than a year, and the rest had been working for their employer for one to four years. Similarly to survey respondents, 54% of focus group participants reported being classified as part-time workers, and almost one-third (31%) reported being classified as a full-time worker.

### DEMOGRAPHICS OF SURVEY SAMPLE

N = 292\*

Gender** N = 290	Male	36%
	Female	6.4%
	Transgender	0.3%
	Other gender identity	0.3%
Race/Ethnicity N= 270	African American or Black	46%
	Latino/a or Hispanic	37%
	Asian or Pacific Islander	9%
	Native American	1%
	White	11%
Yearly Income N = 238	Below \$10,000	19%
	\$10,000 - \$24,999	58%
	\$25,000 and up	22%
Median Hourly Wage N = 208		\$11
Age N = 265	24 years old and younger	57%
	Older than 24	43%
Highest Level of Education N=269	Up to High School Diploma	44%
	Some college or other higher education.	56%
Receiving Safety Net Benefits N = 266	Receive some safety net benefits	40%
	Not Receiving any benefits	60%
Length of Time in the Retail Industry N = 291	Less than a year	17%
	A year to 4 years	49%
	More than 4 years	34%
Length of Time Working for Current Employer N = 276	Less than a year	42%
	A year to 4 years	49%
	More than 4 years	9%
Worker Classification N= 284	Part-time (Average of less than 30 hours per week)	59%
	Full Time (Average of 30 or more hours per week)	38%
	Unsure	3%
Type of Work N = 286	Year-Round	90%
	Seasonal	8%
	Don't know	2%
Hours worked per week N = 285	30 hours or less	55%
	More than 30 hours	45%

\* While CFR collected 298 surveys in total, 6 respondents who reported that they were in management level jobs were excluded from the analysis.

\*\*These percentages add up to more than 100% because respondents selected all options that applied to them.

### 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following findings are based on 292 surveys, three focus groups, and a literature review. Overall, the data shows that there is not a clear path to advancement in the retail industry in New York City, and workers do not have meaningful education and training opportunities to fulfill their current job duties or to climb a career ladder. They also do not have opportunities to engage in professional development practices such as performance reviews or mentorship and they experience barriers to advancement such as racism, sexism and favoritism. Workers supplement the inadequate education and training from their employers with trainings that they receive outside the workplace, mainly at the Center for Frontline Retail (CFR).

#### **I. WHAT DOES ATTEMPTING TO ADVANCE IN RETAIL LOOK LIKE?**

Workers have a vision of advancement in the workplace. When asked in focus groups what career advancement in retail should look like, workers explained that this should mean that they receive promotions, get training and education from their employer, earn a livable wage, and get benefits such as healthcare. However, the reality in the workplace is quite different. The vast majority of respondents (93%) were currently in entry-level jobs. These entry-level positions are not just occupied by new workers: 83% of the respondents working in entry-level positions had worked in retail for more than a year, including a third who had been working in retail for more than four years. In addition, most entry-level workers had worked for the same employer for over a year. While about half of workers surveyed said that they would like to advance in the retail industry, survey data shows that these workers are not receiving title changes, pay increases, training or other benefits, even as their responsibilities increase. Instead, workers report receiving additional responsibilities but without pay increase, title changes, or additional training.

In addition, workers experience racism, sexism and favoritism as barriers to advancement.



*CFR retail worker member prepares for a campaign event*



**FINDING:** Advancement in retail is limited. Most workers, including long time workers, are in entry-level positions. Many workers take on new responsibilities in the workplace without title change, pay increase, or additional training to reflect changes in job duties.

## OUR SURVEY FINDS THAT:

MANY WORKERS REMAIN IN ENTRY LEVEL POSITIONS EVEN AFTER YEARS OF EMPLOYMENT

**91%** of survey respondents were in entry level jobs  
...OF THOSE IN ENTRY LEVEL JOBS:



**83%** have been in retail for **MORE THAN 1 YEAR** (including 1/3 who have been in retail for **MORE THAN 4 YEARS**)



**55%** have been working for the **SAME EMPLOYER** for a year or more



Retail workers discuss issues they face in the workplace

A focus group participant explains that they were not compensated for taking on extra responsibilities:

*I did not receive any change in my paycheck...when we first opened we had the idea of only doing the women's stuff, not opening another men's store, so they had told us they were going to hire more people to deal with the men's stuff. So you're working between two stores, and having the same paycheck that you started with.*

- H, Focus Group Participant



**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

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**A focus group participant explains how they ended up with managerial responsibilities:**

*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?*

*- S, Focus Group Participant*

**The participant also describes the impact of being unable to access management training while being saddled with their manager's responsibilities:**

*I usually say, "I feel like I should be wearing a black shirt," cause managers usually wear black shirts... I've seen my boss...in the office with his feet kicked up, and sometimes I have to remind him that some things have to get done at times. And I've made it clear that I would have no problem taking on these responsibilities because I know them already...I feel like now, I'm being stumped because my store manager isn't letting me progress. And I feel like that happens a lot, where it's like you wanna progress, but someone wants to hold you back.*

*- S, Focus Group Participant*

## **FINDING: Retail workers also experience discrimination as a barrier to advancement in the retail industry.**

Previous studies, such as the Retail Action Project's *Discounted Jobs: How Retailers Sell Workers Short*, have found that women and people of color face inequities in the retail industry around the wage gap, health insurance benefits and promotions.<sup>38</sup> Focus group also described racism, sexism, ableism and favoritism as additional barriers to career advancement.

### **Focus group participants describe the barriers they have faced due to racism, sexism, ableism, and favoritism:**

*"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."*

– H, Focus Group Participant

*"Personally for me, obviously one me being African American that would probably be one. And then two, my speech impediment, that probably is one because managers have to have some sort of clarity when they talk when they convey orders or they want a leader that can at least "talk straight," ... that's probably the only two things that's holding me from moving up."*

*When I was at [luxury retailer], I realized that a lot of Caucasian people get promoted real quick... and Black people that come in there, they come in wanting to grow in the company, end up in corporate or something, but now, half of them, their morale is dead, and they're either leaving the company or just...working for the sake of working, 'cause they believe there is no future for them...I've spoken to a lot of retailers and I cannot get anywhere 'cause of my race; I cannot get anywhere cause I'm a woman; I cannot get a raise cause of x, y, and z...so it's just becoming a lot of politics...*

– H, Focus Group Participant

– N, Focus Group Participant  
*"This guy that had been working there for a year while I was there for three years...had been picked over me to go to a training and he not only got a promotion before me, he got a higher raise... But I had been there...more than twice as long...I don't think it was because they were more qualified at all. He had no experience."*

– S, Focus Group Participant

*"One of the reasons why I left because of the fact that I wanted to ... be manager but... the management team as a whole were like playing favorites with... people that they liked..."*

– N, Focus Group Participant

#### 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### II. HOW ARE WORKERS BEING TRAINED TO DO THEIR JOBS, AND ARE THEY ACCESSING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT IN RETAIL?

Focus group participants reported that access to meaningful employer-provided training and education programs is very limited, and that the training that workers do receive is brief, with little preparation for their actual job duties. After an initial orientation to the store layout and company policy, many workers are thrown onto the sales floor with little preparation. Most of those who said they needed training to do their current job had been working for their employer for more than a year. Over half of these respondents also reported that their employer does not offer the training they need to do their jobs. Focus group participants reported that much of their training came from computer modules, or from asking other coworkers—also poorly trained—for help. Beyond training to do current job functions, many respondents also wanted and needed training to advance in their career (60%). However, 40% reported they are not receiving this training to advance.

Workers described a workplace environment that lacks professionalism, where managers and supervisors are poorly trained to do their own jobs, so workers end up taking on management responsibilities. Further, workers reported that they do not consistently receive meaningful feedback on their work performance from their managers, which keeps them from advancing professionally and from feeling valued in the workplace.

**FINDING: Training from employers is either non-existent or poor quality and therefore does not lead to career advancement.**

### OUR SURVEY FINDS THAT:

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

Few workers reported recent retail training opportunities:

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

**A focus group participant explains the inadequacies of computer-based trainings:**

*I went into the computer, I did the test real quick... and I know the steps cause I've been in retail for so long, that I passed; I went straight to the test. I passed everything, so they only look at...how much you got on your test, and if you passed it. So I passed all the tests, but I didn't go through the [training] process.*

**- A, Focus Group Participant**

**MOST WORKERS, AND PARTICULARLY LONGER-TERM WORKERS, REPORTED THAT THEY NEED TRAINING TO ADVANCE THEIR CAREER, BUT ARE NOT RECEIVING THIS TRAINING THROUGH THEIR EMPLOYER**

**60%** of survey respondents felt they need training to advance their career (*consistent across race and gender*)

**... OF THOSE WHO FELT THEY NEEDED TRAINING TO ADVANCE:**



**90%** had been in retail for **MORE THAN 1 YEAR**  
(including 30% who had been in retail for more than 4 years)



**40%** had **NOT** received that training

**A focus group participant describes the initial orientation that they received on their first day of work:**

*"I was in a room for maybe an hour, two hours talking about what kind of procedure do they do if this happened or that happened and that's about it, it didn't really stick...I received training but...it was not that great...it was more like, 'Here's information, take it or leave it.'"*

– N, Focus Group Participant

**This focus group participant explains that they only received training from fellow coworkers, but never from their supervisor:**

*"For my retail skills, I learned from my coworkers who have been in the company longer and ... they helped me and trained me but still didn't get any training from my main boss."*

– H, Focus Group Participant



CFR staff present at a membership meeting

### **FINDING: Managers are not trained to adequately supervise retail workers; this includes a lack of meaningful evaluation of work performance or guidance on professional development.**

Previous studies have shown that evaluations are an important tool in determining a worker's strengths and weaknesses, and presenting workers with opportunities to grow from the knowledge they gain from the evaluation process.<sup>39</sup> Evaluations are also important in determining promotions and pay increases. However, some workers report that they aren't getting evaluations at all, and focus group participants who do receive evaluations find them to be unhelpful because they often aren't taken seriously in determining promotions or significant pay increases, or are used punitively.

### **OUR SURVEY FINDS THAT:**

**More than a third of respondents had 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.

**A focus group participant describes the cavalier nature of evaluations at work:**

*It's also like they don't want us to move up in the company...because [evaluations weren't] taken seriously. We as employees weren't taken seriously...especially sales associates. So they didn't even bother reading our evaluations. They don't care what we do.*

**- S, Focus Group Participant**

**These focus group participants describe the minimal impact, if any, that evaluations had on their pay increases:**

*"I never got a formal evaluation. But I did get raises after probation period, then maybe another one after that, but they're minimal raises."*

**- M, Focus Group Participant**

*"Not like I was doing well so I got a raise. It was just like, 'You survived 3 months so here you go, here's your first bonus.'"*

**- G, Focus Group Participant**

**This focus group participant reports that evaluations are used in a punitive way at their job:**

*"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."*

**- H, Focus Group Participant**

#### 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This lack of positive feedback, which previous studies have shown directly correlate with increased or sustained work performance, leads workers to feel unappreciated at work and to have a negative attitude about work.

**Many focus group participants reported that their immediate supervisors and managers were not properly trained to do their jobs and had little knowledge of the day-to-day operations in the store:**

*"I know not all retail places train their sales associates well, but that our supervisors had no idea either, that was shocking actually."*

- S, Focus Group Participant

*"One of the managers came from a sporting goods store. The only thing that I saw in him that was management material was that he was wearing a suit. And he looked good in a suit. That's about it... I would tell him what to do, and he's like, "Ok."... A week before I left, I asked him if he ever knew what I was talking about. He said, "No."*

- A, Focus Group Participant

*"My previous manager had... an iron fist and she had to have everything done and she was on top of everything. There wasn't nothing going on in that store that she didn't know about. Now since my [current] store manager doesn't care, has his feet up in the office, there's anarchy running about and literally there's no one on top of it..."*

- G, Focus Group Participant

**This focus group participant explains how the lack of formal evaluation makes them feel expendable:**

*I come in everyday with a negative attitude, treat it just like another job, where I will wait for the day... that you're no longer good for this company and will send you packing... That's the impact to me and anyone else who doesn't get evaluated. You don't know if your employer appreciates you, they just want to... use you, and get rid of you when they're tired of you. But you get an evaluation; at least you know where you're standing. You know there's at least a future for me in this job. I know that I can hopefully build a future from this job. And hopefully training the new people for this job coming in and growing into a company. You take pride. That takes time pointing out what you need to work on.*

- H, Focus Group Participant



#### 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### III. HOW ARE WORKERS ACCESSING MEANINGFUL TRAINING AND ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES?

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**FINDING:** 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.

Our research has made clear that there is a lack of quality employer-based training available to retail workers in New York City. Only 1 in 5 respondents said they have been to a training in the past six months. As retail companies increasingly move their sales online, the quality of customer service has become an incredibly important determinant in keeping up profits in brick and mortar stores.<sup>40</sup>

To fill this gap, the Center for Frontline Retail (CFR) has developed curriculum and programming to train workers on vital skills such as customer service and visual merchandising, and educate retail workers on their rights in the workplace. Over 3,000 retail workers have received no-cost training and services to enhance workplace skills and promote empowerment in their careers. Our trainings and workshops include industry specific courses such as Customer Service, which is certified through LaGuardia Community College, as well as Visual Merchandising, Fashion Blogging, Luxury Selling, and Building a Client Book.

**A focus group participant describes the kind of training they need to advance in their career, and the experience of taking CFR's customer service class:**

*"It would be the customer service training I got here. Customer service, like you said, someone speaking to you, not to brush them off, know how to smile, how to say hello, how you doing, you need some help with anything, and that's what I learned here, customer service."*

– J, Focus Group Participant

**Focus group participants explains how the trainings they attended at CFR helped their retail career:**

*"I took the OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] class... I didn't know anything about the chemical safety, the cleaning supply safety and things like that and I use my [hands] for a lot of things."*

– B, Focus Group Participant

*I took my training at Center for Frontline. I did OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] and I did Customer Service... The trainings were helpful to me as I didn't know... Customer Service, how to deal with situations, the company rules, and it made it easier for me... I had an incident where I came into work but I was sent home and I didn't know it was a legal rule that you have to at least get paid for four hours if you came in and showed up. So [the classes] were very helpful to me and they also look good on your resume... I believe in part they can also help you get promoted.*

– H, Focus Group Participant



**Other focus group participants describe how the trainings at CFR were empowering:**

*"I felt like I had the protection from the law, and I had the opportunity to inform other workers as well, so not only just me being by myself, but letting other people know, that might not be a good thing that they're sending you home..."*

- O, Focus Group Participant

*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 being.*

- H, Focus Group Participant

**Another focus group participant points towards interactive training as a benefit to CFR's model:**

*"At the class, people...shared their experience...I found myself later on saying, "This is like that one time"...The fact that we can ask questions about it, like, "How did you deal with [it]," and they told us and since you engage, you now have an example...if someone approaches you... the role plays help, because you at least know you'll be thrown, or hopefully a whole bunch of stuff you didn't think about before..."*

- G, Focus Group Participant



CFR members and CDP researchers meet to design the survey and focus groups

## 6. THE SOLUTION:

### **New York City Should Invest Real Resources in Expanding the Center for Frontline Retail Training Model**

Retail is severely lacking in training and advancement opportunities for workers. Workers do not receive adequate opportunities to advance and face barriers of racism, sexism, ableism, and favoritism. When workers are given additional responsibilities at work, they are not compensated or given additional training. The retail workplace lacks professionalism, in that there is little to no training and managers are rarely trained to supervise and evaluate work performance meaningfully. Workers get training from CFR and find that CFR's programs fill the void in employer-based training.

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. As part of this fund, the City should also help to facilitate partnerships between retailers and the Center for Frontline Retail, so retailers can work together with CFR to effectively train their workers.



*CFR member receives scholarship from CUNY Murphy Center*



## ABOUT THE CFR MODEL

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. Our career development services broaden workers' knowledge of the retail career pathways and advance workers toward economic self-sufficiency. Our two monthly 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. The 16-hour courses are taught by industry professionals with years of retail experience and facilitation skills and provide the following benefits to participants:



***PATHWAYS TO HIGHER PAYING POSITIONS:*** The Visual Merchandising Training provides training in the retail visual career path for higher-paying positions with opportunities for advancement. During the class, workers learn how to create compelling product displays with the aim to increase store traffic and boost sales, with an emphasis on advanced sales techniques, advertising, and hands-on pinning and styling. Graduates of the Visual Merchandising Training earn certification from the Center for Frontline Retail.



***COMMUNICATION AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:*** In our Customer Service Training, workers learn how to better communicate with customers and develop their leadership skills to improve their qualifications and dominate the sales floor. The curriculum focuses on developing communication, team, and sales skills, along with the leadership and problem-solving skills necessary to navigate challenging retail environments. Although customer service positions are entry level, retail is a competitive field and it can be difficult for workers with little or no experience to find work; as such, the Customer Service Training enables workers looking to break into the retail industry the opportunity to develop their skills and demonstrate a commitment to the sector. Graduates of the Customer Service Training earn certification from LaGuardia Community College.



***WORKER'S RIGHTS AND EMPOWERMENT:*** At our monthly sector-skill classes, workers learn about their rights in the workplace. The curriculum activities are regularly updated to reflect new laws, such as the Fair Chance Act, the Stop Credit discrimination in Employment Act, and workplace protections such as breaks for pregnant workers.



***JOB SEARCH SKILLS:*** At the end of each four-session course, students attend a Job Search Workshop that prepares students to find new job opportunities with their newly developed skills. During the workshop, students learn how to prepare and organize their job search strategy, learn resume writing and interviewing skills, and strategies for completing retail application quizzes.

### **CUNY PARTNERSHIP EXPANSION**

Participants at CFR's Customer Service Training receive a certificate of completion from the New York State Small Business Development Center at LaGuardia Community College. CFR plans to expand on this partnership with CUNY to develop and implement a free, comprehensive retail curriculum focused on advancement and professional training in retail. The comprehensive program would:

- Offer a certificate of completion, an accredited certificate, or banked credits;
- Include a series of sessions from basic retail training to luxury sales and management trainings;
- Create systematic access to CUNY programs and services to address high educational needs of retail workers; and
- Connect workers with employment and advancement opportunities.

Trainings will cover retail industry, labor and employment law, retail career paths, and specialized areas of retail. The comprehensive retail training program will cover a series of courses covering the multiple skill and competency levels required in retail. Trainings will include the basic entry level course to advanced luxury selling techniques, as well as specialized areas in retail such as visual merchandising, blogging, styling, personal shopping, client booking, and fine jewelry and other luxury merchandise.

The curriculum will be vetted by teams of major retailers (such as Zara, Vince Camuto, Harry's, Modell's, H&M), retail workers, and education and labor leaders to ensure that it is reflective of the needs of workers and employers alike. With buy-in from industry leaders, the certificate program will open retail workers to direct employment opportunities at established retailer partners committed to promoting career growth in the retail sector.



## **OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY AND EQUITY OF RETAIL JOBS**

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- 1. Include training requirements with local hire requirements for retail workers in any development receiving financial incentives from the City of New York.**

New York City already attaches local hire requirements to some of its awards. To ensure that retail workers hired are best prepared for the work, we recommend attaching training requirements to the local hire mandate. The training should be required for all New York City residents hired to perform food and non-food retail jobs in any new development receiving subsidies through the City of New York. A training component would ensure local residents who are unemployed or underemployed are also qualified for the work, and also considering long-term career goals within the industry.

- 2. Build on enforcement efforts in key areas where retail workers are most vulnerable by partnering with groups like CFR to educate and enforce new protections recently won at the city and state levels.**

Since 2015, New York City has passed signature legislation that has enhanced the rights and protections of workers. New York City employers are no longer allowed to perform credit checks as condition of employment. They can no longer utilize the practice of on-call scheduling with retail workers, and for those workers caught in the middle of a grocery store buyout, workers can no longer be fired as soon as the new owners take over. As significant as these protections are, they can only be as strong as workers' knowledge of them. The Department of Consumer Affairs with its new Office of Labor Standards has demonstrated a commitment to reaching workers in all sectors. The City needs to make sure the department has the sufficient resources to reach the hundreds of thousands of retail workers in New York City to ensure they know of these hard-fought protections. Moreover, the City should explore partnering with groups like CFR to reach workers and provide essential know your rights trainings on the "Stop Credit Discrimination in Employment Act," the ban of on-call scheduling and the "Grocery Worker Retention Act."

## 6. CALL TO ACTION



*CFR members at a rally to raise the minimum wage*

This report highlights the gaps in training and advancement opportunities in the retail sector. Workers report a lack of on-the-job or outside training and dead-end jobs without promotions or raises. These workers need supervisors who will provide meaningful feedback on work performance and provide guidance on professional development. In light of these shortcomings, CFR has been working to create opportunities for retail workers to learn critical retail skills as they enter or advance in the industry, while also promoting worker's rights and connecting their members with high road employers.

We call on the Mayor and administration to produce concrete outcomes for retail workers by investing resources in training and advancement, as well as expanding the impact of local hiring initiatives by tying them to training requirements. We also call on both the Mayor and the City Council to continue to center the rights and protections for retail workers by enforcing laws on ending on-call shifts and banning credit checks.

These initiatives will be important steps in creating pathways for retail workers to advance and making the retail workplace more equitable for all.

# 7. APPENDIX

## LIST OF DISCLOSED EMPLOYERS FOR SURVEYED WORKERS

& OTHER STORIES	Burlington Coat Factory	Journeys	Staples
Abercrombie & Fitch	BX Sports	K-Mart	Stuart
Adidas	Century 21	Kids Foot Locker	Weitzman
Aerosoles	Charlotte Russe	Lord and Taylor	Sunglass Hut
Aldo Shoes	Clark's	Lovesac	T-Mobile
Alex & Ani	Club Monaco	Luxottica	Target
American Eagle Outfitters	Cole Haan	Macy's	Ted Baker
Ann Taylor	COS	Mandee	Top Shop
Apple Store	Disney Store	Mango	Trader Joe's
Armani	Dress Barn	Michael Kors	Uniqlo
Exchange	Duane Reade	Michael's	Uno de 50
Babies R Us	Express	Modell's Sporting Goods	Urban Outfitters
Banana Republic	Fabco Shoes	Moe's Sneaker Shop	Victoria's Secret
Barney's New York	Flavour	Nike	Vintage Thrift West
Bath & Body Works	Forever 21	Nordstrom Rack	Vitamin Shoppe
Bebe	Gamestop	Old Navy	White House Black Market
Bed, Bath & Beyond	Gap	Payless Shoe Source	Yankee Stadium
Best Buy	H&M	Rag & Bone	Zara
Boost Mobile	Home Depot	Saks Off 5th	
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## 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.

URBAN  
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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

**The Community  
Development Project  
of 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@frontlineretail.org](mailto:info@frontlineretail.org) or 646-918-6907.**