

Not Good or Legal

My Experience Working in a Factory

Lorrayne Reiter Alves

BEFORE YOU READ: What are some things that an employer might do that would be illegal? Share your experience.

Coworkers Not Earning Minimum Wage

I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, but raised most of my life in a small town in the northeast of Brazil. After I finished college in Brazil, I decided to come back to the U.S. I wanted to work in my field, which is Labor and International Law.

My first year in the U.S., I worked in different kinds of restaurants, coffee shops, and retail stores. When the pandemic hit, I started working in a factory. At my interview for the job, the manager told me I was hired, and he asked me not to share with the other workers how much they would pay me (at that time, the minimum wage in Massachusetts was \$13 per hour).



Later, I found out from my coworkers that they were not being paid the minimum wage. This is illegal. Most of the workers were undocumented, but it does not matter what your immigration status is. The law requires employers to pay (most) workers the minimum wage.

Minimum Wage

The federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. That means it is illegal to pay anyone less than that. However, there are exceptions. For example, some servers in restaurants may not earn the minimum wage. Why are restaurants exempt from paying their employees the minimum wage? Good question! Look it up and see what you can find out. What are other exceptions?

Some states have higher minimum wages than what is set by the federal government. Look up the minimum wage in your state.



Over the years, workers have fought for a higher minimum wage. Photo from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>.

The factory exploited workers in many different ways. In addition to being paid under minimum wage, they also got no overtime pay, had bad working conditions, and worked on dangerous machines with no training or safety equipment. The workers sometimes worked for 24 hours straight! The company put no limit on how many hours they could work.

Seeing this situation I started to ask myself, “Why are these people not making the same amount of money that I make, even though they are doing the same job that I do?” It always bothered me. What was happening there was not good, nor was it legal!

Harassment on the Job

One day, I received a text message from an unknown number. It was a man who told me he was watching me during work. He said how pretty I was and how he wanted to get to know me better. After that I went to work everyday completely terrified, knowing that someone was “watching” me. I couldn’t leave my job because Covid hit, and there were not many jobs left at the factory. People were being let go. I couldn’t go to my manager because I was not sure if the person harassing me was one of the managers. I knew if I told someone, I could get fired.

The situation got worse. Maybe the man knew there was little I could do to stop him. He started making comments to me in person, not just by text. He said things about my body, and he made sexual comments. The managers were aware of his verbal abuse, not only of me but of other girls in the building, and they did nothing.

I stayed there for five months. I never thought of finding help from a worker center. I never thought of reporting the abuse because I was afraid. I was new to the country, and I could not afford to lose my job.

You Have Rights, Documented or Not

One day, I received a call from the Brazilian Worker Center. They asked me if I wanted to volunteer because they were super busy helping

Learn More about Worker Centers

Lorrayne works at the Brazilian Worker Center. It is one of many worker centers around the country. Read more about their work in the articles on pp. 10-11 and 12-13.



a lot of families with food and cash assistance. I said yes. Today I am the Immigrant Defense and Domestic Workers Rights coordinator and I help other workers, especially immigrant workers, get the tools and knowledge they need to fight for social and economic justice in their workplace.

One day, a worker came into our office. She was from the same factory that I used to work in. She said that the factory refused to give her overtime pay, and the work was hazardous. I helped this worker by explaining her rights and what we could do to get her wages back.

It doesn’t matter if you are a U.S. citizen or not. You have labor rights that should not be violated. If they are violated, that is against the law. At the Brazilian Worker Center, we want to make sure that workers know their rights.

AFTER YOU READ: What laws did Lorrayne’s employer break? If you’re not sure, look up the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to learn more: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/flsa>. Is harassment on the job illegal? Read more about it here: <https://www.worker.gov/harassment/>.

Lorrayne Reiter Alves is 28 years old. She has a law degree from FENORD in Minas Gerais, Brazil, and she has seven years of experience in international and family law. She is on staff at the Brazilian Worker Center, where she also takes a class called English for Organizers.