

Youth at Work

*The Unionized Fast-food
and Grocery Workplace*

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2 On the Front Lines of the Service Sector

IN THE 1994 film *Reality Bites*, high-flying Lelaina Pierce—college graduate, class valedictorian, aspiring documentary filmmaker—loses her job as a production assistant on a TV talk show, and, after a series of futile attempts to find a replacement job within the media industry, is driven in desperation to apply for work at a fast-food company called “Wienerschnitzel.” Lelaina is interviewed for the fast-food job by a cashier in a “Wienerdude” cap, who—while in constant motion preparing food, serving customers, and barking out orders to subordinates—asks: “Miss Pierce, do you have any idea what it means to be a cashier at Wienerschnitzel?” When Lelaina suggests that being a cashier might involve taking orders and handling cash, the Wienerdude laughs:

Wienerdude: No, it’s a juggling act. . . . I mean, you got people coming at you from the front, coming at you from the back, from the side, people at the condiment exchange, people at the drive-through, kids on bikes, and all depending on who?

Lelaina: Me?

Wienerdude: Yeah. . . . You got to be 150 percent on your toes 150 percent of the time.

The Wienerdude then gives Lelaina a math quiz, asking her to add 85 and 45 in her head as quickly as she can. After Lelaina three times comes up with the wrong number—“140? 150? 160?”—the Wienerdude shakes his head and scoffs, “It’s not an auction, Miss Pierce. There’s a reason I’ve been here six months.” Lelaina, needless to say, is not offered the job at Wienerschnitzel. She does, however, eventually manage to get her life back on track, enjoys some success as a filmmaker, and, by the end of the film, is even able to find true love in an old college friend. Meanwhile, the Wienerdude, after his brief but action-packed cameo, is never heard from again.

This book is about the Wienerdudes of the world. It is about the young workers in those low-end service and retail jobs that are the butt

of countless jokes—jobs that, as many would say, “any trained monkey could do.” Stereotypes of fast-food and other low-end service jobs (including grocery) typically trade on these jobs’ simplicity and simple-mindedness. Indeed, *Reality Bites* finds humor in parodying the Wienerdude’s apparently ludicrous and self-important inflating of the complex and demanding nature of his work at Wienerschnitzel. What this chapter seeks to show is that the Wienerdude is, in many ways, absolutely right: Work in fast-food, grocery, and other low-end service jobs is, or can be, difficult, demanding, and unrewarding. Fast-food and grocery work is high-stress, low-status, and low-wage work. It is work that, on the one hand, is subject to routinization, close surveillance, and management control but, on the other, calls for high levels of self-motivation and investment from workers. It can also be physically dangerous: Grocery and restaurant workers throughout North America face some of the highest risks of all occupational groups of being injured, attacked, or even killed on the job.

HIGH STRESS, LOW STATUS, LOW WAGES

“I would say the stress is the worst thing about it,” a young Fry House cashier says of her fast-food job. “Sometimes I get so stressed out, ‘cause some days you’re in a bad mood yourself, you know, having to deal with people, you just don’t want to, you’d rather be somewhere else, anywhere except work.” High stress levels are the most widespread complaint young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood have about their grocery and fast-food employment. Stress can be caused by many aspects of grocery and fast-food work: difficult relations with customers and managers; repetitive work tasks; low occupational status and small paychecks; continual workplace surveillance; and hot, greasy, and often dangerous work environments. But the number-one factor young workers point to as the cause of workplace stress is the lack of time to do the work they are expected to do. Either there are not enough workers on shift to cover customer rushes and necessary preparation and cleaning work, or workers are not given long enough shifts to get their work stations ready for lunch and evening rushes and clean up after such rushes are through.

Lack of time lies behind almost all other causes of workplace stress. Young workers regularly endure abuse from their customers. Workers

are yelled at, sworn at, and insulted by customers; they are frowned at, glared at, and sneered at; they are ignored, treated as social inferiors, and assumed to be servants whose role in life is to cater to and anticipate a customer's every whim and fancy. There are different reasons for such abusiveness. Young grocery and fast-food workers make easy targets for the displacement of hostility. "Often people come into Fry House," a cashier in Glenwood says, "because they've been yelled at by their bosses, they don't have anybody they can yell at, so they yell at us 'cause they think they can." "Customers go off on some grocery employee," says a stocker in Box Hill, "'cause it makes 'em feel powerful."

Grocery and fast-food workers also incite abuse when their job responsibilities put them in conflict with customers' interests. Checkers in Box Hill, for example, become the target of customers' anger when they are put in the position of having to police company rules on accepting checks or enforce government laws for using food stamps or selling alcohol. In one supermarket, I witnessed a checker politely decline to sell alcohol to a young couple who were clearly intoxicated—as she was required to do by law, under penalty of losing her job. The couple stalked out of the store, and on their way out turned to yell at the checker, "Fuck you! Fuck you, you fucking bitch!" while giving her the finger.

Beyond these various motivations, however, many young workers feel that grocery and fast-food customers are abusive primarily because they fail to appreciate the time pressure under which workers labor:

That's the worst aspect of it for me, having to explain to people [customers] that, well, this is how it works, because they don't know. . . . I've said, you're welcome to come back here, take a tour, sit here for an hour, watch us when it's busy, please. Actually, a lady who worked here for about a month, and then she got another job . . . she said, "You know, I used to get really mad when I had to wait for stuff, but I have a total new respect for people that work in fast-food. I know what you have to do. I know what it's like. I feel so bad for any time I ever blew up at anybody." She says, "I don't know how you guys do it; how you can handle it. I really, really, really admire you guys for that, for keeping your cool the way you do, 'cause it's hard to do."

"They think we're dumb and slow," a Fry House cashier complains of his customers, "but they don't understand. If they came in here and tried to do what we're doing, they'll be about three times as slow as we are."

Young workers are often caught in difficult situations in their relations with customers: On the one hand, they are not given enough time or staff support by their employers to perform at the speed and quality levels their customers would prefer; on the other, they lack the status to be able to persuade customers to respect them for the work that they do manage to do under what are often difficult and stressful working conditions.

Managers are another primary source of workplace stress. Like customers, some managers yell and swear at their young employees, talk down to them, and call them "stupid," "incompetent," and "lazy." Many workers believe that the younger the worker, the more latitude managers feel they have in verbally attacking and belittling that worker. Managers in fast-food and grocery, young workers say, often "go on power trips," order workers around, and "tell you every little thing you do wrong"—all the while, failing to provide encouragement or acknowledgment of jobs well done. Managers criticize workers behind their backs; worse, they dress employees down to their faces, in front of coworkers and customers. Young workers in both Box Hill and Glenwood complain widely of the stress caused by managerial favoritism—by managers picking on workers they dislike and conferring favors on workers they prefer. Many feel that managers will abuse their power by trying to get rid of employees they don't want working in their stores. "When a manager doesn't want you to work there," explains a cook in Glenwood, "they look for things, they kinda set you up so they can give you something bad."

As it does with customer-caused stress, time pressure often stands behind manager-caused workplace stress. Workers, for example, sometimes encounter what they refer to as "office managers"—managers who hide in their offices (claiming to be doing needed paperwork) and avoid helping with rushes. Because stores' labor budgets generally assume that managers will work on the floor when needed, "office managers" put increased stress on already overloaded workers. Workers have to deal with "cheap" managers—managers who (in efforts to keep costs low and earn year-end bonuses) skimp on allocating labor hours. Workers have to deal with managerial error—with managers who regularly screw up when submitting hours to company payroll, so that workers' checks are late or incorrect, or with managers who screw up scheduling, ordering, or inventory tasks. "I notice our managers forget

a lot," one Fry House worker complained, "so we have to explain to our customers, 'We have no fried chicken tonight.' 'How can you have no fried chicken when it's Fry House?' 'Well, our manager forgot to order chicken.' It's crazy!"

Managers in the grocery and (especially) fast-food industries come and go with great frequency. Fry House store managers change over about every six months, while area managers change over every couple of years. Store managers in the Box Hill chain supermarkets change over less frequently, but assistant managers come and go every few months. Workers find that they can develop a relationship and system of doing things with one manager, then that manager will quit or be fired, transferred, or promoted. They will then have to start over, building up a new relationship and new system with a new manager. Over time, management instability can be as stressful and wearing as bad or abusive management. "Every time a new manager comes in, they change everything," complains a Fry House cashier. "It's just like being hired. They have to retrain you on everything. It's pretty hard, because once you get into something, you just keep with it. Then somebody else comes in, and they're like, 'No, no! You're doing it wrong; you have to do it this way.'"

Grocery and fast-food work is low-status work. Fast-food work especially carries a stigma, and fast-food workers are stereotyped as being stupid, lazy, slow, and lacking in life goals and initiative (Newman 1999). Fast-food and grocery "youth" jobs (baggers, stockers) are also low in status simply because they are seen as typically being held by young workers. "What's the image of a fast-food job?" a Fry House cashier asks rhetorically. "You get the image of some kid with about a hundred pimples on his face trying to take an order for somebody, and he doesn't understand what to do." Young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood are well aware that if the work they perform were considered glamorous and important, it would be adults and not youths who would be taking on these jobs.

For many young workers, grocery and fast-food work lacks real or intrinsic meaning, interest, and value. "You can't be very proud of yourself as a grocery worker," says a young stocker in Box Hill. "What is your gift to the world [if] you work at Good Grocers your whole life?" The problem with grocery and fast-food work, for many young workers,

is that it is difficult to feel a sense of accomplishment or progress. A grocery bagger, for example, explains why she would never want a grocery career:

It's tough to have a job where it's just a constant flow of people and nothing ever ends or begins, where you're always just providing a service, the same service over and over again. . . . It seems like, to be a checker, to always be saying hello, how are you, have a good day, to always be doing the same thing. I would like a job better where I started and finished something.

In grocery and fast-food work, tasks tend to repeat themselves almost without end. The work is repetitive, mundane, and often boring. Workers may find getting up to and maintaining speed in what are very fast-paced workplaces initially challenging, but once the basic set of tasks has been mastered, workplace learning plateaus, and workers are left with the drudgery of simply executing tasks that long ago became second nature.

Grocery and fast-food work is often said to be "low-skill" work—and, indeed, many young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood slam their jobs by saying that anyone "with half a brain" could do the work they do. Attributions of skill are notoriously tricky, however: They tend to involve assessments of the social standing of a particular job and the kinds of people who hold that job as much as they refer to any absolute and objective measurement of cognitive demands inherent in a given set of work tasks. Young grocery and fast-food workers develop considerable local expertise in their jobs: knowledge of how best to handle individual customers and managers; of how to bend official work rules to get work done effectively and efficiently on the ground; how to make ad hoc repairs and improvisations in the workplace when machines break down, work tools go missing, or the maddening rush of customer demand overwhelms normal working procedures. What can be said of grocery and fast-food work is that such local expertise emerges within jobs that are seen overall—by workers, customers, and managers—as repetitive and low in status, meaning, challenge, and value.

The low status of grocery and fast-food work feeds into general workplace stress. Young grocery and fast-food workers lack a "status shield" to protect them from customer and manager abuse (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993). As Robin Leidner (1993: 132) writes, "Customers who

might have managed to be polite to higher-status workers [have] no compunction about taking their anger out on [low-status service-sector] employees." The low status of grocery and fast-food work also feeds into low industry wages: Because this work is not considered particularly valuable or important, and because workers in these jobs are considered unskilled and easily replaceable, pay levels in Box Hill grocery and Glenwood fast-food outlets remain depressed. Rabid employer determination to keep labor costs at a minimum, of course, further reinforces and institutionalizes downward pressures on wages.

Unionization has had some impact in Box Hill and Glenwood in raising wages and securing benefits that are unusual in North America's low-end service sector. Wages for some job classifications in the Box Hill grocery stores are relatively high compared with wages in the area's other low-end service industries, and wages in the Glenwood Fry Houses are high compared with those of other fast-food companies in town. Overall, however, wages in these two industries remain low. Even full-time workers earning top dollar in the Box Hill grocery industry stand to make only about the average yearly wage in the United States. The vast majority of grocery workers in Box Hill do not work anywhere near full-time hours—as the grocery industry (like the fast-food industry) mostly provides only part-time work. Grocery wages in Box Hill, furthermore, are divided into three tiers. Only checkers and grocery and produce clerks are paid on the top wage scale. Workers in side deli and bakery departments (who are predominantly women) are paid on a lower, second-tier wage scale, and baggers and stockers (who are predominantly youths) are not on scale, and are paid on a third wage tier, which starts only slightly above the minimum wage.

SURVEILLANCE AND CONTROL

The fast-food and grocery industries traditionally have been characterized by "low-trust" employment relations (du Gay 1996). Because they pay low wages and offer little in the way of enriching work environments and opportunities for job advancement, fast-food and grocery employers generally have expected their workforces to have high turnover rates and their employees to hold only limited commitment to corporate goals. Indeed, these employers hire large numbers of youth workers partly because they expect these workers to be temporary (and

therefore cheap). Fast-food and grocery employers have tried to control their temporary workforces primarily through close direction (or routinization) and surveillance of work performance (Reiter 1991; Leidner 1993; du Gay 1996; Ritzer 1996).

Signs of low-trust employment relations are legion in Box Hill and Glenwood. Employers make use of visible and hidden security cameras throughout their work sites. In some Box Hill supermarkets, rows of opaque brown plastic balls, each containing a video camera, hang down over the entire length of the checkstand areas: The opaque covering prevents workers (and customers) from seeing which way the cameras inside are pointing. One grocery chain has even introduced cameras with audio capacity so that managers sitting in store offices can listen in on conversations between workers and customers on the supermarket floor. Fry House, meanwhile, has been known to install hidden cameras secretly as part of "sting" operations in outlets where employee theft or drug use is suspected. Workers who have discovered such cameras say they now wave receipts for meals they have eaten in the restaurants' staff rooms in front of the cameras' invisible eyes.

Employers in both Box Hill and Glenwood are preoccupied with the possibility of worker pilferage and theft. Grocery checkers in Box Hill are often prohibited from serving family members, for example, because they might be tempted to give them special discounts. Checkers can be subjected to discipline for serving family members, even if no evidence of active wrongdoing (e.g., under-ringing the cost of an item) can be produced. As union officials in both Box Hill and Glenwood take pains to tell their members, employers can—and will, if they wish—fire employees for eating even a single grape (or french fry) that they have not paid for or been given by their employer, or for pocketing even a single penny that they find on the store floor.

Low-trust employment relations are initiated early in the grocery and fast-food hiring process. Grocery workers in Box Hill are required to take a drug test (urinalysis) before they are hired. Many workers in Box Hill and Glenwood have also been required to take pre-employment "honesty" or "personality" tests—tests that typically focus on a prospective employee's background, character, values, and beliefs (Duffy 1996; Hays 1997; Lindsay 1998). In these tests, workers may be asked about illegal behavior, such as whether they have taken drugs or stolen anything in the past, or about the behavior of their friends and

acquaintances, such as whether they know anyone who takes drugs or steals. They are frequently asked to select adjectives that best describe their personalities, and they are often asked to predict their workplace behavior, such as whether they would pocket money they found lying on the shop floor, or whether they would quit if their hours were cut or changed. Workers who have taken these tests note that the questions "are repetitive sometimes, like the next page would have the same kind of question, to see if you'd change your answer."

As has been described at great length in past studies of the fast-food industry, fast-food, grocery, and other low-end service-sector employers rely heavily on work routinization to maintain centralized control of their dispersed restaurant and supermarket empires (Reiter 1991; Leidner 1993; Ritzer 1996). From cooking to cleaning, bagging to packing, and stocking to selling, work tasks in both Box Hill and Glenwood are laid out step by step, often in minute and painstaking detail. When situations arise that are not covered by such work routines, employers sometimes try to insist that their employees refrain from thinking of their own solutions and obtain managers' official pre-approval of non-routine workplace decisions and actions.

Employers' fear of independent decision-making among workers can be so intense, in fact, that it leads to ridiculous amounts of bureaucratic rigidity, as well as to unnecessary levels of workplace stress. As a young Box Hill deli clerk complains:

There's no freedom to make decisions there. If the deli manager and assistant manager aren't there, we have to call the store manager. And half the time, they don't know what to do. I had a customer—, we do dinners every night, we put cold ones [dinners] out in the case they can buy. There were two left of meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and corn. The guy wanted two pieces of meat loaf, just one corn and potatoes. It was the biggest hassle in the world. I was there by myself. I called the night manager; she's, "Oh, jeez, I don't know. . . ." She came over and had to make a decision. She said, "I guess we can do it for two dollars for the extra piece of meat loaf." How hard would it be for me to make that decision? It takes an extra fifteen minutes; I have to bother her. It would be so much easier [for me to make the decision myself].

Young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood often do make their own decisions in the workplace: They makes changes in centralized work procedures and do workarounds to get their jobs done. But for many

workers, official prohibitions against making their own local decisions in the workplace interfere with their ability to perform their jobs well and make them feel that they look stupid and incompetent in front of their customers.

One of the most politically charged workplace issues during my fieldwork in Box Hill and Glenwood was employers' intensified use of routinized "scripting" for customer-service interactions. Customer-service scripts used in the grocery and fast-food workplace sometimes spell out for employees required communicative actions (greet the customer, smile, make eye contact, sell suggestively, thank the customer). Sometimes, however, they dictate the exact words and turns of phrase that employees are expected to use. Baggers in one supermarket chain in Box Hill, for example, are instructed that they must not ask customers: "Would you like me to carry out your groceries?" Instead, they must say: "I'd be happy to help you out with your groceries." The chain, which is trying to promote its carry-out service, reasons that the latter, more direct phrasing gives customers less impetus to feel that they should politely decline offers of carry-outs. Staff rooms in both Box Hill and Glenwood are plastered with posters that spell out the companies' "four principles" or "five rules" or "seven steps" for achieving excellence in customer service.

In Box Hill in particular, employers' overly zealous promotion and rigid enforcement of service scripts has created uncomfortable interactions for workers and customers alike. Some young female workers felt great discomfort when they had to smile at and make eye contact with all of their male customers, as they felt that such behavior could all too easily be misinterpreted as signaling personal interest or sexual openness. Many workers found company requirements to thank customers by their proper names inappropriate, and even counter-productive: Some customers disliked having their names used by supermarket clerks who were strangers to them, or took offense when checkers mispronounced the names they were attempting to decipher from charge-card receipts (see also Associated Press 1998; Grimsley 1998; McNichol 1998).

Service scripting in Box Hill occasionally reaches the absurd. In one grocery chain, baggers are expected to listen as checkers read customers' names off charge-card receipts, then also thank customers by name.

As one might imagine, baggers in busy and noisy supermarkets sometimes cannot easily hear what the checkers are saying. Some baggers thus attempt to handle service requirements by mumbling approximations of customers' names, hoping that the customers are not listening closely. In another chain, stockers reported that customers treated them like social misfits because they were required to look up, smile, make eye contact, greet, and offer assistance to customers not only the first time a customer walked down the aisle in which they were working, but each and every time that customer passed. By trying to eliminate decision-making among workers in their interactions with customers, employers risked turning these interactions into empty, disjunctive, and robotic encounters.

To ensure that workers follow service scripts, employers in Box Hill and Glenwood make liberal use of "mystery shoppers." These mystery shoppers are hired at corporate headquarters to pose as customers in company stores. They purchase meals or groceries just like any other customer would; once outside the store, they write out employee and store evaluations based on their visit. These reports comment on everything, from whether an employee smiled, made eye contact, and followed service scripts, to the state of an employee's uniform, the efficiency and knowledgeability of service, and store cleanliness. Some young workers make a game out of "fingering" or "outing" the mystery shoppers, but for the most part, workers do not know who is grading them.

Because mystery shoppers' reports are presented to employees some time (often several days) after they have "been shopped," employees may not be able to recall who the mystery shopper was, even after the fact—and, consequently, they may be unable to judge the accuracy and fairness of these reports. At least one grocery chain in Box Hill requires employees who do poorly on mystery-shopper reports to attend a special customer-service retraining class (which workers call "smile school"). Many young workers are pleased when they receive favorable reports from mystery shoppers, for these provide what is sometimes rare positive feedback from their employers on their work performance. Unfavorable reports, on the other hand, are widely felt to be unfair, because they generally fail to take into account overall and extenuating workplace contexts (a broken fryer, a short-staffed crew) to focus on decontextualized individual performances. Overall, many workers find

that ever-possible surveillance by unknown company spies contributes to increasingly stressful workplace conditions.

HIGH-PERFORMANCE WORKPLACES

The current emphasis in Box Hill and Glenwood on customer service is shaped by shifts in the competitive landscapes of the grocery and fast-food industries. In both grocery and fast food, companies traditionally have competed by minimizing costs and keeping prices low. But as these industries have become more competitive and reached market saturation, traditional strategies have come to be seen as insufficient. Grocery and fast-food companies are thus now placing increased emphasis on providing "high-quality" customer service and are focusing on ways to build up and maintain strong loyalty among customers. "Service wars" have come to complement, and even replace, "price wars" as primary loci of competition (Stanback 1990; Walsh 1993).

With this increased emphasis on "high-quality" customer service has come a growing concern with recruiting and training a "high-quality," or "high-performance," workforce (du Gay 1996; *Progressive Grocer* 1996; Bailey and Bernhardt 1997; Rosenthal et al. 1997). Fast-food and grocery employers talk increasingly about seeking workers who, if not exactly skilled, are at least highly oriented to service work in their personalities; workers who will also be committed, enthusiastic "team players," willing to participate fully in drives for company growth and success. In order to provide high-quality service, grocery and fast-food employers recognize, at a certain level, that they need more than just service scripts and mystery shoppers. They need employees who are willing and able to engage fully with customers and make customers' shopping and eating experiences pleasurable and timely.

As Paul du Gay points out, new service-oriented competitive strategies create contradictory impulses in the way low-end service-sector employers seek to control and motivate employees:

Management is faced with the classic dilemma between the need to exercise control over the workforce, while at the same time requiring its enthusiastic commitment to corporate objectives. . . . The close direction, surveillance and discipline of labour is more likely to destroy, rather than guarantee, the mobilization of discretion and diligence among the workforce. . . . [There are] emerging tensions between employment relations

based on "low-trust" substitutability of [low-wage] labour and the importance of "service" in a customer-led retail "strategy." (du Gay 1996: 115)

In Box Hill and Glenwood, such "tensions" have created a split in employers' control strategies. On the one hand, employers continue to rely on traditional direct-control technologies of routinization and surveillance. On the other hand, they also seek to foster a self-motivating and self-managing "team" and "competitive" spirit among their employees that will lead to high-quality service without direct managerial control.

High-performance control strategies have two sides: One is high profile; the other, low profile. High-profile strategies attempt to foster a team, entrepreneurial, competitive spirit among workers. In company advertising, employee training, and industry publications, one now sees constant references to building company "teams" and transforming employees into "team associates" or "company partners." Workers are inundated with team and partner rhetoric from the moment they set foot in the grocery and fast-food workplace. In Box Hill, grocery employers liberally extend the title of "manager" to so many hourly employees that it sometimes seems as if everybody in the supermarket is a manager or assistant manager of something. In both Box Hill and Glenwood, employers also extend management responsibilities to workers. Glenwood Fry Houses, for example, generally run without a full-time in-store managerial presence.

Employers in Box Hill and Glenwood seek to foster workplace investment among their employees by sponsoring work-based social events, such as picnics, outings, company baseball games, and Christmas parties. Most of all, though, employers seek to instill team spirit via a dizzying and constantly changing array of incentive programs. These programs usually involve running individual or team competitions within or between stores in a single chain: who can sell the most of a new product; whose store can be kept the cleanest; who can raise the most money for a company's adopted charity. Such programs seek to increase employees' commitment to corporate goals and to personal excellence in work performance by offering a combination of material rewards (cash, coupons, free dinners, prizes) and intrinsic satisfactions (the thrill of competition, the pride of being the best). Material rewards in these programs range from the banal (pins, mugs, T-shirts, dinners with the store manager) to the extraordinary (personal stereo systems, vacations in Hawaii). Incentive programs are not new to the grocery and fast-

food industries, but their use has become more intensive and their design ever more inventive.

Employers in Box Hill and Glenwood also use a set of lower-profile strategies that are just as critical to the high-performance model. As in the manufacturing sector, which has sought gains in productivity by adopting "just-in-time" inventory and ordering systems, the low-end service sector is seeking high-performance productivity gains via "just-in-time" labor systems (Parker and Slaughter 1988, 1994). Employers in Box Hill and Glenwood use sophisticated computer programs to map business flows over the course of each day, each week, each month—often in increments as small as fifteen minutes. Programs are then used to schedule labor hours ever more precisely, according to minute, predicted changes in service demands.

By relying on shorter and more irregular shift scheduling, companies minimize the possibility of "excess" labor that previously might have been "wasted" during brief lulls in business. The result for workers, inevitably, is a loss of labor hours, an intensification of work, and an increasingly stressful workplace environment. Just-in-time labor systems reinforce team commitment among workers, while helping employers avoid having to rely on traditional methods of direct control. Workers become "self-motivated" and "self-managed" to work hard and cover for one another through a combination of commitment to team identities, as well as the pressure of constantly running out of time to get done the jobs that they expect, and are expected, to be able to do. Harried co-workers, impatient customers, and an employer-fostered sense of investment in team competence and success drive many workers in Box Hill and Glenwood to high-speed and high-quality work performance.

HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE: ACCIDENTS, INJURIES, AND ATTACKS

A popular stereotype of youth suggests that young people are not particularly concerned with matters of health, illness, and injury. Such issues are thought to be the concerns primarily of older adults; youths, after all, are generally lucky enough to enjoy good health, and thus do not have to worry so much about health problems in their work and non-work lives. In Box Hill and Glenwood, however, these stereotypes

do not hold. Accidents, injuries, and attacks are a common part of young fast-food and grocery workers' lives. Teenagers and young adults working in these industries, who expect to have long lives ahead of them, often worry that their jobs, which are supposed to be meaningless, stop-gap places of employment, will have lasting and detrimental effects on their bodies and future life activities. "I've seen the physical side of working at the store," says a teenage stocker in Box Hill. "I mean, this girl, a checker, she's already got tendinitis in her shoulder and stuff. She's twenty years old, and she's already got problems of an older person. And me, I got a backache; I'm eighteen years old. It's just, I don't know, it's not worth it."

In the Glenwood Fry Houses, the most common injuries include burns from the splashing or spilling of hot shortening; cuts; back, head, and knee injuries caused by slipping and falling; and back injuries caused by lifting heavy loads. Burns, especially, are so common that many young Fry House workers have largely come to accept them as part of the job. "My arms are all scarred," a Fry House supervisor says, rolling up her sleeves to provide proof. "That one's from a fryer; that's from a fryer. . . . This arm, I've got quite a bit on. They go all the way up my arms. That's from falling, on the floors. You get used to it, though."

Some young workers in Glenwood complain that they have problems breathing in the workplace—problems that they feel are caused by inhaling flour, grease, or chemicals used in cleaning. Other workers are concerned about rashes and skin conditions that they likewise attribute to working with powerful cleaning chemicals or to working in a hot, greasy environment.

Customers provide further sources of workplace danger in the lives of young Fry House workers. Many young workers describe having been verbally attacked and threatened by customers. "I've had customers threaten my life," says one cashier in disbelief, "because I didn't give them a breast instead [of the chicken leg that is regularly part of a special meal package]." Young workers in Glenwood have been grabbed, punched, and pushed by customers—customers who are typically drunk or high. "I didn't do anything to the customer," a supervisor protests, recalling a particularly nasty workplace injury. "He was drunk in the drive-through and punched the window. The glass shattered in my eye. . . . My whole eye was filled with blood, and I had to go in for an operation. I could have lost my sight."

Several Fry House restaurants in Glenwood have been robbed; some many times. What is of particular concern about these robberies is how low-trust employment relations work to increase the risks young workers are willing to take to prevent robberies. Fry House forbids workers from trying to stop robberies—under penalty of being fired. But the company also has a policy of threatening to fire workers if they have more than a certain amount of cash in their tills when robbed. "You were eight dollars from being fired," one young cashier says she was told by her manager after a drive-through robbery.

Cashiers are supposed to remove cash from their tills regularly and "drop" it into store safes. But cash drops are sometimes forgotten or postponed, as cashiers focus on handling customer rushes. One young cashier, who was robbed by a man holding a paper bag that later was revealed not actually to have been concealing a firearm, articulates a not-uncommon viewpoint among some Fry House workers: If he is robbed again with too much cash in his till, he might as well try to fight off the would-be robber. "Well, if I'm gonna get fired for this guy robbing me, why not get fired the big way?" the cashier says. "Why not get fired for beating the crap out of him, stopping him from taking the money anyways?"

Robberies, customer attacks, burns, cuts, and falls are likewise concerns for young grocery workers in Box Hill. Workers who have been in their jobs for extended periods of time also face cumulative injuries: repetitive stress injuries in arms and wrists; back, hip, knee, and foot ailments that workers attribute to working standing up for long stretches of time and to the pounding caused by walking on concrete supermarket floors; and back and knee injuries caused by repeated heavy lifting. One twenty-four-year-old checker I interviewed, for example, had been working part time or full time at a grocery checkstand for six years. Three years before our interview, she had lost four months of work because of tendinitis in her right shoulder. Although she was back on the job, she continued to feel pain and numbness in her shoulder and arm, as well as aches down her back. Her shoulder movement is now restricted—she is no longer able to braid her own hair. Like other checkers in her store, she frequently takes Advil and Aleve. She tries to be conscious of slowing her pace and alternating hands when scanning groceries but finds that the pressure of customer lineups keeps her moving more quickly than she would prefer.

Both the Fry Houses in Glenwood and the chain grocers in Box Hill have health and safety programs. Workers are officially expected to follow health and safety guidelines and are trained in how to work safely. Many workers, however, find the health and safety guidelines to be of limited use—and even to be an added source of wear and frustration. Guidelines are of limited use because they often focus on individual worker actions, without recognizing the realities of actual working environments. A produce clerk in Box Hill who now experiences considerable back pain, for example, reflects on the value of “safe” lifting procedures:

I saw the video [on safe lifting procedures]. Of course, it was all perfect on the video; everything was easy to get to. But for example, the other day, I didn't trim celery because I would have had to reach over another case or two, grab it from the side, and pull it out and twist and lift up and over, with my arms out here—a fifty-five pound case of celery. I was just, like: Too bad, no celery; should have broken the load better. I didn't do it. Stuff like that happens all the time. A fifty-pound bag of onions—you gotta lift it straight up with one arm over something.

As a stocker who worked at the same store points out, lifting problems are caused not only by improper “breaking” of the load, but also by the fact that the supermarket's back room is very small. In cramped storage space, needed items inevitably end up in places that are difficult to access, and under pressure of time, one cannot always pull out, then replace, things to get to a desired crate or box. In both Box Hill and Glenwood, young workers complain of the strain put on their work by limited space—as well as by broken, shoddy, and missing equipment. With stores operating under tight spending allowances, managers are not always quick to repair, replace, or improve equipment that does not directly and dramatically affect customers' shopping experiences.

Health and safety guidelines also become a source of wear and frustration because managers often use them to shift the responsibility for accidents and injuries away from the design of the workplace environment and onto individual workers. One young Fry House cook recalls his experiences following a severe burn he suffered at work:

I was burned in the back of my leg, here, a couple of months ago. It was pretty gruesome. . . . My boss tried to blame it on me—well, not blame it on me, but get mad at me for it, because I'm not wearing the extra type of apron [required by Fry House safety guidelines when workers carry

hot shortening]. But I showed that with the exact burn location, it doesn't cover the apron, so I told him even if I was wearing it that it wouldn't have done nothing. I took two days off. . . . It was pretty bad sitting in the hospital, with my pants down like that!

The cook explains that he—like so many young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood—doesn't always follow safety guidelines because of the time pressure and because of managers' unofficial preference (when push comes to shove) for getting work done quickly rather than safely:

The Fry House safety guidelines are so much safety, it pretty much takes three times as much time to [follow them] than to actually do the thing. . . . Whenever you clean the fryers, you're supposed to wear apron, gloves. There's a certain kind of way you're supposed to do it. I don't do it, 'cause . . . if you wear all that stuff, it just gets in the way, makes it [take] more time. You need all the time you can get when it gets really busy. If it was really dead, no customers, I would pretty much do it the way they want me to do it, especially if a manager is looking at me, making sure I do it the proper way. But if it's really crazy, they say, “OK. Do it the way you do it. Get it done. We need your help.”

Young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood can be disciplined, and even fired, for failing to follow health and safety guidelines at work. Thus, several young workers I interviewed said that they don't always report workplace injuries, especially if these injuries occurred when they were not following proper safety procedures. “I just got my finger cut,” says a young deli clerk. “I didn't report it because I didn't have a [safety] glove on. . . . Even if I did need stitches, I probably wouldn't have said it was on the job, because I don't want them to be, like, you're going to get suspended, or you're going to get fired.”

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POOR WORKING CONDITIONS

Grocery and fast-food work is not all bad, of course. Unionization in Box Hill and Glenwood has brought many improvements in working conditions—as will be discussed in later chapters. And as Part II of this book will show, young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood often find meaning, value, and pleasure in their grocery and fast-food jobs—as workers generally do, under even the worst job circumstances (Rinehart 1978; Molstad 1986). Many of these workers, in fact, say that they like their jobs—at least for the short term. Young workers frequently develop

positive social relationships in the workplace with customers and managers, and they generally develop strong senses of solidarity with their co-workers.

Why, then, emphasize the poor and demanding conditions of grocery and fast-food work? There are two reasons. First, although fast-food and grocery jobs are generally recognized as being undesirable occupations for adults, many observers tend to make an about-face when it comes to considering youth (and especially student) workers, arguing that these jobs are perfectly acceptable. After all, common arguments go, these are "just kids" who work in such jobs only for short periods of time. This study questions such logic. Working in a bad job for a long time is, of course, worse than having to work in a bad job for a short time. But there is no reason to suspend criticism of poor working conditions just because the workers happen to be young or because they will have to endure such conditions only for a temporary period in their lives.

The second reason for highlighting the poor conditions of grocery and fast-food work is that such conditions are critical to understanding the workplace identity and positioning of young grocery and fast-food workers. Some workplace observers, noting the typically poor conditions of youth work, invoke stereotypes of the young service-sector worker as being a fundamentally alienated and disfranchised worker (e.g., Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Willis 1998). In Box Hill and Glenwood, such stereotypes do not fit. Although poor work conditions often do lead to feelings of alienation among young grocery and fast-food workers, these feelings frequently coexist with strong senses of workplace investment and worker commitment. What poor work conditions are decisive in fostering is the almost universal stopgap workplace positioning that definitively characterizes young service-sector workers.

II. YOUTH IN THE WORKPLACE